

1

You know what my life was like before I ran away from home, the abuse and rejection at home and the bullying and harassment at school. We'll talk about that when the time comes, and your bad memories too. For me it feels like I'm in prison. I have no freedom at all. I'm not allowed to do anything without permission from my parents – my guards. It's like in *Cool Hand Luke*: “Wiping the sweat off, boss?” “Yeah, go ahead.” “Going to a rock concert, boss?” “No, you're too young.” “Letting my hair grow, boss?” “No, you'll look like a girl.”

It's so different in the world outside my prison cell. It's 1969, and young people are doing things that are different, they're finding new and different ways to live, to dress, to think about the world.

The media talk about “hippies.” I read stuff about the “counterculture” and a revolution that's been going on for a couple of years. The music is at the center of all of it, with a message that I totally believe in as soon as I hear it: be free, be yourself, practice peace, and above all love everyone: All you need is love, it's the time of the season for loving, hello I love you, won't you tell me your name, peace will guide the planets and love will steer the stars, don't you want somebody to love, and on and on.

I see them holding protests against the war, sticking flowers in the barrels of the soldiers' guns: flower children, flower power. “In the streets of San Francisco / gentle people with flowers in their hair.” Barely two months ago, Woodstock showed the world that our generation could practice what it preached, live together peacefully even under adverse conditions – and also have a lot of fun doing it.

It's a totally different world from the one my parents and all the other "normal" people live in, the world where I'm being held against my will. The world of suits and ties and GI haircuts, where everyone looks alike, everyone marches in step, and no one ever asks Why? A world ruled by fear and hate, by force and intimidation, by the very people who bully me at school and hurt and humiliate me at home. That's the real face of the "System" that's trying to crush the counterculture and keep the war going and the soldiers dying: the love of Power against the power of Love.

It looks to me like "the Movement" is everything that my life isn't, and everything I want it to be. And it's out there, it's happening now, and the more I endure this prison I'm in, the more I'm missing out on it.

So I decide to take the risk, to dare everything and break out of this joint. I plan my escape carefully, I give it lots of thought. I know from sad experience that where I live, people see things and tell my parents – it's a small town, very Mayberry, everyone knows everyone. So I plot to get out of town without being seen.

It's a Friday in early October. I wait until the school buses finish their morning run, then I carry my duffel bag to the Trailways station, going by shortcuts and side streets and alleys. I buy a ticket to Sheffield to throw off any pursuers: if anyone checks, that's as far as they can track me.

In Sheffield I walk to I-95 and start hitchhiking. I've thumbed around town before but this is my first long-distance hitchhiking trip. There are things about thumbing I don't know about at the time, things that make a difference in what comes afterward.

One thing it means is that the time I arrive in D.C. depends on a combination of what time I start, how quickly I get rides, and how far and how fast each ride takes me. This day, it happens that the first ride I get only takes me 20 miles and leaves me standing on the shoulder looking for another ride. If I had started just a little earlier or a little later, I might have gotten a ride all the way to D.C., arriving there a lot earlier than I actually did and encountering a different set of people when I got there. Or someone who knew me might have seen me thumbing and called my parents, and I get busted and never reach D.C. at all: you and I never meet, I kill myself, there's no story to tell. Anything can happen.

What does happen is the next ride I get is with a guy who's going all the way to D.C.: a cop from North Carolina on his way to pick up a fugitive and take him back home. It's a coincidence so amazing it startles me, but of

course I don't say anything: I'm a fugitive myself at that moment, though no one knows it yet but me. And getting caught by the cops and taken home is my biggest fear. It's kind of funny: he's taking one fugitive to jail and helping another escape.

But there's something else: this cop insists on stopping for lunch at a real sit-down restaurant, no fast food or quick-lunch diner for him. I guess his expenses are being paid. It takes a full hour, so I get to D.C. that much later than if I'd been riding with someone else.

But he does take me straight to Dupont Circle, the gateway to Washington's hippie milieu. That's where I encounter the guy who hooks me up with Student Mobe, and that sets the course for everything to come, right up to today. What if I hadn't lost that hour at lunch and that guy wasn't there when I arrived? God only knows where I'd have ended up.

I don't know D.C. very well at that point. I've been there with my family quite a few times: my grandparents lived there for a few years. I know the Northwest quadrant, not much else. I know the number streets run north and south, the letter streets go east and west, the avenues go where they want. Where the avenues intersect, there are traffic circles like Dupont: little parks with statues, fountains, shrubbery. The main thing I know before I arrive – everyone knows in 1969 – is that Dupont Circle is where all the hippies or freaks get together.

And this bright October day it's living up to its reputation: the park is quite busy, young people sitting and talking, playing guitars, singing and dancing, throwing Frisbees, making drug deals or dates.

— Some other day, I might have been there, Jason. I went there a lot to buy grass, to panhandle, to look for guys. I wonder where that might have led, if we'd met that day instead of when we did.

— You would have thought I was a desperate geek, with my barber shop haircut and my heavy duffel bag, going up to random people and asking with a pitiful air, "Do you know someplace I can crash tonight?"

But my guardian angel is with me today: pretty soon I run into a guy named Tony – totally straight-looking, short black hair, chinos and short-sleeved checked shirt with a button-down collar. Not the least bit like anyone's image of a hippie. Cheerful and outgoing.

"There's this place I volunteer," he says. "They might be able to help you."

And in my innocence I say, “Wow, great, let’s go!” When it could be anything – Hare Krishnas, Moonies, sadomasochists, carnivorous aliens.

But it turns out to be Student Mobe and New Mobe. I don’t know a thing about them at that point, but back home I’ve been a minor league activist, organizing little protests at my school. So when I do find out who they are, I’m cool with the concept of working in the national headquarters of the biggest antiwar protest organizers in the U.S.A.: the New Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, and its affiliate the Student Mobilization Committee etcetera etcetera. No one calls them by their full names, it’s always New Mobe and Student Mobe, or “the Mobes” together.

Right now, says Tony, they’re involved in what could be the biggest protest yet, the Vietnam War Moratorium, which is headed up by another group, the Moratorium Committee: demonstrations in places large and small across the country aimed at showing how widespread opposition to the war really is. It’s set for next week. After that they’re planning a march and rally here in Washington next month that they hope will put a million people in the street.

Their offices are in an old office building at Vermont Avenue and L Street: the Moratorium Committee on the eighth floor, Student Mobe on the ninth, and New Mobe on the tenth.

Tony tells me people are flocking to D.C. to help the Mobes make the big march a success. “They’ve been helping them find places to stay, so they should be able to help you.”

— Amazing. Your guardian angel really is at work that day. You’re in D.C. like, what, a half-hour, and you’re hooked up with cool people who won’t steal your stuff, who’ll let you hang out with them, and will help you find a place to stay? That’s not lucky, it’s miraculous.

— I know that now, Mira. I didn’t get it then. I could have still been standing there in Dupont Circle with my bag when everyone went home that night. They’d probably have locked me up and sent me home the very next day. Or maybe I’d be kidnapped and sold as a sex-slave or something.

But that’s how I become a full-time peace activist, an official member of the radical left. They welcome me with open arms and put me to work right away. It doesn’t involve anything more subversive than making phone calls and stuffing envelopes. But I make myself useful doing that kind of thing, I never say no to anyone who asks for help, and everyone gets used to me being around pretty quickly.

New people are showing up every day, coming from all over the country to help with the antiwar effort, so pretty soon it's like I'm one of the old-timers. There are a few Vietnam veterans still dressed in their green fatigues, including one guy with no front teeth who says he came straight from his discharge to D.C., so fed up was he with the war. A lot of them are college students who've dropped out to join the Movement. Some of them are fairly dedicated to one political position or another, everything from diehard Trotskyites to Maoists to New Left, whatever that means. But most of us are just hippies, whatever *that* means: peace and love, of course; thrift shop clothes or Army surplus; and do your own thing, if it feels good do it, sex and drugs and rock and roll.

One of them is a guy named Frank, whom I have some adventures with as time goes on. He just shows up at New Mobe out of nowhere one afternoon, like me and so many others, a week or two after me. He's maybe 20 or 21, and a veteran of the counterculture and left-wing political causes, at least to hear him tell it. And it's probably true: he's the one who gives me those bumper stickers I'm selling when I meet you. He "liberated" them from some left-wing group he worked for before he came to D.C.

A mass of bushy brown hair almost like an afro, a moustache and pointed goatee, a sharp-pointed nose and sharp chin, all of which combine to make him look like a cross between Trotsky and Mephistopheles. His habitual dress includes tight knitted long-sleeved shirts, tight jeans like a rock star, and brown buckskin boots that come up almost to his knees, with a fringe around the top.

Here's the kind of thing that makes life in the Movement so much fun: I'm manning the phones at Student Mobe one morning when the boss, Sharon, comes out of her office. She's a nice woman, in her late 20s I think, long black hair in a ponytail, black-rimmed glasses. No makeup ever, so I know she's into women's lib, which all the women around there seem to be – no surprise. I guess she's a veteran subversive, to be put in charge of the office, but I really don't know her story. She asks me, "How would you like to go join a picket line?"

"Okay," I say, always ready to protest something. "Who are we picketing?"

"It's the taxi drivers' union. They're picketing the Conrad Hilton Hotel over at 16th and K. The hotel signed a contract with a limousine company to take people to and from the airport, and it's hurting the taxi drivers. They say

it violates their contract, and they're boycotting the hotel. They'd like to get some more warm bodies over there to beef up the picket line."

Just then, Frank sticks his head in the door, and Sharon calls him in. She repeats what she told me. Then she adds: "They were actually looking to get some people from SDS. So when you get over there, just tell them SDS sent you."

We all think that's pretty funny, and Frank and I head out to the hotel.

SDS – Students for a Democratic Society – is a far-left national group that's been the force behind a lot of the protests and strikes and stuff on college campuses the past few years. But they've been splintering into different factions recently, one of which is the notorious Weathermen. Those guys advocate "direct action" – confrontation, bombings, violence in general – to bring about the Revolution. Even the most radical of the people I know at the Mobes disapprove of that kind of thing.

— They're just a big pain in the ass as far as I'm concerned.

— I know, our encounters with them aren't very pleasant.

We get to the hotel, and the taxi drivers – about twelve guys, most of them black, wearing their uniforms of tan jackets and caps – greet us like wartime reinforcements. They offer us coffee and give us signs to carry.

The picketing is easy enough, just walking back and forth across the driveway that cuts in from 16th Street to the hotel. The picketing taxi drivers are letting cabs pass through but yelling "Scab!" at the drivers who cross the picket line. So Frank and I do that too.

But after a while, I start getting impatient with this routine. If they really want this boycott to work, they need to turn the picket line into a blockade and force the hotel to negotiate. That's how us professional radicals would do it.

So as I'm crossing the driveway, another taxi comes rolling up and stops to wait for me to get out of the way. But I stop and wave my sign a little, I point at it to remind the driver of what's going on. He scowls and honks his horn.

The picketing drivers look over and see what's going on. "Hey, SDS!" their leader yells. "Don't do that! Let him in."

He comes hurrying over as I reluctantly walk on and let the taxi proceed. The leader is laughing, and the other drivers too. From where they're looking and pointing, it seems they're laughing at the reaction of the driver I blocked, who has an expression like Why me Lord?

“I know you’re just trying to help,” the leader says, “but we can’t block these driveways. We’d all go to jail.”

“Oh, okay,” I say agreeably, but it seems to me that picketing like that is pretty pointless.

We keep at it until noon, when the union guys pack up their stuff and thank us. They’re still chuckling and shaking their heads at me, muttering “SDS” amusedly.

As we start to walk back to Vermont and L, Frank also gives me a look. “You’re a trip, dude,” he says.

“Well, I wouldn’t want SDS to think we weren’t keeping up their reputation.”

With people like Frank showing up out of the clear blue sky practically every day, nobody asks many questions about where I’m from and all, which is good because my cover story really sucks: I tell them I’m from Philadelphia, but I’ve never been to Philly in my life, don’t know anything about it, except that it’s in Pennsylvania and the Continental Congress met there.

— Why on Earth ... ?

— I thought that if I told them someplace I’d actually lived, someone could connect it with this guy named Daniel the police are looking for. I’m just not used to talking with people from different places. Back home, no one really cares where you’re from: if you aren’t a native, you don’t matter. And I’m not, and I don’t. And I don’t know until later there’s no one looking for me. The cops have more important things to do. It’s all just paranoia.

So when someone says, like, “What part of Philly?” I give some really vague answer like, “Not really in Philly, in the suburbs, kind of northwest.” They get the idea pretty quickly that I don’t really want to talk about it, so they leave me alone.

Generally they don’t seem to have any suspicions about me being younger than I say. I’ve been reading college-level books for a while, and reading about New Left politics in some of the magazines my parents get, so I can talk semi-intelligently about a lot of the things they’re interested in. Mostly I just make wisecracks, and I quickly get a reputation for being a joker. If they get into something I really don’t know anything about, I can always go philosophical on them, start pointing out contradictions and stuff, which makes me sound like I know something when I actually don’t know anything at all.

— Sometimes it does, darling. Sometimes it makes you sound like you're from another planet.

— Well, I'm okay with that too. Maybe I should've gone with that from the beginning instead of Philly.

One area makes me kind of nervous, though: sex. I'm basically uncomfortable talking about it "with the boys," always have been: I just don't like discussing something that personal. But I'm also kind of worried that anything I say will make me sound inexperienced and immature. So I try to avoid getting into those conversations, I say stuff like, "I prefer to keep a little mystery in a relationship." That kind of thing gets some snickers, and one guy tells me I'm just a "bourgeois romantic," but I don't mind. It's probably true, and it's better than having them realize that I'm just too young to know what I'm talking about.

The place where I spend the most time working is the mailroom on the tenth floor. There's a lot of work to be done there. You saw that yourself, you met the boss, Annie. She's only a few years older than me, and she's really cool, easy to get along with, likes to keep the party going. So sometimes she buys us burgers from White Tower, or orders pizzas when we're working late, and other stuff like that.

What we do is fill the orders that are flooding in from local groups across the country for posters, fliers, buttons, stickers, all urging people to "Join the November 15th March on Washington," and a separate demonstration that Student Mobe is organizing, the March Against Death. I festoon myself with buttons and fill my pockets with stickers to put on walls and phone poles while I'm walking around town, showing my support for the cause.

But it's not all fun and games. I don't get paid, but I still have to eat, so I spend some time panhandling every day. And after the first few nights, I'm on my own in finding where I'll sleep. I can leave my duffel bag at the office where it'll be safe, but my body's another story.

At first I just walk all night, all over town, until I see someplace that looks safe and maybe a little warm. It's mid-October, remember: it can get pretty chilly at night.

One night I find a basement door unlocked at a big old apartment building. I go in and see the big boilers that heat the radiators upstairs. It's nice and warm and cozy, and I think I've got it made. But I go back the next night and the door is locked.

Some nights all I can find is the space underneath the front steps of some townhouse: out of the wind and out of sight, but still pretty cold. And not much sleep – I nod off most afternoons in the middle of packing up posters.

— Too bad we hadn't met yet. I'd been going through that for six months by then. We could have kept each other warm.

— You know I would've loved that. As it is, for me it only lasts about two weeks. And then some paid Mobe staffers pool their money and rent the apartment in the townhouse on 13th Street. And they open it up as a crash pad for any of us who need it.

It's a terrible neighborhood, just a few blocks from 14th and Swann, the epicenter of the '68 riots. A year and a half later, there are still blocks along 14th Street where all the businesses are closed and the storefronts boarded up from the looting and burning after Martin Luther King's assassination.

The row houses on 13th Street weren't damaged by the riots, they're just suffering from years of neglect by absentee landlords and impoverished tenants. It isn't a place where the average middle-class D.C. resident will ever venture, but I never feel uncomfortable there, except a couple of times when the cops come around. The people who live there seem cool, the few that I see on the street.

The neighborhood's bad reputation does create one problem: all of the doors are kept perpetually locked up tight. Only a few people at the Mobes have keys, so anyone who wants to get in has to find a keyholder and get them to go with them to unlock the door, or let them borrow the key. It's an inconvenient situation, especially as the work at the office runs later and later at night and the number of people who need a place to sleep keeps growing and growing.

So I solve the problem, though it's not a way the responsible people are pleased about. When I was 12 or 13, I went through a phase of fantasizing about cat burglary and secret agent adventures. One way I practiced was by climbing up downspouts and gutters on churches and businesses – one time I even got up to the roof of the town's new indoor mall.

So my practiced eye notices a drainpipe, a nice solid iron pipe, that runs up past a ledge by the second-floor windows, which are always left open a few inches to let out some of the heat that builds up inside. And in nothing flat, I'm inside the apartment. If anyone's with me, I can go back downstairs and let them in. I show the technique to a couple of guys, they pass the word on, and soon we're all swarming up the drainpipe at all hours.

For those who aren't up for climbing, I rig up a rope that's attached to a rack from the oven, which nobody ever uses. When somebody at the door pulls on the rope, it makes the rack crash against the radiator, which does get the attention of anyone who's inside.

— That's putting it mildly. It startles the shit out of anyone who's inside.

— The apartment itself is minimal and squalid: a large front room with a small kitchen area to one side, and a smaller back room with access to the bathroom. Each room has a non-functional fireplace, probably made to burn coal when the place was built. The kitchen is furnished with a stove and refrigerator that look like they date from 1952. It's also home to swarms of roaches, and as a result is rarely used. The bathroom looks like it was last refurbished around 1930. It has a floor of little hexagonal white tiles, a sink that attaches directly to the wall with no cabinet underneath, and a big well-worn bathtub with a shower head above.

As for furnishings, they consist entirely of a variety of used mattresses bought at thrift stores and covering most of the space on the heavily worn hardwood floors. No chairs, no tables, no TV stands, no TVs, no bookcases or other shelves, no closets or wardrobes – in fact nowhere to store any personal items like duffel bags except on the floor in the back corner of each room. You just have to trust no one will mess with your stuff. And as far as I know, no one does. There are sheets and blankets but no pillows on any of the mattresses.

Privacy of course is something else of which the apartment offers none, but everyone behaves with due regard for each other's personal space. There's no segregation by sex: in general, couples prefer the back room, which is slightly more private, but some nights there's no space except in the front room, and any lovemaking takes place in the presence of eight or ten witnesses, who duly pretend not to notice. The Sexual Revolution is going on, after all: Free Love is one of the things that's in the air.

So that's my life now, I'm completely free. I come and go when I want, no one tries to tell me how to look or how to act, I choose who I want to hang around with and what I want to do with them. I even have a sort of purpose now, one I've chosen for myself, although I have to admit it would have been pretty hard for me to say no: I'm working for peace, I'm working to bring down the System, I'm part of the Revolution now. And I like it, I like knowing I'm part of all that, and I like what I'm doing. It's fun.

But Fate has something else in store for me, I soon find out – an even higher purpose, the one thing I was born into this life for, something incredibly beautiful – a true miracle when I find it. Find her, I mean. Find you.

2

I'm wandering one morning in the coppery autumn sunshine with no real destination: on P Street through Dupont Circle and on to Wisconsin Avenue in Georgetown, an affluent part of town where the fashionable thrift-shop look comes with designer labels. No takers for my bumper stickers: "Stop the War Now!" in bold black letters on a lurid red background – no one wants a glue stain on their Bentley's bumper. I punish the bourgeois reactionaries by asking them for a dollar – in proletarian districts I only ask for a quarter.

The day is still young, though. I'll go downtown and try my luck with a less elite crowd: M Street to Pennsylvania Avenue, past the big white building where Tricky Dick resides these days.

The sidewalk is wide in front of the White House, dotted with clusters of tourists gawking and having their picture taken standing by the high black iron fence. I spot a schoolboy a few years younger than me, standing a little apart from a group of kids taking each other's picture while two women supervise: a private junior high school field trip, clearly. I approach the boy, holding out a sticker.

"Antiwar bumper sticker? Just a quarter. Support the Movement."

The kid, maybe 12 or 13, wearing the school uniform of blue blazer, white shirt and gray pants, grins and says, "Sure." I knew it: a radical-in-training, that's why he's avoiding the group photos. He digs in his pocket, hands me a quarter. I give him the sticker, say thanks and walk on.

An instant later, a man's voice behind me loudly demands: "What have you got there? Let me see that."

I look back without stopping: a White House guard is approaching the boy, who smiles nervously and holds out the sticker. The cop snatches it away, and with an unfriendly look toward me, says, “Soliciting’s not allowed on White House grounds.”

Sorry, kid, no refunds, I think. A harsh lesson in politics, but a cheap one for just a quarter. I’m thinking this as I hurry away, showing my growing street savvy: they won’t arrest you for loitering or soliciting as long as you keep moving.

I keep going past the White House and around toward 14th Street, then down to F Street and into the retail district, an area where I haven’t tried to panhandle much so far. Seems ripe for the plucking. I hold out a sticker and repeat my patter to passersby: “Antiwar bumper stickers, twenty-five cents, support the antiwar movement.” All I get back is a few hostile glares, a muttered “Get a job.”

I count the change in my pocket mentally: forty cents now, with the kid’s quarter. Enough for the smallest hamburger and a small drink at White Tower, a pretty paltry meal, not enough: I need to keep panhandling for a little while longer.

Up the sidewalk a little, I see a small commotion, people veering in their paths, faces showing fear or anger or disbelief. The foot traffic opens a little, I see you – and my heart stops, or feels like it. The most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen is just a few feet away from me, dancing like a wind-sprite in the morning sunshine, a visitor from Elfland, magical, enchanting.

I stop in my tracks, my gaze locked on to you, not seeing anything else. I know you, I don’t know how, but the sight of you feels like a deep memory, like a big dream suddenly unforgotten. Are you real or a creation of my imagination, something only I can see, a hallucination, the final proof of my insanity?

You’re dancing barefoot on the cold dirty sidewalk. Your long paisley shawl flutters and drapes as you dance: a little faded, emerald green with a rain of gold teardrops, a ragged gold fringe – the wings of a wind-battered butterfly. A silky blouse with tiny pink flowers, green leaflets, a light blue background. You have one of those coarse woven shoulder bags all the girls are carrying this year, and some of the boys. Blue denim bell-bottoms flap at your ankles. Black sunglasses, opaque circles, conceal your eyes and give you a slightly skeletal look. Fair skin with a rosy tone. Wide mouth and soft pink lips that I don’t see so much as feel with a tingle in mine.

What I see most at the moment is your hair: long and wavy and thick, hanging past your shoulders, flying as you swoop and spin. Two-toned, half blonde and half red: bleached blonde at the ends; at the roots, the natural color – eight inches of red. Not just red, but red like raw saffron, red like dark fire, red like a flame submerged in wine, red like deep red maple leaves glistening with sunlit dew in the autumn dawn. Dark as heart's blood in the shade, blazing like heart's fire in the sun. That kind of red.

— I'm just doing my job: scaring the shoppers, making them nervous. I'm all the things they don't want their women to be: aggressive, unruly, unfashionable, unwashed. My Crazy Dance: I'm a bird, a butterfly, loose and flighty, sexy and scary. I screech like a hawk, I squawk like a parrot, I croak like a crow. All the while laughing like being insane is the funniest thing in the world.

I don't get too close to them, just enough to make them notice, to catch their eyes and fill them with guilt. I hold out my hand and say whatever strange thing pops into my head: "Please sir, the fairies stole my shoes, help me find them, please!" "Help a poor girl through embalming school, ma'am?"

— I know you right away: you're Leonard Cohen's Suzanne, the Rolling Stones' Ruby Tuesday, the Jefferson Airplane's Martha, and I don't know how many more: someone from a forgotten dream, a beautiful strange magical girl my own age, damaged but graceful, sad but joyful, dancing to music only you can hear. I already know I'm in love with you, that happened at first glance. I rocket right past that to This is Her, This is The One, The Love of My Life.

— Now I see you watching me, and I know right away from your look that we're going to meet and talk. I see a serious boy in a poet costume: dark brown tweed jacket, light brown sweater, faded blue jeans, scuffed-up brown bucks. John Lennon glasses: circular silver frames that make you look wide-eyed, curious, innocent. Kind of cute: high school trying to look like college, like a poet, an intellectual. Barbershop haircut running a little wild. Unshaven, but no real beard, just wisps. Rumpled in that way you only get from sleeping in your clothes: from living on the street like me.

You're looking at me in a strange way as you slowly approach, like you have a message you're bringing me that you're not sure I'll like. I see gray-green eyes, a little sad, a little hopeful, like a whipped puppy that still wants

to play. Do I know you? No, I don't think so, but then maybe yes, I've seen you before: in a dream, or maybe a mirror.

— I know you've seen me, I can't stop now: I have to approach you and talk to you. And that's what I want, but I'm suddenly terrified, I feel anxiety flood throughout my body: what if I say something stupid and blow this chance that Fate has handed me? But if it really is Fate, it's meant to be, and it will be.

We're face-to-face now. You dance in front of me with a challenging smile like you're saying, You've got my attention, now what's it going to be? I pull the schoolboy's quarter from my pocket and offer it to you with a bashful smile.

“May I have the next dance, fair lady?”

I say it with a confidence I don't feel at all, because I can't dance, not even a little: I'm the world's worst dancer. But I think I have to be different for you, I have to make myself seem bolder than I really am. I see amusement and curiosity in your look, but wariness too, distrust.

— “Is this all you think I'm worth, silly boy?” I say as I take the coin. I know this game: *Romeo and Juliet*, last year's big hit movie, I saw it six times.

— My heart leaps: you're going to play along and not just chase me away. I feel more confident: words are my gift, my only real talent. “I know it seems a paltry sum to worldly eyes, oh fair princess, but it is everything I have. I would offer you my heart, but that was yours at your very first glance.”

— That almost makes me smile, but it makes me think too: you're being playful, but your voice and your look tell me this matters to you, and that makes it matter to me. I need to be careful with you, we can't just joke and then forget: this won't be our only encounter.

“Do you always talk this way, oh stranger so strange?”

“No, lovely lady, never 'til now. I've never dared speak to a goddess before. I'll stop if it offends thee.”

I can't help but smile: you're good at this, and you're having fun.

“No, I like it. I like everything crazy now. Sanity is so dull.”

“Indeed it is,” you say devoutly. “When it's not terrifying.”

I see it again: that look of familiarity like I'm seeing myself revealed in your eyes, my deepest secrets held up to the light. And I don't even know what they are – maybe that's why you're here, to tell me that.

“Shh,” I say, looking around to see if there’s anyone who might have heard. “You can’t let them hear that. They feed on our fear. Let’s show them we’re not afraid.”

— You hold out your hands for me to take, like we’re getting ready to waltz. And I take your hands and you take a step and we twirl around, we twirl and spin on the busy sidewalk, starting to laugh, twirling and laughing ’til dizziness makes us stop. You let go of my hands, then you touch my arm to steady yourself. We’re still laughing, catching our breath, and I look at you and feel almost faint from the dizziness and the breathlessness and the sheer drunkenness of being in love.

You take a step back and take your sunglasses off to wipe a tear of merriment from your eye. I see your eyes for the first time and they take my breath away, time stops again: I’m drowning in green, deep deep bright bright green, almost luminescent, iridescent, green like an emerald ignited, like the green in a peacock feather, like certain interstellar clouds and exploding stars, galaxies ...

— You’re staring into my eyes with the strangest look: fascination and awe mixed together, like you’re in a trance, seeing something invisible inside me. It makes something wake in my most secret heart, something that wants to stare back at you, something I thought I lost long ago that I’m glad to have back. But I don’t know its name yet and it’s all making me nervous. I can’t let you see that, I cover it quickly.

— “Are you okay?” you ask, your expression concerned, your voice soft as moonlight, waving your hand in front of my eyes as if to wake me from a trance.

I blink, but I can’t stop staring, I want to take your head in my hands and hold you still so I can keep on gazing into this green universe forever. “I’m sorry, I know it’s impolite to stare, but I can’t stop ... I just ... You have the most beautiful eyes I’ve ever seen. I’ve never seen anything so beautiful before.”

— I feel myself blush, I feel myself smile. I look away, then look back, trying to read the look in your eyes. Is this just more joking? A naïve seduction? Or could you really be sincere? I put on my sunglasses to break the spell. “What’s your name, oh silver-tongued stranger?” I ask.

— “Jason,” I say, then quickly so as not to miss this chance, “what’s yours?”

“I’m Mira.” For a second I hear it as “mirror,” but then you spell it out like you’re used to people misunderstanding: “M-I-R-A.”

“Mira,” I repeat admiringly. “That’s a really beautiful name. For a really beautiful girl.”

I’m a little shocked by my own boldness, and you look mistrustful when I say it, but you like it a little too. You laugh a little, like you think I’m just flirting. “You do say the nicest things, Jason. I need to be careful with you.”

Now I’m a little flattered, and encouraged: I hear you saying that we’ll get to know each other better, that this meeting is the beginning of something. “Why would you think that?” I ask, genuinely curious.

You get a serious look. “You didn’t run away from me like all the others do. Like my craziness is catching. Like I’ve got leprosy or something. That tells me you’ve got it too, whatever it is.

“Now, this has been fun, Jason, but I’ve got to go back to work, and you probably do too.”

“Where do you work?”

“Right here, silly. What do you think I was doing when you got here? Do you think I really am crazy? It’s panhandling. I act like a schizo and people give me money out of pity. You’re a street kid, I thought you had me all figured out.”

“I’m kind of new at it,” I admit, impressed and a little worried that you see so easily what I am.

— Neither of us wants to let it end. “Let’s meet later,” I say, surprising myself a little. “Do you know Franklin Square? I like to eat lunch there. Sometime after one, okay? Bring your own food, don’t expect me to feed you.”

“Of course not, Mira.”

“Oh, and don’t go thinking you sweet-talked me into letting you work my street. If I catch you, I’ll cut you to pieces.” Big smile: just kidding, not kidding.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

— You turn and start to walk away. I can’t bring myself to leave, to take my eyes off you. You start to dance again as you drift farther up the street. I finally start to walk, but turned almost backwards, still trying to watch you. I almost walk straight into some guy in a suit. “Watch where you’re going!” he growls.

It's around eleven when we part. I need to make some money so I'll have some food to bring to our little impromptu picnic. I get two bumper stickers sold and earn three more quarters with a plain old "Spare change? Got any change you can spare?" More than enough for a feast.

I'm near Thomas Circle by then so I go to the People's Drug Store to buy my food: a tuna sandwich in a triangular plastic box, two small bags of Fritos, a package of Ding Dongs to split, and a sixteen-ounce bottle of Coke. It'd be the biggest meal I've eaten in weeks if I ate it all myself, but I'm buying extra to share with you. Not a bribe, really, I tell myself. But if I want to show you that I'll share whatever I have with you, I need to have something to share.

It's a few minutes 'til one when I get to the park. I look around to make sure you aren't already there, then I pick a spot on a bench near the fountain where I'll see you approaching. Time goes by: it seems like a lot of time and I'm tempted to start eating alone but I decide to wait at least until two.

I feel very strange. The thought that you might not show up – the sudden worry that maybe you just sent me here to get rid of me, the silly boy who was getting in your way – makes me blush furiously from my scalp right down to the soles of my feet. Near-terminal embarrassment from the realization of what a fool I was to imagine that a girl as beautiful and street-smart and free as you would want to have anything to do with a childish bookworm like me.

What's happening to me? I wonder. In the space of a couple of hours, I've gone from seeing you for the first time to having my heart gripped by your image, aching to see you again, almost panic-stricken by the thought that you might not want me. I don't even know who you are, but in an instant you've become the most important thing in the world to me. Is this love? I don't know anything about love, except that I've never felt it before, but I have to guess that it's what I'm feeling now. I want it to be love, I want you to be the one I love, the one I was always meant to love, and I want you to love me the same way, so desperately I can barely breathe.

It's almost one-thirty when I spot your red hair and green shawl coming from 13th Street, crossing I Street to the park. A wave of relief washes over me. I see you're wearing a pair of flat sandals now: you must have had them

in your shoulder bag all along. I walk over and meet you with a smile and say as calmly as I can, “Hello again, my lady. Where would you like to sit?”

— “Over by the statue,” I say. I’m a little puzzled by the big smile you’re giving me, but I can’t help but smile back a little. “It’s quiet there: most people want to sit by the fountain, but it’s never turned on.”

— You’re carrying a bag from Little Tavern, a local burger chain, but no drink. That’s cool, I think: you’ll probably be glad for some of mine.

We settle ourselves on a bench and start taking out our food. You see my sandwich and say, “Is that tuna?”

“Yes.”

“How can you eat that?” you ask. “Those sandwiches are disgusting. The bread gets so soggy sitting there.”

“It does,” I admit, “but you get more for your money than if you buy a burger.”

“Maybe so, but if you can’t stand to eat it, it’s all a big waste.”

I don’t like the way this is going, so I reach into my bag and take out the two bags of Fritos. “Do you like Fritos?” I ask, offering you one of them.

“Oh, thanks,” you say, and take it, hesitantly.

— I didn’t ask you to buy me food, and it makes me wonder if you’re trying to buy me, trying to make me feel like I owe you something. Then you open a big bottle of Coke and you say, “Help yourself, I can’t drink it all.”

And that worries me more: why is this guy being so generous to me? We just met, we don’t even know each other. “Oh, thanks,” I say, “but it’ll make me need to pee and there’s no place to go around here.”

— I still don’t like how this is going. I want us to tell each other all about ourselves, I want to learn who you really are, I want you to like me – I really really want you to like me.

We both start to speak at once:

“So Mira – ”

“So Jason – ”

We giggle a little. “You first,” I say.

“So Jason, where are you from?”

“A little town you’ve never heard of, down in Virginia, near Sheffield.”

“Sheffield,” you repeat. “That’s south of here somewhere, I know: when I sleep at the bus station, I hear them call it out when the Miami bus is leaving.”

“I know you’re from D.C.,” I guess.

“How do you know that?” you ask, giving me a probing look.

“You like Little Tavern,” I say. “That’s a totally D.C. thing.”

— “Well, okay,” I say, “you got me: I’m a D.C. girl. Are you always this logical – like that guy on TV with the pointed ears?”

— “I’m way more logical than Mr. Spock,” I say as if I feel slighted. “He doesn’t even know that all logic is illogical.”

“But you do?”

“Of course. And I can prove it. Logically.”

“Oh, don’t, please. Not right now, while I’m eating.”

— You laugh at that, I’m not sure why, but it’s a friendly laugh, not a mean one.

“Sorry,” you say. “I’ll save it for some other time.”

“Thank you. So Mister Logical, why are you here? In D.C., I mean. You’re a runaway, right?”

“Is it that obvious?” you ask, looking a little disturbed. “The people at work don’t know about that. I told them I dropped out of college to come and work for the Movement.”

“It’s only obvious to me because I know what it’s like. I didn’t run away, my parents threw me out, but it ends up the same way: we’re living the same kind of life.”

“They threw you out? Can they do that? How old are you?”

“How old are *you*?”

— “Sorry,” I say. “It was rude of me to ask like that. But okay, yeah, I’m sixteen, I’m underage. They can arrest me and send me home if I get caught on the street. Couldn’t they do that to you?”

“They already have. The cops picked me up a while ago for being a runaway, being underage and vagrant and panhandling and stuff. They said they’d do me a favor this time and take me home, but if they caught me again, I’d go to reform school – to prison, in other words. So we get to the house, my mom comes to the door, the cop says, ‘Look who we found!’ Like he thought they’d be jumping for joy to see me. She let me come in, but when the cops left, she and my dad threw me out again. They barely said a word, they just stared at me with so much hate it scared me. I think if I ever go back there again, they’ll probably kill me.”

— “Jesus,” you say, “that’s so fucked up. Your parents sound like real assholes.”

“They are,” I agree. “They’re super-straight, bourgeois to the max, Christian and everything. They don’t like my ‘lifestyle’: smoking pot, having sex, dropping acid, listening to rock, reading filth, dressing like a hippie slut, hanging out with freaks.”

I give you a quick look to see how you’re reacting to my list of sins. You’re just nodding like it’s all everyday stuff to you.

— I’m trying not to show the stab of jealousy I felt when you said “having sex.” Is there some guy already in your life? The thought had never crossed my mind.

— “Basically, everything I do,” I go on. “When they kicked me out the first time, my mom said I was bringing demons into their house. Yes, really,” I insist, seeing your eyes go wide with amazement. “She’s insane. She and my dad just lost their minds, standing there screaming and calling me names: slut, whore, filth, trash – my own parents calling me that. They wouldn’t even let me get some clothes and stuff, they threw me out with nothing but what I was wearing and what was in my purse, like they hoped I’d starve to death.”

— You say it all without tears, just shrugging your shoulders at the injustice and insanity of it.

“Some people should never have children,” I say, trying to let you know I really understand. “My parents either. I wish they’d thrown me out too, but no, they kept me prisoner, like the Gestapo: under their total control, trying to make me conform to their idea of who I should be and what I should do, and using violence to enforce it. My father has a bad temper, and he drinks a lot. There were times when he literally tortured me until I said what he wanted to hear. Tortured me into confessing to things I didn’t do, then punished me for doing them.

“But he acts like he knows that’s the best way to raise a kid, and there’s something wrong with me for not going along with it. Like it’s sort of scientific, not just brutality, and I’m just overly sensitive. It got to the point where I had to get out or I’d lose my mind, or kill myself.”

You nod in agreement. “I thought about that, about killing myself, when they first threw me out. But then I thought, no, that’s fucked-up, I’m not the one who’s wrong here. I have a right to live and goddammit, I’m going to live, whatever it takes. That was six months ago, and here I still am, without any help from them or anyone else.”

“Right on!” I exclaim. “If they won’t help us like they’re supposed to, we’ll just do it ourselves!”

We both smile then, feeling a little embarrassed at being so serious and radical.

“Those Fritos made me thirsty,” you say. “Can I have a taste of your Coke?”

“Help yourself,” I say, and we both burst out laughing. “Because no one else will,” I add, giggling. It’s the first time I’ve heard you really laugh at something I said, and I like it. I want to hear it some more.

“So six months,” I say, “that’s a long time to live this way. I know it’s a hard way to live – even worse for a girl on her own, I would think.”

You nod as you wipe your mouth with the back of your hand and put the cap back on the Coke, then burp.

“The hardest part,” you say, “is finding a warm safe place to sleep. You wouldn’t believe how many guys would just take you and rape you if they find you out and alone at night. It’s almost happened a couple of times. I was just lucky that someone was there to scare them away. But it’s probably only a matter of time. Men look at women like dogs look at meat.”

I can’t help but feel a little relieved: it’s clear that there’s no other guy in your life. But that just makes me feel sad: I know how lonely you must be. And it makes me feel scared for you: so small and vulnerable, alone in this big city. I get an idea – why didn’t I think of this sooner?

“No, that can’t happen,” I say. “I won’t let that happen. I know we just met and you just barely know me, but I want you to start sleeping with me.”

You give me a look of puzzlement mixed with disapproval.

— My first thought is Uh-huh, this guy’s not as different as I thought, he just wants to jump my bones. But then I think, Well maybe he really does feel protective toward me. I don’t know why you would, we just met, but you do sound like you really mean it.

You see my look and it makes you blush with embarrassment. “Sorry,” you say, “maybe I’d better rephrase that. What I mean is, I know how hard it is to find a good place to sleep when you’re on the street. But I know about a place that’s safe and warm – and free. It’s where I’m sleeping now, and I want you to sleep there too, because I care about you and I want you to be safe. But not sleep with me, not like that. Unless you really want to, of course.”

“Oh, if *I* want to,” I say, teasing you. “You’d only do it to make *me* happy.”

You're still blushing, but you're smiling. "That's right," you say. "Sacrifices must be made." You reach into your lunch bag again, pull out a package and open it, and offer it to me. "Care for a Ding Dong?"

"Only if you promise not to make any dirty jokes about it."

"Who, me? No, I won't say a word."

— You take a Ding Dong, holding it carefully so as not to get chocolate all over your hand. "Any strings attached?" you ask.

It takes me a moment to figure out that you're back to talking about the place I mentioned, not asking if I want something in return for the Ding Dong. There's probably a joke there, but I need to keep my promise.

"Only one, and it's not bad," I say. "This place is for people who work for New Mobe or Student Mobe. So you'd have to go there and sign up to work there and put in some time now and then helping stuff envelopes or whatever. You won't mind that, it's a pretty cool place to hang out. Everyone has fun with it."

"I don't know what that is, Jason, New Mobe? Or – ?"

"Or Student Mobe. The New Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam and the Student Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam. We're working on a big antiwar march that's going to happen here in D.C. next month. So there's a lot of stuff to do: stuffing envelopes like I said, and sending out boxes of flyers and posters and buttons and stuff. There's no pay, but it's nothing hard, and the people are cool. It's like a big party, really."

"Would I have to be there on a schedule and work all day like a regular job?"

"No, it's not like that at all. I go there for a while every day, just because I like hanging out there, but I come and go pretty much when I want, and everyone else does too. The people in charge are hippies like us, so they're not into rules and schedules and stuff."

"And you can sleep there for free?"

"At an apartment that some of the paid staff people are renting, and anyone who works for the Mobes can stay there if they need to. Basically a crash pad. No real rules. Just don't be an asshole."

"Where is it?"

"On 13th Street, a couple of blocks north of Logan Circle. I can take you there anytime if you'd like to see it. And I can take you by the office and help you get started there. It's not far either, Vermont and L."

We're finished with lunch. You're interested in what I've been saying. You're about to ask me a question when something catches your eye and you hunch down sort of furtively, like you're trying to hide behind me. I look where you're looking and see a police car cruising slowly past on I Street. You sneak a glance at it, see that it's moving on, and you straighten back up. "Okay," you say, "let's go see this crash pad."

— We walk up 13th Street, in silence at first. We stop at a corner and wait for the walk light.

I decide to ask you the question that's been on my mind since our first conversation: "Why are you being so nice to me, Jason? We just met this morning, you really don't know me. I might not be who you think I am."

I can see you thinking for a long moment: will you make a joke or tell me the truth?

The light changes, we cross the street. "Mira, I'm going to tell you the truth, even though I'm afraid it'll make you think I'm crazy. Or just trying to seduce you. And maybe I am. Crazy, I mean. But I want you to know I'll always tell you the truth. And the truth is I like you. I like you a lot. I don't know why, I just do. I felt a connection between us the instant I saw you. I know it sounds crazy, but I really believe you and I are somehow meant to be together. Something brought us together today. I don't know what it is. I just have this feeling that there's a reason for it. There has to be a reason why I suddenly met the most beautiful girl I've ever seen, just walking down the street. I don't think that can be just an accident."

— I can see you turn inward as you listen to me, checking your feelings about what I'm saying. When I finish, you give me a smile and then a deep sigh.

"That's what I was afraid of, Jason. I thought it was something like that. I appreciate your being honest about it. And I have to admit, I feel something too, something between us. I don't know what it is, but it's there. Like we've met before, even though I know we haven't. So if it's crazy, it isn't just you.

"But you just don't know. You need to know what kind of person I really am before things go too far. You're treating me like I'm this fairy tale princess, and I'm not really like that at all. You seem like a nice guy and I don't want to hurt you, but if you really feel like you say you do, there are things that could hurt you a lot if you find them out later and I didn't tell you. And basically I just believe in honesty. I hate liars."

“Mira, you don’t have to tell me anything. You have a right to be whoever and whatever you are, and to do whatever you need to to get along in this fucked-up world. I already know we’re alike in a lot of ways. We’ve been through some of the same kind of things, the bad kind of things people don’t like to talk about. So I’ll never judge you, I’ll never criticize or shame you. I’ve gotten too much of that myself to ever want to do it to you.”

You give me an ironic smile like you think I’m being hopelessly naïve. “You say all the right things, Jason, but I wonder if you really know what you’re promising. I’m really messed up inside, Jason, more than you can imagine. People are right to run away from me: I’m bad news.”

“So am I, Mira. I’m all messed up too. I’m like someone who’s been crippled and trying to learn to walk all over again. I knew we were alike that way from the moment I first saw you. It’s okay, maybe it’s why the gods or whoever it is brought us together: so we can lean on each other, help hold each other up.”

You shake your head, smiling a little exasperatedly. “You don’t give up, do you,” you say. “But you just don’t know. Let me just tell you one thing, one thing you need to know before this goes any further.

“I don’t just panhandle, Jason. I can’t make enough money to live on that way. So I sell myself. Basically, I’m a prostitute, to use the nicest word for it.

“I don’t go all the way and I never will for money. That’s private and not for sale. I only do oral. I did it for boys at school for free – I thought it would make them like me, but they just told all their friends and laughed about it and called me a slut. So why not really be a slut and get something back for it?”

My stomach is in a knot from what you’re saying and the look in your eyes as you say it: shocked at yourself, a little guilty, but mostly defiant. It takes me a moment to make up my mind what to say.

“It doesn’t matter, Mira, not to me. If you said you already love someone and could never love me, I’d probably throw myself in front of a bus. But I don’t think you’ve done anything wrong, except that it’s wrong for you: it’s not something you want, it’s something you’re forced to do to survive. Maybe if I was less of a coward I’d do the same thing. I get offers, you know. So I don’t think it makes you, like, immoral or sinful or something. It just makes me want to do anything I can to help you so you never have to do it again.”

You smile and shake your head. “You’re a trip, Jason. You’re the original hopeless romantic. The funny thing is, I think you really feel that way. You’re the first one who ever has.” You look me in the eye a little playfully. “Would it be okay if we give each other a hug? I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. You just look like you need a hug.”

Now I smile. “That’s exactly what I need, Mira. And I think you could use one too.”

You open your arms and I put mine around you, and we hug each other tight for a long long moment. Then you draw away and we stand and look at each other, smiling like we’ve both gone completely simple-minded.

“I liked that,” you say. “I never got hugged much at home.”

“Me either,” I say. “My family was never big on displays of affection. Probably because they didn’t have any to display.”

“Maybe we can do it again sometime?”

“Anytime you want, my princess.”

You take my hand and hold it as we start walking again, both of us still smiling but not saying a word. But I’m thinking: this is good, this is really going well now. So don’t fuck it up.

When we reach the apartment, no one is there, so I tell you, “Excuse me, I’ll be back in a minute,” and climb up the drainpipe to the second floor in the usual way.

“Jason!” you exclaim in alarm. “What on Earth are you doing?”

“I don’t have a key,” I explain as I climb. “This is what everyone does when there’s no one here to let them in.” I stop at the sort of balcony where the first floor sticks out and say, “See? Nothing to it.”

You send me up a deep frown. “You don’t expect me to climb up there too, do you?”

“Why not? I know you can do it. No, just kidding. I’ll come down and open the door.”

We get upstairs and you look around at the dingy room, the worn-out mattresses lying all over the floor. “Not exactly the Hilton,” you comment. “Is it always this hot?”

“Pretty much. It helps make up for not having enough blankets.”

“And you say these people from New Mobe will be okay with me staying here?”

“Sure, as long as you hang out there some and help in the mailroom or whatever.”

“Nobody messes with your stuff here?”

“No, never.”

“Nobody messes with your body?”

“Not with mine, so far.”

“You’re not a girl, Jason.”

“It’s not like that, Mira. Girls sleep here all the time. Everyone’s cool. Nobody’ll mess with you.”

“It sounds like you’re just a bunch of hippies,” you say approvingly.

“I prefer ‘freaks’ myself.”

You look around again, quickly, then at me. “Sorry, Jason, I’m really not being choosy. This is way better than where I’ve been sleeping. I knew it would be before we even got here. You don’t want to know what kind of places I’ve been sleeping. Well no, I guess you already do. It’s really sweet of you to want to help me like this. Thank you.”

A kiss, a quick one on the cheek, but it leaves a memory of soft lips, almost feathery, like the brush of a passing angel’s wing.

“And you’ll help me with the New Mobe people? Because I don’t know if they’ll, you know, approve of me, approve of me staying here.”

“It’s not like that, Mira. You don’t have to ask for permission. Nobody’ll ask you any personal questions, they don’t ask anyone else. You’re my friend, that’s all anyone needs to know. But I don’t think they’ll have any problem with you. They really are hippies, or radicals. All about freedom and equality and peace and love and stuff. Women’s Lib, Gay Lib, you name it, they’re for it. *We’re* for it.”

“Well, okay. Should we go there now?”

“Sure. If you get started right away, you can stay here tonight. You can stay anyway, as my guest. But if you sign up as a volunteer, you’ll be, like, a member.”

“Oh Jason, don’t say it like that, you’ll make me cry. No one ever let me be a member of anything before.”

“I know how you feel, Mira. Welcome to the club.” And we give each other another hug.

Next I take you to Student Mobe, on the ninth floor of the building at Vermont and L, and introduce you to the boss, Sharon. She gives you a form to fill out and leaves us alone to work on it. You're not happy about the form.

— It asks all these questions. It invades my privacy.

— You ask me to fill it out for you while you tell me what to write down.

“Last name?”

“Why do they want to know that?”

“Uh, they ask everyone that. It's kind of routine.”

“I don't like to use my last name. It reminds me of bad things. Can't I just go by Mira? I bet I'm the only one here. Lots of people just go by one name. Donovan. Liberace. Capucine.”

I lean close and softly tell you, “It doesn't have to be your real name. I'm not using mine. First or last.”

“Jason isn't your real name?”

“Shh! No. Don't tell anyone.”

“So what's your real name?”

I look around, as if I'm worried that someone might overhear us, even though there's no one else nearby. And who knows? There are rumors that the FBI is bugging our offices.

“Daniel.”

“Oh. Well that's not bad. I kind of like it.”

“It's okay, but the point is, I'm trying not to get busted and sent home. So I can't use my real name, in case someone comes looking for me.”

“You really think someone will?”

“Yeah, I think my parents might send someone. That's the kind of people they are, especially my father. He thinks he's smarter than anyone else, and I'm sure he'd like to let me know that I can't outsmart him.”

“I don't think anyone's going to come looking for me. I know they won't.”

“But you still don't want to put down a last name?”

“I just don't like to be reminded of it. I want to forget everything about my family.”

“Okay. I'll just put down Not Applicable. Now it asks for your date of birth.”

“Why do they – ”

“No, wait, listen. You don’t have to put down the real one. I didn’t. I used the real month and day, but I added two years to make me look eighteen. They don’t actually check any of this. It goes in a filing cabinet.”

— I give you my real birthday, adding two years like you say, and you look a little surprised. “I’m exactly six months older than you,” you say.

“I knew you were an Aquarius,” I say, and you look a little more surprised. “You’re so logical, so intellectual, but funny. You have a good sense of humor.”

“Thank you, so do you.”

— We finish filling out the form. Most of the answers are made-up: your home address, phone number, what school you go to, stuff like that.

“Days and hours available to work?”

“Every day, let’s say anytime after one o’clock.”

“Okay. It doesn’t really matter, they aren’t going to schedule you to work any particular time. Like I said, I pretty much come and go when I want to. The work gets done.”

I give the form to Sharon, who doesn’t look at it, at least for now. “We’ve got everything covered here at the moment,” she says. “Why don’t you show Mira the mailroom? That seems to be where we need the most help at this point.”

I take you up to the tenth floor and around to the other side of the building. The mailroom is just a big room, a little shabby like the rest of the building. There are cardboard boxes stacked all over the place, a few long folding tables along the wall under the windows, a couple of smaller ones here and there, a copying machine the size of a Volkswagen, some folding metal chairs, and a cheap metal desk where Annie, the mailroom boss, is sitting and writing something.

I introduce the two of you, and Annie suggests that I take a couple of orders and fill them to show you how it’s done. Very simple stuff: pull together whatever they’re asking for – posters, flyers, stickers, buttons – then find an appropriate size box, fill it and seal it, put the mailing label on. Weigh it, get the postage rate from a chart that’s taped to the table next to the postage meter, set the meter for that amount, print the postage sticker, put it on the box, and set the box on the table with the other outgoing mail.

I kind of enjoy reading the mailing labels, seeing people’s names and the places they live, all over the country, imagining them opening the box and giving out the stuff we sent them. Knowing that people will be wearing our

buttons and reading our flyers in College Station Texas and Columbus Ohio and Atlanta Georgia and Portland Maine and Palo Alto California and hundreds of other places large and small.

Cream's *Disraeli Gears* album is playing on the portable stereo: "Mother's Lament," a silly English music hall-type song. I know the album well enough to know that's the last song on side two. Annie has finished what she was working on, gets up and goes out carrying her paper with her. The album ends, and I say, "Go ahead and see if there's anything you'd like to listen to." I'm curious to hear what you'll choose.

You go over to the stereo and start looking through the albums, most of which are ones I brought along when I ran away. I see you take out Jefferson Airplane's *After Bathing at Baxter's*, one of my favorites. That's good, I think: it shows we really are on the same wavelength.

While it's playing, you come and sit on the table beside where I'm working. You dangle your legs and give me a big smile. "Thank you, Jason. Thank you for everything: showing me the apartment, bringing me here, getting me signed up. I really appreciate it. I don't know how I can ever repay you," you add with a sly look.

I know you expect me to say something naughty, and yes, that's my first thought too: it'd be any straight male's first thought. But I decide I need to be different with you, I need you to see me as different. "The pleasure of your company is already more reward than I deserve, fair lady."

"How sweet of you to say so, gentle sir. I guess I'll just save what I was thinking of for another occasion."

"Oh. Well, don't forget it. The night is still young, you know. I might do you another favor before it's over."

"I can hardly wait," you say with a suggestive smile.

When we're done for the evening, Annie walks with us to 13th Street. As we're leaving the building, a police car lets out a whoop of its siren, echoing loudly off the office buildings. It startles all three of us, but you jump so hard you almost knock me down, like you're getting ready to run right through me. I put my hands gently on your shoulders to steady you. "Whoa," I say. "It's okay, he's just pulling over that car."

You give me an embarrassed smile. "Sorry," you say. "I didn't even know he was there, the siren startled the shit out of me."

At the apartment, the lights are on and the rope we use for a signal is hanging down. Annie gives the rope a good hard yank, and a moment later a

head sticks out the window. “Hey, lighten up on that,” it says. “Oh, hi Annie, I didn’t know that was you. Hold on a second.”

There are already four people upstairs: the guy who let us in and another single guy, and a couple, Doug and Melanie. All regulars at the apartment, just hanging out at the moment, sitting or reclining on various mattresses: the room has no chairs or couches, or any other kind of furniture.

I head toward the mattress that’s closest to the big radiator under the front windows. Everyone else thinks it’s too hot to sleep there, but I tend to feel chilly anywhere else. You sit down beside me, following my lead, while the others watch with undisguised curiosity.

“Oh, everybody, this is Mira,” I tell them, feeling like I’m sponsoring you for a club or something. “She just started at New Mobe today.”

Everyone says hi. “I love your shawl,” says Melanie. “It’s far out.”

“Very psychedelic,” says Doug.

We make idle chitchat for a while. A couple more people come along and I go downstairs to let them in. Eventually Doug and Melanie head for the back room and everyone takes the cue to settle down for the night. Somebody switches off the ceiling light, the only light in the room.

“You can sleep anywhere you want,” I tell you softly, as I stretch out on the mattress. “The back room is kind of reserved for couples, if there are any, but it’s not, like, a rule.”

“Don’t you want me to sleep with you?” you whisper back, lying down beside me. “That’s what you said.”

“Nothing in the world would make me happier. But I don’t want you to feel obligated. You know, just because I’ve been so nice to you and done so many good things for you and all. No pressure at all. I won’t even mention it.”

“No, of course not. Even though you just did.”

“Oh, you noticed that.”

“Jason?”

“Yes, Mira?”

“Shut up and roll over. No, the other way. I want to make spoons with you.”

“Yes ma’am.”

I feel you mold yourself to my back, hips, legs, and lay your free hand on my shoulder. “There, that’s nice,” you whisper. “Good night, sweet prince.” You give me a quick kiss on the back of my neck.

“Good night, my princess,” I whisper back.

I’m sure I’m going to have a hard time going to sleep, so I start doing a yoga breathing exercise I’ve been practicing for a while. It helps: I relax a little. But I’m deeply aware of your presence. This is a totally new experience for me, this nearness and these sensations – this warmth, this aliveness, this pressure and release of your body against my back as your breathing settles down, deepens, slows. After a few minutes we’re breathing together, and sleep comes quickly after all.