

Drugs

They were on drugs and happy. They clung to each other. With their fingers they touched places on their bodies that could not be said to properly exist. Their mouths were sticky and gaping, breathing for wetness. Their eyes, huge and believing, pulled threads of the other's being.

These were days of fortune and longing.

Maxine abandoned herself on the bare mattress, stained with sweat and reeking of love odors. Bastion was in the bathroom, picking at scabs in the mirror. Maxine's legs tingled sweetly. She closed her eyes and imagined her blood moving through her, coming out of her. In her mind, it sparkled. It overflowed the mattress onto the floor, forming a warm, wet embrace. But the beauty turned swiftly, unexpectedly into anxiety. Bastion had been gone for a while. It seemed like hours. Probably minutes. It was too long. Her hands groped along the mattress, searching for nothing. Bastion, she moaned. Then he was there, his great warm hulk covering her and his tongue on her neck. Bastion, she whispered. Bastion, Bastion. She wanted to say it for the rest of her life. He didn't say her name, just moved along her, scaling up and down like a monkey searching for food.

Let's get up, she moaned. She didn't want to get up. It was the last thing she wanted to do. But she was feeling hot. Too hot, and saying something like that would make her feel colder, allow her body to establish some type of equilibrium. Bastion groaned. More, he said. Now all she could feel was his giant clammy body covering her, stopping her from moving, stopping her from breathing. Get up, get up, she said, shoving him aside. She spread her body out to get some air. I need to get up, she said. Bastion buried his face in the pillow that had dried hard with the sweat of flailing bodies. She stood in the center of the apartment. Her whole body was

concentrated into the soles of her feet. She could number every splinter of wood beneath her. The sensation was too real. She shifted her weight. What is this place, she asked herself.

She saw, as though for the first time, objects, objects she couldn't name, cluttered on the floor, everywhere that didn't make sense, she didn't even remember them falling. How could she not remember them falling? They must have made a huge clattering sound. She saw islands of congealed neon substances, spilled sodas and generic gelatinous concoctions. There were clothes strewn all over the place, a nonsensical trail leading from the door to the bed to the door to the bathroom to the kitchen. Clothes everywhere like the shells of insects. Her eyes drifted back to the door, and she felt something like horror. The door was open just slightly. She rushed over and slammed it shut. Bastion jerked awake, a trail of spit dangling from his lip to the pillow.

The door was open! she shouted. What if someone came in here? What if someone was watching us? Basti, what if someone was here? She was crying and hugging herself, rubbing her hands up and down her arms.

Huh? he said. No one's here. Come back to bed. Let's do more.

We don't have anymore, Bastion!

Don't call me that, he said. You said you wouldn't call me that.

She knelt next to him on the mattress. Her scent came up at her like a blast of low tide. We have to go, Bastion, we have to go, she said.

Don't call me that, he mumbled and dropped into sleep.

She put on clothes, anything she could find. Jeans she didn't know if they were hers or Bastion's, a sweater, shoes. She scuffled around in the shoes looking for something else, she didn't know what. Keys? She didn't need keys. She didn't have keys. A bag? What was a bag,

anyway? She rummaged in one of the drawers and shoved a few crinkled bills in her pocket and left.

It was bright out but it was cold. It was very cold. She rubbed her arms as she stumbled down the street, bumping into people. People cursing her off. She didn't look at them. The air was so clear and bright it hurt. She wanted to be back with Bastion, doing more. Dissolving into their warmth. Things were so solid around her. Cars moved with such intensity. And the sounds, so loud. Everything crinkled and buzzed. She didn't know where she was going. She passed a bar and when she kept walking past she felt hollow and lonely. She walked back to the bar and went inside.

I need a drink, she said, falling over the barstool.

I'd say, said the bartender. He was a worn man with a big white beard and reading glasses. A veteran of the place. We don't give freebies here, he said. It didn't shake her up. It grounded her, a reminder like that, that parts of society still had rules to live by.

Bourbon and coke, she said. No ice.

While he was fixing her drink, two guys walked in. Jeans and boots and leather jackets and big, crinkly heads. They were the most comforting sight in the world. She spun towards them, her thighs dangling apart.

They sat at the bar. The bartender brought them drinks.

Hey, she shouted at them. One of them looked at the other and then at her. Hey, he said. Little early, don't you think?

Early for me is early for you, she said.

We just got off work.

Well I did too. I just got off work.

Lady, I don't mean to pry, but are you doing all right?

The world suddenly snapped itself shut. She had to get out of there. She threw back her drink and stumbled towards the door. A big hand closed around her upper arm.

Hey, wait there, I don't think you should--

Should what? Who the hell are you? Who the hell are you!

She ripped her arm away, but he was too strong. Then she was crying, letting go of everything right into the shoulder of his jacket. Between heaves the smell of cracked leather and cigarettes invaded her nostrils. It calmed her.

Hey, sit down. Just sit down. We'll talk about it. Mike, another one for the lady here.

In a second there was sweet, cold liquid at her lips and down her throat. The other man moved to another stool and the man whose shoulder she had cried on lifted her onto the stool. And there was the bartender leaning against the back wall cleaning glasses, looking at her with the patience of the universe in his eyes. She was so happy she wanted to die.

Tell me your story, he said. She looked at him and could tell he wanted to know.

Okay, she said. I don't like it here.

That was all she could think to say. She was about to speak again, but every sentence that might come out would just be a less accurate version of what she'd already said. But he knew. The man on the stool with his dirt-creased construction worker's hand on her shoulder knew. He didn't ask her where she wanted to be because he didn't want to make her lie.

She sat with her head down to her neck, drooping on the stool. A flat, cigarette-yellowed fingernail rose up to her eyes and pushed aside a few strands of hair. His fingers were the size and shape of rulers.

It'll be okay, he said. Won't it, Mike? You see? Mike's okay. Aren't you Mike?

The bartender nodded patiently, digging his toweled hand into and out of a glass that was already clean.

You see? And Mike's seen everything. I mean, everything.

She gave a little smile.

The man's friend had already left. She hadn't noticed. Now the man got up, placed some bills on the counter, and adjusted his jacket. He winked at her and then was out the door. He took all the heat with him.

There's extra money here, said the bartender, if you want another.

She ran out the door after the man. But the street was so crowded with people. She spun around, searching, not knowing which way to go. She chose a way and ran.

She came up on a man, tall and broad-shouldered with his hands in his jacket pockets. She grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around. The man looked at her confused, ready to shout at her. Then his face softened. He looked her up and down.

Hello, he said. His face was fresh and unlined, like someone she had never met.

Take me, she pleaded. Take me. Take me to a cabin in the desert.

Okay, he said.

He put his arms around her and they stumbled together to the subway station.