



Your life is your own, then one day someone else wants it

Chapter 1

Sam's mind is adrift amidst the clattering chaos that is his usual commute, as he hustles between his modest apartment and his too familiar workstation. The rhythmic pulse of overlaid carriages on lumpy steel track is a symbolic underscore to the pattern of his life. Unstoppable momentum, planned and on time, careering onwards towards an uninspiring destination. In the background, the smothering loud murmur of murky conversations, as if plotting their escapes. The intrigue of countless personal histories, lives compressed into one more unpromising moment.

The upbeat music that's wired into his ears distracts, but barely suppresses the approaching threat of another day, where his real self will no doubt be unnoticed, even to himself. Invisibility, he tells himself again, was never his calling.

It's a ritual that is now stifling his once irrepressible self. His dreams as a sixteen year old boy on the verge of adulthood are fading just like the faces of the school yard and don't reconcile even remotely with his 28 year old reality. The driving music that he intended would mask the human tide instead allows his thoughts to flow unchecked and his past to unravel. How did he come to this? How will he explain these wasted years to himself? He conjures up myriad excuses then moulds and tests them, one by one, only to be confronted by the undeniable truth. The truth, in glaring footlights, of his own weakness. The inescapable fact that he gave in to his father's well-meaning, misguided advice. If you can call it advice. More of a slow, relentless persuasion. A grinding down. Expectations which pressure over time like a crushing sedimentary deposit, the ultimate quarry a rock-solid, bank-guaranteed investment in an interminable education. A well choreographed menu of sameness. Sameness designed to deliver a predictable mind. Predictable minds to nurture and maintain the accepted continuum.

He knows now with enough certainty that his mother had also failed him badly. She could have looked closer at him to find a better fit, but instead chose the apologetic path of parental solidarity. Her more subtle message, though well meaning, was just as brutal as his father's. The only difference was that hers was soaked in so much love that he felt drowned in it. Sam concluded long ago

that his mother was an equal player in his parent's manifest manipulations. He has however forgiven them both on the grounds of their unconditional love for him, their good intent; and his own complicit inaction. Sam knows now that at some point, probably at the age of 18, parents should back off, step aside and leave their children to make their choices, even sometimes bad ones, and so find themselves.

He never wanted to be an accountant, he tries not to act like one and with his revolutionary earring and discreet tiger tattoo atop his left arm he hopes he doesn't look like one. He knows for sure that he doesn't feel like one. But unfortunately for Sam, his sharp intellect, even though mostly applied disinterestedly as if it were an out-of-body experience, has enabled him to become a very good one, putting any attempt to swim against the current tide of his life that much more difficult. If not out of reach altogether. He understands now that risk is a price that must be paid somewhere along the line to be even slightly visible. He should have learned to say no a long time ago. He says no quite often now.

The badly lit subway station taken at breakneck speed illuminates the carriage in a short burst of strobing pulses, but fails to ignite its sombre human cargo. Most of them, like Sam, endure by allowing their thoughts to rest elsewhere. Sam keeps his tight grip on the steel pole, expertly riding the subtle, hypnotic roll of the carriage. The train lurches, causing him to tighten his grip on the pole even more firmly, bracing himself for an aftermath jolt that doesn't come...only the wet spray of thick bodies clad in swaying raincoats and wet paraphernalia.

On this dreariest of drab-grey winter days, the brush of her warm, firm nipple against the back of his hand as it holds onto the closest pole is wonderfully surprising, it's owner unseen amidst the wet, heaving humanity. He receives her touch happily as an accidental brush but is too polite to dare to look. Another faint touch. He tries to distract himself by taking in the advertisement located slightly above his head, in the opposite direction from the source of his new acquaintance. It's a faded advertisement for a defunct financial advisory services company, which is no distraction at all to an industry insider. He can only remain nervously alert, though in truth he harbours a less than innocent hope.

The next brush seems more purposeful, but he still wonders if his greedy imagination is feeding his groin a lie. Whoever she is, he is grateful for her and better still, as a victim he is guiltless. Anticipation renders him incapable of movement, but his traitorous penis is now seriously attentive. He closes his eyes and savours more light brushing and at least he now knows that her movements cannot possibly be unintended. He is hunted. Sam argues with himself whether to relinquish his grip on the pole but his instincts tell him stand firm, so the thought soon passes. Is she as attractive as she feels? No bra, just the lightest movement of an aroused nipple. Steadfast through her silky gossamer top as it moves across his frightened fingers and surprisingly warm amidst the cold wetness all around. He is frozen, now crippled. His fear is that the tenderness should stop. Her anonymity is now strangely important to him, as often happens when knowledge dispels the mystery, stealing its magic. He resigns himself to it. He is a slave to it. He closes his eyes to savour more of what he knows is his first real seduction. The rubbing, the firm smoothness, the rhythm, the boldness. The excitement. The pleasure mounts and his breathing adjusts without him even being aware of it and is soon perfectly synchronised with the nipple's careful caress. His breath becomes heavier, deeper and he is soon in another place and his mind and body surrender to her vaporous, poetic touch.

The train buffets and slows. None of the faceless, wet army of passengers is aware even of his existence, let alone his guilty, secret condition. Sam waits impatiently for another verse, swollen and hopeful, his eyes still shut. Nothing. The train screeches and grinds to its shuddering stop, but he remains transfixed. No breathing now lest he wake from it. No motion lest he frightens it away.

The passengers mobilise even before the final jolt of the carriage that marks its arrival. He opens his eyes and quickly scans the closest huddle for his tormentor but it turns as one and then joins the greater huddle as it's sucked away from him towards the hissing doors in a hurried squeeze. Collective blind enthusiasm to clone another day. They press through and out and onto the platform, now an unstoppable human torrent of soaked and shiny grey and black. Sam looks around, suddenly panicked, desperate to identify the perpetrator of what he knows for certain was a crime, but she is gone and he is cut adrift to deal with an elevated disappointment. He hesitates as if to admonish himself for his stupidity then in an act of madness suddenly throws himself through the door, brushing past a few unhurried stragglers, spinning himself onto the platform. He moves

quickly through the crowd as it traverses along the platform like a lava-flow that defies gravity as it turns and ascends the stairs towards the daylight city buzz far above. He moves fast, taking in as many faces as he can, looking for her but with no plan to know her. Maybe a smile. Some flickering look of acknowledgement. A reaction. Any reaction. Something! His progress is slow and he struggles even to discern the men from the women, let alone a woman who would be a seductress. A sea of strangers. He forces his way through, through and up and up further, faster to where he thinks is the front of them all. He turns around, immersed amongst them and as he strains to see her the swell forces him backwards. One man knocks into him, then another and he is forced to give up his search. The best he can do is to move with them and push and shove until he is clear to one side. He finds a bench and stands on it to survey the scene in the hope of seeing her but his efforts are wasted. He soon reflects on the stupidity of it all and is angry at his own spontaneous combustion. She is gone. Only then does he remember that this is not his station and his sense of humour returns as he smiles to himself and steps down from the bench and back into the fray to return to the platform.

She was not hard to notice, once he noticed her. At first she was just a glimpse across the tidal wave of people. Then another glimpse. He cranes his neck for a better view and sees the full flow of her movement on the other side of the railway concourse. She is walking away from him, casually scanning the railway shopfronts as she goes. He follows her and is soon trailing her swaying dark coat as it circles her slender ankles, which are beautifully wrapped in the coiled straps of her burning red stilettos. She moves at a steady pace but with an elegant poise that's centred about an exquisitely long, exposed neck. Her hair is blonde, wound and tucked under a beret which is the exact same shade of red. Maybe it was the colour that attracted him amidst the colourless wash of the subway and all its ugly inhabitants. She is alone as far as he can tell and seeing her is a welcome correction to what he had feared only a few moments ago might be a temporary insanity. She stops to look at a jewellery shop with its cheap trinkets, badly arranged with large, tacky price tags and to Sam the whole display is unworthy of her and far more suited to the undiscerning masses. He works his way through the rush and is soon stumbling to a halt barely twenty feet away from her in the next shopwindow. She catches his sudden movement and turns to see him and as she does she catches his stare and it causes her to turn her face away disapprovingly. He studies her instead in a convenient reflection, but

she sees that too and is decidedly uncomfortable. He has to decide whether to be cast as a drooling schoolboy, or a prospect with abundant charm. He moves closer to her then starts...

“Excuse me but...did we just meet...on the train?”

She turns to face him as a cornered quarry might face its attacker and he is saved from the savagery of her claws only by his pinstripe suit, his youthful good looks and possibly his earring.

“I’m sorry?” She says in a harsh if not impersonal tone that is entirely lacking in empathy. Indeed, she herself seems poised and ready to attack.

If his question was intended to justify his unwanted intrusion then he fails. As if he were not invisible enough already! He looks away and takes a brief moment to compose himself, then returns with a self-conscious smile. He is naked in his stupidity, but still committed enough to risk another failure. He thus becomes more animated, even boyish, for the purpose of his next stumbling onslaught.

“I just met someone on the train and... I didn’t see her but...I know this sounds ridiculous... I had this feeling it might be you.”

She scans his tailored suit, his blonde tossed hair, his carefree good looks and decides to go soft on him. Sam meanwhile is self-destructing, unassisted. Even his intellect has deserted him. The entire episode is marked by an uncharacteristic lack of awareness that’s seeded in the desperation that comes from thinking below the waist. She takes him on and stays calm.

“You met someone that you never saw? How does that work?”

Her logic is compelling and as he searches for an alternate proposition that avoids the ridiculous truth, she continues to dismantle his maleness.

“I’m sure if we met, I’d remember it.”

“You’re right, I’m being an idiot. I’m sorry.”

He decides to cut his losses and orchestrates a dignified withdrawal. She, however, isn’t prepared to allow him such a convenient luxury. He needs to suffer a little more.

“Are you trying to pick me up? Because if you are, this whole lost puppy thing doesn’t cut it with me. You’d have a better chance if you threw a fit. So, if you’ll excuse me, I’m late for work.”

She turns to leave on her way but his ego needs to recover a semblance of respectability. He has to move quickly. It occurs to him, in what he will later reflect upon as a reliable test of insanity, that the truth might be of some help...

“I wasn’t trying to pick you up. Actually, I thought maybe you were trying to pick me up.”

She turns back to face him. “Excuse me?!”

“It’s a little hard to explain. Not you exactly. But someone.”

She twirls one earring as she digests this latest offering and Sam can only imagine that it’s an attempt to turn him off. Either way she is out of patience.

“You met someone you never saw, who was maybe trying to pick you up, on a train crammed with people...and you think it might be me?”

“Yeah, well...when you say it like that...Look, it obviously wasn’t you, so...I’m sorry...please, just forget you ever saw me.”

“I can do that.”

She flashes a condescending smile and he watches her walk away and is immediately relieved that his self-inflicted lunacy has ended its public phase. She disappears around the corner, never looking back and he feels damaged but strangely richer for the encounter. She was, after all, a stunner. Just the wrong nipple. He walks slowly back down the stairs and sits alone on a bench, the emptied platform catching its breath before the next timetabled onslaught. He turns his arm to look at his grandfather’s wrist watch, stylishly outdated but more reliable than anyone he’s ever met; and knows he’ll be late for work once again. He throws his head back and laughs openly at himself and his ridiculous attempt to self-destruct and as he does he hopes that nobody he knows will ever find out. What in God’s name was he thinking?

“Sam!”

The insistent tone has a few other colleagues looking to see what the problem is, though it causes Sam not the slightest interest. His attention moves slowly upwards from his screen to settle on the agitated face of Steve Markson, which looks down over the dividing partition. Steve is a colleague of similar age but dissimilar disposition. He accepted his accountant’s fate some time ago and is imbued with a misplaced positivity; one which gets him through the day as well as the frequent but unrewarded overtime. The two young men are the darlings of the human landscape of Morley Cacher International, a boutique, high-end financial services company which spans several levels of a scraping tower in the healing heart of the New York financial district. They are both single and while they are thoroughly professional when called upon, their preference is to be childishly playful, especially when left to their own devices. It’s how they deal with the pressure. The two enjoy a kind of immunity that’s envied and resented within the firm in about equal measure. What sets Sam apart from Steve however is his erudite wit, paired with an uncanny ability to fashion risks on behalf of clients that he would never take with himself. A successful analyst, which Steve regards as luck, Sam is also a skilled programmer who has developed several financial modelling tools that have not only earned him respect, but have become widely used. So that while he may be a darling of Morley Cacher, he’s a darling with substance. He has also developed the ability to tune out from Steve’s neediness whenever it suits and this is one of those moments.

“Did you hear a word I said?” Steve threatens over the partition that separates his own unsalvageable mess from Sam’s impressive, spartan organisation.

“You only said one word.” Sam offers teasingly.

“Very funny. Before that.”

“No. Sorry. What?”

“The presentation’s at three o’clock for....for Christ’s sake.”

“You were going to say fuck then weren’t you. You’ve been counselled.”

Steve’s response is a frustrated, forced whisper.

“No I wasn’t. If I was gonna say fuck I’d ‘ve said fuck. But I didn’t. I said Christ. So just give me what you’ve done. Now. Please!”

“I sent it to you ages ago.”

Steve is now panicked. His head disappears as he quickly sits back down and interrogates his laptop. Seconds later comes his unseen disbelief.

“Bullshit!”

Steve appears back over the partition, with a glare that threatens mutiny. Sam however has seen it too many times before. Enough to ignore him and so he does this time as he casually works his keyboard with a practised efficiency. He soon finds what he needs and remains calmly indifferent to Steve’s suffering.

“Oh, sorry! It’s still in my drafts folder. I was gonna add something in.”

Sam raises his arm in the air and with a flurry allows it to spiral down onto his keyboard, his index finger decisively releasing the email that is evidently a matter of life and death. He looks up and smiles and it’s clear that to him it’s just a game. About as dangerous as accounting ever gets.

“There you go Stevie baby...do your thing.”

For a brief moment they are both frozen in time and expression, like two fencers, each awaiting a hint of movement and ready to parry then quickly counter-attack. But Steve is impatient.

“Why the hell didn’t you just call out? I’m three feet away for fucks sake.”

His profanity draws amused stares from several other colleagues, all of them aware of his inability to change and his propensity to stress. He silently mouths the words “get fucked” along the line of glib faces then sits and returns his attention back to his laptop. He clicks and opens Sam’s email and the stress within him slowly builds.

“You know I’ve been waiting for it. We don’t have much time.”

Sam leans back into his seat and folds his arms across his chest. It’s an aggressive posture, intended to repel. He is over this shared responsibility thing.

“We? Whaddya mean we? This is your presentation, I said I’d give you a hand, that’s all.”

“You mean you’re not going? Are you fuc...are you kiddin’ me?! You have to explain these charts...they look...”

Steve examines them as he leans in and scrolls anxiously through the array of coloured graphics, then continues...

“Complex!”

Sam is disinterested, if not detached. Biotract is, after all Steve’s client, not his. He unfolds his arms and stands to make sure there is no room for any misunderstanding then reminds Steve of this unavoidable fact. Steve looks back at his screen and studies the graphs even more closely but remains mesmerised by them. A frown creases his face, drawing his eyes half closed. He leans in closer still to the screen in the hope that he might see something. Perhaps that an explanation might jump out of it...

“What are these anyway? Is this what we discussed?!”

“More or less, with a few refinements.”

“What refinements!?”

Sam ignores the question. He throws a smile past Steve and down the line towards several colleagues who all seem entertained by the prospect of Steve’s undoing.

“You enjoy this don’t you? It’s sport. You love to...to complicate things. To fuck people up.”

“I didn’t complicate anything. Actually, I simplified it for you. You should be grateful. Just take a look at them and if you have any problems, I’ll be at the gym.”

Sam reaches down beneath his desk and picks up his battered canvas gym bag, resplendent with tattered and fraying seams and covered with permanent marker messages that give insights into every person he ever knew. That or it had done

several tours of duty. He slings it over his broad shoulder as he stands, then goes to leave.

“How am I gonna reach you at the gym?”

As soon as he says it he realises that he won't and was never meant to. His concentration goes back onto his screen, with his impossible deadline beckoning. Sam smiles at the others who have seen it all before and he leaves the office quickly, with Steve's words chasing him out.

“Thanks for all your help!”

Steve looks back at the screen and then speaks quietly to himself, his faith in Sam, if not his fellow man, obliterated.

“Fuck. What is this shit?!”

The subway trip home is late as usual and as uneventful as most any other day. Only this time Sam is more easily distracted than usual. He has already scanned the half-full carriage, critiquing every hidden breast, in an inspired but ultimately futile attempt to match a feeling to a fabric. He knows that the memory of her will fade and the thought of what might have been still plays in his head. He should have moved on her sooner. He catches his own reflection in the window and notices that he's the only one standing. Worse, he has a nipple-height grip on the steel pole. On seeing it, he sits down quickly on a sideways-seat, now worried that his thoughts might be transparent. A gentle looking, elderly woman sitting nearby attempts a faint, sweet smile, which he nervously parries, then looks away. He looks back at her again when her gaze has moved on to her book and he can't help but notice her withering breasts beneath a woolly knitted top. He recoils in self rebuke. “I'm losing it.” He tells himself. “I'm going crazy.” He hides his face in his hands as if to cleanse his mind, then changes the music on his iPhone to something more urgent. More punishing. When he finds it in the form of Highway to Hell he allows his head to fall back against the window and closes his eyes, taking a few deep, controlled breaths. His arms are spread across the back of the seat and soon the fingers on his lucky hand gently play with the air.

Sam checks his watch and it's seven o'clock in the evening. The lights of Sally's Delicatessen look bright and warm and welcoming against the reddened sky which seems to deepen into blackness with each chilly stride that he takes. The suburban quietness of shiny roofs and dimly lit windows refracts and reflects in the remnant, still puddles. A car approaches, its tyres hissing as it they cut through the wetness, leaving a trace imprint that soon disappears, returning the road to stillness. Sam enters the shop and is soon negotiating the aisles that are cluttered with various-sized stacks of cardboard boxes, creating something of an obstacle course. Some boxes are opened and awaiting attention, others are yet to be discovered by the presumably overwhelmed shelf stackers, who are nowhere to be found. Sam imagines that this must be the unavoidable pitfall of a small corner store. Overcrowded and overpriced and barely winning the battle to survive, but losing the battle for supremacy. Sally's Delicatessen has however weathered the storm quite well and has been trading for all of the eighteen months that Sam has lived around the corner. What he imagines it the thing that has saved it is its transformation from convenience store to deli. A lifeline thrown by a neighbourhood that is undergoing a youthful, double income led gentrification. But the boxes still remain like an old habit.

He reaches over to lift a bottle of Senorio de Vizcantar olive oil from a shelf that is precariously overstacked, making a mockery of the tiny sign that reads "Any Breakages Must be Paid For." When Sam first moved into the area he was almost tempted to break something to test the owner's legal resolve. He never did, however and the owner soon proved to be a happy unfit man whose round face has become familiar, giving him immunity from any prosecution. Sam carefully manoeuvres a single bottle free then out with his fingertips and places it into his small basket. Next some water crackers and a small bottle of macadamias, then onto the cold store aisle for some vintage cheddar cheese and a sealed pack of duck liver pate, whose outrageous price Sam could care less to argue. Satisfied with his minimal purchases, he heads towards the check-out where a plain cashier in her early twenties is busy organising her uniform. She looks up at Sam and smiles quickly before her eyes retreat, as if she were slightly embarrassed to meet his gaze. In truth she is already resigned to the fact that Sam orbits in a different transit and was and will always remain out of her reach.

“Hello Sam.”

He knows that he knows her well enough to know it, but try as he may he can't recall her name. He wings it, offering a warmly enthusiastic “Hi” that oozes as much familiarity as he can muster. But even as he says it, he feels he may have overdone it and her half-smile confirms that that is indeed the case.

“You still don't know my name, do you?”

He is taken by surprise. He may have been served numerous times by her before but he had pegged her as the anonymous, reticent, unfrontational type, so her demanding words get his attention. He suppresses the temptation to tell her to get a life, do her job and stop bullying customers. Maybe even wear a name tag.

“Er, no. Sorry, I'm not good with names. But if you tell me I promise I'll remember next time.”

She holds his eyes for a few moments, then takes a breath and soon her words catch up to her thoughts...

“You should know me.”

He lowers his gaze to take in her ample breasts. Even without a nipple on offer, he wonders if she could be the one. But how the hell could his mind conjure such a disappointing jigsaw from the single piece he was given? The nipple he remembers was attached to a stunning beauty, with flowing long dark hair that caressed a long, vulnerable neck, large brown bedroom eyes, an open full mouth, soft ebony skin, Brazilian curves. Not the skinny anaemic check-out-chick standing awkwardly in the way of a clean exit. He quickly decides that he may have been violated after all, but before he can affect a citizen's arrest she gives him a more convenient resolution.

“I went to school with your younger sister. We were in the same year for a while. We've met a few times. I'm Miranda. Miranda Gibson.”

The name means nothing to Sam but his relief is palpable, his virtual jigsaw puzzle still intact. He is also thankful that his imagination is able to retain some semblance of credibility. He is however now slightly gripped by guilt for his aloofness. He doesn't do humility well, but gives it a shot.

“Miranda. I’m sorry.” He says, wondering how such a beautiful name can be so poorly applied.

“That’s OK. It was a while ago.”

“Can I be honest with you?” He adds.

Her look says yes, so he smiles and begins his manipulation of her.

“I really am sorry. Not because I didn’t recognise you, but...because I didn’t take the time to really see you. Maybe one day it’ll be me behind some counter and you’ll ignore...I mean forget...who I am!”

She manages a forgiving smile before her eyes detach from his and move on to his meagre groceries, which she starts to scan.

“I won’t be forgetting who you are.” She says in an outpouring of feelings that she regrets the moment she has said it. She takes his money, then quickly seeks the safety of the cash register. She fiddles in the tray, then hands him his change.

“Say hello to Catherine from me.”

“Sure. I will. Miranda.”

He takes the change then leaves the store, pleased to have tricked a smile onto her face, but oblivious to her feelings for him. Nor does he feel her eyes burning into his back as he walks along the shimmering street, as she questions whether it was easier to love him anonymously. No sooner does he turn the corner onto his street than his cell phone rings, scarring the peace. He juggles it badly with his plastic bags, then looks at the caller display and answers. It’s Steve and Sam knows by the sheepish tone in his voice that it’s not good news. Moments later he learns that his boss Edmunds wants him back in the office. Right now.

“We’ve got friends for dinner tonight. I can’t come back.”

“He mentioned something about London. I’m not sure what exactly. All I know it that he wants you back here and if you want my advice, I don’t think it’s one ‘a those times you should say no.”

“Fuck! Isn’t there someone else? This is a real problem Steve. Tonight’s a big deal. I’m trying to make it up to Julie... for last time.”

“It’s probably got something to do with that little black box of yours. Even I don’t understand how it works and I’m a genius. He said to catch a cab.”

Sam lowers his phone and curses the wind. He regains his composure, knowing full well that he trusts Steve’s judgement. He has no choice. But even as he agrees he is already contemplating how much damage this will cause. Julie is patient, yes. Understanding too. A career girl who knows about deadlines and pressure and what it can do to a relationship. But she has wanted more from him for some time now and though this may truly be out of his hands, he knows that she will see it as one more example of how he fails her. How he chooses to live his life. Maybe he can’t do relationships right now. Maybe it’s time for a change? Maybe it’s time to move on. Perhaps consider one of the offers that occasionally come his way from the ever-circling head hunters.

“OK. I’ll be there.”

He snaps the phone closed and spins around in the empty street, where most people are already home and settled everything is good. He, on the other hand, knows that he is dead. He dials home and Julie picks up.

“Hi darling. It’s me.....”

Sam is tired and dishevelled as he enters the flat quietly, its sleeping walls lit only by the small blue light emanating from the kitchen clock. He drops his shopping bag containing the meagre groceries that he purchased at least four hours ago and which has accompanied him across the city and back again and throws his coat onto the back of a chair. He scans the kitchen, then the dining area beyond and even the lounge and is unsurprised that there is not a single shred of any evidence nor any other sign of any dinner party of any kind. Not the faintest hint of any life. Julie has intentionally destroyed all material evidence of her evening, to ensure that whatever may have transpired tonight in this home that they are supposed to share is forever lost to him. Payback. Worst, he has no excuse. None, at least, that could possibly quell the fury that

seems to emanate from every single item they own. Each in its proper place. Each one mocking him. The calm before the storm.

Julie is asleep, her face close to his in the small bed that crowds their two bodies, in the small room that crowds their two lives. The sandy waves of her long blonde hair fall on both their pillows in a gentle trespass. Sam carefully takes one offending wave and spins it around his index finger. He moves it a little closer to his face and sniffs it, as if to replenish a missing need. He reaches down with the same hand and gently touches the sheet that hides her naked breast with the back of his hand. He finds her nipple and moves the back of his hand against it in a hesitant rhythm, fearful of what he might discover. She moans briefly in sleepy protest and spins around in a reflex to face the other way, her hair slipping unnoticed through his fingers. He falls on his back and watches the ceiling, unsure for the first time in their three year relationship if the passion is there. He tries to construct his tormentor again as a complete woman, but is defeated by a lack of forensics. He decides that even the sexy girl with the blue high heels fell short of the mark. The ghostly imprint of her is now indelible on him. He turns on his side facing away from Julie, thumps his pillow flatter, and forces his eyes closed.

Damn her, whoever she was. Whoever she is.