

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE SUGAR FACTORY

**Rachel Waugh, Master of Fine Arts, 2016**

Thesis Directed By: Maud Casey, Professor of Creative Writing,  
English Department

Luke Banas is a young video artist who lives illegally in the disused Domino sugar refinery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. While his art is an attempt to fully record and share his own life story, developers want to tear down the building where he works; a building that's a monument to his hip neighborhood's industrial past. The novel's narrator, Lila Fairfax, is a journalist writing her first feature article about Luke and the fate of the factory. Observant and astute, she soon realizes that, despite his obsessive self-revelation, Luke is hiding a secret. Lila's rational, detached approach to life is disrupted as, in the course of her reporting, she falls in love with Luke and as a result, learns far more than she anticipated. Though primarily a love story, *The Sugar Factory* is also an investigation of art, and art's interaction with commerce, history, and new technology.

THE SUGAR FACTORY

by

Rachel Waugh

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Maud Casey, Chair

Professor Emily Mitchell

Professor Howard Norman

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## Chapter 1

I first heard of the dispute over the sugar factory last September. That was how I met Luke. Luke Banas, the artist famous for recording his whole life. That's impossible, I know. Funny that I watched him doing it.

I'm talking about the Domino sugar factory. That huge, red brick building with the giant smoke stack that once made over half the sugar in America. Right here on the Williamsburg waterfront where Brooklyn faces Manhattan across the East River.

Of course, factories don't really make sugar; they refine it. In its heyday, this one took in hundreds of tons of raw material from Africa, Asia, South America. The workers were European immigrants. They would unload the sticky brown sand and boil it in huge vats. The temperatures inside the buildings were tropical. When crystals formed in the syrup, they would spin the slurry until the white grains separated from the dark molasses, then package them for distribution across the country. I like to picture the factory as a giant crucible, taking in the sweetness of the world and refining it to meet the standards of the American public.

By the time I met Luke, the factory hadn't produced any sugar for a couple of years, but it was far from empty. That's what the dispute was about.

When I heard about it I was sitting outside at a café on Bedford Avenue. At the next table were two women a few years older than me, both guarding sleeping babies in expensive looking strollers. It was a crystal clear September day, the kind that makes New York City – even Brooklyn – look clean. A few scrappy trees were sporting orange and green leaves. The sky was a bright azure and the red brick tenements glowed. Layers of

posters fluttered on the telephone poles. Retired Italians sat on deck chairs surveying the passersby. Polish and Dominican immigrants hurried to and from work. Artists, poor and scruffy, dodged other, newer residents either rich and scruffy, or rich and unapologetically well dressed, all with eyes cast down on tiny hand-held screens.

As she scraped up the last spoonful of her crème brûlée, one of the mothers complained that she was having a hard time getting her toddler to eat his vegetables. “Ugh, I know,” said the other, licking cake crumbs off her polished fingertips. “Until a couple of weeks ago, Jupiter wouldn't eat anything except Cheerios. But then Christine—you know Christine, she runs the L Gallery — she said maybe we were offering him the wrong cuisine. She said, maybe, in a past life, he'd been used to, you know, Japanese, or Ethiopian. She figured American food was all wrong for him.”

“Oh my God, what did you do?” asked the friend, eyes wide over the rim of her cappuccino.

“We made, like, twenty different dishes for him and guess what? He likes Middle Eastern. So now we give him humus, we give him baba ghanoush. He even eats okra, if it's made with powdered sumac.”

“That's awesome,”

“I know, right?”

It was just as I'd suspected – you did have to be born hip. Then they started talking about the sugar factory.

“It's such a cool looking building.”

“Yeah. Christine's working really hard to preserve it.”

Even then, before I ever set foot inside it, I knew the outside of the factory well and silently agreed; it was very cool looking. At its center was a 19<sup>th</sup> century fortress of burgundy brick, punctuated by row upon row of small arched windows like hundreds of narrow eyes with eyebrows raised in disdain. Next to the fortress was a 1960s concrete tower. An enclosed metal walkway, set at a steep angle between the two structures, connected the architecture of two centuries. The top floor of the new block was walled in rectangular panes of glass, a random selection of them blue. On the waterfront, a long low-rise industrial shed topped with a tangle of metal tubes, and a multicolored collection of rusting silos joined the conglomeration of buildings. And, on the side of the tower that faced the river, *DOMINO SUGAR* was spelled out in once-illuminated letters that could still be seen by day from Manhattan's Midtown to the southernmost point of Battery Park.

But apparently the factory was now in danger of being replaced with loft-like condos, and somebody named Christine was leading an effort to preserve it. Could this be the news story I'd been hoping would just fall into my laptop? I opened my computer, and began typing, writing my way from one stage of my life into the next like a caterpillar spinning thread around herself, propelled by internal and external forces she can feel but doesn't yet understand.

I was pretty unsophisticated before I met Luke. I had moved from Pittsburgh a year earlier, in 2005, and, while doing a master's in journalism, lived on the Columbia campus. When I graduated, one of my professors helped me to get an internship working on the real estate section of New York Magazine's online edition. I mostly worked from home since there were no free desks at the office. All I had to do was enter the information

realtors emailed to me – mostly gleeful reports of ever-rising property values that defied the gloomy post- 9/11 predictions of a few years before. In return I received a small salary and the opportunity to pitch stories directly to the features editor; a loud British woman named Felicity Adams. My parents offered to pay my rent for a year, and I moved into a tiny walk-up in Williamsburg.

I chose the neighborhood because it was one subway stop from Manhattan on the L train, and because it promised the kind of authentic New York experience that had eluded me in my dorm room. As a J-school student I'd learned a lot about the city but the friends I'd made were from out of town, and when the course ended, for the most part they left. Besides, Williamsburg was frequently described in print and pixel as the epicenter of cool, and I was hoping some of that free-floating coolness would affix itself to me. As part of my effort to become cooler - and this may have been counterproductive - I spent hours online researching my new neighborhood's history. Starting with the collective wisdom of Wikipedia, I worked my way around the web. What I found out was that by the time Brooklyn was incorporated into New York City in 1898, Williamsburg had grown from its origins as a farmers' market to an industrial and financial hub, providing the nation with basic necessities like mustard, shoe polish, and sugar. At the turn of the century, when the Williamsburg Bridge was built, Eastern European and Italian immigrants spilled across from the Lower East Side. From 1924 onwards, they were able to do so by subway, riding the “L” train, that runs across lower Manhattan into Brooklyn.

When the industries died off in the 1970s and 80s, crack and crime took over. Huge empty warehouses and low-rent tenements attracted artists, and as time passed, a



variety of young professionals. By the time out-of-townies like me had discovered Williamsburg's charm, rents were only slightly lower than in Manhattan, but I willingly sacrificed space for location. Restaurants, galleries and cute stores proliferated around the Bedford Avenue stop, like the wads of gum subway riders spat out when they reached the sidewalk. And here was I, right where the heart of cool would be, if cool had a heart.

After a couple of weeks, despite all my research, I still hadn't come up with an idea for a feature. But I was on nodding terms with the proprietor of the nearest Korean deli, and I had a favorite cafe: The one where I was sitting that morning, on the corner of Bedford and North 5<sup>th</sup>, when I pitched Felicity the story about the sugar factory. Perhaps because I'm from Pittsburgh, another industrial city that the rest of the country once both depended upon and despised, I badly wanted to remind New Yorkers that this chic neighborhood owed its gritty appeal to actual industry. I drank my coffee and waited, hoping she would go for it.

My phone buzzed, disturbing one of the sleeping toddlers who whimpered and woke up the other. The two mothers sighed, downed their coffees and left. Since it was Felicity calling, I held the phone a little away from my ear.

"How did you hear about this?" she demanded. I explained. "Ask the yummy mummies where you can find Christine then go talk to her."

"But I was eavesdropping."

"Good. Now ask them."

"They actually just left."

"Lila, your writing and research skills are excellent. But if you want to succeed as

a reporter, you're going to have to learn to be a lot less polite," Felicity yelled. I promised to try my best.

On my way out of the cafe, I asked the woman behind the counter what the "L" was. She looked at me quizzically and replied with a Polish accent, "It is subway train."

"I know," I felt myself blushing, like I'd been exposed as a tourist, "I know it's the train, but is there a business with that name nearby?"

Standing next to me at the counter, a skinny black guy with a short Afro and green-framed glasses flicked the contents of a sugar packet into his cappuccino. "The gallery in the Old Dutch Mustard building," he said, and after looking me up and down felt the need to add, "on Wythe and Metropolitan."

Back home, I reassured myself that I really did live in Williamsburg. And I did. On the third floor of a barely renovated tenement, in a railroad apartment that had only two doors; the front door and the one that led to the egg-like bathroom with its curved walls, ancient white tiles and 1970s yellow tub. The remaining 300 square feet were divided by two archways, the remains of walls that had once separated the kitchen from the bedroom and the bedroom from the living room. Walls that were necessary once, when, incredibly, entire families lived here. All the wood in the place - from the baseboards to the handmade kitchen cabinets - was covered in so many layers of paint that all the corners had rounded edges like an illustration, making it the perfect toy apartment for me to play house in. I put up vintage curtains and bought a geranium for the kitchen window sill. I could only fit a loveseat and an ottoman, which doubled as my coffee table, into the living room, but the whole place filled with golden light in the evenings and if you

craned your neck out of the kitchen window you could see the sun set over lower Manhattan. When my parents came to visit, my dad said it was positively European. I had a cat named Holly Golightly that I'd adopted from a local shelter.

The following morning, I found the L Gallery in the Yellow Pages and the receptionist gave me an appointment to interview Christine at her loft. In the early evening, I left my apartment and walked two blocks west, then south down Wythe Avenue. On my right were intermittent views of the East River, and a barge, like a huge wooden raft, taking the city's garbage to somewhere else. Seagulls circled it like overprotective parents, the only ones reluctant to see it go. When I reached Metropolitan Avenue, I saw a big squat cube of a building, exuding the solid confidence of turn-of-the-century prosperity. Hand-painted Gothic letters read "Old Dutch Mustard Company" on the weather-beaten brick walls.

Inside, a freight elevator with no walls took me on an unnerving journey upward, and as my head, followed slowly by the rest of me, arrived at the fourth floor, a figure came into view through the diamond frames of the elevator's folding gate, silhouetted against the windows at the other end of a huge loft. A woman of around forty was cooking, sipping from a large wooden spoon and dipping it back into a huge pot of bubbling, aromatic sauce. She wore a tight black dress with a full skirt, which swung as she moved between the stove in her cobbled together kitchen island, and the dark wood cabinets and counter that ran along the back wall, under the windows, pulling down a small jar and adding a pinch of spice between tastes. She appeared both calm and energetic, slipping onto her nose a pair of glasses, which hung from a chain around her

neck, and peering through them at the recipe book she had propped up against the earthenware pot of a lavender plant. Behind her were acres of blue sky.

I closed the gate of the elevator with a clang and said, “Um . . . Christine?” The woman looked up over her glasses and smiled. “Come in, come in. I've been expecting you. Lila . . .?”

“Lila Fairfax. Thanks so much for agreeing to talk with me,” I stepped off the elevator directly into a space the dimensions of which made me want to pirouette from one end to the other. The view to the northwest gave me the illusion of being at eye level with the remaining towers of lower Manhattan, glittering in the evening light. To the southeast, Brooklyn sprawled like a stray dog on a hot day.

I walked about 40 feet into the room and extended my hand. As she walked toward me, Christine wiped sauce off her fingers and entwined them in mine, leading me to a vintage sofa upholstered in green velvet. “Oh please, are you kidding?” she said. “I'm just so happy you're going to be writing about the sugar factory. It's such an important symbol of the neighborhood. Would you like some tea? Or a glass of wine?”

“Oh, tea would be great. Thanks. You have an amazing place.”

Christine filled a huge iron kettle and used a match to light the burner. Then she turned her back to me and perused her shelves. “Let's see. I have Earl Grey, English breakfast, Irish breakfast, Darjeeling, Assam, Ceylon, lapsang souchong or jasmine; or maybe you'd prefer herbal: peach, masala chai, lemon, ginger spice, chamomile, rooibos or mint?” When Christine finally reached the end of the list I laughed out loud. She smiled, “I guess I'm kind of a tea nut.”

“No, no. You're like a – a tea fairy. You choose.” She looked pleased, and as she made the tea I took out my tape recorder and checked the batteries. Then I gazed around me. Nothing in the huge room matched. The walls were partially plastered, the floorboards wide and uneven. The chairs around the dining table were eight different shapes but since they were all painted white, made a set. House plants taller than me stood in the middle of the floor like shy guests. Three massive abstract oil paintings took up one wall. Hundreds of tiny paintings and random objects – a green plastic skull, a toy car, a mirror framed with bottle caps – covered another. Walking over with a tray, Christine sat next to me on the mossy sofa and placed two small Moroccan glasses of mint tea on the coffee table and offered me a slightly rusty canister sporting the words *Domino Sugar!* in jaunty cursive. “So. Where should we start?” she asked.

“Hmm. When did you first move to the neighborhood?”

“Oh, it must have been . . . 1994. Williamsburg has changed so much in the last ten years. Can you believe it - at that time there wasn't even an ATM on Bedford Avenue? Not a single trendy restaurant or boutique— but it was fun. We ate a lot of Polish food. We'd stay out all night then go for pierogies at Kasia's and watch the sun coming up. The only other people awake were dock workers and hookers. We bought all our clothes at the Salvation Army. That was before people called old clothes ‘vintage.’ Back then when you said vintage you were talking about wine.” Christine looked at me intently as she spoke, her body inclined toward mine.

“Now we're being inundated with P.R. types and celebrities,” she continued, pausing to take a sip of tea. Steam rose from the glass. “But that's how it goes. Just look at

Soho. Look at the West Village. What am I going to do? Move to Redhook? I'm too old to be an urban pioneer again and I probably couldn't afford it anyway.” Christine smiled in a way that let me know I should take her self-deprecation with a pinch of salt. “Do you know who's been looking at the penthouse of the Gretsch building?” she asked, then, pretending to be horrified, slowly mouthed the letters, “Jay-Z.”

“He did grow up here, though, so . . .” I shrugged.

“Jay-Z grew up in Williamsburg?”

“Yes. In a project near the J and Z trains. That's where his name comes from.”

“Hm,” said Christine. “How interesting.”

It was true. Shawn Carter, as he was known as a kid, grew up in the Marcy Houses off Myrtle Avenue, and attended IS 318. Surely he had as much right as anyone, I tentatively suggested, to buy a three million dollar penthouse on top of the Gretsch building, a former musical instrument factory with a view of the trains he named himself after, crossing high over the East River between Brooklyn and Manhattan?

“Maybe,” said Christine, “but the point, is that we don't want the sugar factory to end its days housing celebrities who have moved to Williamsburg in search of the very artistic community they are inadvertently pricing out of the neighborhood. We have other plans.”

Domino closed the refinery in 2004, Christine explained, blaming high fructose corn syrup and the resulting drop in the demand for sugar, and the building had been on the market for a couple of years. Artists had clipped the barbed wire and while ownership remained unresolved, made what they could of its dark and sweet smelling interior. A

developer, Mark Unger, was trying to buy the site in order to raze it and put up loft-like condos in its place. Christine told me she was heading a non-profit that also aimed to buy the building but planned to leave most of it intact. She wanted the factory's status to be changed from unofficial to official artists' housing, studios and gallery space.

“Come and take a look, Lila,” She motioned me toward the south facing windows, “see how beautiful the factory is from here.” I looked down and saw a guy walking a very small dog directly beneath me. I could've leaned over and sprinkled cinnamon on the foam of his latte. Then I looked out across the rooftops of tenements and other, smaller factories toward the facade of the Victorian behemoth. At its center stood a giant smoke stack, like a middle finger raised at Manhattan. Seen from Christine's window, without the collage of new buildings visible, the refinery looked a little less like Willy Wonka's meth lab, and more like a Bavarian castle.

“It's so stunning from this angle. The original buildings are landmarked, of course,” said Christine. But to me, the factory's beauty was not due to its imposing architecture, but to its candor. It wore its history on its sleeve. Facing waves of technological advances it had added mismatched layers to its form, like a sandcastle that had miraculously withstood the changing tides by gathering to its walls strands of seaweed, plastic bottle caps, and old Popsicle sticks. Even the haphazardly applied graffiti on the factory's walls could not trivialize its presence. From all angles its message was clear: I'm still standing.

“Isn't it wonderful? What a tragedy it would be if we lost it.” said Christine. “Oops, I have to check on my sauce. I hope you can stay for dinner? Good. I've invited

someone you might like to meet.” She resumed dipping and tasting, then filled a second large pot with water and heaved it onto the burner. I offered to help, and she set me to work tearing basil leaves off a small tree. When the water began to bubble, she took out of the fridge a wooden rack draped with strands of homemade pasta and dropped them in, one by one.

The elevator gate closed with a clang and a man in his early sixties strode in, wearing a perfectly tailored grey wool suit, a tan and a silk tie that he was loosening with one hand. In the other he carried a briefcase. “Christine, my dear,” he said warmly, as she trotted across the expansive floor to kiss him on the cheek and hang up his jacket.

“Lila, this is Mark, my father,” said Christine.

Mark shook my hand, smiling at me as if I were a child, and handshakes were still a novelty, which was kind of true. He took possession of a leather arm chair, grunting slightly as he leaned back, the smooth fabric of his shirt straining against his belly. He rolled up his sleeves revealing a chunky Swiss watch on one thick, hairy wrist. “So Lila,” his voice was gravel and honey, “what brings you to New York?” He chuckled and added wryly, “to our great metropolis.”

“I have a kind of a job at New York Magazine.”

“Oh, yes?” he replied. Christine brought us both glasses of red wine and Mark raised his to me, an expansive smile spreading across his wide face. “What kind of job, exactly?”

“Lila's writing a piece about the sugar factory,” said Christine, carefully setting cloth napkins around the table.



“Really,” said Mark, looking at me as if I'd snapped into focus. In a moment he smiled again, “And where do you stand on the issue?”

“Well, I love old buildings. And the factory is beautiful. But of course, I have to reserve my judgement until I have all the facts.”

“Of course. Spoken like a true journalist. Did you hear that, Christine?”

“Yes, I did. Lila and I just met and I'm very impressed by her integrity.”

Christine placed a big bowl of leaves on the table. “I guess Justin's running late. Let's start without him.” Mark and I moved to the table as she served us. “Well, my dear, what is this fabulous arrangement of greenery?” Mark asked.

“It is organic Tuscan kale with squash blossoms and lemon oil,” said Christine.

“Of course, Italians traditionally serve salad at the end of a meal but Mark eats more greens if we start with them.”

“Right, before I fill up on pasta,” Mark nodded. “Christine takes better care of me than I do.”

“Thank you. So Lila, where do you live?” Christine asked. I told her. “That's a great location, right near the train.”

“Yes. I love it. It gets a little noisy, though.”

“Ah, you're not a New Yorker yet. Pretty soon you'll be sleeping through anything; sirens, trucks backing up,” she said.

“Your neighbors getting mugged,” added Mark.

“You've gotten so squeamish. You grew up in Brooklyn, remember?”

“Ah, that was a long time ago.”

Another clang from the elevator announced Justin. He was a tall, skinny guy in skinny jeans and a black t-shirt, and had an apologetic air, perhaps not only because he was late but because he knew he was hardly an original. That first time we met, though, he was just as exotic to me as everything else in Christine's loft. As he dismissed me with a glance, I fought the familiar feeling that I am too undeniably suburban. My teeth are straight and white, my skin is smooth and freckled. I am polite. I have no nervous gestures or bitten nails. Despite my red hair, I am level headed.

“Hey,” said Justin, holding up a palm in greeting. His narrow wrists were circled with strips of leather and dirty thread. He sat down next to Christine. “Sorry. The L was fuckin' packed as usual.”

“Yes. Transportation is a problem now that the neighborhood has so many condos, housing so many commuters,” said Christine.

“Since we're providing Lila with quotes,” said Mark, breaking a loaf of crusty bread in half, “here's mine: The new water taxi will prevent the subway from becoming overcrowded.”

“The taxi that goes to Wall Street?” asked Christine.

“Do you have a problem with Wall Street?” Mark said quietly.

“Only when it interferes with Williamsburg.” While Christine looked expectantly at Mark, Justin stuffed his mouth with bread and stared blankly past me. Eventually, Mark smiled and picked up his fork, and Justin patted Christine tentatively, leaving some crumbs on her shoulder.

I was completely confused. At first I'd thought that Justin was the “someone”

Christine had said I might like to meet but she hadn't even introduced him to me. Was he her son? That must be it. But Mark had barely spoken to him. Although my plate of foliage looked more decorative than edible, I gamely stuck in my fork and, following Justin's example, chewed instead of speaking. The light was fading and the table was illuminated by strings of twinkling lights twisted around the overhead pipes. "Wow, I didn't know kale could taste good. I mean this good," I blurted.

Mark's Blackberry pinged and after glancing at it he said, "I have to take this."

"Ugh," said Christine in exasperation. "Be quick." Mark walked away from the table and stood at the other end of the loft, facing a wall. As he listened, his eyes wandered over the art in front of him without seeing it. Then he nodded and said, "Uh huh. Uh huh."

"Excuse me, I'm going to ask him to take that in the bedroom." Christine walked over and nudged Mark through a door in a drywall partition. She closed the door behind them.

"Where do you live?" asked Justin with his mouth full. Again, I answered that I lived on Bedford Avenue, a couple of blocks from the subway.

"How much do you pay?"

"My rent? Why do you ask?" I said, repeating what I'd been taught to say in response to personal questions. Justin stopped chewing and looked at me. "Because if you have a good deal, I might want to move into your building," he said, apparently resisting the urge to add, "duh."

I told him, then asked, "Where do you live?"

"In Queens. The commute is killing me. I'm trying to get a space in the sugar

factory. Don't say anything to Mark.” He poured himself another glass of wine.

“Why don't you want Mark to know where you live?” I thought about Felicity's advice. “Is he your grandfather?”

“My grandfather?” Justin repeated, frowning. Then he started laughing like a hyena. “You think Mark's my grandpa?” I shrugged. “He's Mark fucking Unger. If I was his grandson I'd be living in fucking . . .” Justin worked his imagination, “. . . fucking, Park Avenue or some shit like that.”

“But Mark Unger wants to buy the sugar factory.”

“Duh.”

“OK, but -”

“Yeah. And Christine's not my mom. I'm pretty sure there are laws against that.”

Christine came out of the bedroom and walked to the stove. I didn't understand then why she hadn't told me right away who her father was. I didn't understand because I didn't yet know how much she loved to throw people off balance. She stirred the sauce and pasta together in a bowl and carried it to the table, saying, “Let's eat.”

As we inhaled the olive-and-tomato-scented steam rising from the noodles, Mark came out of the bedroom and waved his Blackberry at us. “See, I'm turning it off,” he sat down. “Mmm, this smells great. Puttanesca. My favorite.” Mark passed his plate to Christine and after she had filled it, I did the same. I'd only had pasta out of a box until then and I can remember my first bite even now, a year later. As I chewed I tried to formulate questions.

“So Justin, what's showing at PS1 this month?” Christine asked.

“Oh, a pile of shit as usual. Photos of some woman French kissing her cat. Stuff like that. Except this one guy, he's pretty cool. He records everything. I mean, like, everything. Him brushing his teeth, people on the subway. Then he puts the footage on his web site.”

“And why does he do that?” asked Mark.

“It's like a comment, on like, how we're all voyeurs, and how we all want to be watched. And how time, you know, passes. You watch his video and you're like, shit, this is my life. I mean, think about how much time you spend, you know, just doing shit.”

“Of course, I'm not an artist,” said Mark, “but it sounds to me as if this young man is wasting his time. ”

“That's right, Mark, you're not an artist,” said Christine.

“You're a property developer,” I said.

“Yes, Lila,” said Mark. “I'm trying to buy the sugar factory but it looks as if my daughter here is outsmarting me.”

“Not ‘outsmarting,’” said Christine, “I have the community behind me. You'll never get approval from the board.”

“You're probably right,” said Mark.

“What, do you mean?” I asked.

“The building is zoned for industry, not residences,” said Christine. “The community board will approve my plan to rezone, as it preserves the spirit of the neighborhood, but not Mark's, because he's trying to turn Williamsburg into an amusement park.”

I thought about pulling out my tape recorder but I didn't want to break their flow. Also, I couldn't imagine ever forgetting what they were saying.

“Yeah. A fun house,” said Justin, boldly.

“Whereas now, it's . . . what? A hive of industry?” said Mark. “What exactly does Williamsburg produce these days?” (later: “*What does Wall St. make?*” “*Wall st. makes money.*”)

“Williamsburg makes art,” said Christine.

“S'right,” said Justin, draining his glass. Mark stared at him until Justin mumbled something and looked away.

I helped Christine clear the dishes. She opened more wine while I loaded the dishwasher and Justin rolled two joints and gave one to Mark. “Finally, something they can agree on,” Christine whispered to me. “Don't tell *New York* magazine.” Justin heard her and looked at me. “What do you cover?”

“Real estate. And, whatever else I want to, I guess.”

“You should come to my next show.” He slid a postcard across the table to me, half-covering it with his palm so Mark wouldn't be able to read it. Hesitating at the subterfuge, I picked it up and read it with my back to the table. On one side was a photo of the Domino refinery and on the other side were the words “The Sugar Factory,” a date, a list of names, and a web site address. When I sat down again I put it in my bag. We drank and talked some more about the neighborhood, and New York in general, as New Yorkers always seem to do. Justin asked me again to go to his opening, and in the spirit of investigative journalism, I agreed. At around 10, Mark pushed himself out of his chair,

and kissed Christine goodbye. “Why don’t you take the elevator together?” Christine asked me. “The damn thing takes forever to get back up here.”

“OK,” I said. “Thanks for a fantastic dinner. It was so great to meet you.” I picked up my bag and jacket. “You too,” said Christine, hugging me. “Just don’t listen to whatever Mark has to say,” she added.

“No doubt Lila is more than capable of making up her own mind,” said Mark.

As we stepped into the elevator and rumbled to street level, Mark asked me, “So, whose side are you on, Lila?”

“Journalists don’t take sides, Mark,” I answered, and we laughed. “Seriously, I’m right at the beginning of my reporting.”

“Of course,” he said. “Good hunting.”

Once I got home, I could barely sleep, I was so filled with an emotion I couldn’t put into words. At dawn, I sat on my fire escape drinking a cup of coffee as working Brooklyn roused itself. Metal gates were being rolled up on Bedford Avenue’s storefronts. Garbage and restaurant supplies were being picked up and dropped off. A lost yellow cab, like a bee separated from the hive, was trying to find its way back to Manhattan. There was not a hipster in sight. Except one.

Across the alley between sleeping tenement buildings a guy in a knit cap was behaving very strangely. He tiptoed up to a pigeon, holding his head at an odd angle, like a pigeon himself. When he was as close as possible, he crouched down, and staying completely still, regarded it for a full minute. While he watched it, I watched him, equally

transfixed. Eventually, the bird flew to a telephone wire and he continued to gaze up at it. As I followed his line of vision, I understood the feeling that had woken me up that morning. It was the sense that my real life was finally beginning.

I think of that morning as the first time I met Luke.



## Chapter 2

Felicity was somewhat happy with the notes I sent her the next day. She felt that my piece should include more about the art that was coming out of the factory, and told me to pick one artist to focus on, so I decided to check out the web site on Justin's card. The site was surprisingly professional. The first page was a photo of the factory, cut and pasted against a black background, with its smoke stack pumping out hand-drawn cartoon clouds. I slid my cursor over the surface until it turned into a little hand on the factory door, which creaked as I pushed it open. The next screen showed a hall of interior doors, that were also photos embellished with pen and ink drawings. Each door had a name on it. I clicked on Justin's door. A mad Mickey Mouse jack-in-the box popped out screaming, making me jump and spill my coffee. I tried a couple of other doors. Behind one were lots of photos of graffiti on subway cars and walls, some of which I recognized from around the neighborhood. Another door revealed computer generated images of lines in space, spinning, expanding, and contracting. They were pretty, but reminded me of an old screensaver.

Then I saw the name Luke Banas. In my head, I pronounced it the way it's spelled, B. A. N. A. S., with the accent on the first syllable. Actually it's pronounced B'nash. Like panache. A good fit for Luke. Perhaps that's why he chose it.

I clicked on the door. Behind it was a picture of an old wooden cabinet like the ones they used to have in libraries, to hold all the little cards. I rolled my cursor, which had become a magnifying glass, over the drawers, and clicked on one labelled "Bird

Brain.” The drawer opened and I zoomed into it, until, in the darkness, a movie began to play. I can see it now, in my mind’s eye; and literally, if I wanted to. I’m positive it’s still online.

### Bird Brain

*A cockroach lies on its back, waving its legs feebly, stroking the air. It rights itself, and hobbles a fraction of an inch, then a giant beak descends, stabbing at it like a spiked jackhammer. The camera pans out and shows the beak attached to a bird that continues to peck at the bug. Because the bird’s eyes are set so wide apart, when it turns its head to one side to inspect the bug, it gives the impression that it’s looking straight at the camera; that it knows someone is watching it. When it turns back to peck, the eye facing the camera is beautiful - pale blue and perfectly round - but blank; the eye of a vacant or very angry person. Rapid, staccato movements are followed by moments of stillness, as if the bird has forgotten the bug exists until, once again, it attacks.*

*The soundtrack accompanying the video is of a woman’s voice, speaking Polish. The voice is critical, intermittent; the harshest tones parallel the jabs of the bird’s beak. In the background is the sound of a baseball game playing on TV.*

Someone knocked on my door. Caught in my peephole fishbowl view, was a woman in a red dress. She opened her eyes wide and pursed her scarlet lips like a goldfish, then brought her face right up to the door until one huge blue eye blinked at mine. She was

wearing false eyelashes. “Hell-oo,” she said. “Anybody home?” When I opened my door she burst in like a one woman carnival, and my tiny apartment shrank to half its size. “Hey neighbor! Can I borrow a cup of sugar?”

“OK. Come on in,” I said.

She extended her hand, which was red and chapped, like a little kid's. Her blue nail polish was chipped and her otherwise pale arms were covered with tattoos, mostly the classic sailor kind; an anchor, mermaids, a pair of bluebirds, and a heart, itself tattooed with the word “MOM.” “Hi. I'm Val. I live across from you.”

“I'm Lila. Nice to meet you. Why don't you sit down. I'll get the sugar.”

“Oh, no. I don't need any. Not really. I was just kidding. I don't eat refined sugar, I just wanted to meet my new nabe.”

Val plonked down on my loveseat and swung her feet over the end. She looked around, nodding. “I like what you've done with the place. The guy who lived here before was a total pig,” she peered under the sofa as if to check that he wasn't still there. “So, what are they charging you?” She asked. I told her because I wanted to know what her rent was.

“Jeezus.” Val whistled.

“Yeah. How about you?”

“I can't tell you.” Val kicked off her shoes. They were vintage heels, and had given her blisters.

“Why not?”

“Because I have rent control, and I've been here a while so if I tell you, you'll hate

me. Plus, I promised Lou I wouldn't." Lou was our landlord.

"How long have you lived here?"

"Twenty seven years."

"No way."

"Yup. I was born in this building. Well, I was born at St. Vincent's but you know, this was my first home. Took my first steps here. Went to school around the corner."

"Wow. That's amazing."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I didn't think anyone was actually from Williamsburg." Val extended her arm to me again, elbow first.

"Touch me, Lila. I'm real." I laughed and patted the tail of a mermaid that twisted around her wrist. "So you are."

I made some fresh coffee and we talked for a while. I told her where I'm from. Val had been to Pittsburgh to visit the Andy Warhol museum while she was in art school –she was an art teacher – so I opened the the Sugar Factory web site and showed her Luke's work, starting at the library card catalogue. We clicked on a drawer labelled "Disconnect."

### Disconnect

*The movie begins with the sound of a heart beating in the darkness. The beat gets gradually louder, and is matched by a tiny pulsing light. The light expands and becomes an embryo, rapidly growing and passing through the stages of its development until it's a*

*fetus floating in utero, attached to the walls of it's dark red home by a grey twisted rope of umbilical cord. Gentle piano music plays as it bends its knees and pushes off from the uterine wall, bouncing against the one opposite. The cord tightens and slackens as the fetus ricochets around its cell, either joyfully, or in an effort to escape. With one final push, the fetus morphs into an astronaut floating in space, attached to the mother ship by an umbilical-like tube The lullaby is replaced by eerie space music. Then the astronaut changes into a dry leaf loosening from a twig, twisting in the wind. One after the other, the baby and the astronaut and the leaf disconnect from their tethers and are cast away, spinning into deep space. The wind, the eerie music, and the baby's cry combine to form a plaintive wail.*

“Hmm,” said Val. “Mommy issues.”

“How do you get that?”

“You're kidding?”

“Yes, I'm kidding. But I like it. It's so self-contained. Like a snow globe.”

“What's this?” Val moved the cursor, reorienting our view. A desk (the librarian's?) appeared. On it were piles of books, a small cactus in a pot, and a clunky grey computer. Val clicked on the image of the desktop monitor. The monitor's screen grew aligned with mine, and letters spelled out, in that neon green space-agey font that old computers used, the words, “The Exposure Project.” Val clicked.

### The Exposure Project

Eggs were frying in a pan. The footage was black and white, and blurry. The eggs sizzled. A hand poked at them with a spatula and one of the yolks broke. A sound like a curse came from off-screen. The eggs sizzled.

“I’m hungry,” said Val. “Now I want eggs. You should come by later. I’m having a party to celebrate the fall equinox. Or Rosh Hashanah. Whatever you’re into.”

“OK, great. Thanks,” I said over my shoulder as Val left. I kept watching the blurry footage.

Eventually the eggs were cooked. Then they were consumed. With toast.

I kept my laptop open as I made my own lunch, and tidied up the apartment. Every so often the screen would go blank and I’d have to twitch the mouse to reawaken it. I took a nap. When I woke up, I woke up the screen. I checked the time, 4 pm. The same time, and the date, was displayed at the bottom of *The Exposure Project*. It was nice, like having a low maintenance roommate. The combination of intimacy and anonymity is something I love about city life, and here it was; personified.

A chair scraped as my new roommate shuffled into another room, the bathroom. His hand pulled back the shower curtain. There was a half-second blip and the camera angle changed to a shot of his feet, then the shower came on. The feet turned this way and that, and suds swirled around his toes.

It was like a very low budget soap commercial. Five minutes passed. The music from psycho came on, which was funny, and made the footage slightly less boring. Five more minutes passed and I did get bored. I went to take a shower, and treasured my privacy. When I came out and refreshed my screen I saw the back of Someone's freshly washed head, sitting at a desk, surrounded by screens. Nothing much happened, and if it weren't for his occasional scratching and coughing, I would have decided the picture was frozen. In desperation, I read a boring book about real estate that Felicity had recommended until, at around nine, I heard a procession of footsteps on the stairs so I got dressed, and brushed my teeth. By the time I was done, music was beckoning me from across the hall. When I left to go to Val's, I left my laptop open.

Across the hall, Val's apartment was so full, her guests were spilling out of her doorway. A couple were chatting on the tiny landing, while three more were sitting on the stairs. Getting into the apartment was like entering a crowded subway car, except that the crowd was lively and smiling, and trying its best to talk over the pounding music. I turned sideways and lifted the six pack I was carrying overhead. Slowed down by hands reaching for the bottles of beer, by the time I made it into the living room, only one was left. I held on to it tightly, wondering how to open it.

Val's place was the mirror image of mine, the same railroad car layout with a kitchen at one end and living/bedroom at the other. But every inch of Val's was decorated with thrift-store finds. Plastic fruit hung from the corners of the kitchen ceiling, along with strings of Mardi Gras beads and Christmas lights. A disco ball rotated in her living room, sending coins of light across her guests' faces, her faux tiger skin wall hanging, and her

collection of paint-by-numbers art.

“Liii-laaa” I saw Val’s hand waving in mock slow-motion at me from the kitchen. “Ho-old o-on.” Pretending to be a footballer in an action replay, she gently shoved her way towards me while balancing a platter overhead. Finally she presented it to me.

“Devilled egg?”

“Ah, no thanks. They look good, though.”

“An old family recipe.”

We were talking loudly, our faces almost touching. I held out my beer and mimed removing the cap. Val put down the eggs, took my hand and led me back to the kitchen, where she pointed to a bottle opener attached to the wall. A small trash can underneath it was already half full of caps. Val had changed into a different vintage dress. This one was fuller and shiny with blue and green swirls. I’m not good at fabrics but maybe it was taffeta. Two guys standing next to us were having an animated conversation, which Val interrupted by tugging on the elbow of the one wearing a tan corduroy jacket and glasses. “Lila, this is Graham,” we smiled and called out “hi” at each other, two strangers emboldened by beer and the comical loudness of the party, which forced us to speak up. “And this is Dave,” the other, taller guy had a rockabilly quiff and a single gold earring. “We teach together.”

“Is that what we do?” asked Dave, rolling his eyes.

“We try,” said Val. Graham shrugged and nodded.

“We try to keep them off the pipe,” said Dave. “Off the pole, and out of Club Fed.”



“Dave, you watch too much T.V.,” said a black woman with cowry shell earrings, as she reached over him for a chip.

“Life imitates art,” said Dave. “Lila, meet Karen. We smiled and raised our bottles at each other. “Michael Johnson and Sha-quon Pearson cut school yesterday to make money standing on a line up. What message does that send them about where they’re headed?” Dave continued.

“What do you mean? I asked.

“The police give our kids \$10 if they stand in a line up, you know, when a witness is trying to identify someone,” Karen explained.

“But what if they don’t fit the witness’s description?” I asked.

“That’s the problem,” said Graham. “They always do.”

“Oh,” I said. “I see.”

“This is how oppression gets internalized,” said Karen. “It’s why my history class figured Nelson Mandela must have spent 25 years in jail for drug offenses.” Mulling this, we all took solace in our beer. Then Karen turned to Val and started talking to her about raising money for a pair of prescription glasses for a student named Crystal, who wasn’t able to see the blackboard. “What do you teach?” I asked Graham. Just as he was about to answer, Dave cut in. “I’m math and Graham’s history.”

“Say what?” asked Val.

“I’m sorry, buddy. I thought you told her,” said Dave. Karen shook her head and walked slowly backward through the press of people.

“I teach English, actually. But - please don’t yell at me Val - I’m leaving at the

end of this year.” We were all already almost yelling but I sensed he meant something else.

“Where are you going?” asked Val. Graham looked around nervously.

“I’ve applied to law school,” he said, trying to shout and whisper at the same time.

“What?”

“LAW SCHOOL,” yelled Graham. For a beat, the noise level in the room dropped a decibel, and a couple of people glanced at him. Val, who had been bopping to the music, froze. She seemed to be deciding how to express herself. Then— “*Bastardo*,” she said and gave Graham a playful slap on the head. But she was really mad, and she kept slapping Graham, putting down her beer so she could use both hands. Graham cowered, at first in self-parody, then in self-defense. “Ow, Val. Ow. Your rings are hurting me.”

“Good. I hate you. *Brutto figlio di puttana bastardo!*” Val kept slapping Graham’s head and started to cry, the disco ball illuminating her tears like tiny jewels. Dave took hold of her elbows from behind and moved her arms to the rhythm, away from Graham and into the music. I remember it was *Take Me Out* by Franz Ferdinand. She spun around and grabbed Dave’s hand, pulling his left arm up and forward into a tango. Val and Dave strode dramatically into the living room and other people started dancing too, until the walls and floor of the shoe-box apartment shook.

Graham still had his head down. He was picking at the foil on his Corona.

“When did you start teaching?” I asked him.

“Just last year. Everyone says the first year is the hardest . . . so I thought I’d give

it one more go, but I knew, as soon as I came back this September that, that,” he paused, “that was it.”

“It must be really hard.” Graham nodded grimly, then he rallied.

“What do you do, Lila?” He seemed genuinely interested. I told him I was writing an article about Williamsburg artists and asked him if he ever went to local galleries.

“Not really. I prefer the Met. Val thinks I’m an art snob.” He picked at his beer again.

“She was pretty mad but I don’t think she really blames you, somehow.”

“Do you know what she called me? An ugly son of a bitch bastard.”

“Wow. It sounds so much nicer in Italian.”

“Everything does.”

Val and Dave double-stepped back into the kitchen. “What happened, Graham? Don’t you like being cursed at by kids on drugs packing heat?” Dave asked. “Oh that,” said Val. “He’s used to that.” In answer, Graham lifted the fine straight hair off his forehead to reveal a red circle the size of a quarter. “I have ringworm.” Val leaned in and scowled .

“Why d’you let it go like that?” She asked. Graham shrugged.

“I didn’t know what it was. Someone at the gym told me. Now I can’t go back there. But they won’t let me cancel my membership until the end of the year.”

“That seems unfair,” I said. If they won’t let you go back -”

“Well, *they* would -” Graham’s shoulders contorted some more.

“Aw, you’re too embarrassed,” said Val, hugging him. She put a blue fingernail on

Graham's forehead. "It's looks cool. You need another one." She added a second red circle near the first with the print of her lips.

"If you hate blood sucking parasites so much, why are you going to law school?" said Dave. "Why don't you just go down to Times Square and turn tricks with Angel Hernandez?"

"Is he doing that again? We talked about that," said Val, she raised her spread hands and turned her head as if to say she just couldn't take any more. Dave put his arm around her again. "Why is it always the ones named Angel?" Val asked. "Lila, if you ever meet a man named Angel, run."

"True that," said Dave. Graham shook his head. "Graham doesn't like my bad grammar, Lila."

"No grammar is bad, per se," said Graham. "But isn't it a little pretentious to adopt the syntax of a group to which you don't belong?"

"You mean like saying 'per se'? Ha! You're not French. And I do belong. I belong here," said Dave, surveying the crowd and raising his beer bottle as Val pulled him back to the dance floor.

"Do you think it's pretentious, Lila? To speak French?" Graham looked concerned.

"Totally," I said. "But 'per se' is Latin."

"Yeah. You're right," said Graham and yelled after Dave, "'Per se' is Latin, ya moron!" We laughed together and Graham asked me if I wanted to go out on the fire escape for some fresh air.

Kissing on a fire escape in New York City is so romantic. But the problem was, I was *thinking* about how romantic it is, and how we were like Tony and Maria from West Side Story, with the laundry hanging between the buildings and everything, which made me wonder how you hang laundry on a clothesline that high up - was there a pulley system? (There is, by the way.) Behind those thoughts floated the grainy black and white image of pale, delicate feet, and a hand, reaching repeatedly for a chipped mug full of coffee.

Graham pulled away, and caught me with my eyes open. “What’s up, Lila?”

“Oh, nothing. I’m just thinking about stuff.” Graham ran his hand through his fine hair.

“You must think I’m such a sell-out.”

“No. Really -”

“It wasn’t the kids. Most of them are just great. Enthusiastic, and fun, and very sweet. But they have such a terrible time. I had *one* adult show up for parent teacher conferences last semester. One. I have a hundred and fifty students. I called every single number on my roster. A lot of the phone lines were dead. Most of the people who picked up couldn’t speak English or were high. One showed up.” Graham raised an index finger off his beer bottle and swayed a little. “One, well-dressed, punctual, sober woman. I showed her the kid’s writing portfolio, and told her she should be proud of her daughter. But it wasn’t Sabrina’s mother. It was her probation officer.”

“That’s so sad.”

“I know. I can’t stand it any more. I can’t stand witnessing their lives.” Graham

leaned in again, this time for a hug. Apart from that, I didn't know how to comfort him.

"My dad's a lawyer," I said. Graham pulled back, possibly afraid of being sued.

"Really. What kind of law?"

"Mostly class action suits."

"Huh." Graham nodded energetically.

"Don't tell Val."

"Hah!"

"Or Dave!" I was climbing back in the window. "I'm going to head home now," I said.

"OK. Well, it was great meeting you," Graham sort of waved and saluted me with his beer bottle but it flew out of his hand and after a weirdly long interval of time during which we both held our breath hoping it would land on something soft, or maybe sprout wings and soar into the laundry festooned night, it hit concrete and shattered ostentatiously. An angry stream of Polish words followed us back into the apartment where I left Graham to face Val's wrath once again.

Midnight, said my kitchen clock, and *The Exposure Project* digitally concurred: 12:00:00 a.m. He was sitting at a desk, in front of a screen. On this screen within a screen I could barely make out a couple of pigeons, scratching and pecking. He stopped the film and backed it up. There were some clicks. He started the footage again, inching forward, editing, backing up. It was excruciating. But kind of fascinating. The pigeons pecked . . . then pecked in reverse at double speed, then pecked again. I went back to the card catalog.

On the front of one drawer is a photo of Michelangelo's *Pieta*. I know from my art history classes that the statue represents Mary holding Jesus after he's been taken down from the cross, but since I'm not religious, what I see when I look at it is a woman holding her adult son on her lap, like a big baby. She looks very young, and Christ looks vulnerable and beautiful like Kurt Cobain, and both of them are kind of anguished yet serene. He's utterly pathetic, and she's responding with infinite empathy. Perhaps it is her empathy that makes her beautiful. Anyway, they both look like human beings to me; his flesh and her robes are rendered in sensual, tactile curves and the emotion expressed by the statue is pity, of course, but I don't get the spiritual angle. Why should human beings feel sorry for God?

My virtual hand pulled open the *Pieta* drawer, and the title, *Dr. B*, and a list of dates appeared on the right. I clicked on the most recent and an older woman's voice, shaky in delivery but firm in intent, began, saying "Tell me what's on your mind." at the bottom of the screen a bar showed me how much of the recording had played. Then I heard what I recognize now as Luke's voice, and as he spoke, the Madonna's head began to nod slowly, and bright blue tears rolled down her marble cheeks.

Dr. B., 3/15/2005

LUKE: I was always afraid of disappearing. When I was a kid, when my hand went down my coat sleeve, I worried I'd never see it again. I would cry every time my mother put my coat on. I cried a lot. I was a pretty whiny kid.

DR. B: How old were you when you felt this way?

LUKE: I d'know. Two or three.

DR. B: You have an unusually good memory.

LUKE: OK. If you say so.

DR. B: What else do you remember from that time of your life?

LUKE: I loved taking a bath, and I never wanted to get out of the tub. One day I wouldn't get out so my mom pulled the plug and I watched the water go down the drain and I was so afraid that I would swirl down the plug hole with the water.

DR. B: What did she say to reassure you?

LUKE: She said I was being stupid. That I was much too big go down the plug hole. She held my wrist and forced my hand over the drain and I could see she was right. My fingers covered the hole and the water flowed through them. But I was scared.

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. The creator of *The Exposure Project* was recording his therapy sessions and posting them on the web. Just to confirm this, I clicked on another date, 07:06:2006. The image and the voices were the same. I watched and I listened.

Dr. B., 5/1/2005

LUKE: I heard a man being murdered.

DR. B: When?



LUKE: Last night. I heard it happen twenty years ago and I heard it again last night, in my head.

DR. B: Tell me what you heard.

LUKE: There was a fight going on outside my window. Two men were arguing in Spanish. One had a deep voice. There was a lot of yelling then the deep voice said something, very, I don't know, deadpan. The other one stopped yelling and got quiet. Then he started begging, and pleading. The guy with the deep voice didn't say anything. Then there was a gunshot. Then there was no more sound.

DR. B: What do you think happened?

LUKE: Back then, I thought, oh now you get brave. Now you stop crying. Like me, he complained until he was smacked, then he shut up. It's like he wanted to be hit. He was asking for it.

DR. B: What happened next?

LUKE: After a few minutes, I heard sirens. I figured the shot guy was being picked up, and taken to hospital, and the guy who shot him was going to jail. That's how I pictured it. But I kept thinking about it. About why the guy stopped screaming and crying *after* the gunshot. It didn't make sense. I replayed it in my mind a few times over the years. I decided I'd remembered it backwards. I decided he got shot then he started bawling.

DR. B: And what happened last night?

LUKE: I heard it all play out again, except this time I put together what happened. One guy pulled a gun. The other one screamed until he was shot dead. The one guy killed the other. Then he ran away. The police showed up after it was all over.

DR. B: Once you'd "put it together," how did that make you feel?

LUKE: They really do say that.

DR. B: I beg your pardon?

LUKE: Nothing. I felt hmm. Sad. Guilty. Like I coulda done something and I didn't. I didn't even get what happened until last night.

DR. B: Did you ever tell your parents about this incident?

LUKE: No.

*The Madonna wept more neon tears.*

I thought about how it would feel to hear a murder taking place outside my window. As shocked as I was by the fact of what this guy was sharing, I was completely drawn in by what he shared. And I felt scared. Miles away across the hall, the thump, thump of Val's speakers rocked my single bed in my own shoe-box home, like a small boat on a stormy sea.

## Chapter 3

Val and I had dinner and a bottle of wine at a local Thai restaurant then headed south to the sugar factory for the party Justin had told me about. It was a Thursday night but the neighborhood was busy. Stores and cafes were open, and the slow-moving cars pumped music from their windows. Officially, I was attending the opening as part of the research for my article, but mostly I was going in search of Luke. I was intrigued by his work, and wondered about the source of his suffering. His live-feed, *The Exposure Project*, was supposed to offer total revelation but he didn't ever film himself. Did he want to be seen, or not?

As we made our way down Bedford Avenue, we became aware of other people, walking in groups or singly, turning down side streets toward the waterfront, like ants congregating at a picnic. We followed, not knowing which particular building, let alone entrance, we were looking for. The trail of party-goers led us past the factory's central brick fortress to the long modern block on the river. Guided by the string of lights from cigarettes and cell phones, we crossed a wasteland of dried mud, weeds and broken bricks,, Val stumbled and giggled, and collected a couple of cool looks as we ascended a rickety metal fire escape into what I now know was the packaging plant.

A door at the top of the fire escape opened into a rectangular room. The upper half of the wall on our left was made of two rows of square-paned windows, which revealed Manhattan darkly through their blue glass, and reflected the party to itself. The room was full of packaging equipment. In the middle of the floor stood an assembly line like a

miniature obstacle course: a series of waist-high contraptions, resembling a Rube Goldberg machine, or a grade school project made of the insides of toilet rolls and old cornflake packets, all of which were sprayed with thick aqua paint. Threaded through the machines was a roller coaster of a conveyor belt that had once carried loaves of sugar along to be cut, cubed, wrapped and boxed. The whole room was sprinkled with white powder. Discarded snowballs of sugar lay scattered on the floor. People stood around, talking, their heels crunching the sticky grit into the peeling linoleum. The air was sweet and musty. Someone poked my arm.

“Hey, Lila. You made it.” It was Justin.

“Hi. Yeah. This is Val.”

“Uh huh. Come and take a look at my work.” Justin hustled me into the next room.

I looked back at Val, hoping she would come with me, but she shrugged and pointed to a couple of Formica kitchen cabinets topped with empty plastic cups and a few bottles of wine.

The next room smelled of sugar, like the last, but also sweat, some of it fresh but most of it decades old, emanating from the short rows of rusting lockers that stood perpendicular to the windows, like bookcases in a library. Inside some of the lockers were huge, boxy TV sets; two of them showing the endless mesmerizing loops I’d seen on the *Sugar Factory* web site. A third displayed the random dance of static accompanied by white noise that had plagued the analogue TVs of my childhood.

We passed through the locker room to another rectangular space, empty except for the milling crowd. On the left, through the same large blue window panes, Manhattan

appeared again, unmoved. Large canvases, illuminated by industrial flashlights, filled the wall to my right.

Justin's "anti-paintings," as he called them, were white rectangles sprayed with hip-hop style graffiti. They featured a lot of curse words and Jackson Pollock-style drips and splashes, and cartoon characters with severed limbs. The largest was of Mickey Mouse, his eyes two manic coked-up spirals, his legs braced in a semi-squat as he leveled an automatic weapon at the world. Justin stood next to me. "It's a comment on contemporary American culture," he said. I said something about needing a drink, and went to find one. An influx of people blocked my way back to the entrance so I went further into the factory, into another low-ceilinged room with windows that faced Manhattan, paintings on the walls, and empty plastic cups set out on folding tables.

Full cup in hand, I wove my way back through the party to find Val, but catching sight of Justin again, I ducked through a black curtain into a large storage closet, the inside of which had been painted all black. Two large flat screen TVs hung on the walls. On one screen, a cheerful crowd was dancing and singing. Heavy-set men with satisfied smiles had their arms around long-haired daughters. A band on a small stage played Italian folk music. Because the scene was filmed from above the crowd, which was swaying in time to the music, and because I was tipsy, it took me a moment to recognize the location; Havermeyer Street, in front of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

"It's the feast of the Giglio," I said aloud, and then I realized someone was standing next to me.

"Yes," he said. "Here she comes," a ten-foot-tall wooden structure covered in lilies

and holding a statue of the Madonna was being carried through the crowd by six men in purple t-shirts. “I was there,” I said.

“Me too.” He was just a couple of inches taller than me, and smelled of tobacco and gum.

On the other screen was a close up of a line of leaf cutter ants struggling to pick up and carry thick and unwieldy pieces of leaves. They waved their antennae and flicked the leaves around as if to find the best angle from which to hoist them. I looked back at the other screen, now showing up close the straining muscles of the men carrying the Giglio, shifting it on their shoulders. A calm male voice began, “the ants carry the leaves back to their nest where they masticate them into a paste.” On the other screen, a thick-necked guy wearing mirrored shades was chomping on a slice of pizza.

I laughed, and the person next to me acknowledged my response by laughing softly too.

As we watched, the music from the feast became louder, drowning out the voice over, and the movie of the ants sped up, and played backwards then forwards, so it looked like the ants were dancing to the accordion and the trumpet. Then the screens traded movies. Then both played the ants dancing for a few seconds before switching back to the Brooklyn crowd with the voice narrating, “Next to humans, leaf cutter ants form the largest and most complex animal societies on Earth.” The crowd swayed and jostled, passing paper plates around the wobbling Madonna. For a split second, I thought I caught a glimpse of myself in the group of revelers. I began to feel crowded and claustrophobic and slightly confused. Both cameras panned out, and I was looking at two similar moving

images – the ants marching and the people marching to the lively music and the soothing voice picked up its tempo as on both screens it started to rain. Silver balloons fell on the ants and burst, sending them sprawling, while invisible splatters made the humans raise their forearms over their heads and look up and grimace and run for cover.

The Giglio wobbled, the precious leaves fell in the dust, plastic garlands twisted and shook loose and paper plates were caught up in gusts of wind. The ants were knocked off their feet and the Giglio fell into the crowd and was barely caught, as water laid waste to the plans of both communities. Then both movies stopped abruptly and I was left in darkness with the stranger.

I felt breathless and stepped backwards partly tearing down the curtain, which was held up by push pins. He caught my wrist as I tripped and steadied me and my drink splashed a little on both of us. He made a sound like, “Oy-yay,” and smiled at me. It was the guy in the knit cap, who I'd seen stalking a pigeon a few days before. “So, what did you think?” he asked.

“Um, it was a little heavy handed.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, comparing the people to the ants, was kinda obvious.”

He shrugged, “Yeah, I guess so.”

“I mean, their efforts to survive, our efforts to create meaning, and find, you know, something spiritual in ritual, both at the mercy of nature . . .” I trailed off as I noticed he was pushing the curtain's pins back in position with his thumb, and frowning. “Oh my god. This is yours. I'm sorry,”

“No, no. Don't be sorry. That's what I was going for. I hope everyone gets it like you did. I always think nobody is ever going to get what I'm,” he rolled his eyes, “trying to say. You're right. It's heavy handed.”

“The camera work was great. Did you film that?”

“The Giglio part. Not the ants. I borrowed that from *Animal Planet*. Hey, do you want another drink?” He had a very slight accent that I couldn't place. I said yes, and as he walked through the crowd ahead of me, I watched his shoulder blades moving under his t-shirt, and the back of his neck. That's when I recognized him for the second time, from his web site.

“What's your name?” he asked, turning to hand me another cup of cheap red wine. “Lila,” I said, and my own name sounded different, as if I were hearing it for the first time. “I'm Luke,” he said. I didn't tell him that I already knew this. I just said, “it's nice to meet you,” which was, and was not, a lie.

Luke looked at me, searching my face, and I felt naked under his scrutiny. I wouldn't have been able to stand being seen so completely if I hadn't, by then, already known so much about him. My knowledge gave me a sense of security, as if in concealing what I knew I kept a corner of myself secret. I didn't think about the fact that this ace I held was information Luke had already shared with the whole world.

At that moment, Justin came over and said, “Luke, I need to talk to you about *The Exposure Project*.”

“I'll be right there,” he said.

“OK. Meet me in my office in five,” said Justin. Luke nodded in reply as Justin



walked away. “What does he mean?” I asked. “Does he have an office in here now?”

“He’s just being a dick,” said Luke. He hesitated, then took out his phone. “Lila, would you give me your number?” I told him and he began entering the digits. His black hair flopped down over his forehead as he frowned at the keypad. I know it doesn’t sound very romantic but I felt as if we were signing an important contract. He smiled at me, not a social smile, but with true delight, and his dark eyes twinkled. Then he leaned forward and kissed me. Ostensibly on the cheek - but the corners of our mouths intersected just enough to make a feeling like laughter curl through me.

After Luke left, I waited around for a few minutes, pretending to look at Justin’s paintings. I went into the locker room and tried to open one of the closed lockers, but it was rusted shut. When I realized Luke wasn’t coming back, I went to look for Val. I found her talking to a guy and began to back away but she pulled me into their conversation.

“Lila, this is Bill. He rolls his own.” Bill nodded and raised his home-made cigarette a half inch in greeting. He was wearing black jeans and a black t-shirt, a black canvas messenger bag across his portly torso, and wire-rimmed glasses. “Lila’s writing an article about the Sugar Factory for *New York* magazine.”

“Oh. Did you see my work?” Bill asked. I shook my head. “Come.” Bill led me and Val through a doorway onto a section of roof that caught the wind blowing off the river. The air was crisp, and the lights of Manhattan twinkled coldly on the ripples of the water. “Hold on,” said Bill, reaching for a switch. A ululating whining sound, like a child imitating a police siren, echoed around us, bouncing from one hidden speaker to another.

A catch in the throat became a long bark, and other wolf voices joined the first to form a layered and repeating howl. We stood in the semi-darkness letting the sounds wash over us.

“OK,” said Val. “That was great but I’m freezing. Open the door, Bill.” We stepped back inside.

“That was cool,” I said.

“Yeah,” said Bill. “It turned out real well. But I can’t show it.”

“Why the hell not?” asked Val.

“It’s site specific,” said Bill. “Unless I can find a gallery willing to recreate the whole fucking tri-state area it’s just a tape of a bunch of wolves. To truly experience the piece you have to be outside, up high, with a view of Manhattan. You have to ask yourself, who is lost, me or the wolves? Who is desperate? It doesn’t work unless you’re shitting yourself.”

“Can you get the buyers to come here and listen to it?” I asked.

“Do you see any buyers?” We surveyed the party. Most of the people were in their twenties or thirties, drunk, and hungry looking. They milled around, and leaned in when they talked. Their eyes darted and glinted. Artists. Not starving in the literal sense but . . . unsatisfied. One guy stood out in contrast to the crowd. Smiling and relaxed, his empty hands were moving freely. His orange t-shirt sported a dragon kicking a soccer ball, and his pants were emerald green. He had a boyish, ageless quality. “Ugh. Fucking Stefan. What the hell is he doing here?” said Bill.

Stefan walked over to us, smiling and patted Bill on the shoulder. “Bill, how are

you?” he said with a European accent. Bill grunted. Stefan smiled at Val and I until we introduced ourselves. Under the dragon on Stefan’s t-shirt was the word “Nederland.”

“Ah. You must be Lila who is writing for *New York*?” Stefan asked me.

“Yes,” I answered, surprised, then asked him, “Do you have any work here?” Stefan smiled his boyish smile, looked down at his brand new sneakers then back up at me. “No, no. I exhibit mostly in Manhattan.”

“Sorry I didn’t catch your last show,” said Bill. “I was real busy, y’know, working on my installation.”

“No worries, no worries.”

“Sell much?”

“Yes, nearly all.” Stefan stood with his arms folded, chest out and legs apart. He rocked back and forth on his heels.

“That’s awesome,” said Val.

“Yeah. That’s great,” I said. With his middle finger, Bill pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. “Congrats. Guess they haven’t figured out yet that painting is dead.”

“Ha ha. Lucky for me,” said Stefan.

“Who’re your buyers?” Bill asked.

“I had some individual, some corporate buyers.”

“No museums, huh?”

“Is that really what one wants for one’s work?”

“Well, my work doesn’t go so well over the couch.”

“When is your next show?” asked Stefan. Bill put his hands in the pockets of his jeans, then, finding they didn’t really fit, took them out. “It’s up in the air, right now. I’m so done with Christine. I’m talking to a coupla guys. Not easy to find a gallery that gets my work. They’re all about paying the rent.”

“Yes. Rents must be paid!” said Stefan cheerfully.

“Yeah. But that’s not why I make art, y’know?”

“I know, I know,” said Stefan. “OK, it was great to see you. Good luck with everything!” Stefan walked back a few steps, smiling at us, and then turned and made his way toward the door, shaking hands and patting shoulders as he went.

“Little shit,” said Bill. “He sells a few paintings and he thinks he’s found the answer to world peace. Like we should all be grateful.” A bottle of vodka had appeared in his hand. He took a long pull then tucked it into his messenger bag. “He’s been in the neighborhood, like, two years. While I was busting my ass moving furniture for a living, he was at some art school in Europe, copying the old masters.”

“How do you know each other?” I asked.

“We used to show at the same gallery,” said Bill. “The L.”

“So you know Christine Wright?”

“Oh, I know her.”

“Did you work for Moishe’s Moving Company?” asked Val, squinting at Bill playfully.

“Yes!” said Bill, inexplicably thrilled. “Moishe. What a fuck -”

“He’s my dad’s best friend,” said Val.

“What a fucking awesome guy!”

“He can be a tough boss.”

“Look at that,” Bill held up a permanently bent and slightly shaky left pinky. “You know how that happened?” Guessing that Bill had sustained the injury while moving furniture I said that I wanted to look around some more. I went back to the closet room with the two TVs, and watched Luke’s movies three more times. When I came out, Bill was showing Val how to roll some kind of cigarette on a counter that held boxes and boxes of old sugar cubes, some of them spilling out, and she didn’t mind when I said I was leaving .

Back at my apartment I checked in on *The Exposure Project*, reassuring myself that this was not weird, or creepy. Luke wanted people to watch him. And when I logged on, there he was, back at the party, somehow filming. His camera was at waist height, and I saw people’s midriffs and hands, holding drinks and cigarettes, gesticulating. There were occasional swooping shots of feet on the sugar-coated floor. Then, a shift, and the camera was at head height. I saw faces, people nodding and smiling in greeting, talking. The camera swept over Justin’s work, then settled on the windows, and their slightly distorted, dispassionate overview of the guests. The camera remained steady for a good five minutes. Among the throng of heads reflected in the window panes, I saw Bill and Val shuffling in a circle, their hands on each other’s shoulders, dancing to music that nobody else seemed to hear. I realized then that there was no audio to the live feed, as there was when he filmed himself at home. Perhaps Luke couldn’t both record and broadcast sound,

as he moved around the room? In fact, was he moving? The steadiness of the camera's gaze suggested that he had detached it from his person, and temporarily freed himself from the self-imposed obligation to document his life. Luke was like the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*; there and not there, at the same time. I wondered what he was doing.

Feeling slightly bereft, I went back to the card catalogue in the imaginary library, and clicked on the picture of Michelangelo's *Pieta*. Under the heading "Dr. B" I clicked on "October 31," and the movie began.

Dr. B, 10/31/2004

LUKE: Some new tenants moved into my building— my father's building— when I was in first grade at Sacred Heart.

*The image of the pieta is replaced with a child's crayon drawing of a tenement building with four floors. There are two windows on each floor, and people at the windows.*

LUKE: We had the ground floor left apartment, and my grandparents had the ground floor right. The second floor tenants were also Polish, the third floor was Italian, the new couple were in 4 left, and 4 right was Chinese.

*The crayon people in the window wave as they are introduced.*

LUKE: It was Halloween and Agata wanted to go trick-or-treating. Back then we'd sometimes hear gunfire from the south side - *the rattle of automatic weapons* - so our mom said we had to stay inside the building. *In the background, a woman speaks urgently in Polish.* And we had to take our 4-year-old cousin, Zofia. We worked our way up the

stairs.

*The sound of footsteps; small feet ascending.*

LUKE: Our Polish neighbors gave us little stale hard candies and laughed at our costumes. I was Spider-Man, and Agat was an angel. Zofia wasn't anything because she just arrived from Krakow, and didn't know about trick-or-treating. But she caught on quick— she was carrying a big-ass plastic pumpkin for all the candy she planned to collect. *Knocking.* The Italian family in 3-L didn't answer the door. We tried 3-R and Anna Maria – man, she was crazy. She had this hair. It was fake jet black and she pulled it up into this kinda tuft on the top of her head, like a little dog—she gave us each a cookie and squeaked at us to be good. Like we had any choice. The Chinese man who opened the door of 4-R rubbed his eyes and blinked like he'd just woken up. He had no idea what we wanted. He called his wife, and she called their son; a kid with braces on his teeth and a Yankees t-shirt. He looked embarrassed and gave us a snickers. We sat on the stairs and Agat ripped the wrapper off the candy bar. She split it into three and we ate it. It was good.

*An empty snickers wrapper floats across the screen.*

The last of the bad wine I'd drunk at the sugar factory had worn off and I felt distinctly uncomfortable about spying on Luke's therapy session. If I'd been at home, in Pittsburgh, and had discovered his work through a random online search, or even if I'd just never met him face-to-face, I would have felt differently, I'm certain.

But at the same time, I was hooked. I was interested in Luke, and I was interested in his work, and the two felt inseparable. I was puzzled, too. In person, he didn't seem particularly open - let alone someone who would over-share, or impose his life story on others. He didn't seem needy or attention-seeking, or self-absorbed. If anything, he was a little detached. There were moments, like when he asked for my phone number, when he seemed intensely present, and others when he was slightly preoccupied, as if he'd left a pot on the stove unattended.

The puzzle captivated me. I kept watching.

LUKE: Sometimes I wish I had a camera inside my head.

DR. B: Why is that?

LUKE: Because it's so hard to describe – to get it right. Everything in Williamsburg is so different now. I wish everyone could see what I see, in my head. The little apartments, with the sloping floors; the pattern of the linoleum on the stairs, like brown bubbles. The new tenant, her name was — (*a hiccup obliterates the name*), opening the door of 4-L, kind of growling, dressed as a witch, and her husband, he was behind her, showing his vampire fangs at us. We screamed and nearly fell down the stairs then she called us back, and gave us candy, and little plastic spiders, and those eyeballs that pop, and a slinky. *An image of brown linoleum appears, scattered with candy and toys.*

DR. B: The new tenants meant a lot to you. Were they friends of your parents?

LUKE: No, no. They were artists. My father was proud to have English speakers as tenants, that's all. Even though my mother said the woman was a Jew.



DR. B: It would be unusual for a Jewish woman to have that name.

LUKE: My mother's an idiot.

DR. B: Your mother is not an educated woman. It's important to accept people for who they are.

LUKE: My family never accepted me for who I am.

DR. B: Life is not fair.

*The words, No Shit, appear as if being typed on the screen.*

DR. B: Why do you think your mother felt hostile toward the new tenants?

LUKE: She knew, I guess she could see we were connecting in a way that we didn't.

DR. B: You connected with *-hiccup-* in a way you couldn't connect with your mother?

LUKE: Yes.

DR. B: And this made your mother jealous?

LUKE: Hmm. Maybe.

DR. B: So she cared about her relationship with you?

LUKE: She just couldn't figure out what I saw in this crazy artist. ———— had no kids, she wore second hand clothes. Her hair was always all over the place. And my mother couldn't figure out what ———— saw in me.

DR. B: Perhaps she felt excluded.

LUKE: But I was the one who was excluded.

DR. B: That's true.

*The Madonna wept her neon tears.*

## Chapter 4

Perhaps it was because I was falling in love with Luke that I decided to write about him. I wanted to get closer to him, of course, but also, I think, I wanted to distance myself; to keep him at arm's length. Perhaps we weren't so unlike.

The morning after I first met Luke in real life, I called Felicity and pitched her my new angle. "I've found the artist I want to focus on. He's kind of representative of the Sugar Factory group."

"So what's his name? What's his work like?"

"Luke Banas. His work is . . . it's hard to describe."

"Try."

"He makes movies, and puts them on his web site."

"Give me an example."

"Well, he has movies about his life - he records everything he does - and then other movies about whatever he's thinking about, or - gifs." I paused.

"I know what a gif is, Lila."

"OK. Right. He's obsessed with 9/11, so he has this repeating video of the planes hitting the towers."

"Big deal. That's on a loop in my head," said Felicity.

"And sometimes he combines images, like images of the Haitian earthquake victims, and images of the people of Pompeii who were killed by the volcano, and you know those chalk outlines the police draw around homicide victims?"

“I’m familiar with those, yes.”

“Well, in 1989, to raise awareness about AIDS, protesters drew outlines all over 5th Avenue in different colored chalk. He put those images, and the images from Haiti, and Pompeii, together in a sequence.”

Felicity was always in a hurry, and I knew I wasn’t doing a good job of convincing her that Luke was doing anything worthwhile. I couldn’t find the words to explain, in that moment, how the images showed a progression - how faces and figures emerged, merged, and disappeared over and over again. I understand now that the images shared a quality that Luke was obsessed with; that of being there, and not there, at the same time. The people of Pompeii had disappeared without a trace, disintegrating over centuries. What was left of them were voids, negative space in the hardened ash that had surrounded and suffocated them. The figures that tourists visit today were created by pouring plaster into those ashen molds, making the people solid again. And the AIDS protesters, by chalking outlines around empty space, had literally drawn attention to the absence of those who’d been lost, making the invisible, visible. I tried to describe to Felicity the pictures of the people buried alive by the shifting Haitian landscape; their eyes, ears, and mouths stopped with mud, looking themselves like the victims of Vesuvius, or like newly created humans with no names. All of the people Luke had put side-by-side, I realized, were nameless, and not only dead, but in danger of having the fact of their existence permanently erased. I admired his efforts to prevent that; to commemorate them.

“I don’t get it,” said Felicity. “What else? What’s the thing about him recording everything he does?”

“OK, yes. He carries a small camera with him everywhere, and he records everything.”

“Why is that interesting?”

“I don’t know. People like it. He has a following online.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, he went to a gym on Long Island, and he filmed a lot of people working out, and thousands of people watched the movie.”

“Was it soft porn?”

“No, no. He was, well I guess he was making fun of them, indirectly. A lot of the guys were really built, and the women had big hair, and fake tans. And the web site has the ad for the gym on it, the one that was on local TV.” The ad featured the owner, Danny, strolling around talking earnestly about the equipment, enjoying a cup of freshly squeezed juice while flexing a bicep, and finally, with a smile and a wink, pointing a beckoning finger at the camera.

“So he made a fool of poor whatsit - Vinnie,” said Felicity.

“Danny.”

“Whatever. He’s got some disaster footage, and he poked fun at the bridge and tunnel crowd. This is all over the place. I’m not getting a theme here. What does it all add up to? You have to talk to him. See if there’s a story there.”

She was right. On the one hand, Luke’s compassion seemed to extend infinitely, across national boundaries and back in time. On the other hand, I thought he was mean-spirited for posting the ad for *Danny’s Gym*. I thought so even more later, when I

found out who Danny was. I told Felicity I would interview Luke, and made myself some more coffee.

When I left my apartment to buy a quart of over-priced milk, Luke was waiting for me, sitting on the curb outside my building. I wasn't surprised to see him. I guess because I'd been picturing him all night, it was like I'd summoned him. The object of my desire had materialized on my doorstep. He was carrying his messenger bag and wearing his black knit cap and black leather jacket, and I remember thinking, not many people can dress like that without looking like they're trying to be something they're not.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“Do you want to get some breakfast?” Luke said. Funny, but it didn't occur to me then to ask him how he knew where I lived. He must have asked Justin.

Even though it was after 10 am, none of the newer cafes were open yet, so we went to an old Dominican bakery, with a 3-tiered wedding cake in the window the size of a bicycle wheel. The cake had been on display so long that it was turning brown and had been nibbled by mice - it's probably still in the bakery window today - but Luke swore that the bacon, eggs, and coffee were fresh and the warm, sweet-and-salty smell of the place confirmed what he said.

We sat down opposite one another and ate, Luke now and again stopping to ask me polite questions. Did I like New York? How long had I been living here? Where was I from originally? I answered him, feeling a little frustrated. Except that I enjoyed his physical presence, I missed the Luke that I knew online.

I wanted to be upfront, so I told him that I was writing an article about the sugar factory - the dispute over the building and the artists who were currently living there. “Is it OK if I interview you?” I asked. He smiled, and seemed relieved that he didn’t have to make any more small talk. “Ask me anything you want.”

“Do you film all the time?”

“Yes. Unless I have a technical problem.”

“Are you filming right now?” Luke nodded. At this revelation I felt slightly thrilled but also both exposed and complicit. “How?” He pointed at his messenger bag. Through a hole in the front a lens poked out, camouflaged by the black fabric around it. Like the eye of a well-behaved dog, it was placidly watching the foot traffic of the bakery: heavy work boots, sneakers, and strappy sandals. Perhaps his bag was also listening to orders being called out in Spanish, repeated to the kitchen, and then repeated again when they were ready; the cash register beeping and clanging open and shut. A radio DJ speaking rapid-fire over the beginning of a heart-felt love song.

“Do you always record sound, too?” I asked.

“Not always.”

“Right now?”

“Not right now,” he said. He smiled at me, and I felt we were complicit again, in a different way. His eyelashes were very long.

“But you do record your therapy sessions.”

“Yes. Most of them.”

“Does your shrink know you’re recording?”

“Nah.”

“What if she sees your web site?”

“She won’t. She’s pretty old. Not too tech-savvy.”

“Isn’t that . . . doesn’t that feel, a little weird?” I asked. Luke shrugged.

“Why do you say that?”

“Therapy sessions are supposed to be private. You’re sharing with one person you really trust. That way you can be unselfconscious and totally open up.” Luke pushed his plate away, and put his elbows on the table. “You can’t be unselfconscious if anyone is listening to you. You’re always going to mess with reality, you know, present it in a way that makes you look . . . the way you want to look. It’s like that cat, that cat that’s dead and alive at the same time.”

“What?” This was the first time I encountered Luke’s passion for physics.

“Yeah. They put this cat in a box, with some poison, and until they looked in the box, the cat was alive and dead at the same time,” Luke’s eyes were wide.

“Do you mean Schrödinger's cat?”

“You’ve heard of it?” He was genuinely surprised.

“Well, it’s a pretty famous thought experiment.”

“How do you mean, ‘thought experiment’?”

Luke had never taken a physics class. He learned everything he knew from YouTube. He’d learned a lot that way, but he wasn’t clear on some basic things, and he thought of physics as a kind of magic. To him, it was a collection of bizarre and singular occurrences – frogs raining from the sky, huge black holes swallowing stars, and

subatomic particles whizzing around and through us like tiny invisible bees – beautiful, inexplicable, lawless. Kind of the opposite of what science really is, but also, maybe, exactly what it really is. Not the stuff we learn in high school, an orderly, consistent set of rules, but a mad, fertile chaos that claims order as just one of its infinite manifestations.

Luke was interested in my definition of thought experiments but I've no doubt that he still believed that somewhere, a cat was hiding in a box, cunningly evading death, or observation.

“What does Schrödinger's cat have to do with recording yourself, or other people?” I asked him.

“Scientists can't study quantum particles because they change their behavior if they know they're being watched,” Luke explained. I decided to let that go. “People also behave differently when they know they're being watched. So, to get the real, you know,” he made his hands into a frame, “How things really are, I don't tell them.”

“Don't you have any problem with that?” I asked, wondering if he felt bad at all for violating others' privacy.

“No. It's pretty easy,” Luke replied.

“Hmm. OK. Another thing I don't understand, in the movie “Halloween,” you said you wished you had a camera inside your head. But you have eyes, you have a memory. Isn't that enough?”

“No. Because you can't show what's inside your head. You can't put that online.”

“So the showing is more important than the recording?”

“I don't know. I record a lot of stuff that I don't show.”



“Why?”

“You never know when something interesting is going to happen,” Luke wrapped his hand around my wrist, and stroked the inside with his thumb. The sounds, movements and smells in the bakery dimmed, replaced by my hyper-awareness of the landscape where his skin touched my skin.

“Seriously.”

“Seriously. If I have something on film there’s always the option of showing it. It’s like a permanent record of reality.”

“OK. But what about the reality that’s in your head, even if you don’t film it, even if you never share it with anyone?”

“That doesn’t seem so real,” Luke replied. “I’m never convinced stuff happened, until I tell someone else.”

“Do you mean, if you’re not being watched, you don’t exist?”

“Maybe. Yeah.”

Then my cell rang. I put it to my ear and heard Felicity, already in mid-sentence, “—a fire in Greenpoint. A packing materials warehouse. You’re my nearest reporter so I want you to take a look. Go and get a few quotes and some local color for the arson piece.” Felicity had someone working on a feature about the recent spate of arson in Brooklyn. I covered the phone’s mic. “I have to go,” I told Luke.

“What’s up?” He stood abruptly and knocked his coffee over. As I watched him clean up the spill, I noticed that his hands were shaking. “I have to cover a fire,” I whispered.

“Where in Greenpoint?” I asked Felicity.

“Just follow the smoke, darling.” She said the phrase with such relish I wondered if it was a reporter’s aphorism. I still don’t know if she meant the words metaphorically, but when Luke and I left the bakery, I could see an actual fist of grey punching through the haze of pollution that hovered over the city. We hugged goodbye and I promised him I would come to the factory when I was done, to continue our conversation.

Bummed as I was to be separating from Luke, I was pretty excited to be doing some disaster coverage. I walked back to my place to pick up my car, and, it was then, glancing in my rear-view mirror as I drove off, that I saw Bill opening my front door, and carefully looking around before exiting the building.

I parked on Java street, a couple of blocks from where the plume originated and walked toward it. Two fire trucks with blinking cherry lights were parked askew on Franklin, their back wheels on the sidewalk. Behind them a small warehouse, that took up the length of the block, belched unending soft rolls of smoke that spread upwards from its empty windows. A couple of firefighters on tall ladders aimed equally relentless streams of liquid at their flickering source.

In front of a tenement building across the street stood a small crowd of evacuated occupants. It seemed impossible that so many people lived in that tiny place - a doll’s house in the shape of a cereal box. But two apartments on each floor, four floors, with two or three or four people in each apartment could easily add up to twenty five people living on 1,000 square feet of land. They looked sleepy, bewildered, the adults holding tightly to their children, while the children clutched stuffed animals, and everyone gazed at the

flames, including me.

Mesmerized, we watched the building succumb to the fire, and the fire succumb to the firemen. We pushed the limits of the caution tape, caught between keeping a sensible distance and the foolish desire to get closer to the charismatic blaze and risk being consumed. Only the firefighters seemed able to resist its allure, so we watched them too, unsure of where our loyalties lay.

More people gathered behind the tape, some wearing clothes they'd obviously slept in. "Whoa," yelled a man in an undershirt, with a blanket around his shoulders, "There goes the roof!" The building shook and groaned, and while the firefighters shouted warnings to each other, the horizontal supports collapsed into the center, their outer ends flipping upwards to become a slanted rack of black beams, like the broken rib cage of a roasted dinosaur.

A man in thigh high boots and a ludicrously large helmet labelled "Fire Chief" strode over to us, the seriousness of his expression extinguishing the impression that his get-up was in any way absurd. "See that building?" He said, pointing at the charred carcass of the warehouse. "It looks like it's brick but it's a wooden skeleton covered by brick. The wood is gone. The only thing holding those bricks up is gravity." As he spoke, as if to illustrate his point, a jet of water from a hose broke off part of the wall and sprayed bricks to the ground like broken teeth. "I need you all to be a hundred and fifty feet away from the building." He waved everyone back, and moved the cones and caution tape back with us.

The crowd started yelling questions so I took out my notebook. "How long before

the building falls?” asked the guy in the undershirt.

“We’re expecting the rest to come down over the next few hours,” said the chief.

“What caused the fire?” I asked.

“This was a rope and twine warehouse. Rope and twine are highly combustible.”

“Was it arson?” asked a guy holding a teddy bear. “Coz we coulda been killed in our beds!”

“Maybe,” admitted the chief. “Or, could be homeless persons were using the building for shelter and made a fire that got away from them,” he sighed. “But arson has not been ruled out.”

“When can we go home?” asked a woman wearing a yellow bathrobe.

“We’ll let you know as soon as it’s safe. There was a lot of old stock still lying around. This is going to smolder for quite some time.”

I went back to my car and called Felicity to give her the quotes . She was pleased. “All this arson takes me back to the good old days,” she said. “‘Ladies and gentlemen, the Bronx is burning!’ So said Howard Cosell, whilst covering the 1977 World Series.”

“Actually, he never said that,” I said, and immediately realized that I shouldn’t have. Despite her accent, Felicity was a New Yorker, and there are some beliefs about the city that you just don’t question.

“What?”

“Um. Yes. It’s an urban myth.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Lila. I was there.” She was really mad, and ranted for a while about the Internet, and young people who placed more stock in Google than in the lived experience of actual human beings.

I felt a little shaky as I drove away from the site of the fire, and not just because I’d crossed Felicity. I wondered if she’d been lying about being at Yankee Stadium that day but I didn’t think so. She really believed she’d heard those words at the game, even though Cosell denied ever saying them, and there was no video record of him doing so. I wondered if maybe Luke was right; that our memories are insufficient.

When I arrived at the factory, I called Luke and he directed me to a side door painted with a large black and white portrait of a rat . He opened the door and let me in. We walked up in a narrow stairwell, then through a passageway made of plywood boards, until we reached an arched doorway that I recognized from Luke’s web site; the door was wooden and had heavy cast iron hardware. Luke opened it with a large old-fashioned key. “Are we inside the filter house?” I asked. Luke looked surprised and smiled. “Yes. But now it’s my house. My castle.” He showed me the makeshift kitchen where he made his coffee and eggs, the shower he’d installed himself, and the cameras he used to record his daily life. “Let me show you where I do my work.” He led me through another brick arch, and flipped on the lights.

Luke's workshop was like the nest of a cyber-rodent that had been colonized by some kind of techno-fungus. Computer monitors and cameras were stacked haphazardly against two adjoining walls above a u-shaped control panel, all connected by a snarl of

wires. Some of the screens played footage I was familiar with, some, stuff I hadn't seen; others were tuned to local TV stations. One screen showed live coverage of the sugar factory's main entrance. The walls around and presumably behind this organic proliferation of machines were covered in a sticky residue of airborne sugar. Thick, brown and gummy, it possibly kept the pile from collapsing. On one screen was a still shot of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*.

“What are you working on?” I asked.

“Do you want to see it?”

“Of course.” I dropped my bag, and stood next to Luke as there was only one swivelling chair. This is what I saw:

### Holy Thursday

*An image of Leonardo Da Vinci's Last Supper, painted by numbers. The voices speak a mix of Polish and English:*

PETER: Pass the butter. Dziękuję.”

JESUS: Cześć, Lukas.”

PETER: How was the game, Danny?”

*In the picture, crudely animated, the disciples pass plates back and forth. Judas pours the drinks. An argument breaks out. Voices are raised.*

THOMAS: You never listen to me!”

*Saint Peter leans over and slaps Thomas hard on the cheek. A food fight breaks out. Loaves and fishes fly across the table and a large cup—the grail?— hits Jesus in the temple. Screams of rage. The blobs of color melt and run together into a sticky mess.*

“That’s funny,” I said. “Is it based on a family meal?”

“Yeah.”

“Will your family see this?”

“Nah. They don’t know anything about what I do.”

“Oh. Did you do the animation?”

“Yeah. I hate painting but I found a kit online.”

“It’s great.”

“It’s OK. I have to fix the timing of the slapping sound.” Luke swivelled his chair to face me and put his arm around my waist. I put my hand on his shoulder.

“Go ahead.”

“OK.” Luke slid his other arm around my waist.

“I mean fix the timing on the video.”

“Right now?”

“I want to take a look around.” This was true. And I needed time to make a decision - or perhaps I was just savoring my anticipation of what was to come. I know I did want to see Luke at work. “OK.” Luke turned his stool back to face the control panel. He swiveled 360 degrees as he edited; pressing buttons, picking up earphones and pressing them briefly against his head, then dropping them; occasionally drawing his

knees up to his chest and biting his thumbnail as he stared at this screen then that, lost in thought. One camera filmed him as he worked.

Luke's room was on the second floor, with a view of the East River. Through the windows, I could see the old piers where the barges had made their deliveries. After a few minutes, I left without Luke noticing, to explore the factory. I decided to follow the route of the sugar, so I went back down stairs to the ground floor. I began by walking the length of the cavernous warehouse known as the sugar shed. A dark barn of brick, the place was huge; an empty cathedral to industry. This was where the contents of billions of sacks and barrels was once stored before being processed; it had regularly housed a small mountain of sugar. Traversed by beams of sunlight from two high-up rows of broken windows, its walls dripped with the sweet-sour smell of fermenting molasses. My feet crunched across acres of concrete floor covered with broken glass, and were caught in dark, sticky puddles. Pigeons flapped in the iron rafters of the vaulted ceiling.

Further on, in the filter house, were rows of giant vats, into which workers would mix the raw sugar with then add boiling water to loosen the debris of its journey. Eventually, I reached a brick wall, and pushed open a door with a dented and rusty sign that read, "no spitting." In the middle of a room the size of my high school cafeteria, a huge metal tank was pinned to the floor by fifty metal pipes that looked like giant chopsticks, or electrodes stuck into a dreaming brain. Unlike the innards of every other factory I'd seen (though I haven't seen that many, I'll admit), not one of these pipes was parallel with another. Some went straight to the ceiling where they exited through half-open skylights, while others were bent like drinking straws.



The metal container was a filter for the liquid raw sugar from the mixing vats. The large opening at the front – like the wide maw of a whale -- once drew in the dirty sweet solution, peppered with pieces of packaging: splinters of barrel from Louisiana, reeds from Manila’s mats, and all the flotsam and jetsam that stowed away inside the bags and crates: Haitian dust, spiders from Cuba; the sweat of Jamaican slaves. For over one hundred years, sugar came here from the Brazilian port of Pernambuco; from Egypt, Hawaii, the Philippines , and the West Indies, most of it harvested by force. Here, the evidence of its violent past would be filtered out through blood and charred bones.

A bent orange railing surrounded the square forehead of the vessel, as though it had needed to be contained, or restrained. Now the steel hulk was resigned; an exhausted Gulliver held by taut, haphazard ropes, jerry-rigged in a struggle that had taken place over the course of a century. It was fed, and ate, and produced, and reproduced. Consuming the world’s labor to supply America’s sweet tooth with sweet stuff. Now, what had once been the hub of the factory was defunct - a hollow, rusted, long-beached Moby Dick, shedding toxic flakes of boardwalk blue paint.

I left the Filter House for the Pan House, passing through brick archways into a room of 16-foot metal cylinders, in which the syrup was boiled again, until the water supplied by the river had evaporated, then spun dry in centrifuges. From there I turned south again to the finishing house, where the whitened sugar was roasted into free flowing granules.

Finally, I crossed from the old brick building to the 60s tower block through a metal skybridge, with conveyor belts of either side of me. I found myself again in the

packaging plant, where the artists of the Sugar Factory Group had held their opening party, and where the product of Africa, Asia and South America was wrapped and boxed by European immigrants from Poland, Hungary, Greece, Denmark, and Ireland, before being dispersed across the United States. I walked back through another metal sky-way that took me over the street and back to a part of the main building I didn't recognize.

In search of Luke's corner of the factory, I wandered through small offices, into smaller corridors; from wide chambers clogged with pipe-connected vats to elevator shafts filled with pigeons. As I wandered, I lost all sense of direction. There were rooms knee deep in water, a few open to a ceiling of blue sky, others pitch dark. The factory was endless, the variety of its interior defied imagination. Everything you'd expect from modernity – cleanliness, newness, symmetry, efficiency, uniformity— was lacking. And everywhere was evidence of absent workers, hats on hooks, tools left in mid-use, a handcart propped against a wall - not gone perhaps, but ingested, and made part of this Gothic, psychedelic ruin. For the most part, the purposes of the factory's machinery - its tangle of pipes, tanks, cogs, and wires, abandoned stools, ladders, light fixtures, dials and troughs were completely mysterious to me. It was like a time machine, containing all of history, a destination from everywhere and point of distribution to anywhere.

Exhausted, I rested at an arched window with a deep sill, trying to get my bearings from the world outside. The air from the river had a salty tang. An oak door in the brick wall was sealed shut by hardened caramel froth. I yelled and kicked the door in frustration.

“Lila?” It was Luke.

“Argh! Where are you? I'm totally lost.”

“Where are *you*? This door doesn’t open.”

“No kidding.”

I heard some noises, like Luke was hitting the door with something. Then nothing.

“Luke?”

“OK. I figured out how to get you in here. Walk along your side of the wall, toward the river.” I walked back to the arched window and shoved its rusty frame until the lower half swung open. I stuck my head out and saw Luke.

“Hey,”

“Hey,”

“Just jump onto that fire escape and I’ll pull you in,” I looked down and saw the piers, and the river.

“You’re insane,”

“I’ve done it,”

“Like I said, you’re insane.”

I felt light, and scoured out from all the time I’d spent walking around the factory, like I’d tasted a million dishes and eaten nothing. Everything seemed connected now, and it was ridiculous that I couldn’t reach Luke. I would fix that. I put one foot on the sill then the other. Holding the window frame I lowered myself onto the thin metal grid. When it swayed and creaked I felt immediately that I could die, easily. And that dying would be much, much easier than finding my way back into the building, which would require me to move, to breath, to open my eyes.

“Lila,”

“Uh?”

“Just move a little bit towards me.” I opened one eye and there was Luke’s hand, reaching for mine. I inched toward it. The bricks were warm and rough, and the surface of each one was different. My sneakers were sticky and scraped up scraps of rust. I took one more step until Luke caught my wrists and moved his hands to my elbows then around my ribs as I reached up and he pulled me in.

I lay down on the floor and panted. Luke lay down on the floor next to me and kissed me. He licked the tears off my cheeks and followed their path to my ears and neck. For a moment he held my right earring – a pearl— between his teeth. As I moved on top of him I found that my hair and jeans were sticking to the floor. “Oh my god,” I’m stuck!” Luke lifted one arm then let it drop, as if he couldn’t unglue himself from the floor. “Oh no. We’re going to have to take off all our clothes.”

## Chapter 5

After you sleep with someone - if you keep seeing them, I mean, and Luke and I saw each other just about every day - you usually have that conversation where you exchange life stories, and music preferences, and I explain how I got the scar on my knee (sledding in Schenley Park when I was eight). That didn't happen with Luke. Instead, after a couple of weeks, he introduced me to his best friend, someone who he could count on to do the talking for him. All I knew that Friday afternoon was that we were taking the 2 train to Pelham Parkway, to meet a guy named Ralf, who lived with his mom in the Bronx.

Sitting side-by-side on the train, Luke and I were holding hands. I felt a little glow around me, like a silvery aura of specialness. As we rattled north of the Upper East Side, the well-heeled white passengers, including some tourists and a few corporate employees heading home early for the weekend, gradually evacuated the train until Luke and I were ethnically in the minority. Once we'd passed into Harlem, the mood in the car changed. The Bronx-bound passengers didn't talk or consult blackberries or read newspapers or check the overhead map, so the only noise and motion in the car was that of the train itself. Although I'd lived in New York City for over a year, this was my first time visiting the Bronx. Despite all I'd heard, read, and been told, the borough's gangsta reputation was nowhere evident in the faces around me; the other passengers didn't look threatening or hostile, but only very tired, as if burdened spiritually as well as physically by the things they carried: bags of groceries and laundry, small staring children who came with their own Disney-themed baggage, and random objects such as construction materials and

pieces of bicycles. The people on the train were mysterious— but only in the sense that their lives were a mystery to me. As we travelled further from the economic bustle of Midtown I wondered if I was going to find out what had made them so discouraged.

At 125<sup>th</sup> st, a bunch of junior high school kids got on the train and took over one end of the car, draping themselves across seats and around poles, full of urgent chatter. As the train picked up speed, the car swerved sharply, shaking them loose and throwing them against each other like pinballs, and they let themselves be flung like tourists, as if they hadn't been riding the train their whole lives. The girls screamed outraged accusations at the nonplussed protesting boys and their squeals of laughter matched the shrieking of the brakes. When the kids tumbled off the train at Grand Concourse, the remaining passengers slumped an iota further into their plastic seats, their exhaustion made complete by the exodus of youthful energy.

One person in our car was lively. A boney, dark-skinned black man with closely cropped hair had his back against a pole, his hands pushing out the thin fabric of his jacket pockets, his feet braced on the rolling floor. He kept running the heel of his hand over his bumpy skull and his large brown eyes moved around as if they watching a movie that only he could see. His gaze would settle for a second then twitch away like a fly, the muscles in his jaw tensing. He looked like a plot about to unfold and I couldn't unglue my eyes.

At the next stop, Luke tugged my elbow and we got off the train only to walk a few steps down the platform and get back on at the next car, to avoid the addict. Though he seemed harmless to me, even vulnerable, somehow Luke picked up on the fact that he was dangerous. A few minutes later, two white guys pulled open the door at the end of our

car and strode the bouncing length of it. They wore leather bomber jackets and acid washed jeans, and had spiked gelled hair. One wore mirrored glasses, the other had razor burn on the back of his neck. Their plain clothes only drew attention to their professional status. The officer in the shades slung open the door to the car we'd just left.

The train slowed again and we pulled up alongside the platform of East Tremont Avenue. Luke looked out of the window and smiled. "There they go." The two police officers had the restless man by his upper arms and were pulling him along. He mouthed curses as he tripped over the sagging jeans that threatened to drop to his ankles and shackle him.

Luke held my hand so tightly I could feel his pulse – or was it mine? Either way, the blood seemed dangerously close to the surface. We didn't talk again until we reached our stop. Instead I looked out of the window as the train emerged from under the ground into another New York—a post-apocalyptic yet festive version of Manhattan. Here, instead of speed-walking, people ambled along the cracked sidewalks or just hung out, lingering beside liquor stores, outside storefronts that housed churches and check-cashers and bodegas selling single cigarettes, cheap beer, and lottery tickets. This was a shadow city of vacant burned-out lots, loud radios pounding hip-hop and jangling bachata and stray dogs and men peeing behind overflowing dumpsters.

Walking the streets to Ralf's mom's place I felt both totally ly conspicuous and studiously ignored, like the time I tried to collect money for the ACLU at the Edgewood Country Club. I was dazzlingly, luminously white, in a way that Luke, somehow, was not. Nonetheless he seemed uncomfortable. Was I embarrassing him? He walked with his head

down, a few steps ahead of me. I had to run a little to catch up. I had no idea where we were going until Luke stopped walking, reached for the brass handle of a heavy revolving door and said, "This is Ralf's building."

We passed through the door into a stunning art deco foyer. The ceiling was 14' high, the floors were made of marble and the walls were covered with mosaics. "Wow," I said, "I, uh, didn't expect this."

Luke glanced around and nodded. "Yeah, it's beautiful. And rent controlled." We got in the elevator. "You're gonna like Ralf's mom, she's really cool."

"Great."

"Just so you know, Ralf's sister is disabled."

"Oh," I paused. "Like, how?"

"I d'know. But really badly."

"OK."

Luke rang the bell and a guy I took to be Ralf opened the door. He was wearing a polo shirt and khaki shorts, white tube socks that were pulled halfway up his skinny shins, and sneakers. Because his skin and hair were golden brown, he looked kind of Californian.

"Ralfie, good to see you man."

"Lukey. Come on in." They hugged each other and Ralf smiled at me over Luke's shoulder. Squeezing past Luke, Ralf shook my hand and spoke to me in a tone that suggested he was running for office. "I'm Rafael Rivera. You must be Lila. It's a pleasure to meet you. Come in." He spoke to Luke as if they were both still in high school. "So, wassup. Lukasz?"



“Not much,”

“Lila, my mother is looking forward to meeting you. Unfortunately she doesn't speak much English. Do you speak any Spanish?”

“Argh, no. I took French.” I said, suddenly realizing what a stupid decision that had been. For the first time in my life I actually wanted to speak to someone in a language other than English, and it turned out that I had learned the wrong one.

“Moi aussi. Have you been to Paris?” Ralf asked. When I shook my head he said, “You should go, it's a stunning city.” We were moving through a narrow hallway that opened into a dining room and living room separated by two steps. The living room window looked out onto tree tops. The apartment was neat and tasteful. “This is a great building,” I said.

“Yes,” said Ralf. “It was built for upwardly-mobile white immigrants in 1925, along with the subway stop. After the Cross-Bronx Expressway was built, real estate in the Bronx tanked and became more affordable to blacks migrating from the South and hispanic immigrants, which increased white flight to the suburbs.” I didn't know how to reply to this. It was like Ralf was talking about himself in the third person. I didn't say anything but he didn't seem to care.

The sound of women's voices speaking Spanish, accompanied by a low moaning, was coming from the kitchen. Ralf's mom and his sister must be in there talking – was one of them in pain? Ralf directed us to the sofa. “Please sit down, we'll eat pretty soon.” Ralf turned around and his voice switched again, “Mar – mee!” he yelled, and spoke loudly and rapidly in Spanish. Then he disappeared into the kitchen.

“What's the matter?” I whispered to Luke.

“What do you mean?”

“Why is Ralf yelling?” Luke was reading a book he'd found on the coffee table, *The Art of Chess*.

“He's not yelling.”

I sat down next to Luke and looked around. In a glass-fronted cabinet were trophies of every kind except athletic. Ralf had won spelling bees and geography bees, trophies for language arts and debate, and certificates for everything else. A series of graduation pictures showed him at different stages of life holding various diplomas. In each photo he wore the same confident smile. I heard the moaning again.

“Is Ralf's mother sick?” I asked. Luke looked up, frowning.

“I don't know. I don't think so.” He went back to his book.

The dining table had been pushed against the wall and its surface was completely covered with dishes. Two foil baking trays of yellow rice sat side by side, one dotted with large green peas, the other with roasted chicken. Despite the plastic wrap stretched across the food I could smell its buttery aroma. I realized that I was really hungry.

Ralf swung open the kitchen door and with a flourish introduced a small, smiling woman with short black hair and amused eyes. “Lila, this is my mother, Migdalia.”

I jumped up, and held out my hand. “It's very nice to meet you, Mig . . .”

“Micky, you call me Micky,” she said and took my hand in both of hers and squeezed it lightly. Then she nodded at Luke. “Hey, Lukey. Howah you?”

“I'm good, Micky. How 'bout you?”

“Good, I'm good.”

There was a level of affectation and understanding between them that I hadn't expected. I'd never felt very close to any of my friends' parents. I was wondering about their relationship when another woman popped her head around the kitchen door and asked Micky something in Spanish. Micky answered and Ralf said, “This is Carmen.” We said hello and Carmen shyly withdrew. I wondered momentarily if she was Ralf's sister, but she had no obvious disability and she was at least thirty five.

Micky turned and spoke to Ralf in Spanish and he fired something back at her then told us she was still working on the *empanadas* and we could go hang in his room. Once we were in Ralf's room he noticed the chess book Luke was holding. “That's really good. You can borrow it when I'm done with it.”

“Let's play, man.” said Luke. “Come on, I'll let you whip my ass.”

“Oh, I'll whip it, bitch,” said Ralf and suddenly cried out, “Mom, where's my chess set? Then, as if remembering his mother wouldn't understand, he repeated the question in the same pitch in Spanish. Micky yelled something back and Ralf looked on top of his bookcase and said, “Oh yeah, here it is,” as if he'd found the set himself. He also pulled down a clock, the kind you use to time each move, and a manuscript, hundreds of pages thick. “Hey, Lila, look. It's my thesis.” He tossed it onto the bed and I read the title: *The Mandate Under International Law For A Self-Executing Plebiscite on Puerto Rico's Political Status, and the Right Of U.S.-Resident Puerto Ricans To Participate*. Out of politeness, I leafed through it. After a minute Luke said, “You don't have to read that, Lila.”

I sat on Ralf's bed while he and Luke played at a child-sized desk. Ralf's actual desk was taken up by a computer monitor and keyboard. Luke had told me that Ralf was living with his mom to save money while he was at law school but it didn't seem like he'd ever really moved out. Half of his bed was covered in stacks of clean laundry— mostly polo shirts and khakis. His homemade shelves were slipping down the wall under the weight of encyclopedias, chess books and copies of *National Geographic* and *Time*. “Do you play chess, Lila?”

“No. I prefer *Scrabble*.”

“Hmm. That's largely a game of luck,” said Ralf. He stared at the board and knuckled his temple. One clean white sneaker tapped on the worn carpet.

“Smart move.” He rocked slightly as if in pain then relaxed and slammed down a piece and hit the clock with his palm. “Ha! If you're so smart, Lukey, why d'ya drop out of school? Did you know that, Lila? Luke dropped out the Bronx High School of Science. That's a very selective school. Then he dropped out of Cooper Union. Also very selective. Only ten percent of applicants are accepted.”

Luke quietly pushed a piece forward and tapped the clock. “I'm doing OK.”

“Oh, you mean your Internet shit? You think you can make money from that?” It struck me as funny that Ralf's diction was always very precise, even when he was cursing.

“Fuck you,” said Luke, without malice.

Ralf twitched. “It's not a rhetorical question, It's a legitimate question. It's the same question everyone who participates on the world wide web is asking: How can we make this shit pay? What do you think, Lila?”

“Artists in any era don't make art in order to make money. Society has to support art, and artists,” I said.

Ralf smiled and wiggled his eyebrows at Luke. “Oh, you found yourself a sugar mama, huh? What do you do Lila, that you're going to support Luke?”

“Listen. We're not . . .” I was indignant at the implication that Luke and I were betrothed. Then Ralf really turned on the heat, all the while periodically moving his chess pieces and hitting the clock.

“Come on, Lila, tell me. What you do?”

“I write for a magazine.”

“What section?”

“Real estate.”

“You're interested in real estate?”

“No, not really.”

“So, what are you interested in?”

“Feature writing.”

“OK, so you both want to be creative. I don't see how that's going to work. Do you want your kids to go to public school?”

“Um, ‘our’ kids?” I said.

“Yeah, shut up, dickhead,” said Luke.

“Calm down. Let's just say that you might have some kids, someday, with somebody. Do you want them to go to public school?”

“Ralf, you went to public school.”

“And I managed to make a success of myself nonetheless. But if I'd gone to better schools I'd have gotten into a better law school, and ten years from now I'd be making twice as much money. What do your parents do, Lila?”

“Enough, Ralfie,” said Luke. “Fucking shut up. Let's play, come on.”

Ralf smiled and rubbed his knees, perused the board and nodded. “Lila, Luke was always pretty good. He *may* have had as much talent as me but he never had my self discipline. He didn't put in the necessary time.”

“Are you talking about jerking off, jerk off?” replied Luke, sliding a knight forward and nudging Ralf's bishop off the board.

“Nice. Nice way to talk in front of a young lady,” said Ralf, taking the knight with a pawn.

“Why are you wearing that stupid shirt with the stupid fucking little crocodile on it?” said Luke.

“Lila, Please tell your foul-mouthed boyfriend that grunge is dead.”

“Lila, would you like to see Ralf's umbilical cord? His mom keeps it pressed in the family Bible.”

I stood up. “As much fun as this is, I'm going to see if Micky needs some help in the kitchen.”

I walked down the hallway and tentatively swung open the kitchen door. I discovered the source of the moaning that I'd heard earlier. In a large playpen a woman of about my own age lay writhing on a waterproof sheet decorated with pictures of Minnie

Mouse. She was twisting her hands in an elaborate dance of glacial slowness and her face wore a quizzical expression, as if she were struggling to figure out how she came to be lying on a kitchen floor in a diaper, and was trying to point her fingers at the cause or speak its name; but all that came out of her mouth were noises of random pitch and duration and a string of saliva, that hung quivering across the space between her glistening red lips.

Micky, who was at the stove, turned and said, "This Marisol, my big baby." Carmen sat quietly in a kitchen chair with her hands folded in her lap. The pan made sizzling noises. Marisol's eyes flicked a look at me that was a momentary genetic parody of Micky's wise, level gaze. I resisted the feeling that I was being assessed. I knelt down and poked my finger through the wooden bars. "Hello, Marisol." I stroked her wrist.

"How long you know Luke?" Micky asked me.

"Not long," I said.

"He's a nice boy," said Micky. "Very smart. He gotta alotta problem with the family."

"Mmm," I nodded.

"They kick out. I say live here but he don' wanna." I wasn't sure how to respond. "His choose. He choose that. I offer him to live here." Mickey pursed her lips and looked at me.

"That was very nice of you," I said. Micky shrugged and I got the feeling I was missing her point. She put the hot empanadas on a plate and nodded her head to one side as a request for me to hold open the kitchen door.

Ralf and Luke were already hovering over the table. Ralf explained to me what the dishes were. “*Sopa mondongo*—” Ralf said, squeezing his eyes shut and clicking his fingers next to his temple, “What’s the word in English, um, um” Ralf opened his eyes triumphantly, “– tripe.” Luke and I passed on the tripe. Then Micky uncovered the *aroz con pollo*, and we filled our plates and sat on the sofa.

“Hey, Lila. You’re from Pittsburgh, right?” Ralf asked. I nodded because my mouth was full of fried plantains. He spoke to his mom, and, amid the Spanish, I recognized my name and the name of my city. Micky nodded at me, “Ah, Roberto Clemente!”

“Roberto Clemente was from Pittsburgh?” asked Luke.

“No,” said Ralf just as I said yes. “He was Puerto Rican. People think he’s from Pittsburgh because he played for the Pirates from 1955 to ’72.”

“So he lived in Pittsburgh for twenty years,” I said.

“Yes.” said Ralf, conceding nothing.

“How’s life, Micky?” asked Luke. Micky smiled wryly and rocked her head from side-to-side. Her eyes twinkled with merriment. She finished eating and winked at us and went back to the kitchen. “Is your mom still doing piece work?” Luke asked Ralf.

“Yeah.”

“How’s Carmen?”

“She’s pretty good. Better than the last one.”

“Good that Micky has some help. The city paying for it?”

“Yeah. Four out of five days. Hey, I saw my dad.”



“That's cool.”

“Yeah. I'll probably see him again next time he's in town.”

“Cool.”

We focused on eating for a while then Ralf told us about a legal case he'd just studied. A woman was eating in a restaurant and thought she saw something in her food. She decided it was nothing and took a bite. There was a small rock in the mouthful, and the woman chipped her tooth. Ralf asked us if she could successfully sue the restaurant. I said yes – especially since she'd been careful — but Ralf said that the answer was no. It was precisely because the woman had checked before she went ahead and bit down on the food that she was responsible for her suffering. She had taken responsibility for the outcome.

“That's bullshit,” said Luke.

“It's the law,” said Ralf.

Micky brought out a sheet cake with gelatinous pink flowers piped on the corners and placed it on the table. The doorbell rang. “We should go,” said Luke. Ralf blinked. He had a grain of rice stuck to his cheek.

“Why? You just got here. Have some cake.”

“Nah. Lila has to be somewhere,” Luke lied. I stood up at his prompting, just as I had on the train, as if to avoid something dangerous. On our way out we crossed paths with a stream of entering relatives. “Why are we leaving?” I whispered to Luke. “I want cake.”

“I don't want to stand around singing happy birthday to Ralf,” Luke whispered

back. He hadn't told me it was Ralf's birthday.

On the train on the way home I felt as exhausted as the other passengers, and in my weariness, comfortable and unexceptional. I kept wondering what Micky had been trying to tell me about Luke. I thought about asking him but couldn't put my question into words. Certainly Luke couldn't have answered, even if I had known enough to ask: exactly what is it about you that is a threat to my happiness?

And even if I'd understood Micky's message - that Luke was self-destructive - warning me off wouldn't have worked. Because, like the woman who broke her tooth on a rock, I thought that proceeding with caution could save me from being hurt.

## Chapter 6

A couple more weeks went by and the weather got colder. One morning, Luke and I went to an exhibition, at a small gallery on the corner of South 4<sup>th</sup> Street and Wythe Avenue. The space had been a storefront, and had two large windows, one facing each street. Inside, everything was white; the walls, the pressed tin ceiling and the wide uneven floorboards. There were only two paintings on display, guarded by a fiercely bored guy sitting at a small desk. His demeanor changed when he saw Luke. He stood up quickly and shook Luke's hand.

“Hey, man.”

“Hey, how's it going? Ethan, this is Lila. What's up?”

“Not much. Coupla new pieces,” Ethan nodded at me then gestured toward the paintings. Each one was uniformly covered in tiny speckles of paint, in multiple shades of grey. The canvas was rounded at the corners. “The artist is Sam Harris. He makes the surface of the canvas look like an old TV, you know, they way they got when there was no reception.” I looked at the card next to one painting. Its title was “static screen.” I moved closer and looked at the grey flecks. They were impenetrable. Luke rubbed his chin.

We said goodbye and decided to walk further south. Luke grunted to himself.

“What?” I asked.

“That stuff was shit.”

“Maybe the idea is that an unresponsive screen is unthinkable for us now.”

“You're too nice. But hey, it'll make good footage.” I'd forgotten that Luke was filming.

“Isn't that guy your friend?”

“Ah, he thinks so.”

“And, isn't it like shooting fish in a barrel?”

“What?”

“Making New Yorkers look pretentious?”

“That's not the point of the Project. I'm recording my life.

“But we don't really see you.”

“It's from my point of view.” Luke turned and made an frame with his hands around the storefront we'd just left. “That used to be a deli,”

“Oh yeah?”

I turned and walked backwards too, imagining the way the gallery looked when it was stocked to the tin ceiling with cans of Bustelo coffee, diapers, cigarettes, and dangling strands of lotto tickets.

“My dad used to get coffee there on his break from the factory.”

“Your dad worked at the sugar factory?”

“Yeah, for years.” Luke put his arm around my shoulders. “Let’s find somewhere that still sells coffee.”

As we walked past all the store fronts, I remember noticing that some of them had large windows that were shaped liked the canvases we’d just seen; wide rectangles with rounded edges. With their windows shaped like screens, the cafes and restaurants were web sites. The narrow sidewalk itself was so crummy, with stubby trees and trash in the gutter, but as soon as you entered any of these spaces you were transported into a pocket fantasy world. One restaurant, Ocean, had a large pool in the middle of the dining area, directly under a skylight. Lotus blossoms floated on the water, as well as a small wooden boat. Presiding over the diners, wearing a beatific smile, was a ten foot statue of Buddha, painted gold. Within a few blocks of this Balinese paradise were a Tuscan taverna, a Hawaiian surf shack, and a rustic Chinese restaurant with long rough-hewn wooden tables and shared benches where strangers sat side-by-side, eating from steaming bowls with

chopsticks, just like real Sichuan peasants. The decor of other new businesses, with their tiled floors and tin ceilings, stayed closer to the neighborhood's history though I doubted that turn of the century Williamsburg had ever had a gourmet cheese shop, stocking European specialities, or a genuine English pub. Even the family-owned pizza places, bodegas and Polish diners that had been in Williamsburg for decades felt like exotic options now that they were surrounded by yoga studios and boutiques selling the work of fledgling designers. It was as if quotes had been placed around them, and they'd received the Midas-like hipster touch that bestows irony. Paradoxically, when the original fixtures in the neighborhood became hip they also became somehow less authentic. I remember deciding then that Luke was the exception because he was both hip and authentic. Yes, he was really, really cool.

We walked through McCarren Park to an old-style diner with a long curved counter and stools attached to the floor. The interior actually seemed genuinely vintage, and this was confirmed when the owners, a couple in their late seventies, shuffled in from the kitchen and very slowly set about making us some coffee.

“So what did he do?” I asked.

“Who?”

“Your dad, at the factory. What was his job?”

“First he worked in the pan house. That sucked because it was really hot in there,”

Luke frowned. “Then, after Danny - that’s my younger brother - was born, he worked in the packing plant.”

“What did he do there?” Luke pulled a packet of sugar from its rectangular ceramic holder. “Quality control. That means he inspected these tiny little bags to check if they were perfect. Not defective in any way.”

“All of them?”

“Nah. A randomly. Selected. Sample.” Luke tore a corner of the packet with each word. His nails were long and dirty and his fingers shook slightly. The sugar spilled out onto the counter. “Argh, fuck.” He said and swept the grains onto the floor with the back of his hand. “How’s your article coming along?” he asked.

“Pretty good. I’m doing an interview this afternoon.”

“Who with?”

“Christine Wright, she’s heading that campaign to save the factory. And she’s a gallery owner. You must have met her.”

“I know who she is.” Luke looked out of the window.

“You should talk to her. She wants to make the factory into artists’ housing.”

“Ah, I don’t know.”

“Why not? What’s the problem. ”

“I used to know her, way back. When I was a little kid.”

“Oh my God,” I said. “She’s the woman who lived in your building, isn’t she? The one who gave you the Halloween candy?”

“Yeah. That’s her.”

“You should talk to her. I’ll call her.” I pulled out my phone.

“Nah. I don’t want to lean on her like that.” We went back and forth for a long time. I couldn’t figure out why Luke wouldn’t approach Christine. They seemed like natural allies. I knew Christine could help him — both in his career as an artist, and, I felt, to make peace with his past. I was aware that his relationship with his family was troubled, though I didn’t know then exactly why, or how. Neither did I know, of course, that Christine was one source of that trouble.

Finally he agreed to let me ask her if she wanted to meet with him. He was certain she would say no.

After a while we walked back through the park. Luke had an idea for a video post and asked me to help him. But I had to feed my cat, and take a shower - I never felt comfortable showering at Luke’s- so I agreed to meet him back at the factory in an hour.



We kissed before parting ways. “I’m going to call Christine as soon as I get home,” I told him.

“Ask her if she remembers Lukasz,” he said.

Christine did remember Lukasz. She knew Luke also; his work, at least. But she had never connected the two. So I did that for her. Oh, Lila.

I have to keep reminding myself that it was not possible for me to anticipate the destructive consequences of this well-intentioned act.

“You’re kidding,” she said when I told her. “You’ve got to be kidding. Little Lukasz is the man behind *The Exposure Project*?”

“Yup,” I nodded. We were at her gallery, in the back office. I’d had a hard time getting past her receptionist and had to play the old *New York* magazine card, then wait in the gallery while my credentials were checked. The work covering most of two walls and part of the ceiling was a lace-like lattice of cut-out paper, like a huge spider’s web of connected snowflakes or a growth of white lichen spreading in the corner of the room. Close up, the kaleidoscopic pattern turned out to be made of tiny bones. The card read, “*Network of Human Bones*,” by Kay W. Louverture. On the other side of the room was a table display, like a Day of the Dead altar, with piles of sugar skulls, and marigolds. Some Barbie-sized paper mache skeletons wore festive, 19th-century clothing and sat at a table piled with doll-sized delicacies. Another, standing skeleton raised a whip over three others, who were cowering and manacled. The title was “*White Sugar, Black Skeletons*.”

Then the receptionist, now smiling, held the door to the back office open to me, where Christine offered me coffee and a tiny sugar skull. She was amused by the coincidence and flattered that Luke wanted to see her. Perhaps she gave herself some credit for his success, such as it was. She certainly knew how to turn other's talents to her advantage. No doubt she learned that from her father. Whatever. The connection was made; the first domino set in motion. We agreed to meet the following Friday, the week before Thanksgiving, at the factory.

When I got back to Luke's we listened to a recording he had made. It began with Luke saying, "I told Christine that some bad girls at school kept opening the door of the boys' bathroom and making fun of me. She asked me why I couldn't go in a stall and I told her that the janitor had taken the doors off." It went on like that, with the shrink asking the occasional question. Luke wanted to put it on his blog but with changes. He wanted a woman to voice what Christine had said. He decided to include her name this time. He asked me to play the role of Christine. The irony of this, with its excruciating, matryoshka-like layers, does not escape me. Nor do I escape it.

He had written a script, with parts for us both to play. We recorded it, and he edited it, taking lines from the original session he'd had with his therapist. In the new version, Luke sometimes spoke in a much younger voice, with a heavier accent, the way he used to speak when he was a kid and first knew Christine. He called that his "Lukasz" voice. He played the whole thing back over vintage footage of a cockroach scurrying around. The roach was filmed so close-up it looked as if it were trapped inside the

camera's lens. The film hiccuped and looped and slowed in places like a home movie. He titled it *Cock Roach*.

### Cock Roach

LUKASZ: Some bad girls at school keep opening the door of the boys bathroom and making fun of me.

CHRISTINE: Can't you go in a stall?

LUKASZ: What's that?

CHRISTINE: The little room, in the bathroom, that has a door?

LUKASZ: They don't have a door. The janitor took off the door because some boys were doing bad things.

CHRISTINE: So the girls look in at you?

LUKASZ: Yes. Ania, and her friends. And they laugh at my—. At me.

CHRISTINE: Did you try telling the teacher?

LUKASZ: She don't believe me. She finks the girls are all sweet. And she finks I'm bad.

LUKE: Christine thought for a second then opened a drawer and took something out. She held it toward me and when she opened her hand I jumped back.

CHRISTINE: Look at this roach.

LUKASZ: Yuk.

CHRISTINE: It's not real. Here, take it.

LUKASZ: Ew. Ha ha. It's not real.

CHRISTINE: Next time Ania is not at her desk, put it on her chair.

LUKE: I was stunned at the idea.

LUKASZ: OK.

DR. B: Did you do it?

LUKE: Yes. I did just what Christine told me to do. Ania's reaction was better than anything I coulda pictured. She screamed, and ran around the room, flapping her arms. I picked up the plastic roach and put it in my pocket before the teacher found it. It was great. I was so happy.

DR. B: What made it so satisfying to you?

LUKE: I never thought I could control people's reactions like that. That I could have an influence. After that Ania stopped picking on me. I guess I just had more confidence.

DR. B: Confidence in your own efficacy.

LUKE: Yes. That's it. I felt effective. And the roach wasn't even real. It was like magic.

A few days later, Christine asked me if I'd used the roach and I said yes.

CHRISTINE: Did it work? Was Ania scared?

LUKASZ: She nearly haved a heart attack!

LUKE: Christine was happy for me. I didn't give her back the plastic bug. I treasured it. I felt guilty because I was confused if it was a loan or a gift. But that kind of power. I couldn't give it up.

As I watch the movie again, for the hundredth time, I understand that the power came when Luke realized that he could change another person's perception of reality by presenting it in a new light. In other words, that he could make art. His tormenting, humiliating sensitivity was suddenly an asset. This was Christine's gift to him, and the reason why he held her in such awe.

*The glossy brown bug opened its wing cases slowly, like a superhero spreading his cape in preparation for flight, and with a spastic fluttering, took off.*

When the movie stopped I brushed at my face and blinked. Luke laughed and stroked my hair. "There ain't no bugs on you, Lila." He held my head in his hands and we kissed for a bit. Then Luke asked, "Did you sing that song at summer camp?"

"I don't know, probably."

"Did you roast marshmallows over the campfire?"

"Yes, Luke. I did."

"Was it fun?"

"It was awesome."

Later, we took the L train into the city to see a movie. As we walked along 14th Street from the subway to the movie theater, a lean, stooping guy approached us. His irises were unusually blue - both in shade and intensity. He spoke quickly - and shifted on the spot like a little kid but his face was lined and tanned like someone who had spent years

working outside, and he was bearded, and swathed in beads and scarves, as if he'd just returned from a hiking trip in Tibet. "He-ey" he leaned in to air-kiss me in an elaborate barely-touching hug, like a parody of a society hostess. "This must be Lila." Luke looked uncomfortable, bordering on mad.

"This is Dorian,"

"Hi Dorian, I'm Lila," Dorian swayed and giggled, his teeth were long and yellow.

"Oh, I know," he said widening his eyes, then cracking up again. He turned to Luke, "She is, just," he put his hands out gently as if to form the figure of a woman - except I don't have that kind of figure - and instead flexed his wrists once, like someone setting a hot dish on a table, "just like you said."

"Yeah, man. Isn't she?" I raised my eyebrows at Luke as he slapped Dorian on the back, "OK, man. Good to see ya."

"Way, way, wait," Dorian held Luke's sleeve. "Where ya going'?"

"What do you need man?"

"It ain't like that. I just wanna know how you been? Wassup? D'ya wanna go somewhere?"

"I'm just hanging with Lila today, man,"

"OK, that's cool. I get it." Dorian put up his hands to show he was backing off.

Then he bowed, and kissed my hand, his wet lips staying a second too long. I resisted

pulling away before he was done. With effort, he stood up straight. “Lila, it was a pleasure.”

“Happy birthday, man,” said Luke, and slipped something into Dorian’s jacket pocket. Dorian punched Luke’s shoulder in a “you shouldn’t have” gesture then ran around the corner like a kid who’s seen an ice-cream truck.

We walked a block west, toward Union Square. “Ok. who was that?” I asked Luke.

“He’s an old friend,” said Luke. We went to highschool together.”

“Really? He looks much older than you.”

“Drugs’ll do that.”

“It was nice of you to stay in touch with him all this time.” Luke said nothing.

“What kind of drugs?”

“Heroin,” Luke said quickly, then added, “But he’s on methadone now.” Luke grinned. “He sells his piss.”

“What?”

“Yeah. He gets disability if he sticks with methadone. Other people on his program are still using. They get tested once a week, so they need pee that’s clean but has methadone in it.”

“That’s wild.”

“Yeah. I think he fell off the wagon, though,” Luke rubbed the inside of his forearm.

“Is that why you gave him money?” Luke looked surprised and smiled at me.

“Well, he can’t sell his piss right now.”

“I see.”

I’ve watched *L’Atalante* a few more times since I first saw it with Luke at the Angelika. Sometimes I watch it with no sound, because that helps me focus on the beautiful images. Besides, my favorite part doesn’t have dialogue. The part where the new bride has misgivings about marrying. After the wedding, she waves goodbye from the deck of the barge to all her family, a large glum group gathered on the river bank. She pushes away her bride groom and walks the length of the departing barge, resisting as it pulls her away from her old life. She’s walking from left to right, across the screen, and the barge is moving from right to left, so in effect, she stays put, in front of the camera, ambivalent, moving but not going anywhere. Of course, that was Luke’s favorite part of the movie, too.

That Friday, when I arrived at the factory, the ratty entrance was wedged open with a sneaker. I made my way up to Luke’s, and when he opened the door to his place I’d never seen him look so sheepish, his hair all falling forward, smiling, and covering his mouth, hopping from one foot to another - Luke bent forward and kissed me on the cheek and whispered, “Christine’s here,” as if this were unbelievable news. I saw her over his shoulder, sitting on a chair by the window, a cup of her beloved tea casting spirals of steam and corresponding swirling shadows on the wide sill. On her lap was the box, open, and she held a couple of photos in her hands,



“Lila,” she said, looking up, and her eyes were - not misty - but unguarded. She was as emotional, at that moment, as I’ve ever seen her. She looked down again and shook her head, “Can you believe it’s been tk years?” she was dipping back into the box, examining items one by one: stamps, a pocket knife, Polish banknotes. She held up a picture of a chubby boy in a white dress shirt, seated against a bright aqua background, holding a small wooden cross: a school photo of Luke, aged around ten. He was gazing at something over the photographer’s shoulder, and his mouth was slightly open, as if he had trouble breathing through his nose. “Little Lukasz,” sighed Christine, and Luke stared at his feet, which were bare. “You were quite a dumpling, back then.” She raised her eyes to Luke’s, and surveilled him, as if to fully appreciate his transformation. Then she put everything back in the box, shut it, and handed it to me. She gave me the box as if she were handing a dirty plate to a waiter because I had become, at that moment, no longer a target for her charm but just another one of the many people who served her.

“I have wonderful news,” said Christine, addressing Luke. He wore the same vulnerable, foolish expression as the little boy in the picture, complete with the mouth breathing. I felt irritation rise in me. “Huh?” he said.

“I - well, my organization, has bought the factory, and it’s now rezoned for residential use.”

“I thought you - I mean the organization - was trying to get the building landmarked,” I said.

“Of course, that too!” Christine laughed. “Isn’t it great? We should have a huge opening party. The whole Sugar Factory Group,” she punched Luke on the upper arm.

“Just think, now you’ll be my tenant!”

“That’s so, so cool,” said Luke.

Christine pulled on her winter coat, “I have to go. It was wonderful to see you,” she said, then smiled at me and added, “both.” She wrapped her hand-knitted scarf around her neck and flipped the end over her shoulder with a flourish. “I’ll be in touch.”

## Chapter 7

Val sat with her elbows on my kitchen table, her chin in her hands. She was listening to one of Luke's therapy sessions.

### The Year of the Rat

LUKE: Another time there was a rat in the classroom, they were bombing the subways with poison. They do it, once every few years. The rat walked into the room. It looked so cool it could have been chewing gum. We all screamed. But the rat didn't flinch. It was a subway rat, probably born deaf. Somebody switched the light off and on again – it was a grey winter day - to try and scare it. That was no use. We all kept screaming, then laughing, laughing then screaming. Some of the kids climbed up on their chairs. The rat looked around, kinda groggy, like a person who just woke up. Then it strolled over to the teacher's desk. Sister Margarita was the teacher. She was up on her desk, crouching, pulling her skirt up. I saw her legs. More scary to me than the rat.

DR. B: What about her legs was scary?

LUKE: The fact that she had them. I always figured she was on wheels, or little jets or something. And she looked so clumsy. Her crazy hat thing—I don't know the word in English— that thing that looked like a seagull was taking a crap on her head, it got knocked sideways. After a few minutes another teacher came in and she called the janitor and he poked the rat with a broom. While he had it cornered we all left and went to the

cafeteria. Sister Margarita had to go sit in the teachers' lounge for a smoke. I think that's the day I stopped believing in God.

DR. B: Tell me about that.

LUKE: I figured, if Sister really believed in God, why was she scared of a rat? Her fear – it was so raw. All her, you know, nun clothing, her status, it couldn't protect her from the stupid rat.

“I think I know this guy,” Val said.

“Of course you know him,” I said. “It’s Luke. But what do you think?” I had woken her up by pounding on her door, and then I’d dragged her across the hall. She was wearing a vintage silk kimono, and last night’s makeup.

“About what?”

“The other movie, the clip from *L’Atalante?*” Luke had posted our favorite scene, of the bride walking along the barge.

“OK. You went to see the movie together, a couple of nights ago.”

“Yes.”

“And now there’s a clip from the movie on his web site.”

“Yes.”

“So he was filming during the movie.”

“Yes!”

“I think that’s illegal.”

“But do you think it’s weird?”

“How?”

“That he was filming while we out together?”

“Lila,” Val looked at me through one tired eye. “Luke films all the time. That’s the point of his project, right?”

“Yes, but. Do you think ‘all the time’ means, literally, ‘all the time,’ or is it more like, ‘I like coffee; I drink it all the time.’”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s like, ‘I like sleeping late. I sleep late, all the time.’ But, or, maybe it’s like, ‘I’m in a coma.’”

“That analogy -”

“I know.”

“Hmm.”

“I like the other clips he put up.”

Val and I watched them together. There was a scene from *The Lost Weekend*, a 40’s movie about a guy who descends into alcoholism. At his lowest point, he hallucinates little animals. In Luke’s clip, a cute mouse pokes its head out of a crack in the protagonist’s living room wall, and squeaks, then a scary bat swoops in through the window, and after a few disturbing passes over the guy’s head, attacks the mouse while it squeals horribly, and blood drips down the wall. “Yikes,” I said. Val concurred.

The next clip was from *The Wizard of Oz*. Judy Garland crouches sobbing next to a large hour glass filled with red sand. As the sand runs rapidly into the lower chamber, she cries out, “I’m frightened!” in a very convincing way.

“Why is she frightened?” I asked Val.

“Because when the sand runs out, the witch is gonna kill her,” said Val, exasperated by my ignorance. “And because the movie studio forced her to live on coffee, cigarettes, and diet pills.” Then the film ran backwards, and the sand ran upwards, back into the upper chamber of the hour glass. Luke liked to do that. Loop things, reverse things. He had that footage of 9/11, of course, and he also had a clip of the film running forward, then back; the first plane hitting the first tower, smoke billowing. Then a hiccup, and the smoke was pulled back into the building, and the plane was withdrawing, flying backwards, and away. I guess he was always trying to turn back the clock.

“So you don’t think it’s a big deal?” I asked Val.

“The constant filming? I think it’s *the* deal,” she answered. “You know, I definitely know that guy. Let me see that rat movie again.” She clicked around until she found *Year of the Rat*. Halfway through, she slammed her palm on the table. “I knew it!”

“What?”

“Sister Margarita! How many of those can there be? We were at school together. Me and Luke. But his name wasn’t Banas. It was Woe . . . Woe . . . something.” I thought of the little boy in the photo with the goofy expression. “That’s too funny,” I said.

“Something happened to him,” Val rubbed her eyes and forehead. “Listen, d’you mind if I go back to bed? We can talk about this later, right?”

“Yeah. Of course,” I said. “I’m sorry I woke you. We can talk later. That’s fine.” But it wasn’t fine, because I needed to know what had “happened” to Luke.

“K,” Val stood and hugged me, and stumbled over the cat on her way out. “Bye Lila.”