

A slight haze blurred the skyline, and the expanse of lights faintly reflected in the wall-sized ceiling and bay windows that wrapped midtown Manhattan around the rooftop club. The buildings were dotted with lights like the chessboard's light and dark squares. On top of the Empire State Building, red and green Christmas lights shone the brightest. The DJ's music muted anyone's interest in the view, and the bar was pressed five deep, where twenty-somethings bottlenecked around VIP tables seated with occasional celebrity sightings. He found more space near the EXIT. She had left him in charge of her espresso martini, her favorite drink, but he had abandoned it at the bar along with his beer. He checked his watch; he had forgotten to change the time for the three-hour difference. He decided not to move the big and little hands forward; it was an hour before midnight in Los Angeles, and he wanted to keep it that way.

He was not too old, thirty-five to be in a nightclub, but this was the last place he thought he would be with her on Christmas Eve. He still felt a little jet-lagged. They were staying at his friend's railroad apartment on Thompson Street in The Village. His friend was out of town for the Holidays. She had slept for most of the six-hour flight and refused to take the shuttle bus to Grand Central Station. Though it was quicker and a third of the price, she didn't want to be recognized on a bus as she was outside the hotel club, where paparazzi seemed to be permanently installed at the entrance. Unlike him, she welcomed the attention without the slightest awkwardness. There were only a handful of times when a stranger would recognize her. She admitted it used to happen more often.

After sending her a text without a response, he began a lap around the club, scanning the tables for her. He ran into Devix, the professional party maitre d' and chaperone to the stars, whom she had paid to set up the evening.

"Are you having fun?"

"Sure," he lied.

In this light, Devix's eyeliner was more pronounced, and his post-punk, spiky hairstyle would have mistaken him for a lead singer in an '80s pop band.

"Have you seen Keara?"

"Not for a bit," Devix answered. "She'll turn up."

He didn't know whether to stand with Devix or continue on his lap.

"She's a cool girl and beautiful."

"Yeah, she is," he said.

"She loves to party."

"When we first met, she didn't go out much, but lately more so." He heard himself think out loud.

"Nothing wrong with having fun."

"No, nothing wrong at all."

After an awkward pause, he scanned the room again.

"Wasn't she on the Maxim Hot 100?"

"She was."

"That was a while ago."

"I'm not sure."

"How long have you been together?"

"About eight months."

"Past the honeymoon phase."

"I hope so," he said.

He didn't know why Devix was curious about their relationship status; his first impression was he didn't like women, but he wore a pearl necklace, which could mean he was gender-fluid.

"You in the business too?" Devix asked.

"Behind the camera."

"Cool," Devix checked his phone. "This is another client I have to take care of. They're holding him up at the door. Don't they know the dude's a lead on a Streaming show? If I see Keara, I'll tell her you're looking for her."

He found himself catty-corner to the restrooms and looked over his left shoulder at the ladies' room. She's probably in there, he thought, and as he was about to walk away, she emerged from the adjacent men's room with a Rasta guy whose dreadlocks were tied up in a bun atop his head. They laughed, and she touched his forearm; again, they laughed. He typed into his phone, then showed her the screen, and

she nodded. They didn't see him, and they had drifted in front of the ladies' room. He tried to calm himself, but it was worse than anything he could have imagined. It couldn't lead to this; she has a prescription. Still, she doesn't notice him. He could turn, walk away, get lost in the crowd, and pretend it didn't happen. Then an explosion of heat prickled his arms, along his shoulders, the back of his head, pushing against his insides, wave after wave, until the rage paralyzing him for the moment unfastened, sending him straight towards her; he stopped himself somewhere between them and pulled himself up to make himself as tall as possible. He was half a head taller than Rasta.

"What's going on?" His voice was doing things he had never heard.

"Nothing," she answered.

The Rasta guy smelled like pot and incense.

"I got you. Anytime," Rasta said to her.

An image flashed of him pivoting towards Rasta, throwing a left hook across his jaw, and dropping him to the floor. Before he could act on it, Rasta stepped away.

"What's he talking about?"

"Nothing." She looked down to her left. He knew her well enough to know she lied when she looked down to her left.

To keep his hands from shaking, he clutched the front of his pants pockets; someone bumped into him from behind, and she repeated herself, and he could only hear and see her. They were alone on an island in the middle of the crowd. It couldn't be possible; she couldn't have let this happen, not now, not here on their first trip together. When she took a Vicodin, her eyes would look groggy, but he had never seen her eyes this empty.

He couldn't bring himself to say, I saw you come out of the bathroom with him. To hear the words out loud would be impossible to endure. His throat clamped shut, and one last wave of heat spread over him, dropping into the pit of his stomach, it balls up, and he exhales slowly, trying to unwind it, before it erupts in an ugly scene. A piece of him splits off, and his hands release their grip from his pants pockets. This was not the place to have it out with her; he couldn't leave her here. They had another five days together. She said something he didn't hear; he reached for her arm to pull her away, where there was a clearing, an opening with less noise.

"There you are." Devix's voice slipped through. "You found her. I knew she'd turn up." She stood closer to Devix, using him as a buffer. "Oh God, that door guy doesn't know how to run a list. You should see the line. I practically had to bribe him to get my client in." Devix turned towards the bar. "I need a drink." They followed in his wake. The displacement of people closed just as quickly as it opened. He lagged without wanting to catch up, and to his left was the EXIT.

When they reached the bar, he made sure Devix stayed wedged between them.

"What?" He said to Devix. He repeated something to him, but he didn't hear him.

"What are you having?"

"Having?"

He looked to Devix for an answer.

"Yeah, to drink."

When he didn't respond, Keara answered for him, "He doesn't drink much."

"A beer and a shot," he finally said.

"I've never seen you do a shot," she said and ordered an espresso martini.

"Isn't she gorgeous?" Devix raised his hands as if presenting her.

Two bar seats became available, and he declined Devix's offer to sit beside her.

The gap between them left an opening for the beautiful people to lean in and shout their orders. The bartenders shook the gold-plated cocktail shakers at ear level, as though they were listening to the crushed ice signaling when to pour the colored drinks with white foamed tops. Without joining Devix's Christmas toast, he followed his shot with half his beer. He leaned forward away from them, placing both elbows on the bar. The shot and beer did nothing to steady him.

Devix held his champagne up to include him in the toast. His glass was in limbo, waiting for a response; he raised his beer and peeked around Devix to see if she would join in. Her attention was in the other direction. "Merry Christmas," Devix said.

He couldn't bring himself to say it. He tipped his half-full glass of beer to toast Devix and finished it.

"Would you like another beer?"

"I have the next round," he said.

After he ordered, Devix held up his phone. "We all have to take a selfie together. My followers will love it."

"You two go ahead."

Devix squeezed against her and snapped a selfie, and said something that made her laugh. They looked like they were having fun, and how good she was at acting like nothing had happened. He stayed outside their conversation and did his best to pretend everything was normal. A part of him held tight to the belief that this was true, and not to ask any questions; he had his answer, and it was unedited: he wasn't surprised by her. He wished he could say he was; that would be the easy way out. The round he ordered arrived. He took his time drinking his beer. Not once did she look over at him.

At some point, the evening had turned to early morning, the club had become humid, and the DJ was shirtless, three rows of heavy rope gold chains fell between his pierced nipples. The crowd had swollen beyond capacity. Devix brought up an exclusive after-hours party. Before she asked, he said, "We have a big day tomorrow." No matter how much Keara wanted to go, she couldn't push him into going. As they made their way out, he walked ahead, and he felt her grasp his right hand. He loosely held onto her as he cleared a path out. They waited silently at the elevators.

Towards the far end of the railroad apartment, the bedroom overlooked Thompson Street. One of the two windows opened onto a fire escape that zigzagged along the red brick façade. The familiar sound of a siren pierced the city's white noise, and voices from below trailed off as couples and groups made their way from one of the many late-night cafes and bars before last call. Enough streetlight came through the blinds to silhouette her natural curves that needed no enhancement or hours in the gym. He lay on his side and watched her undress. He remembered the exact moment when he had told himself, this was the last woman he wished to watch undress. She had said, I like it when you watch me.

During the day, sometimes he found himself drifting off, tracing the outline of her hips, up the soft small of her back, her curved waist where he liked to place both his hands, sliding onto her waist, and drawing her near. Just the thought of it sent a quiver through his chest, leaving him helpless against wanting her. After their first date, they were inseparable as though they had already known each other. He never had a woman take such an interest in him; she won him over, and he quickly gave in, but with each month, her interest waned. He told himself it was temporary and it would return to the way it was when he made her laugh, and she would drape her leg over his when they sat in a movie theatre. For a few more moments, he watched her, her unaware of his gaze and his thoughts; this would be the last time he watched her undress.

He felt her spooning herself behind him, and she gave him room to turn on his back, and she kissed him as though she were testing if he wanted to be kissed; he could still smell the nightclub and liquor on her and himself. She must have become aware his hands were at his sides, so she slipped herself atop his chest and pulled his arm around her waist. He should hold her close; that's what he would normally do to feel her entire weight, and for her to feel his strength, pressing together and wanting to be one with her. Though he went along, he couldn't hide his reluctance; she must have sensed it, she reached inside his boxer briefs for him, and for the first time, nothing. And again, nothing. He wanted to stop and slip out from underneath her and roll onto his side to hide his face. She kissed him slowly, and again there was nothing. Unable to think of what to say, he gave her a small kiss; he didn't want to hurt her feelings. She was patient, kissing down his neck, and he placed his hands on her shoulders, lifting her a little to stop her from kissing further down his body.

"I'm tired," he said.

She lay sideways, facing him, propped up on her arm, and with her other hand, brushed aside her long, loose, curly hair. Even in this light, her eyes were glazed over, falling short of responding to what was happening outside of herself, and revealing nothing about her.

"I'm just tired, that's all."

"It's okay," she said.

She rolled over, her back facing him, and hugged her pillow between her knees. He kissed the nape of her neck as if to stop himself from drifting too far from her, but she didn't respond. He pulled the sheet and comforter up over her, then himself. He couldn't leave her uncovered. He closed his eyes without saying goodnight and listened to the city until he fell asleep.

It had started late that morning, his imagination, while they were packing, images, one after another, of her and Rasta hiding in the stall to complete the transaction. No matter how much he tried to stop the images, he couldn't get them out of the stall: the door closed, and their shoes faced each other. Rasta leaned into her, his face tilted forward as though he was waiting for the right moment to kiss her, his hands on her waist, using the transaction to try to get more from her. And she's going along to close the deal, her cheek to the side as he tries to kiss her, and popping a Vicodin, before exiting outside the restroom where he had been standing. The rage was equal to or greater than it had been when it happened. He didn't know for sure it happened, and as much as he wanted to reason with himself, he knew his imagination would flare up when he least expected it. No, there was no way through this; the internal images of her had been set in motion, crossing a line he couldn't erase.

During the cab ride to Grand Central Station, each of them looked out their separate windows. He checked the Amtrak App, and the 1:20 pm Empire Service to Albany was on time. Her neighbor would pick them up and drive them to the home she inherited from her stepmom in Dorset, Vermont. Out in the countryside, she would be away from any temptations, and he felt a sense of relief in managing this part of their trip.

"What's the next stop?" He woke from his nap.

The motion of the train had put him to sleep. She had her earbuds in, listening to her music. He tilted his head forward so she could see he was talking to her, and she took her right earbud out from the ear closest to him. He repeated the question.

"Poughkeepsie."

The business class car was almost empty, and to get his bearings, he looked past her out the window as the train made its way up the Middle Hudson and across the river; the leafless evergreens and hardwoods stood stark against the snowless hillsides. Here and there, house lights began to glow in the early evening. Inside, families celebrated Christmas at dining room tables. It would have been magical to have a clean blanket of freshly fallen snow on the ground and to kiss her as the banks of the Hudson passed by. She removed her earbuds and tilted her head towards him as though she were measuring him.

"I intend to stop," her voice was matter-of-fact, and she must have seen his look of confusion. "My prescription."

He waited for her to continue, but she said nothing.

"Okay," he said, unsure if her intention was an invitation to talk about what had happened.

"When I get back to L.A."

He searched for his words. "Are you going to get help?"

"Help?"

He saw that she hadn't thought of it.

"Yes," he said.

"Like AA?" She lowered her voice, and they leaned toward each other, protecting their conversation from anyone overhearing.

"Or rehab."

"You mean go to rehab?"

He was supposed to tell her he would be there for her, to take her hand, and reassure her that they could come through it together; tell her what she wanted to hear.

"You could," he said.

"I don't like going to those places."

"They're very nice, like a home."

"What would my agency say?"

"I'm sure they're familiar with it."

"I'm on the fence with them. I haven't worked in a while."

"How long would it be, a couple of months?"

"I don't want to think about it now."

What urge he had to bring up what happened last night, to tell her what he had seen, her coming out of the \_\_\_\_, he couldn't say it to himself, the words he would never say aloud to anyone or to her had gone.

"If you don't want to do, then you-"

"I intend to," she looked down to her left, then back up at him. "To stop. I mean. I'll try. You know I will."

He peeled away from her and sat up straight.

"That sounds like a plan," his voice was indifferent. "When we get back to L.A."

"Yes, when we get back to L.A. I knew you would understand."

She looked out the window. Night had fallen. "We're almost there," she stretched her arms out in front of her. "You're first time in Vermont." He was glad she changed the subject. "I know you'll love it."

He pushed a smile.

"The train has been lovely. You did a good job taking care of everything," she said. "I'm going to take a nap."

"I'll wake you at Albany."

She tilted her body towards the window, and he watched her fall asleep. He tried to remember exactly when she admitted she used Vicodin for her occasional anxiety attacks. She emphasized that it was a prescription, but he had no memory of her visiting a doctor. When they were at her two-bedroom rented house, at the edge of Hancock Park, she'd insist on going alone at night to the corner liquor store. She had been friendly with the young man who worked behind the counter. His forearms were sleeved with tattoos, and one nostril was pierced. It was common in L.A. for someone who worked in a strip mall liquor store to deal as a side hustle. Mostly, she came home empty-handed. Everything about her had been abstract, and what he thought were her eccentricities started to make sense.

If he could go back and begin again with her, before, yes, but there was none; all of her abstraction had been framed and there for him to see. He recalled their first kiss; how he wanted to believe her rare, almost transparent blue eyes allowed only him to see her, and her to see him. But had she ever wanted him to see her? She had asked if he had seen any of her films. No, he hadn't, and when she asked if he was going to, he deliberately procrastinated watching her movies. It would interfere with getting to know the true her, he thought. Finally, he watched her latest, which had been released a few years back. She was talented and beautiful, and the camera wanted to know more about her. She was present, her eyes clear and interested, and the difference was striking compared to the dullness he had only known. As much as he knew it was an image, he would have liked to have met her, the one in the movie. While he sat there, going over these two images of her, he realized that neither version of her ever existed for him.

Then another realization, one that made him a ludicrous figure. How could he blame her? She had hidden it in plain sight and left clues for him to follow. He had forced what he had wanted to see; it was his idea for the trip to New York, and after her hesitation and his convincing, she agreed and added Vermont. He was not innocent of wanting a woman like her to love him. The only words he could find to console himself were clichés.

The next day, he woke before her and found eggs, coffee, butter, and strawberry jam in the kitchen. Jeff, the neighbor who picked them up at the station, must have bought the supplies. He had a key and took care of the house when she was away. They had arrived late, and it was dark, and they hadn't spoken during the car ride here. "You two look like something the cat dragged in." Neither of them admitted to Jeff that they had been at a nightclub on Christmas Eve. He liked his forwardness, and he had a slight Minnesota accent that reminded him of his childhood in upstate New York. He showed him where the red light was located on the porch of the Colonial-style house; if it came on, it meant the pipes were frozen.

"I'm going out for a walk," he called up to her from the stairs. "Do you want to come?"

"Maybe later."

"Do you need anything?"

"Could you pick up a bottle of wine from the store in town?"

He didn't answer.

"White," she filled in the silence

"The coffee is already made."

He walked no more than three blocks to the Dorset Union Store. The sign above the green and white striped awning read, "Since 1816." A Christmas wreath tied with a red ribbon hung in each window, and a simply decorated spruce tree stood at the base of the steps. A large American flag prominently displayed on a 45-degree pole finished the storefront with a burst of color. A shop bell chimed when he

entered, and the female shopkeeper came from the back of the store. She wore a fleece vest over a flannel shirt and adjusted her glasses. She smiled when she greeted him.

"I think I can find everything," he answered her question.

He walked one of the three aisles to the extension in the back, where The Union Store Deli, Wines, and the Made In Dorset section were. He liked the many locally made products he found on the shelves. The hardwood floors looked original and creaked, and felt soft in certain spots. He picked up some fresh baguette bread baked in East Dorset and Vermont-made cheese, along with the bottle of wine. After he paid, he stopped at the door. It was drizzling outside, and he waited to see if it would turn to snow. He paused and went back to the shopkeeper, ordering a coffee to go.

"Do you mind if I stay here and finish my coffee?"

"Of course not," she said. "Spend as much time as you like. I'll be in the back if you need anything."

He browsed the aisles, but this time slowly.

On the way to the house, he ran into Jeff at the base of his driveway. The red carrier signal flag on his mailbox was raised, and he had a magazine in his hand, The New Yorker, and a closed umbrella in the other.

"I didn't know people still read magazines," he said. "Do you get the newspaper too?"

"I sure do, from the Store."

"You have a charming town."

"You get a good night's rest?"

"I did."

"Boy, you two looked worse for wear."

"It's peaceful out here," he said.

"Nothing much to worry about," Jeff folded the magazine so as not to bend the envelopes that were slipped between the pages. "Susie, Keara's stepmom, used to leave her car keys in her car overnight."

"You're kidding."

"She was like that, always wanted to believe the best in people."

Jeff paused, and he saw a memory of her flash across his face, separating him from their conversation.

"Keara told me good things about her," he said, trying to reach him.

"What was that?" And before he could answer, Jeff looked directly at him, and the memory went from his face. "She adopted Keara late; she was fourteen and had sorta got lost in the system."

"Sad she passed away so young."

"Fifty-three is too young. One day, they found a lump, and the next," his voice trailed off. "It's been a while now."

"She doesn't talk about it much."

"She doesn't come around much, either. We're all proud of what she's done. If it weren't for Susie, she would have never become an actress."

Jeff confirmed that it was true she was discovered by an agent on a trip with Susie to New York, her senior year of high school.

"It's a great story," he said.

"It's good to see her again. You'll have to come over for dinner tonight." Jeff opened his umbrella and tipped it in his direction. "You need some cover to your door?"

"It's not coming down hard."

They were halfway up the driveway when they split off from each other.

In the center of the living room, she was kneeling between two open boxes of Christmas ornaments and decorations. A knotted string of Christmas lights was coiled in the middle of the sofa. He hung his wet jacket in the foyer and had made it before the rain picked up. She placed her first ornament on the right side of the fireplace mantel.

"You were gone for a while." He could tell by her sleepy eyes that she was already under the influence. "I was worried you didn't want to come back."

"Where would I go?"

"I don't know."

"I ran into Jeff."

"What did he say?"

She was searching through one of the boxes for something specific.

"He invited us for dinner."

"Let me see how I feel," she said.

"I'd like to go."

"I'll call him later."

He was surprised she was hesitant about the invitation.

"I like talking with him." He stood at the entrance to the kitchen just to the left of the fireplace. "I'm going to take him up on it."

"Maybe by then, I'll feel like it. I'll play it by ear," she said. "Did you get the wine?"

He pulled the bottle out of the bag to show her.

"Do you mind pouring me a glass?"

He put the cheese and bread on the kitchen table, found an opener in the drawer next to the kitchen sink, poured her a glass, and returned to set it on the mantel.

"Don't you want one?" she asked.

"It's a little early."

"We're on vacation."

"Maybe later."

"You're no fun."

She had never pressured him to drink. He sat in the armchair perpendicular to the sofa, then on the sofa, and he stood, paused, and went into the kitchen and back out to the living room empty-handed.

"Christmas ornaments?" His inflection rose more out of confusion than worry.

He took one step from her as she sorted through the other box.

"I haven't unpacked these in I don't know how long," she said. "Here it is." She held up a large Victorian-style ornament, laced with tiny pearls braided over a teal blue silk brocade fabric, and more pearls dangling from the bottom like a luxurious chandelier. "This was Susie's favorite. It was in her family for years."

"It's right out of a fairy tale."

"Isn't it?" She held it just above eye level. "I wish we had a tree."

"It would be hard to find one," he said. "Yesterday was Christmas."

"Don't worry, I'm not asking," she sipped her wine and held her glass just below her chin in contemplation. "We'll decorate the house, instead." She placed the ornament in the center of the mantel. "You can do the lights."

He paced back and forth behind the sofa, unknotted the lights, and sat in the armchair, stood, and walked behind the sofa.

"Are you sure you don't want a glass of wine?"

"I'm fine," he searched for something of interest, "I like the Union store."

"It's sweet," she said. "And they have a lot of homegrown products."

"I saw that."

"There used to be more."

She placed an ornament to the left of Susie's, and another on the right side, and stepped back to get a better look.

"The woman who works there is nice," he said.

"She bought it a couple of years ago."

"It's like going back in time."

Her wine glass was almost empty, and her eyes were glazed over. He had no impulse to tell her to slow down; it would be pointless, and he knew where it would lead.

"I hope she doesn't change it," she said.

"I'm sure she will."

"Oh, don't say that."

"I already did."

He stepped around the sofa and handed her the unknotted lights.

"Do you want to help?"

"You do it, you're better at this than I am."

She draped the string of lights along the front of the mantel.

"Plug them in? She asked.

He found a socket next to the fireplace. A handful of bulbs were dead, and the others were dim with age.

"There, now it's Christmas."

The heavy rain against the window made him turn, where there was no reflection of the lights in the glass.

"I wish there were fresh snow," he said.

"It would have been pretty to see."

"Yes, it would have," he said.

"It always snows in December."

"Not this year."

He sat on the armrest of the sofa and watched her place more ornaments. He stood and shifted his weight lightly from left to right.

"There are blankets in the foyer closet," she said, and became aware of what he must have looked like. "You can grab one and get comfy on the sofa."

"I don't need it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

She sipped the last of her wine, and with the Vicodin, he saw that one glass was like having three. He went into the kitchen, leaned against the counter, and his right hand began to tremble. He closed his eyes and attempted to fix the memory of the life he had wanted. The monologue of images he wished to have with her receded past what was before and had been made permanent. Inside, he had come apart; each moment fell faintly away and drifted out of sight. To say something to her at this time in this house would be cruel and brutal. That was it, he thought, for a few more days they would be alone together. He opened and closed his right hand until it felt steady. The heavy rain on the roof held him there for a few more moments. The forecast called for on-and-off rain throughout the rest of their stay. He looked about the Kitchen, and could tell it hadn't been used in years. The entire house seemed vacant.

"We fly back on the thirtieth," he said loud enough for her to hear.

"What day is that?"

"Tuesday."

"I like going back; you gain three hours."

"Back to reality," he faked, trying to sound positive.

"We have New Year's, and I have parties for us."

"That's right, I almost forgot."

"What do you mean you almost forgot?"

He surfaced from the kitchen and stood in the entrance as she closed the boxes and moved them to one side of the living room. He thought how beautiful she was, and she would always be an attractive woman. On New Year's Eve, at midnight, he would kiss her one last time, long and slow and eyes closed, her on tiptoe, resting her hands on his shoulders, holding his breath and listening to the sounds she made when they kissed. She turned fully towards him, away from what she was doing, and for a moment, her eyes gave him a sign of recognition of what he thought was love.

"Nothing," he answered.



