

Sands Hall

Theim's Wingéd Chariot

JUST AS DAFNE FINISHED HER ROUSING—IF SHE SAID SO HERSELF—lecture about the limited choices for women in nineteenth-century America, much less Britain, and had called on the dependable Serena for a response, the door to her classroom nudged open. And there, peering around the doorjamb, was Edward! Dafne's heart lurched like an old car. The whole of Friday night tumbled at her, an Atlantic wave full of force and silt guaranteed to knock her over the fence and into the moon.

"Professor Hartman!" she said. That horrid betraying flush was, she knew, making her face look as if she'd been in a boiler room shoveling coal.

Edward nodded, pushed open the door the rest of the way, and tiptoed, elaborately, to the nearest available chair.

Serena, who was addressing the significance of Madame Merle's comments regarding the lovely little cups on Gilbert Osmond's mantelpiece, lost track of her point and drifted to a stop. They all watched Edward slide into a chair, one of those with a built-in desks that doesn't allow anyone over 160 pounds within its wooden embrace. He looked, the only word for it was, *dapper*. More dressed up than he'd been for Friday's dinner. Striped shirt. Blue tie. Beneath the hem of dark gray slacks the toes of dress shoes gleamed. As did the skin of his chin, as if he'd shaved just minutes before, and slapped on oil.

He gave a little wave. The students near him shifted, one even slid her desk a few inches away. In the humid silence they all gazed at him.

"Professor Hartman!" Dafne said again, copying the hearty way he often greeted her in the department hallway.

"Professor Theim!"

"To what do we owe the pleasure, Professor Hartman?"

He cocked his head to one side and there, suddenly, was his breath on her neck, his fingers splayed on her belly. With both hands she took hold of the lectern and stared down at her notes (*Why no to Goodwood?*). "We're discussing *Portrait of a Lady*." She looked up in time to see the students' faces swivel back to her. She encouraged her students to pull the desks out of rows and into a circle and this arrangement allowed them to look from him, in his desk by the door, to her, at the front of the room. But now it was as if they were watching a tennis match, except that what she and Hartman were tossing back and forth across the net was something like a stuffed toy octopus, pink plush legs flopping.

The length of Edward's torso rising above the desk emphasized the sense that the chair belonged in a dollhouse rather than a classroom. "Don't let me

interrupt,” he said, waving a hand. “Please, go on.”

She should never have told him he could visit her classroom. Anytime, she’d said! She blamed the Sangiovese. Or the piña colada, which she’d ordered before dinner to make her palms stop sweating.

But she must keep heading towards the climax that Edward had derailed, she must keep fanning the flame before it fell off the mountain, she was so close to convincing them why these novels are worth reading! Trying to get to the life raft that is Casper Goodwood, come to save Isabel Archer from the fate she has shot herself straight towards, and why she will turn away from the promise of salvation he offers and thrash back towards thin, mean, ascetic Gilbert Osmond, not because she wants to be with him—so Dafne wanted the students to realize—but because Isabel won’t abandon Pansy, the stepdaughter issued forth from the improbable loins of Madame Merle.

Dafne had laid out the kindling, tucked in the twists of paper, flames were licking around the discussion; the students (most of them) were with her, they were about to discover the New World for *themselves*, have it be their *own*—now all this had to pause as Edward sat there, elbow on desk, chin in palm. Why had he come to her classroom? (Although she had a good sense of why. How she could ever have allowed it to happen in the first place was one part of the leggy squishy *thing* they were tossing back and forth across the room.)

Another was the idea that it could happen again. No. No. Absolutely not.

The students were restive, some of them concerned, shooting her glances.

She placed the chalk in the shallow trough beneath the board and dusted her hands (one of the things about the college she loved: the old classrooms with black chalkboards and real chalk). She dusted them longer than she needed to, trying to ascertain how she might retain her standing in her students’ eyes. It startled her, how much the balance of like and respect could swing violently—palpably—away, how in the course of a moment one could go from feeling like a favored professor to finding oneself in a room full of hostile eyes. She patted a last bit of chalk off her hands. “Professor Hartman has come to observe our class—”

Why did she not simply admit that she’d invited him? But she was relieved when the students nodded. They understood this! She pressed on. “You recall when my—our—colleague Professor Wright came, at the beginning of the semester?”

Again the students nodded, happy to have a hook onto which this odd moment could be hung.

“Well, Professor Hartman is also here to observe, which he does because—”

Raising his eyebrows, Edward grabbed the edge of the desk as if it were about to take off, carrying him with it, and he would not be unhinged no matter how bumpy the ride.

“—because he is a senior member of the department and—”

Edward tilted his head one way, and then another. He looked, of all things, like a bird on a branch.

“—which he does unannounced. It’s an important part of the department’s . . . *functioning*, these unexpected visits of tenured faculty to those who are untenured.”

“No.” Edward said the word with a cheerful little uplift at the end of it.

The students’ heads swiveled back in his direction, their foreheads creased with the effort to understand what had just happened. Had Professor Hartman just pointed out that Professor Theim was *wrong*, or worse, that she was *lying*? Hot prickles of shame burst out along Dafne’s arms and cheeks.

“No. I came to watch you. I’m here to see you do it, Professor Theim.”

Dafne felt, even heard, the brains in the room whirl around the question: *Do what?*

“Do what?” Ainsley with the overbite asked.

Ainsley had been taught to be proactive. Been taught to question. Not by Dafne. By other teachers and parents that Dafne would give just about anything to have had.

Edward smiled, that real smile, that surprisingly sweet smile. “*Engage*,” he said. “How does Professor Theim make you care?”

Smart move. Professor Edward Hartman, rumored to have once been the most popular teacher in the department, had captured the students’ attention. They believed he wanted to know their opinions. Nothing made them happier, especially if it involved no reading.

“She makes us write *all the time*.”

“She answers our emails right away! Like a minute after you press *Send*, bang! there’s your answer!”

In other words, she had no life.

“About Isabel,” she said. “And Pansy—”

“She doesn’t care whether you raise your hand—she just *calls* on you.”

“I used to *hate* that. But now I don’t! Now I actually read what I’m *supposed* to read!”

The class guffawed. Edward gave a nod. “What else?”

“She *makes* us come to her office to talk about our papers.”

“She’s in her office a lot, *way* more than the times listed on the syllabus. Way more than any of my other professors.”

“She went over my essay with me for like almost an hour and it got dark outside while she was doing it. She works really hard!”

The students were scrambling, trying, as they saw it, to save her job.

“Mr. Hartman,” Dafne said.

“Professor Theim?”

“I mean, Professor Hartman. We’ve been discussing Caspar Goodwood’s final plea that Isabel return with him to America. Do you have any thoughts about this?”

“Many.”

The class laughed. The class was on his side! For a moment she saw the ease and shine of the brilliant professor he was reputed to be—although subdued

chat at the copy machine implied he'd slipped a bit the last few years. Ever since his wife died.

"Any that you would like to articulate?"

He shook his head. He appeared to have combed his gray hair to cover as best it could a pate that nevertheless shone faintly blue beneath the fluorescent lights. From a pocket he pulled a handkerchief—a cloth handkerchief!—and dabbed at his forehead. "Oh, no," he said. "I'm only here to observe."

The students moved their feet beneath their desks, looking back and forth between them, formulating—just as she had taught them to do—what the *subtext* might be. Why was he here? What was he "observing"? And all because she'd let him take her to dinner and in an astonishing lapse of judgment—

No. She wasn't going to think about it.

She hadn't been sure dinner was a good idea. But she hadn't refused the invitation. Frankly, she was a little tired of spending every evening alone. Except for Professor Hartman, widower, she was the only single professor in the entire department. Everyone was married, almost all had children, always there was something they were racing to do: shove the chicken in the oven, fetch the in-laws at the airport, whisk the feverish Joey away from daycare.

So when Professor Hartman came knocking at her office door suggesting a "light repast" later that Friday evening, she'd pushed the pile of papers she was grading to one side.

"You grade in pen!" he said.

Those unexpectedly bright blue eyes blinked at her, blinked again. She felt the unnecessary question dragged out of her: "You don't?"

"Not anymore. Now I use pencil. Gives me the option to change my mind. I do, sometimes. Sometimes they manage to convince me!"

He smiled, a singularly sweet smile, which made him look much younger. "It may take a day or two," he said, "thinking about what it is they've argued. And so, if I haven't yet handed back the paper, I head into the office and use an eraser and try to reframe my commentary without looking wishy-washy. Sometimes I leave quite a mess, though, and I'm sure they can tell I've been dueling with my—"

With a flexible wrist he waved a hand as if it held a rapier.

"Your what?" She was fascinated.

He smiled again, a little racily, with a quirk of an eyebrow. "My conscience," he said. "My acumen. My sense that there is still so much to learn. For some reason! So what do you say, Professoressa? Shall we break bread? Something simple, a pasta Bolognese, perhaps, and a good bottle of Sangiovese?" He pronounced the Italian words with a flourish of lingering vowels.

Really, there'd been no way to say no. Even though he was not the man she imagined would be her first date in her new life! She'd spent her time in grad school and post-grad getting the grades and publications that allowed her to arrive exactly where she was now—and while during those years she'd gone to

parties and slept with a callow youth or two and even for awhile lived with Bart of the Long Hair (who was as happy as she to think of bed as the ideal place for reading), all along she'd trusted that the man for her would be waiting along with tenure. She'd been looking forward to that part of things in her new job. But going out with a man almost old enough to be her father! It was like putting a toad in the aquarium. It was not part of her plan.

When her mother called later that same afternoon, she told Dafne to have a good attitude. "You never know, Daf, you never know."

Her mother asked about what she called Dafne's "love life" every time she called. Her mother wanted grandchildren. Tucking the phone between ear and shoulder, Dafne wandered toward the plant by the window to twist off a few dead leaves. Professor Hartman was way too old to have children! But her mother plucked at that thought as if it had been spoken aloud. "You just look at that Clint Eastwood and his young wife, or whatshisname that got whatshername pregnant so late. God gave that to men, for some reason. They can keep getting women pregnant while women just dry up and blow away, which is what's going to happen to you one of these years and there you'll be! Dry! Childless! So I'm just saying. You never know!"

"Mom," Dafne said, crumbling the leaves in her hand and heading to the kitchen to put them in the trash. "It's just not possible. I mean, if you saw him!"

"Kind hearts are hidden within the most mysterious of hides," her mother said. She was fond of saying this, in spite of the man who when she was eighteen gave her Dafne ("gave" is how her mother put it) and then disappeared.

On the pad of paper kept on the kitchen table, Dafne doodled, *A Kind Heart Is Not What I Am Looking For*, but then scratched it out, vastly troubled. Of course she wanted a kind heart! But she also wanted a lion, like Brenda's. Brenda, Twentieth Century Lit, flaunted her trophy husband (equally accomplished, a professor in Psychology) at all campus gatherings. Bruce was tall and dark with a forelock that fell over one eye. Dafne didn't know about his heart, but he was fetching. "Well made," her century's novels described such men. His thighs were long and strong beneath jeans, dark ones, in deference to the strictures of academia, which he wore with tweed blazers and really fine shoes.

She tried to insist on meeting Professor Hartman, rather than having him pick her up, where her neighbors might see her getting into his car. She emailed him: *Please let me know the name of the restaurant. I'll meet you there at 6:30.*

Picking you up. 329 Faitville. 6:20, he wrote back.

Well. She'd made that choice, listing her address for anyone to find in the campus directory.

The outfit. Not too elegant, not too skimpy. Black, definitely. Trousers, not a skirt. Turtleneck, not a blouse. She'd look like a prude. She didn't care. She was a prude.

"What are you wearing?" Her mother called again at five thirty. Dafne was tempted to pour herself a slug of the unopened bottle of Glenfiddich, purchased

when she first moved in (a college professor, tenure track, would have good liquor in her cabinet, would she not? So she began her collection with scotch, even though she thought it sour and far too strong. She had yet to buy anything else, not even berry-flavored vodka, which she actually liked). “Are you wearing black, Dafne?”

“I am.”

“Oh, Dafi! You’re so tiny, and black makes you look like an ant. At least wear that blue scarf—or the red one! Do you have that red one with you?”

“Mom, I’m not remotely interested in attracting him. I am not wearing a scarf!”

Silence at the other end.

“Jewelry, then.”

“Mom.”

“You’re so pretty. Why do you hide it and hide it! He sounds like a nice man. Like that Bart was, who would have given you some pretty children if you’d both stopped reading long enough to let it happen. Let this nice man *be* a nice man before you judge him with your *ferocious* set of values that you got from somewhere, not from me.”

Dafne made a face at herself in the mirror. “Oh, look at the time! He’s coming any minute. Got to fly. Love you.”

She pressed *End* with her thumb and threw the phone on the bed. She did look like an ant. Her big boobs, her little waist, her huge (her own word; her mother’s was childbearing) hips. She pulled off the black turtleneck and replaced it with a cream-colored one. Now she looked like a waitress. She yanked that off and pulled on a gray blouse with a scoop neck. Flirty. It would have to do.

She waited for him outside the house she’d rented (not purchased because even though she had an excellent teaching record and a growing list of publications she wasn’t going to jinx her tenure options by being hopeful). She would not have him knock and come in, an intimacy that would be altogether too much. So at six fifteen she was sitting on the wicker chair she’d purchased at a garage sale when she first got to town, leafing through a carefully chosen copy of the *Literary Review* and listening to the Iranians next door fighting, as they did most evenings, in low voices over the bang of pots and the smell of onions and cumin; and to the little girl a few doors down practicing scales on her violin.

A surprisingly classy black Honda crawled slowly up the one-way street. As it pulled to a stop Dafne pushed the journal under a cushion, scrambled down the stairs, and opened the passenger door, praying that the cat perched on the railing of the house across the street might be the only witness. “Hi,” she said, sliding into a soft seat and a wash of steel guitar from the stereo.

“Hello, yourself, Dafne.” His face was full of weather, the smile wrinkles just some of them. He turned down the music. “That’s a pretty scarf. I’m fond of that particular shade of red.” He put the car in gear. They sailed too slowly down the street. “You look fetching, Professoressa Theim!”

She resisted the desire to say, *No, I don’t*. Then he’d ask, *Why do you say that,*

Dafne?, and then they'd be talking about her.

"What a nice car," she said. "And that's a nice CD."

Nice nice nice. The etymology of that word included *fool*. As in simple. Have a foolish day.

He stretched his leg. In fact, he moved his hips, lifting and lowering them as if he needed to ease something in the area of his crotch. Aghast, she stared out the window, in time to see her neighbors Mike and Corinne wave at her, smiling delightedly at her good fortune.

"One of my favorite musicians," Professor Hartman said, gesturing at the CD player. "Fellow named Frisell. Do you know his music?"

She knew the song. "Shenandoah." Its heartbreaking notes filled the car.

"It's lovely," she said, and begrudged that she thought it was.

And now he was in her classroom! She had to somehow catch hold of the focus, had to push her students over the epiphany before they scooped up their backpacks and ran; she would not see them for another week! When they would have moved on from Isabel Archer to Ellen Olenska, yet another woman immured in the expectations of her time. Well, she'd told Edward Hartman that her tack was to engage her students. She was going to have to do just that.

"We'll just let Professor Hartman be one of us, shall we?" she said brightly, beaming at handsome winsome Donnie, who tugged once at the front of his Lacoste shirt and smiled back. "Let's just pick up here, where we sense that Isabel has been truly *moved*, truly, as the critics say, aroused. Do you think, as Farquart's essay proposes, that this is the reason she beelines back to Osmond? That she is afraid of—passion?"

Almost she had said sex. She would have said it if Edward were not sitting there. She felt her cheeks flame again.

"Brittany?"

Brittany was not among those waving at her. But it was true, she called on students whether or not they had their hands up. Brittany tossed her long hair over a shoulder and petted it as if it were the long spine of a bunny. "Well, sure, that's one way to look at it."

As usual, Brittany wasn't prepared for class. But there wasn't time to embarrass her. Dafne fixed her with a faintly disgusted eye, pretended to make a negative tick in the notebook beside her name, and moved on. "Andrew?"

Andrew sat up as if he'd been hit with a jolt of electricity. "Absolutely! That's what the whole scene's *about*, what maybe the book's about! I mean she has her pick! Goodwood's handsome, he loves her, but she runs away from him, although maybe that's because he's passionate, you know, he's got all that *good wood!*" His fellows laughed, and Andrew leaned more loudly into his argument. "Then there's Warburton, the cool English dude—but she turns even *him* down. And who *does* she accept? Super-weird super-cold Osmond." Again the class cackled along with him; Andrew plunged on. "But when all that *good-wood* shows up again"—the class broke into all shades of laughter—"all Isabel wants

to do is flee back to her tiny little world where she doesn't have to think about, umm, *it!*"

With a wave of his arm, Andrew flung himself back in his chair. The class practically clapped. *Engaged!* Dafne thought triumphantly, but did not look in Hartman's direction. "Good, Andrew! I'd even say chock full of *good wood!*"

The students shifted and looked at one another obliquely. The joke had fallen flat. This time she couldn't help a glance at Edward. He had his head cocked to one side again, lips pursed, considering.

She swallowed. "So that's one perspective. Thank you, Andrew! Now, let's talk about the role Osmond's daughter plays in the decision. What about Pansy?"

She'd lost them. It was ten to and even though no actual bell had sounded the move to fetch bags and backpacks looked choreographed.

But they all paused, politely, when Edward raised a hand. "It's likely, as Professor Theim proposes, that Isabel doesn't want to abandon her step-daughter. But perhaps, too, she senses Pansy may well be the only child she'll have, since, as Andrew has so vividly pointed out, Osmond is perhaps lacking much 'good wood?'"

The class laughed halfheartedly—they hadn't liked his joke any better than hers! Again they surged around their seats, gathering knapsacks and laptops and binders; their bodies might be in the room but they were gone. Gone for a week! "First two hundred pages of *Age of Innocence*," she shouted, above the hubbub. "Study questions are posted online!"

"Professor Theim," "Professor," "Professor," students swarmed about her, asking questions, checking office hours, wanting to know if a paper could be rewritten. Aware that Edward hadn't moved, she tried to glide past him, staying within the group of students, but he slid out of the desk and followed.

To be polite, especially with students watching, she turned to wait, bending her neck (that neck he'd breathed upon!) so that she felt eerily like a swan. The students drifted away and they fell into step together. "Well, Professorssa Theim!" he said as they reached the double doors at the end of the hall.

"Well, Professor Hartman," she said, but it was not robust.

"Edward," he muttered.

"Edward," she said. Was he wearing *cologne*? It was astringent, kind of bracing, reminding her of the time Bart of the Long Hair's cat, Beatrice, had gotten stuck in a tree; when they finally got her down she'd smelled piney for days. Not unpleasant. Dafne sniffed again.

As they climbed the steps to the department's floor Edward muttered something that sounded like *I just wanted to free you*. That couldn't be right. But when she said, "Pardon?" he shook his head.

Outside the department office he said, "I enjoyed the discussion, Dafne. I enjoyed being there." In an impressive and surprising move he shot the cuffs of his striped shirt, and then fiddled with a button. "I'm grateful."

She wanted to say, For what? But it was as if he were about to tilt his face into her neck again, she could almost feel his breath, that push of his fingers. Whatever had possessed her?

“Thank you for coming,” she said. “I hope you found what you came to find.”

“Oh, I did, Professoressa, I did.”

In spite of herself she lifted her eyes to meet his. She wanted, desperately, to know what that was. He wore that gentle smile, the one that disarmed her so. “Oh,” she said.

“Oh,” he teased, twinkling. For a moment she wanted to put a hand on his arm and twinkle back.

“I need to check my box. Late papers, you know . . .” She turned into the office.

“See you,” he called.

She paused, again arching a neck that she had never in her life before thought of as swan-like.

He’d tipped more wine into her glass and asked for the third time what she thought made a successful teacher. “And stop calling me Professor Hartman,” he’d said. “Edward, please! Good lord! I’m not your professor!” He had ordered pasta Bolognese for both of them. Cutting a coil of spaghetti into three parts she wondered why he wanted to know. He had thirty years of teaching under his belt.

“Because,” he smiled, even though she’d said nothing, “we have such excellent reports coming in about your teaching. I’m not the only one who’d like to know what you’re up to.”

She felt her face flush, the terrible heat that she knew reddened brow to breasts. She held her napkin to her lips, letting the huge linen square hide her exposed neck until she felt the heat subside.

“I’m quite interested,” he said. “And I’m always ready to learn something new.”

She spiked one of the miniscule bits of beef with the tine of a fork and slid it between her teeth. “I try to engage them.”

“What does that mean?” His smile was sweet. It made him look as if he were thirty, not fifty-odd. Someone she could actually imagine dating. “I’d like to know what you mean by that,” he said. “How do you engage?”

She squinted, thinking she heard mocking quotes around the word, but he was holding his glass aloft, toasting whatever she was about to say.

“Well, they are so young, you know.”

“They are.” He grinned, as if something about this was exquisitely amusing.

“And they are these little fires, waiting to be galvanized, they are these streams that have been clogged and someone has to clear the weir.”

“Clear the weir, yes.”

“You could come to one of my classes, if you like. Anytime.”

“Thank you. I’d like that. But please go on.”

“Well, I just want to get in there with a toothbrush, you know, and scour the spaces between the grout. Because sometimes things have gotten gummed

up and they care too much about what others think and part of my job is to show them the highway through their own minds, to make them understand that they can have all the thoughts they want in that room, they don't have to care what others have written on their blackboards; it's theirs now; it's time they seized their lives and grabbed hold of the chalk and the eraser too if that's what it's going to take to anchor their sense of self!"

She pressed the back of her wrist to her forehead, hoping to matte whatever sheen might be there.

"I appreciate your passion, Dafne! That is surely part of what makes you such a good teacher."

She reached for her water.

"An interesting and most attractive passion. Your eyes spark when you speak of it. And the mixing of metaphors is darling, really."

She'd been told about this propensity of hers by numerous professors. Following her dissertation she'd been warned about a "proclivity to pile image upon image that mars otherwise elegant writing."

"Sorry."

"No, no! Don't apologize!" His teeth shone and his eyes softened. He was really not a bad looking man, at least in candlelight. "Remember last week's department meeting, when we were discussing what appears to be the demise of the English major? The horizon is receding, you said, we must find a way to put the clapper back in the tuba. Darling."

She remembered her colleagues' laughter, fond though it appeared to have been, with chagrin. She stood, placing her napkin on the table. "I don't know that much about musical instruments." She headed to the restroom, where she pressed her forehead to the cool mirror, keeping her eyes closed. She knew her color would be high, her hair untidy, her eyes too bright. *Darling!* No one had ever called her *darling*. What was she going to do?

While she was gone he'd called for the bill and was putting down a credit card. She had her own handy for just this moment and fumbled to get it, but he told her not to be silly. "I make twice what you do," he said, "I have an endowed chair, for crying out loud. Put that away and keep it away."

Just once, he pressed the palm of his hand against her spine as they walked to the door of the restaurant, which he opened for her. The banisters on either side of the steps to the sidewalk had twinkle-lights twined around them, which made it seem as if they were exiting fairyland. And the restaurant had been a kind of fairyland, with now and then even a pulse of *possibility*, but also the well-laid table between them, whereas now there was nothing. He held a hand beneath her elbow as they walked to his car. He opened the door for her, went around to clamber in behind the wheel, slid the key into the ignition but didn't turn it. "Where to, Professorita?"

"Pardon?"

"What's next?"

A motorcycle roared past, making the car shake. "Trying to prove what *he's*

got between his legs!” Edward laughed heartily, gazing after it. Dafne made a face that she knew her mother would call ghastly. She thought about emphasis. If Edward had stressed the word *between*, or even *legs*. But that *he’s* made her shake her head rapidly in the darkness.

“So, where to?”

“I’ve got a ton of papers to—”

“You’ve got all weekend, Dafne!”

“I like to get started early. I take a lot of time with each essay and I like to have my head clear. This is as late as I’ve stayed up since I got here! I really should just . . .”

With a flick of his wrist, he turned the key, and the engine purred. He smiled at her. “Okeydokey.” But he didn’t pull out into traffic. The passing headlights washed the interior of the car with brief, fervent illumination. “Bonnie and I never had children. Did I tell you?”

She shook her head. It was a real sorrow, he told her. All his colleagues watching their kids go off to college, some already with grandchildren, etcetera, etcetera.

Another car zoomed by. He patted the keys so that they jangled. “I have to admit I always assumed Bonnie was barren. Terrible word. Then about a year ago I was dating this person, let’s call her the Virago, and she asked me, why blame your wife?” He adjusted the rearview mirror, peering into it, and made his voice high and a little nasal. “‘That is so passé, Edward,’ the Virago said. ‘So typical of a man to make it the *woman’s* fault. Could just as easily have been your own. Did you ever get a test?’”

Edward stopped with the high voice and shook his head. “We never did get a test. And by that point Bonnie had died.” He adjusted the rearview mirror again and put the blinker on. “I miss her terribly,” he said. “Even still.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I can hardly imagine such a loss.”

“But I could get one,” he said. “A test.”

He jangled the keys again, as if waiting for something. He let a few more cars pass before pulling out, and took an immediate left, which meant they were headed back to her house.

Being home was what Dafne thought she wanted. But she was also disappointed. She’d been worried he’d insist on a nightcap somewhere, some viscous sweet thing that would make her head pound in the morning, but now her house was coming towards them, dark and lonely. She should get a cat. But what if she wasn’t asked to stay beyond the year? She pressed the button to make the window descend halfway, and let the night air wash over her.

He prowled down the one-way block, past the cars on either side, looking for a parking space. “I can just get out,” she said.

“Wouldn’t think of it.” He put a hand on the back of her seat, looking over his right shoulder, fingers grazing her neck as he parallel-parked in one swift, clean move. “Congratulations to me!” he said, and turned off the ignition.

“Indeed.” She placed fingers on the door handle.

“Dafne.”

“Yes.”

“I have an odd request. But I hope you will receive it in the spirit in which it’s made.”

She would teach his class while he was away at a conference. She would look over his syllabi. She would share her class assignments. She would grade his essays! But she would not do the thing he asked: let him touch her belly.

Although she couldn’t help but ask, “*Why?*”

“Not your breasts, though they are very pretty breasts. And not your gracious hips, though they, too, have their charms. I’d like to kiss you, too, but I can see that’s not in the cards, not yet. The belly? Perhaps because it’s from there that all life comes.”

She stared out the open window, at the cars parked on either side of the street, all facing the same direction and glinting under the light from a streetlamp. She took in the row houses where here and there light shined through curtains. Beyond those curtains, televisions flickered their stories full of bright and dark, the fledgling violinist ate a bowl of ice cream, the Iranians argued as they washed up; beside her, Edward mourned his lost wife and unmade children: dozens of people on this block alone making what sense they could out of their days without the help of an author to put a frame around the experience and say *The End*, so that the lesson could be drawn, the themes taught. Poor Edward! And it was this paroxysm of sympathy (the phrase that came to mind, subsequently) that made her not pull away when he placed a hand on her stomach, which was, at that point, protected by blouse over trousers. Even through the layers the warmth of the hand was like a heating iron. She let it stay.

“Thank you,” he said.

He tilted towards her. His shoulder touched hers. They sat like that for a moment, and then he moved his fingers under the blouse and began to slide them beneath the waistband of the trousers.

And she let him. She would never know why, not even years later, when she’d sometimes think about it, watching water run over the dinner dishes in the sink, Izzie behind her at the table, creating a portrait with the paints or pens or chalk her grandmother, having glimpsed a budding talent, sent monthly; little Eddie already tucked into his favorite chipmunk sheets; big Eddie (as he only sometimes allowed himself to be called), reading in the armchair by the window. His fingers went under the waistband and even under the elastic trim of her bikini underwear, which she was ridiculously glad she’d decided to wear—and really, why had she reached way to the back of her top drawer to find those, rather than wearing her usual high cotton ones? The question never failed to intrigue her, to engage her, when she thought about it, which she did sometimes, as she washed the wineglasses after dinner, or kissed Izzie’s forehead goodnight.

Edward’s hand lay heavy and warm on her belly. He heaved a sigh. His forehead pressed into the space between shoulder and chin, his breath warm against her neck. She stared over his balding head at the row of parked cars

all heading the same direction, at the dark path between them that was the pavement, and all down the block all the lives going on: the soft laughter of her neighbors Mike and Corinne drinking beer on their stoop, the cat stealing out from under the porch to prowl, a child calling like a jaybird in the dark.