

Orbits

My windows are a kaleidoscope, blue, orange, yellow, and sun shines through in solid square streams from the panes that are clear glass. This morning, I wake up sticky and warm, curled on the futon by the windows with the blankets kicked off. There's a hot box effect of sun in the room.

My hair is curled with humidity and tangled from too many days without wash. I pull it back with my fingers and they get stuck half way through. A notebook has fallen open beside the bed, next to my circled and highlighted collage of classifieds, my carton of Pall Malls, a half eaten sandwich from the bodega downstairs, the change that I'm saving in a mason jar. Most things remaining exactly as they fell days ago. Evidence of Julie is scarce but still present.

The heat from the sun tells my body to tell my brain that I'm burning. I button a big flannel over my naked breasts and throw a tapestry over the bare curtain rod drowning myself in blue light.

I hear the deadbolt click open. Julie is home from work, returning, as usual, just as I'm waking up. I cringe a bit from wanting her and wanting her gone in equal degrees. She comes over to the bed, slings her paisley bag to the floor. "Erin," she says, smiling almost like she's coming home to a pet. She lays down with her head in my lap, gypsy skirts fanning around her, the familiar smell of roasting coffee and jasmine. Smells that will be from now on poisoned with her association. Her hair falls around her face in loose black ringlets. I run my fingers over her sharp, perfect collar bones, and she unbuttons my flannel slowly, kissing my neck, kissing each of my closed eyelids.

Julie is twenty-two, from Connecticut, living in Brooklyn on her parents' money. She's the kind of girl who thinks it's *in* to be poor. Who *wants* to be poor. When I first took her home with me, she stopped at the door of the warehouse and looked up the six floor mosaic of colored glass and graffiti, her eyes wide. She smiled all the way up the four flights of stairs that smell like piss and weed, mildew and cheap cigarettes. She said she never wanted to leave, and she's still here.

Julie takes the tapestry off the window, and I'm naked again. Already, she has undone all of my progress for the morning. She traces one finger down the length of my body, says I look more beautiful in the sun. We fuck, sheets damp with sweat, our skin slipping and sticking in all the wrong places, and she never opens her eyes.

I know that Julie does not love me. Nothing close. I'm just one part of this experience, which I would think by now, must be getting old. I have an apartment with factory windows and high ceilings, drug contacts, musician and artist friends downstairs, a cunt she can have whenever she wants. Some months, I can't pay rent and she can feel vicariously bohemian, supplementing me with trust fund dollars. But she is so stupidly young and beautiful that I keep letting her come back.

When we're finished, I put the tapestry back up on the window, pull on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, foregoing underwear and bra, tie my hair up without combing it. Julie's curled up at the side of the bed, back turned to me, and I wonder if she feels that same hollow in her stomach as I do, the one that says no matter how close we come we will never connect. That we could orbit each other forever but we will never touch.

"I have a sitting this afternoon," I say, and she doesn't say anything, just lays there, maybe pretending to be asleep. "Maybe I'll stay in the city for a while. Have a few drinks. You have any plans tonight?" When she doesn't answer, I grab my bag and slam the door shut when I leave.

It's hard for me to leave the sun of Brooklyn for the maze of shadows in the city, and I only do it because rent demands. The subway air is thick with the sick humidity of too many bodies, air so stale I think molecules of it linger from the year this tunnel was built. When I go down the stairs, I remember why people here are so insane, everyone scurrying underneath the city like ants. Somewhere down the platform, a man is chanting mantra-like in a voice that goes all the way down to my gut. "The train is coming. Stop your bullshitting and lolly-gagging around and get on the train," he says. "I have been here this entire time calling that train," and his conviction makes me believe him, makes me believe that he alone is responsible for every train that comes down these tracks.

There's a sign across the way that says "Caution: Rodenticide" that I can't take my eyes off of, and right below it, a rat scampers underneath the electrified rail. Some kind of super rat, I think, that will breed more super rats until, eventually, all of Manhattan is overrun.

I hear the rumble and squeal of the coming train and watch as more and more toes creep over the yellow line. I let myself melt into the crowd, be herded into a car, and find a seat. "This is a Manhattan bound L train" a soothing female voice announces, and then in a deep mans voice: "Stand clear of the closing doors, please." Directions always in a woman's voice, instructions in a man's. I stare straight ahead at my discolored reflection in a Pepsi ad, and my eyes look like holes in my head, and everything shuts down until I make my stop.

As I pose, the studio is quiet except for the rustle of charcoal on paper and the occasional scrape of a chair against the hardwood. I close my eyes and let my other senses take over. The room smells like dust and oils. Chemicals and potpourri. Yellowed pages of library books. Corners of an old, leaky ceiling, soaked and dried again. The warm air blowing from the vents is cool once it gets to me. It prickles against my bare skin and I stay as still as I can. I try to remember all the lines and folds of my body but see Julie instead.

I open my eyes and twenty people are staring at pieces of me. My breasts, my ankles. Trying to get gravity right in the way my hair falls over my shoulders. I imagine the other sides of the easels, all the different renditions of me that are not me.

If I were a romantic, I could say that art and beauty brought Julie and I together. We met in this room. She was one of those anonymous pairs of eyes. For some reason, she picked me out of all the other naked women that sit in front of this class.

It only took her two tries. The first time, she came into the back where I was getting dressed. I was just buttoning my jeans and I held my t-shirt over my chest. "I don't know how to ask this without sounding creepy," she said, "so I'm just going to ask. Would you like to go get some coffee this afternoon?" There was that school girl shrill and rush in her voice. The one that says, Christ, I've been working up the courage to say that all week. Her cheeks were flushed but she had the guts to look me in the eyes the entire time. She had a green headscarf on, brown canvas bag, long linen skirt that almost touched the floor. Quintessential hippie artist. She reminded me too much of me when I was young, before I dropped out of school, back when my edges were still soft. "You're not my type," I said, pulling my shirt on and grabbing my bag. I smiled at her as I left the room and maybe that wasn't callous enough because a few weeks later she asked me again. She came into the room and the first thing she said was, "You're not my type, either." That was the pick-up line that worked on me. You're not my type, either. It was such an intriguingly bad idea that I couldn't pass it up.

We rode into Brooklyn and went to this twenty-four hour dive, the kind where the cooks yell back and forth in Spanish and Arabic and somehow understand each other, and the grilled cheese costs more than the hamburgers. We had fresh donuts and bad, diner coffee, speculated about what the meat was made of and decided it was probably people. I admit, she amused me, and I liked looking at her there across the table. She told me about art school, that she was living with a friend in Manhattan in a

two bedroom apartment with exposed brick and a courtyard. "That's probably the most beautiful apartment you'll ever see in the city," I said.

"I hate it," she said. "I feel like an asshole. I want the old, bombed out eighties New York."

Yeah, I thought. AIDS and poverty and homeless people sleeping all over the sidewalks.

"You'd love my place," I said. "Roaches and mold."

She said she couldn't connect with anyone in the city. She said that she talked to me that first day because I stood out to her. I seemed *real*. I know it was rhetorical but she sounded like she thought the people in Manhattan really were figments of her imagination. "It's all the same thing," she said. "Friendships, relationships, sex. It's just people wanting to connect. Any two people." She reached across the table and wiped something off of my cheek. "Powdered sugar," she said.

The third time she convinced me to take her back to my place. I opened a bottle of red wine while she wandered in circles around the studio and looked out the windows, the only thing visible in the darkness the silhouettes of water towers over the warehouses. "Nice view," she said, and I couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic but was afraid she wasn't. We sat on the couch and every time I looked at her it seemed like she had moved closer without actually moving. Maybe it was just the angle of her body, her eyes that never left me, the way she seemed frighteningly open. "This is exactly the kind of place I've always dreamed of living," she said.

"You don't want to live here," I said. "You don't want to live in New York. It'll wear you down."

"You don't seem worn down," she said, and I just laughed, wanting to remind her of how little she knew me. She took my wine glass out of my hand, set it on the table, and I let her kiss me. "I've never slept with a woman before," she said, which was no surprise at all.

I take responsibility for the rest. Red wine goes straight to my head, and there's only so much a girl can take. You would think that people have instincts for situations like that, but everything was

painfully awkward that first time, and afterward, I felt half used, half predatory. She stared at my body for a long time while we lay there, part fascination, admiration, something, and part scrutiny, like she was looking into a mirror. Like it was her own.

When this sitting ends, I pull my clothes on again, tie my hair back up. I wonder if this me is less "real" than the nude figure that Julie fell for. The teacher, a grey haired, puzzlingly conservative woman, hands me a fifty for my naked body. "Too bad I don't have the tits to be a stripper," I joke, and she scowls at me.

I go down to the street, crawling with foot traffic and taxis. I try to guess who's a tourist and who actually lives here, but everyone looks equally authentic to me. I play a game sometimes where I try to pick out a local and ask them for directions. I'm usually wrong. The tourists always look flattered to pass as New Yorkers. Sometimes people ask me if I'm from Europe and I'm flattered by that, too. Everyone relieved to be mistaken for someone else.

For a long time, I just walk, not wanting to go home, replaying the last few days that led to this morning's coldness. Our argument yesterday started when I got off the phone with my friend Dominic, downstairs. Julie and I were sitting together on the couch. "Why can't I ever meet any of your friends?" Julie had said.

"What are you talking about?" I said. "You've met some of my friends, and Dominic comes over all the time."

"That's not the same," she said.

"You wouldn't get along with my other friends." I put my hands on her shoulders and gave her a playful shake. "I know you and I know them, and there's no point."

"Sure," she said quietly. "I get it. Can't be seen with me."

"I'm not having this conversation again," I said, and thankfully Dominic knocked at the door. Julie was the one to get up and answer it.

"Hey Jules," Dominic said when he saw her. "How goes?" He was in his usual paint smeared, baggy, thrift store clothes, looking like he hadn't showered in a week, his face covered in black not-quite-beard, not-quite-stubble. He and Julie gave each other a sideways hug, then he flopped down next to me on the couch. I gave him twenty bucks, he gave me the equivalent in weed, and I saluted him, smirking.

"I finished a new piece," Julie said to Dominic, and he got up to look.

Her work is good. Mixed media numbers with intricate, black ink detailing that I've always admired. I lit a cigarette and sat on the couch to watch them. Julie beamed at all of Dominic's compliments and laughter tumbled easily from their mouths. Something in her posture changed. Her shoulders relaxed, her movements gained a natural flow. She looked comfortable. They talked for a good while, then Dominic said "Okay, I'm out."

"Ciao," I said, raising a hand, and he let himself out of my apartment. "Julie," I said when she sat back down next to me, trying to remove the bitterness from my voice and leaving the honesty, "what are you doing here with me?"

I open the door to the apartment and it's dark inside. "Julie," I whisper, thinking she might have gone to bed early. There is a definite, uninhabited silence. I flip the light switch, and things look off, like someone's rearranged the furniture. Everything has been cleaned. Then it dawns on me, like something I had been expecting all along. I don't see any of Julie's things. Her paintings are gone from the corner of the room. I take a deep breath, let loss and relief flood in together. But her clothes are still there when I check the closet, her paintings stacked inside. Her toothbrush is on the sink. The room still smells of coffee and jasmine. I exhale.

Going on instinct, I call Dominic. “It's Erin,” I say. “Is Julie over there?”

He chuckles. “She's here, don't worry.” He's almost whispering. “She fell asleep on the couch.”

I smile, imagining how tiny she must look curled up on his brown, lumpy couch. “Don't wake her up,” I tell him. “Let her stay.” And gently, I push us out of orbit.