

Donna Tartt

The Goldfinch: A Novel

Chapter 1.

Boy with a Skull

i.

WHILE I WAS STILL in Amsterdam, I dreamed about my mother for the first time in years. I'd been shut up in my hotel for more than a week, afraid to telephone anybody or go out; and my heart scrambled and floundered at even the most innocent noises: elevator bell, rattle of the minibar cart, even church clocks tolling the hour, de Westertoren, Krijtberg, a dark edge to the clangor, an inwrought fairy-tale sense of doom. By day I sat on the foot of the bed straining to puzzle out the Dutch-language news on television (which was hopeless, since I knew not a word of Dutch) and when I gave up, I sat by the window staring out at the canal with my camel's-hair coat thrown over my clothes—for I'd left New York in a hurry and the things I'd brought weren't warm enough, even indoors.

Outside, all was activity and cheer. It was Christmas, lights twinkling on the canal bridges at night; red-cheeked *dames en heren*, scarves flying in the icy wind, clattered down the cobblestones with Christmas trees lashed to the backs of their bicycles. In the afternoons, an amateur band played Christmas carols that hung tinny and fragile in the winter air.

Chaotic room-service trays; too many cigarettes; lukewarm vodka from duty free. During those restless, shut-up days, I got to know every inch of the room as a prisoner comes to know his cell. It was my first time in Amsterdam; I'd seen almost nothing of the city and yet the room itself, in its bleak, drafty,



sunscrubbed beauty, gave a keen sense of Northern Europe, a model of the Netherlands in miniature: whitewash and Protestant probity, co-mingled with deep-dyed luxury brought in merchant ships from the East. I spent an unreasonable amount of time scrutinizing a tiny pair of gilt-framed oils hanging over the bureau, one of peasants skating on an ice-pond by a church, the other a sailboat flouncing on a choppy winter sea: decorative copies, nothing special, though I studied them as if they held, encrypted, some key to the secret heart of the old Flemish masters. Outside, sleet tapped at the windowpanes and drizzled over the canal; and though the brocades were rich and the carpet was soft, still the winter light carried a chilly tone of 1943, privation and austerities, weak tea without sugar and hungry to bed.

Early every morning while it was still black out, before the extra clerks came on duty and the lobby started filling up, I walked downstairs for the newspapers. The hotel staff moved with hushed voices and quiet footsteps, eyes gliding across me coolly as if they didn't quite see me, the American man in 27 who never came down during the day; and I tried to reassure myself that the night manager (dark suit, crew cut, horn-rimmed glasses) would probably go to some lengths to avert trouble or avoid a fuss.

The *Herald Tribune* had no news of my predicament but the story was all over the Dutch papers, dense blocks of foreign print which hung, tantalizingly, just beyond the reach

of my comprehension. *Onopgeloste moord. Onbekende.* I went upstairs and got back into bed (fully clad, because the room was so cold) and spread the papers out on the coverlet: photographs of police cars, crime scene tape, even the captions were impossible to decipher, and although they didn't appear to have my name, there was no way to know if they had a description of me or if they were withholding information from the public.

The room. The radiator. *Een Amerikaan met een strafblad.* Olive green water of the canal.

Because I was cold and ill, and much of the time at a loss what to do (I'd neglected to bring a book, as well as warm clothes), I stayed in bed most of the day. Night seemed to fall in the middle of the afternoon. Often—amidst the crackle of strewn newspapers—I drifted in and out of sleep, and my dreams for the most part were muddled with the same indeterminate anxiety that bled through into my waking hours: court cases, luggage burst open on the tarmac with my clothes scattered everywhere and endless airport corridors where I ran for planes I knew I'd never make.

Thanks to my fever I had a lot of weird and extremely vivid dreams, sweats where I thrashed around hardly knowing if it was day or night, but on the last and worst of these nights I dreamed about my mother: a quick, mysterious dream that felt more like a visitation. I was in Hobie's shop—or, more accurately, some haunted dream space staged like a sketchy version of the shop—when she came up suddenly behind me so I saw her reflection in a mirror. At the sight of her I was paralyzed with happiness; it was her, down to the most minute detail, the very pattern of her freckles, she was smiling at me, more beautiful and yet not older, black hair and funny upward quirk of her mouth, not a dream but a presence that filled

the whole room: a force all her own, a living otherness. And as much as I wanted to, I knew I couldn't turn around, that to look at her directly was to violate the laws of her world and mine; she had come to me the only way she could, and our eyes met in the glass for a long still moment; but just as she seemed about to speak—with what seemed a combination of amusement, affection, exasperation—a vapor rolled between us and I woke up.

ii.

THINGS WOULD HAVE TURNED out better if she had lived. As it was, she died when I was a kid; and though everything that's happened to me since then is thoroughly my own fault, still when I lost her I lost sight of any landmark that might have led me someplace happier, to some more populated or congenial life.

Her death the dividing mark: Before and After. And though it's a bleak thing to admit all these years later, still I've never met anyone who made me feel loved the way she did. Everything came alive in her company; she cast a charmed theatrical light about her so that to see anything through her eyes was to see it in brighter colors than ordinary—I remember a few weeks before she died, eating a late supper with her in an Italian restaurant down in the Village, and how she grasped my sleeve at the sudden, almost painful loveliness of a birthday cake with lit candles being carried in procession from the kitchen, faint circle of light wavering in across the dark ceiling and then the cake set down to blaze amidst the family, beatifying an old lady's face, smiles all round, waiters stepping away with their hands behind their backs—just an ordinary birthday dinner you might see anywhere in an inexpensive downtown restaurant, and I'm sure I wouldn't even remember it had she not died so soon after, but I thought about it again and again after her death and indeed I'll probably think about it all

my life: that candlelit circle, a tableau vivant of the daily, commonplace happiness that was lost when I lost her.

She was beautiful, too. That's almost secondary; but still, she was. When she came to New York fresh from Kansas, she worked part-time as a model though she was too uneasy in front of the camera to be very good at it; whatever she had, it didn't translate to film.

And yet she was wholly herself: a rarity. I cannot recall ever seeing another person who really resembled her. She had black hair, fair skin that freckled in summer, china-blue eyes with a lot of light in them; and in the slant of her cheekbones there was such an eccentric mixture of the tribal and the Celtic Twilight that sometimes people guessed she was Icelandic. In fact, she was half Irish, half Cherokee, from a town in Kansas near the Oklahoma border; and she liked to make me laugh by calling herself an Okie even though she was as glossy and nervy and stylish as a racehorse. That exotic character unfortunately comes out a little too stark and unforgiving in photographs—her freckles covered with makeup, her hair pulled back in a ponytail at the nape of her neck like some nobleman in *The Tale of Genji*—and what doesn't come across at all is her warmth, her merry, unpredictable quality, which is what I loved about her most. It's clear, from the stillness she emanates in pictures, how much she mistrusted the camera; she gives off a watchful, tigerish air of steeling herself against attack. But in life she wasn't like that. She moved with a thrilling quickness, gestures sudden and light, always perched on the edge of her chair like some long elegant marsh-bird about to startle and fly away. I loved the sandalwood perfume she wore, rough and unexpected, and I loved the rustle of her starched shirt when she swooped down to kiss me on the forehead. And her laugh was enough

to make you want to kick over what you were doing and follow her down the street.

Wherever she went, men looked at her out of the corner of their eyes, and sometimes they used to look at her in a way that bothered me a little.

Her death was my fault. Other people have always been a little too quick to assure me that it wasn't; and yes, *only a kid, who could have known, terrible accident, rotten luck, could have happened to anyone*, it's all perfectly true and I don't believe a word of it.

It happened in New York, April 10th, fourteen years ago. (Even my hand balks at the date; I had to push to write it down, just to keep the pen moving on the paper. It used to be a perfectly ordinary day but now it sticks up on the calendar like a rusty nail.)

If the day had gone as planned, it would have faded into the sky unmarked, swallowed without a trace along with the rest of my eighth-grade year. What would I remember of it now? Little or nothing. But of course the texture of that morning is clearer than the present, down to the drenched, wet feel of the air. It had rained in the night, a terrible storm, shops were flooded and a couple of subway stations closed; and the two of us were standing on the squelching carpet outside our apartment building while her favorite doorman, Goldie, who adored her, walked backwards down Fifty-Seventh with his arm up, whistling for a taxi. Cars whooshed by in sheets of dirty spray; rain-swollen clouds tumbled high above the skyscrapers, blowing and shifting to patches of clear blue sky, and down below, on the street, beneath the exhaust fumes, the wind felt damp and soft like spring.

"Ah, he's full, my lady," Goldie called over the roar of the street, stepping out of the way as a

taxi splashed round the corner and shut its light off. He was the smallest of the doormen: a wan, thin, lively little guy, light-skinned Puerto Rican, a former featherweight boxer. Though he was pouchy in the face from drinking (sometimes he turned up on the night shift smelling of J&B), still he was wiry and muscular and quick—always kidding around, always having a cigarette break on the corner, shifting from foot to foot and blowing on his white-gloved hands when it was cold, telling jokes in Spanish and cracking the other doormen up.

"You in a big hurry this morning?" he asked my mother. His nametag said BURT D. but everyone called him Goldie because of his gold tooth and because his last name, de Oro, meant "gold" in Spanish.

"No, plenty of time, we're fine." But she looked exhausted and her hands were shaky as she re-tied her scarf, which snapped and fluttered in the wind.

Goldie must have noticed this himself, because he glanced over at me (backed up evasively against the concrete planter in front of the building, looking anywhere but at her) with an air of slight disapproval.

"You're not taking the train?" he said to me.

"Oh, we've got some errands," said my mother, without much conviction, when she realized I didn't know what to say. Normally I didn't pay much attention to her clothes, but what she had on that morning (white trenchcoat, filmy pink scarf, black and white two-tone loafers) is so firmly burned into my memory that now it's difficult for me to remember her any other way.

I was thirteen. I hate to remember how awkward we were with each other that last morning, stiff enough for the doorman to

notice; any other time we would have been talking companionably enough, but that morning we didn't have much to say to each other because I'd been suspended from school. They'd called her at her office the day before; she'd come home silent and furious; and the awful thing was that I didn't even know what I'd been suspended for, although I was about seventy-five percent sure that Mr. Beeman (en route from his office to the teachers' lounge) had looked out the window of the second-floor landing at exactly the wrong moment and seen me smoking on school property. (Or, rather, seen me standing around with Tom Cable while *he* smoked, which at my school amounted to practically the same offense.) My mother hated smoking. Her parents—whom I loved hearing stories about, and who had unfairly died before I'd had the chance to know them—had been affable horse trainers who travelled around the west and raised Morgan horses for a living: cocktail-drinking, canasta-playing livelies who went to the Kentucky Derby every year and kept cigarettes in silver boxes around the house. Then my grandmother doubled over and started coughing blood one day when she came in from the stables; and for the rest of my mother's teenage years, there had been oxygen tanks on the front porch and bedroom shades that stayed pulled down.

But—as I feared, and not without reason—Tom's cigarette was only the tip of the iceberg. I'd been in trouble at school for a while. It had all started, or begun to snowball rather, when my father had run off and left my mother and me some months before; we'd never liked him much, and my mother and I were generally much happier without him, but other people seemed shocked and distressed at the abrupt way he'd abandoned us (without money, child support, or forwarding address), and the teachers at my school on the Upper West Side had been so sorry for me, so eager to extend

their understanding and support, that they'd given me—a scholarship student—all sorts of special allowances and delayed deadlines and second and third chances: feeding out the rope, over a matter of months, until I'd managed to lower myself into a very deep hole.

So the two of us—my mother and I—had been called in for a conference at school. The meeting wasn't until eleven-thirty but since my mother had been forced to take the morning off, we were heading to the West Side early—for breakfast (and, I expected, a serious talk) and so she could buy a birthday present for someone she worked with. She'd been up until two-thirty the night before, her face tense in the glow of the computer, writing emails and trying to clear the decks for her morning out of the office.

"I don't know about you," Goldie was saying to my mother, rather fiercely, "but I say enough with all this spring and damp already. Rain, rain—" He shivered, pulled his collar closer in pantomime and glanced at the sky.

"I think it's supposed to clear up this afternoon."

"Yeah, I know, but I'm ready for *summer*." Rubbing his hands. "People leave town, they hate it, complain about the heat, but me—I'm a tropical bird. Hotter the better. Bring it on!" Clapping, backing on his heels down the street. "And—tell you what I love the best, is how it quietens out here, come July—? building all empty and sleepy, everyone away, you know?" Snapping his fingers, cab speeding by. "That's *my* vacation."

"But don't you burn up out here?" My standoffish dad had hated this about her—her tendency to engage in conversation with waitresses, doormen, the wheezy old guys at

the dry cleaner's. "I mean, in winter, at least you can put on an extra coat—"

"Listen, you're working the door in winter? I'm telling you it gets *cold*. I don't care how many coats and hats you put on. You're standing out here, in January, February, and the wind is blowing in off the river? *Brrr*."

Agitated, gnawing at my thumbnail, I stared at the cabs flying past Goldie's upraised arm. I knew that it was going to be an excruciating wait until the conference at eleven-thirty; and it was all I could do to stand still and not blurt out incriminating questions. I had no idea what they might spring on my mother and me once they had us in the office; the very word "conference" suggested a convocation of authorities, accusations and face-downs, a possible expulsion. If I lost my scholarship it would be catastrophic; we were broke since my dad had left; we barely had money for rent. Above all else: I was worried sick that Mr. Beeman had found out, somehow, that Tom Cable and I had been breaking into empty vacation houses when I went to stay with him out in the Hamptons. I say "breaking" though we hadn't forced a lock or done any damage (Tom's mother was a real estate agent; we let ourselves in with spare keys lifted from the rack in her office). Mainly we'd snooped through closets and poked around in dresser drawers, but we'd also taken some things: beer from the fridge, some Xbox games and a DVD (Jet Li, *Unleashed*) and money, about ninety-two dollars total: crumpled fives and tens from a kitchen jar, piles of pocket change in the laundry rooms.

Whenever I thought about this, I felt nauseated. It was months since I'd been out to Tom's but though I tried to tell myself that Mr. Beeman couldn't possibly know about us going into those houses—how could he know?—my

imagination was flying and darting around in panicked zig-zags. I was determined not to tell on Tom (even though I wasn't so sure he hadn't told on me) but that left me in a tight spot. How could I have been so stupid? Breaking and entering was a crime; people went to jail for it. For hours the night before I'd lain awake tortured, flopping back and forth and watching the rain slap in ragged gusts against my windowpane and wondering what to say if confronted. But how could I defend myself, when I didn't even know what they knew?

Goldie heaved a big sigh, put his hand down and walked backward on his heels to where my mother stood.

"Incredible," he said to her, with one jaded eye on the street. "We got the flooding down in SoHo, you heard about that, right, and Carlos was saying they got some streets blocked off over by the UN."

Gloomily, I watched the crowd of workers streaming off the crosstown bus, as joyless as a swarm of hornets. We might have had better luck if we'd walked west a block or two, but my mother and I had enough experience of Goldie to know that he would be offended if we struck out on our own. But just then—so suddenly that we all jumped—a cab with its light on skidded across the lane to us, throwing up a fan of sewer-smelling water.

"Watch it!" said Goldie, leaping aside as the taxi plowed to a stop—and then observing that my mother had no umbrella. "Wait," he said, starting into the lobby, to the collection of lost and forgotten umbrellas that he saved in a brass can by the fireplace and re-distributed on rainy days.

"No," my mother called, fishing in her bag for her tiny candy-striped collapsible, "don't

bother, Goldie, I'm all set—"

Goldie sprang back to the curb and shut the taxi door after her. Then he leaned down and knocked on the window.

"You have a blessed day," he said.

iii.

I LIKE TO THINK of myself as a perceptive person (as I suppose we all do) and in setting all this down, it's tempting to pencil a shadow gliding in overhead. But I was blind and deaf to the future; my single, crushing, worry was the meeting at school. When I'd called Tom to tell him I'd been suspended (whispering on the land line; she had taken away my cell phone) he hadn't seemed particularly surprised to hear it. "Look," he'd said, cutting me off, "don't be stupid, Theo, nobody knows a thing, just keep your fucking mouth shut"; and before I could get out another word, he said, "Sorry, I've got to go," and hung up.

In the cab, I tried to crack my window to get some air: no luck. It smelled like someone had been changing dirty diapers back there or maybe even taken an actual shit, and then tried to cover it up with a bunch of coconut air freshener that smelled like suntan lotion. The seats were greasy, and patched with duct tape, and the shocks were nearly gone. Whenever we struck a bump, my teeth rattled, and so did the religious claptrap dangling from the rear view mirror: medallions, a curved sword in miniature dancing on a plastic chain, and a turbaned, bearded guru who gazed into the back seat with piercing eyes, palm raised in benediction.

Along Park Avenue, ranks of red tulips stood at attention as we sped by. Bollywood pop—turned down to a low, almost subliminal whine—spiraled and sparkled hypnotically, just at the threshold of my hearing. The leaves were

just coming out on the trees. Delivery boys from D'Agostino's and Gristede's pushed carts laden with groceries; harried executive women in heels plunged down the sidewalk, dragging reluctant kindergartners behind them; a uniformed worker swept debris from the gutter into a dustpan on a stick; lawyers and stockbrokers held their palms out and knit their brows as they looked up at the sky. As we jolted up the avenue (my mother looking miserable, clutching at the armrest to brace herself) I stared out the window at the dyspeptic workaday faces (worried-looking people in raincoats, milling in grim throngs at the crosswalks, people drinking coffee from cardboard cups and talking on cell phones and glancing furtively side to side) and tried hard not to think of all the unpleasant fates that might be about to befall me: some of them involving juvenile court, or jail.

The cab swung into a sharp sudden turn, onto Eighty-Sixth Street. My mother slid into me and grabbed my arm; and I saw she was clammy and pale as a cod.

"Are you carsick?" I said, forgetting my own troubles for the moment. She had a woeful, fixed expression that I recognized all too well: her lips were pressed tight, her forehead was glistening and her eyes were glassy and huge.

She started to say something—and then clapped her hand to her mouth as the cab lurched to a stop at the light, throwing us forward and then back hard against the seat.

"Hang on," I said to her, and then leaned up and knocked on the greasy plexiglass, so that the driver (a turbaned Sikh) started in surprise.

"Look," I called through the grille, "this is fine, we'll get out here, okay?"

The Sikh—reflected in the garlanded mirror—gazed at me steadily. "You want to stop here."

"Yes, please."

"But this is not the address you gave."

"I know. But this is good," I said, glancing back at my mother—mascara-smearing, wilted-looking, scrabbling through her bag for her wallet.

"Is she all right?" said the cabdriver doubtfully.

"Yes, yes, she's fine. We just need to get out, thanks."

With trembling hands, my mother produced a crumple of damp-looking dollars and pushed them through the grille. As the Sikh slid his hand through and palmed them (resignedly, looking away) I climbed out, holding the door open for her.

My mother stumbled a little stepping onto the curb, and I caught her arm. "Are you okay?" I said to her timidly as the cab sped away. We were on upper Fifth Avenue, by the mansions facing the park.

She took a deep breath, then wiped her brow and squeezed my arm. "Phew," she said, fanning her face with her palm. Her forehead was shiny and her eyes were still a little unfocused; she had the slightly ruffled aspect of a sea-bird blown off course. "Sorry, still got the wobbles. Thank God we're out of that cab. I'll be fine, I just need some air."

People streamed around us on the windy corner: schoolgirls in uniform, laughing and running and dodging around us; nannies pushing elaborate prams with babies seated in pairs and threes. A harried, lawyerly father

brushed past us, towing his small son by the wrist. "No, Braden," I heard him say to the boy, who trotted to keep up, "you shouldn't think that way, it's more important to have a job you *like*—"

We stepped aside to avoid the soapsuds that a janitor was dumping from a pail on the sidewalk in front of his building.

"Tell me," said my mother—fingertips at her temple—"was it just me, or was that cab *unbelievably*—"

"Nasty? Hawaiian Tropic and baby poo?"

"Honestly—" fanning the air in front of her face—"it would have been okay if not for all the stopping and starting. I was perfectly fine and then it just hit me."

"Why don't you ever just ask if you can sit in the front seat?"

"You sound just like your father."

I looked away, embarrassed—for I'd heard it too, a hint of his annoying know-it-all tone. "Let's walk over to Madison and find some place for you to sit down," I said. I was starving to death and there was a diner over there I liked.

But—with a shudder almost, a visible wave of nausea—she shook her head. "Air." Dashing mascara smudges from under her eyes. "The air feels good."

"Sure," I said, a bit too quickly, anxious to be accommodating. "Whatever."

I was trying hard to be agreeable but my mother—fitful and woozy—had picked up on my tone; she looked at me closely, trying to

figure out what I was thinking. (This was another bad habit we'd fallen into, thanks to years of life with my father: trying to read each other's minds.)

"What?" she said. "Is there someplace you want to go?"

"Um, no, not really," I said, taking a step backwards and looking around in my consternation; even though I was hungry, I felt in no position to insist on anything.

"I'll be fine. Just give me a minute."

"Maybe—" blinking and agitated, what did she want, what would please her?—"how about we go sit in the park?"

To my relief, she nodded. "All right then," she said, in what I thought of as her Mary Poppins voice, "but just till I catch my breath," and we started down toward the crosswalk at Seventy-Ninth Street: past topiaries in baroque planters, ponderous doors laced with ironwork. The light had faded to an industrial gray, and the breeze was as heavy as teakettle steam. Across the street by the park, artists were setting up their stalls, unrolling their canvases, pinning up their watercolor reproductions of St. Patrick's Cathedral and the Brooklyn Bridge.

We walked along in silence. My mind was whirring busily on my own troubles (had Tom's parents got a call? Why hadn't I thought to ask him?) as well as what I was going to order for breakfast as soon as I could get her to the diner (Western omelet with home fries, side of bacon; she would have what she always had, rye toast with poached eggs and a cup of black coffee) and I was hardly paying attention where we were going when I realized she had just said something. She wasn't looking at me but out over the park; and her expression made me

think of a famous French movie I didn't know the name of, where distracted people walked down windblown streets and talked a lot but didn't actually seem to be talking to each other.

"What did you say?" I asked, after a few confused beats, walking faster to catch up with her. "Try more—?"

She looked startled, as if she'd forgotten I was there. The white coat—flapping in the wind—added to her long-legged ibis quality, as if she were about to unfurl her wings and sail away over the park.

"Try more what?"

"Oh." Her face went blank and then she shook her head and laughed quickly in the sharp, childlike way she had. "No. I said *time warp*."

Even though it was a strange thing to say I knew what she meant, or thought I did—that shiver of disconnection, the missing seconds on the sidewalk like a hiccup of lost time, or a few frames snipped out of a film.

"No, no, puppy, just the neighborhood." Tousling my hair, making me smile in a lopsided, half-embarrassed way: *puppy* was my baby name, I didn't like it any more nor the hair-tousling either, but sheepish though I felt, I was glad to see her in a better mood. "Always happens up here. Whenever I'm up here it's like I'm eighteen again and right off the bus."

"Here?" I said doubtfully, permitting her to hold my hand, not normally something I would have done. "That's weird." I knew all about my mother's early days in Manhattan, a good long way from Fifth Avenue—on Avenue B, in a studio above a bar, where bums slept in the doorway and bar fights spilled out on the street and a crazy old lady named Mo kept ten or

twelve illegal cats in a blocked-off stairwell on the top floor.

She shrugged. "Yeah, but up here it's still the same as the first day I ever saw it. Time tunnel. On the Lower East Side—well, you know what it's like down there, always something new, but for me it's more this Rip van Winkle feeling, always further and further away. Some days I'd wake up and it was like they came in and rearranged the storefronts in the night. Old restaurants out of business, some trendy new bar where the dry cleaner's used to be...."

I maintained a respectful silence. The passage of time had been much on her mind lately, maybe because her birthday was coming up. *I'm too old for this routine*, she'd said a few days before as we'd scrambled together over the apartment, rummaging under the sofa cushions and searching in the pockets of coats and jackets for enough change to pay the delivery boy from the deli.

She dug her hands in her coat pockets. "Up here, it's more stable," she said. Though her voice was light I could see the fog in her eyes; clearly she hadn't slept well, thanks to me. "Upper Park is one of the few places where you can still see what the city looked like in the 1890s. Gramercy Park too, and the Village, some of it. When I first came to New York I thought this neighborhood was Edith Wharton and *Franny and Zooey* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* all rolled into one."

"*Franny and Zooey* was the West Side."

"Yeah, but I was too dumb to know that. All I can say, is, it was pretty different from the Lower East, homeless guys starting fires in trash cans. Up here on the weekends it was magical—wandering the museum—lolloping around Central Park on my own—"

"Lolloping?" So much of her talk was exotic to my ear, and *lollop* sounded like some horse term from her childhood: a lazy gallop maybe, some equine gait between a canter and a trot.

"Oh, you know, just loping and sloping along like I do. No money, holes in my socks, living off oatmeal. Believe it or not I used to *walk* up here, some weekends. Saving my train fare for the ride home. That was when they still had tokens instead of cards. And even though you're supposed to pay to get in the museum? The 'suggested donation'? Well, I guess I must have had a lot more nerve back then, or maybe they just felt sorry for me because—Oh no," she said, in a changed tone, stopping cold, so that I walked a few steps by her without noticing.

"What?" Turning back. "What is it?"

"Felt something." She held out her palm and looked at the sky. "Did you?"

And just as she said it, the light seemed to fail. The sky darkened rapidly, darker every second; the wind rustled the trees in the park and the new leaves on the trees stood out tender and yellow against black clouds.

"Jeez, wouldn't you know it," said my mother. "It's about to pour." Leaning over the street, looking north: no cabs.

I caught her hand again. "Come on," I said, "we'll have better luck on the other side."

Impatiently we waited for the last few blinks on the Don't Walk sign. Bits of paper were whirling in the air and tumbling down the street. "Hey, there's a cab," I said, looking up Fifth; and just as I said it a businessman ran to the curb with his hand up, and the light popped off.

Across the street, artists ran to cover their

paintings with plastic. The coffee vendor was pulling down the shutters on his cart. We hurried across and just as we made it to the other side, a fat drop of rain splashed on my cheek. Sporadic brown circles—widely spaced, big as dimes—began to pop up on the pavement.

"Oh, *drat!*" cried my mother. She fumbled in her bag for her umbrella—which was scarcely big enough for one person, let alone two.

And then it came down, cold sweeps of rain blowing in sideways, broad gusts tumbling in the treetops and flapping in the awnings across the street. My mother was struggling to get the cranky little umbrella up, without much success. People on the street and in the park were holding newspapers and briefcases over their heads, scurrying up the stairs to the portico of the museum, which was the only place on the street to get out of the rain. And there was something festive and happy about the two of us, hurrying up the steps beneath the flimsy candy-striped umbrella, quick quick quick, for all the world as if we were escaping something terrible instead of running right into it.

iv.

THREE IMPORTANT THINGS HAD happened to my mother after she arrived in New York on the bus from Kansas, friendless and practically penniless. The first was when a booking agent named Davy Jo Pickering had spotted her waiting tables in a coffee shop in the Village: an underfed teenager in Doc Martens and thrift-shop clothes, with a braid down her back so long she could sit on it. When she'd brought him his coffee, he'd offered her seven hundred and then a thousand dollars to fill in for a girl who hadn't shown up for work at the catalogue shoot across the street. He'd pointed out the location van, the equipment being set up in Sheridan Square park; he'd counted out the

bills, laid them on the counter. "Give me ten minutes," she'd said; she'd brought out the rest of her breakfast orders, then hung up her apron and walked out.

"I was only a mail-order model," she always took pains to explain to people—by which she meant she'd never done fashion magazines or couture, only circulars for chain stores, inexpensive casuals for junior misses in Missouri and Montana. Sometimes it was fun, she said, but mostly it wasn't: swimsuits in January, shivering from flu; tweeds and woollens in summer heat, sweltering for hours amid fake autumn leaves while a studio fan blew hot air and a guy from makeup darted in between takes to powder the sweat off her face.

But during those years of standing around and pretending to be in college—posing in mock campus settings in stiff pairs and threes, books clutched to her chest—she'd managed to sock away enough money to send herself to college for real: art history at NYU. She'd never seen a great painting in person until she was eighteen and moved to New York, and she was eager to make up for lost time—"pure bliss, perfect heaven," she'd said, up to the neck in art books and poring over the same old slides (Manet, Vuillard) until her vision started to blur. ("It's crazy," she'd said, "but I'd be perfectly happy if I could sit looking at the same half dozen paintings for the rest of my life. I can't think of a better way to go insane.")

College was the second important thing that had happened to her in New York—for her, probably the most important. And if not for the third thing (meeting and marrying my father—not so lucky as the first two) she would almost certainly have finished her master's and gone on for her PhD. Whenever she had a few hours to herself she always headed straight to the Frick, or MoMA, or the Met—which is why, as

we stood under the dripping portico of the museum, gazing out across hazy Fifth Avenue and the raindrops jumping white in the street, I was not surprised when she shook her umbrella out and said: "Maybe we should go in and poke around for a bit till it stops."

"Um—" What I wanted was breakfast. "Sure."

She glanced at her watch. "Might as well. We're not going to get a cab in all this."

She was right. Still, I was starving. *When are we going to eat?* I thought grumpily, following her up the stairs. For all I knew, she was going to be so mad after the meeting she wouldn't take me out to lunch at all, I would have to go home and eat a bowl of cereal or something.

Yet the museum always felt like a holiday; and once we were inside with the glad roar of tourists all around us, I felt strangely insulated from whatever else the day might hold in store. The Great Hall was loud, and rank with the smell of wet overcoats. A drenched crowd of Asian senior citizens surged past, after a crisp stewardess guide; bedraggled Girl Scouts huddled whispering near the coat check; beside the information desk stood a line of military-school cadets in gray dress uniforms, hats off, clasped hands behind their backs.

For me—a city kid, always confined by apartment walls—the museum was interesting mainly because of its immense size, a palace where the rooms went on forever and grew more and more deserted the farther in you went. Some of the neglected bedchambers and roped-off drawing rooms in the depths of European Decorating felt bound-up in deep enchantment, as if no one had set foot in them for hundreds of years. Ever since I'd started riding the train by myself I'd loved to go there alone and roam around until I got lost,

wandering deeper and deeper in the maze of galleries until sometimes I found myself in forgotten halls of armor and porcelain that I'd never seen before (and, occasionally, was unable to find again).

As I hung behind my mother in the admissions line, I put my head back and stared fixedly into the cavernous ceiling dome two stories above: if I stared hard enough, sometimes I could make myself feel like I was floating around up there like a feather, a trick from early childhood that was fading as I got older.

Meanwhile my mother—red-nosed and breathless from our dash through the rain—was grappling for her wallet. "Maybe when we're done I'll duck in the gift shop," she was saying. "I'm sure the last thing Mathilde wants is an art book but it'll be hard for her to complain much about it without sounding stupid."

"Yikes," I said. "The present's for Mathilde?" Mathilde was the art director of the advertising firm where my mother worked; she was the daughter of a French fabric-importing magnate, younger than my mother and notoriously fussy, apt to throw tantrums if the car service or the catering wasn't up to par.

"Yep." Wordlessly, she offered me a stick of gum, which I accepted, and then threw the pack back in her purse. "I mean, that's Mathilde's whole thing, the well-chosen gift shouldn't cost a lot of money, it's all about the perfect inexpensive paperweight from the flea market. Which would be fantastic, I guess, if any of us had time to go downtown and scour the flea market. Last year when it was Pru's turn—? She panicked and ran into Saks on her lunch hour and ended up spending fifty bucks of her own money on top of what they gave her, for sunglasses, Tom Ford I think, and Mathilde still had to get her crack in about Americans and

consumer culture. Pru isn't even American, she's Australian."

"Have you discussed it with Sergio?" I said. Sergio—seldom in the office, though often in the society pages with people like Donatella Versace—was the multimillionaire owner of my mother's firm; "discussing things with Sergio" was akin to asking: "What would Jesus do?"

"Sergio's idea of an art book is Helmut Newton or maybe that coffee-table book that Madonna did a while back."

I started to ask who Helmut Newton was, but then had a better idea. "Why don't you get her a MetroCard?"

My mother rolled her eyes. "Believe me, I ought to." There had recently been a flap at work when Mathilde's car was held up in traffic, leaving her stranded in Williamsburg at a jeweler's studio.

"Like—anonymously. Leave one on her desk, an old one without any money on it. Just to see what she'd do."

"I can tell you what she'd do," said my mother, sliding her membership card through the ticket window. "Fire her assistant and probably half the people in Production as well."

My mother's advertising firm specialized in women's accessories. All day long, under the agitated and slightly vicious eye of Mathilde, she supervised photo shoots where crystal earrings glistened on drifts of fake holiday snow, and crocodile handbags—unattended, in the back seats of deserted limousines—glowed in coronas of celestial light. She was good at what she did; she preferred working behind the camera rather than in front of it; and I knew she got a kick out of seeing her work on subway

posters and on billboards in Times Square. But despite the gloss and sparkle of the job (champagne breakfasts, gift bags from Bergdorf's) the hours were long and there was a hollowness at the heart of it that—I knew—made her sad. What she really wanted was to go back to school, though of course we both knew that there was little chance of that now my dad had left.

"Okay," she said, turning from the window and handing me my badge, "help me keep an eye on the time, will you? It's a massive show"—she indicated a poster, PORTRAITURE AND NATURE MORTE: NORTHERN MASTERWORKS OF THE GOLDEN AGE—"we can't see it all on this visit, but there are a few things..."

Her voice drifted away as I trailed behind her up the Great Staircase—torn between the prudent need to stick close and the urge to slink a few paces back and try to pretend I wasn't with her.

"I hate to race through like this," she was saying as I caught up with her at the top of the stairs, "but then again it's the kind of show where you need to come two or three times. There's *The Anatomy Lesson*, and we do have to see that, but what I really want to see is one tiny, rare piece by a painter who was Vermeer's teacher. Greatest Old Master you've never heard of. The Frans Hals paintings are a big deal, too. You know Hals, don't you? *The Jolly Toper*? And the almshouse governors?"

"Right," I said tentatively. Of the paintings she'd mentioned, *The Anatomy Lesson* was the only one I knew. A detail from it was featured on the poster for the exhibition: livid flesh, multiple shades of black, alcoholic-looking surgeons with bloodshot eyes and red noses.

"Art One-oh-one stuff," said my mother. "Here, take a left."

Upstairs it was freezing cold, with my hair still wet from the rain. "No, no, this way," said my mother, catching my sleeve. The show was complicated to find, and as we wandered the busy galleries (weaving in and out of crowds, turning right, turning left, backtracking through labyrinths of confusing signage and layout) large gloomy reproductions of *The Anatomy Lesson* appeared erratically and at unexpected junctures, baleful signposts, the same old corpse with the flayed arm, red arrows beneath: *operating theater, this way*.

I was not very excited at the prospect of a lot of pictures of Dutch people standing around in dark clothes, and when we pushed through the glass doors—from echoing halls into carpeted hush—I thought at first we'd gone into the wrong hall. The walls glowed with a warm, dull haze of opulence, a generic mellowness of antiquity; but then it all broke apart into clarity and color and pure Northern light, portraits, interiors, still lifes, some tiny, others majestic: ladies with husbands, ladies with lapdogs, lonely beauties in embroidered gowns and splendid, solitary merchants in jewels and furs. Ruined banquet tables littered with peeled apples and walnut shells; draped tapestries and silver; trompe l'oeils with crawling insects and striped flowers. And the deeper we wandered, the stranger and more beautiful the pictures became. Peeled lemons, with the rind slightly hardened at the knife's edge, the greenish shadow of a patch of mold. Light striking the rim of a half-empty wine glass.

"I like this one too," whispered my mother, coming up alongside me at a smallish and particularly haunting still life: a white butterfly against a dark ground, floating over some red fruit. The background—a rich chocolate black—had a complicated warmth suggesting crowded storerooms and history, the passage of time.

"They really knew how to work this edge, the Dutch painters—ripeness sliding into rot. The fruit's perfect but it won't last, it's about to go. And see here especially," she said, reaching over my shoulder to trace in the air with her finger, "this passage—the butterfly." The underwing was so powdery and delicate it looked as if the color would smear if she touched it. "How beautifully he plays it. Stillness with a tremble of movement."

"How long did it take him to paint that?"

My mother, who'd been standing a bit too close, stepped back to regard the painting—oblivious to the gum-chewing security guard whose attention she'd attracted, who was staring fixedly at her back.

"Well, the Dutch invented the microscope," she said. "They were jewelers, grinders of lenses. They want it all as detailed as possible because even the tiniest things mean something. Whenever you see flies or insects in a still life—a wilted petal, a black spot on the apple—the painter is giving you a secret message. He's telling you that living things don't last—it's all temporary. Death in life. That's why they're called *natures mortes*. Maybe you don't see it at first with all the beauty and bloom, the little speck of rot. But if you look closer—there it is."

I leaned down to read the note, printed in discreet letters on the wall, which informed me that the painter—Adriaen Coorte, dates of birth and death uncertain—had been unknown in his own lifetime and his work unrecognized until the 1950s. "Hey," I said, "Mom, did you see this?"

But she'd already moved on. The rooms were chilly and hushed, with lowered ceilings, and none of the palatial roar and echo of the Great Hall. Though the exhibition was moderately

crowded, still it had the sedate, meandering feel of a backwater, a certain vacuum-sealed calm: long sighs and extravagant exhalations like a room full of students taking a test. I trailed behind my mother as she zigzagged from portrait to portrait, much faster than she usually went through an exhibition, from flowers to card tables to fruit, ignoring a great many of the paintings (our fourth silver tankard or dead pheasant) and veering to others without hesitation ("Now, Hals. He's so corny sometimes with all these tipplers and wenches but when he's on, he's *on*. None of this fussiness and precision, he's working wet-on-wet, slash, slash, it's all so *fast*. The faces and hands—rendered really finely, he knows that's what the eye is drawn to but look at the clothes—so loose—almost sketched. Look how open and modern the brushwork is!"). We spent some time in front of a Hals portrait of a boy holding a skull ("Don't be mad, Theo, but who do you think he looks like? Somebody"—tugging the back of my hair—"who could use a haircut?")—and, also, two big Hals portraits of banqueting officers, which she told me were very, very famous and a gigantic influence on Rembrandt. ("Van Gogh loved Hals too. Somewhere, he's writing about Hals and he says: *Frans Hals has no less than twenty-nine shades of black! Or was it twenty-seven?*") I followed after her with a sort of dazed sense of lost time, delighted by her preoccupation, how oblivious she seemed of the minutes flying. It seemed that our half hour must be almost up; but still I wanted to dawdle and distract her, in the infantile hope that time would slip away and we would miss the meeting altogether.

"Now, Rembrandt," my mother said.

"Everybody always says this painting is about reason and enlightenment, the dawn of scientific inquiry, all that, but to me it's creepy how polite and formal they are, milling around the slab like a buffet at a cocktail party.

Although—" she pointed—"see those two puzzled guys in the back there? They're not looking at the body—they're looking at *us*. You and me. Like they see us standing here in front of them—two people from the future. Startled. 'What are *you* doing here?' Very naturalistic. But then"—she traced the corpse, midair, with her finger—"the body isn't painted in any very natural way at all, if you look at it. Weird glow coming off it, do you see? Alien autopsy, almost. See how it lights up the faces of the men looking down at it? Like it's shining with its own light source? He's painting it with that radioactive quality because he wants to draw our eye to it—make it jump out at us. And here"—she pointed to the flayed hand—"see how he calls attention to it by painting it so big, all out of proportion to the rest of the body? He's even turned it around so the thumb is on the wrong side, do you see? Well, he didn't do that by mistake. The skin is off the hand—we see it immediately, something very wrong—but by reversing the thumb he makes it look even *more* wrong, it registers subliminally even if we can't put our finger on it, something really out of order, not right. Very clever trick." We were standing behind a crowd of Asian tourists, so many heads that I could see the picture scarcely at all, but then again I didn't care that much because I'd seen this girl.

She'd seen me, too. We'd been eyeing each other as we were going through the galleries. I wasn't quite even sure what was so interesting about her, since she was younger than me and a little strange-looking—nothing at all like the girls I usually got crushes on, cool serious beauties who cast disdainful looks around the hallway and went out with big guys. This girl had bright red hair; her movements were swift, her face sharp and mischievous and strange, and her eyes were an odd color, a golden honeybee brown. And though she was too thin, all elbows, and in a way almost plain, yet there

was something about her too that made my stomach go watery. She was swinging and knocking a battered-looking flute case around with her—a city kid? On her way to a music lesson? Maybe not, I thought, circling behind her as I followed my mother into the next gallery; her clothes were a little too bland and suburban; she was probably a tourist. But she moved with more assurance than most of the girls I knew; and the sly, composed glance that she slid over me as she brushed past drove me crazy.

I was trailing along behind my mother, only half paying attention to what she was saying, when she stopped in front of a painting so suddenly that I almost ran into her.

"Oh, sorry—!" she said, without looking at me, stepping back to make room. Her face was like someone had turned a light into it.

"*This* is the one I was talking about," she said. "Isn't it amazing?"

I inclined my head in my mother's direction, in an attitude of attentive listening, while my eyes wandered back to the girl. She was accompanied by a funny old white-haired character who I guessed from his sharpness of face was related to her, her grandfather maybe: houndstooth coat, long narrow lace-up shoes as shiny as glass. His eyes were close-set, and his nose beaky and birdlike; he walked with a limp—in fact, his whole body listed to one side, one shoulder higher than the other; and if his slump had been any more pronounced, you might have said he was a hunchback. But all the same there was something elegant about him. And clearly he adored the girl from the amused and companionable way he hobbled at her side, very careful where he put his feet, his head inclined in her direction.

"This is just about the first painting I ever really loved," my mother was saying. "You'll never believe it, but it was in a book I used to take out of the library when I was a kid. I used to sit on the floor by my bed and stare at it for hours, completely fascinated—that little guy! And, I mean, actually it's incredible how much you can learn about a painting by spending a lot of time with a reproduction, even not a very good reproduction. I started off loving the bird, the way you'd love a pet or something, and ended up loving the way he was painted." She laughed. "*The Anatomy Lesson* was in the same book actually, but it scared the pants off me. I used to slam the book shut when I opened it to that page by mistake."

The girl and the old man had come up next to us. Self-consciously, I leaned forward and looked at the painting. It was a small picture, the smallest in the exhibition, and the simplest: a yellow finch, against a plain, pale ground, chained to a perch by its twig of an ankle.

"He was Rembrandt's pupil, Vermeer's teacher," my mother said. "And this one little painting is really the missing link between the two of them—that clear pure daylight, you can see where Vermeer got his quality of light from. Of course, I didn't know or care about any of that when I was a kid, the historical significance. But it's there."

I stepped back, to get a better look. It was a direct and matter-of-fact little creature, with nothing sentimental about it; and something about the neat, compact way it tucked down inside itself—its brightness, its alert watchful expression—made me think of pictures I'd seen of my mother when she was small: a dark-capped finch with steady eyes.

"It was a famous tragedy in Dutch history," my mother was saying. "A huge part of the town

was destroyed."

"What?"

"The disaster at Delft. That killed Fabritius. Did you hear the teacher back there telling the children about it?"

I had. There had been a trio of ghastly landscapes, by a painter named Egbert van der Poel, different views of the same smouldering wasteland: burnt ruined houses, a windmill with tattered sails, crows wheeling in smoky skies. An official looking lady had been explaining loudly to a group of middle-school kids that a gunpowder factory exploded at Delft in the 1600s, that the painter had been so haunted and obsessed by the destruction of his city that he painted it over and over.

"Well, Egbert was Fabritius's neighbor, he sort of lost his mind after the powder explosion, at least that's how it looks to me, but Fabritius was killed and his studio was destroyed. Along with almost all his paintings, except this one." She seemed to be waiting for me to say something, but when I didn't, she continued: "He was one of the greatest painters of his day, in one of the greatest ages of painting. Very very famous in his time. It's sad though, because maybe only five or six paintings survived, of all his work. All the rest of it is lost—everything he ever did."

The girl and her grandfather were loitering quietly to the side, listening to my mother talk, which was a bit embarrassing. I glanced away and then—unable to resist—glanced back. They were standing very close, so close I could have reached out and touched them. She was batting and plucking at the old man's sleeve, tugging his arm to whisper something in his ear.

"Anyway, if you ask me," my mother was saying, "this is the most extraordinary picture in

the whole show. Fabritius is making clear something that he discovered all on his own, that no painter in the world knew before him—not even Rembrandt."

Very softly—so softly I could barely hear her—I heard the girl whisper: "It had to live its whole life like that?"

I'd been wondering the same thing; the shackled foot, the chain was terrible; her grandfather murmured some reply but my mother (who seemed totally unaware of them, even though they were right next to us) stepped back and said: "Such a mysterious picture, so simple. Really tender—invites you to stand close, you know? All those dead pheasants back there and then this little living creature."

I allowed myself another stealthy glimpse in the girl's direction. She was standing on one leg, with her hip swung out to the side. Then—quite suddenly—she turned and looked me in the eye; and in a heart-skip of confusion, I looked away.

What was her name? Why wasn't she in school? I'd been trying to make out the scribbled name on the flute case but even when I leaned in as far as I dared without being obvious, still I couldn't read the bold spiky marker strokes, more drawn than written, like something spray-painted on a subway car. The last name was short, only four or five letters; the first looked like R, or was it P?

"People die, sure," my mother was saying. "But it's so heartbreaking and unnecessary how we lose *things*. From pure carelessness. Fires, wars. The Parthenon, used as a munitions storehouse. I guess that anything we manage to save from history is a miracle."

The grandfather had drifted away, a few paintings over; but she was loitering a few steps behind, the girl, and kept casting glances back at my mother and me. Beautiful skin: milky white, arms like carved marble. Definitely she looked athletic, though too pale to be a tennis player; maybe she was a ballerina or a gymnast or even a high diver, practicing late in shadowy indoor pools, echoes and refractions, dark tile. Plunging with arched chest and pointed toes to the bottom of the pool, a silent *pow*, shiny black swimsuit, bubbles foaming and streaming off her small, tense frame.

Why did I obsess over people like this? Was it normal to fixate on strangers in this particular vivid, fevered way? I didn't think so. It was impossible to imagine some random passer-by on the street forming quite such an interest in *me*. And yet it was the main reason I'd gone in those houses with Tom: I was fascinated by strangers, wanted to know what food they ate and what dishes they ate it from, what movies they watched and what music they listened to, wanted to look under their beds and in their secret drawers and night tables and inside the pockets of their coats. Often I saw interesting-looking people on the street and thought about them restlessly for days, imagining their lives, making up stories about them on the subway or the crosstown bus. Years had passed, and I still hadn't stopped thinking about the dark-haired children in Catholic school uniforms—brother and sister—I'd seen in Grand Central, literally trying to pull their father out the door of a seedy bar by the sleeves of his suit jacket. Nor had I forgotten the frail, gypsyish girl in a wheelchair out in front of the Carlyle Hotel, talking breathlessly in Italian to the fluffy dog in her lap, while a sharp character in sunglasses (father? bodyguard?) stood behind her chair, apparently conducting some sort of business deal on his phone. For years, I'd turned those strangers over in my mind, wondering who they

were and what their lives were like, and I knew I would go home and wonder about this girl and her grandfather the same way. The old man had money; you could tell from how he was dressed. Why was it just the two of them? Where were they from? Maybe they were part of some big old complicated New York family—music people, academics, one of those large, artsy West Side families that you saw up around Columbia or at Lincoln Center matinees. Or, maybe—homely, civilized old creature that he was—maybe he wasn't her grandfather at all. Maybe he was a music teacher, and she was the flute prodigy he had discovered in some small town and brought to play at Carnegie Hall—

"Theo?" my mother said suddenly. "Did you hear me?"

Her voice brought me back to myself. We were in the last room of the show. Beyond lay the exhibition shop—postcards, cash register, glossy stacks of art books—and my mother, unfortunately, had not lost track of the time.

"We should see if it's still raining," she was saying. "We've still got a little while"—(looking at her watch, glancing past me at the Exit sign)—"but I think I'd better go downstairs if I'm going to try to get something for Mathilde."

I noticed the girl observing my mother as she spoke—eyes gliding curiously over my mother's sleek black ponytail, her white satin trenchcoat cinched at the waist—and it thrilled me to see her for a moment as the girl saw her, as a stranger. Did she see how my mother's nose had the tiniest bump at the top, where she'd broken it falling out of a tree as a child? or how the black rings around the light blue irises of my mother's eyes gave her a slightly wild quality, as of some steady-eyed hunting creature alone on a plain?

"You know—" my mother looked over her shoulder—"if you don't mind, I just might run back and take another quick look at *The Anatomy Lesson* before we leave. I didn't get to see it up close and I'm afraid I might not make it back before it comes down." She started away, shoes clacking busily—and then glanced at me as if to say: *are you coming?*

This was so unexpected that for a split second I didn't know what to say. "Um," I said, recovering, "I'll meet you in the shop."

"Okay," she said. "Buy me a couple of cards, will you? I'll be back in a sec."