

*Malerie Marder*

*Nine*

Sometimes she had money, sometimes she didn't. Sometimes she earned it, more often it was given to her she usually didn't know why.

She had known love.

Her heart had been broken.

She had lived on three continents six countries seventeen cities twenty-seven apartments, she didn't have a home, no home, no home.

Depression, self-hatred, fear they were all her friends.

Sometimes she slept for sixteen hours a day, sometimes not at all.

She ate steak rare, chicken fried, drank smoked ingested.

She drove fast in the rain, slow in the sun.

Security and peace came to her in brief fleeting moments. She never knew when or why she would stop regardless of where she was or what she was doing, she would stop and breathe slowly and deeply stop and slowly and deeply breathe.

Ecstasy. Beneath women, men, on top of them in front of them inside of them inside of her. It was always physical. She heard there was more, she had heard, she had heard.

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She didn't want to go. Another party in LA full of clothes and jewelry and irony and desperation. Her friend called six times before noon, said please come please come, I don't want to go alone please come. Her friend wanted to meet a producer or a director or an actor anyone with money and fame, take him to the bathroom and fuck him, move in with him and fuck him, leave him and sue him and fuck him. She had been trying for four years, had been to hundreds of parties, had seen plenty of porcelain, a couple big houses, not much else.

She calls again. Again. Again. She calls again.

Hello?

Please come.

Why?

I need you there.

No you don't.

I do.

Why?

Because I do.

It'll be the same as every other one. I'm sick of them.

It won't.

It will.

For half an hour. If you hate it you can leave.

I'm gonna hate it.

You won't.

I will.

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In 1996 the drive would have taken fifteen minutes. In 2005 it takes an hour. They move slowly past fast food restaurants, strip malls, auto-body shops. Her friend drives and smokes and talks she never stops talking. The Hills loom over them on one side. The Flatlands stretch endlessly away on the other. It's hot. The air conditioning is on high. She stares out the window. The sidewalks are empty, as they always are, the sky is blue, as it always is. Her friend keeps talking.

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She's sitting on a couch in the backyard. Three men have offered her their phone number, one offered to take pictures of her, everyone she's met has asked what she does for a living. She's drinking Chablis. She doesn't like the taste, but she loves the name. She says it over and over to herself, using a different voice each time, it always makes her laugh: Chablis, *Chablis*, Chablis. She tries to decide whether she's going to get drunk, or how drunk, she thinks about doing some coke she knows it's around.

Hi.

She looks up. Tall thin dark hair dark eyes. Pants too low, purposely battered tennis shoes, a loose black t-shirt.

Hi.

You doing well?

Sure.

You don't remember me.

No.

He smiles. She looks at him. Nothing.

Do I know you?

Yes.

How.

He's still smiling. He turns and walks away.

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She watches him. He flirts with other women. He laughs with his two friends, one of whom is drinking, the other smoking weed. He eats four cheeseburgers. He drinks domestic beer in a can. He knows she's watching him. It doesn't seem to affect him. She's trying to figure out where, when, if he's full of shit, if she slept with him. She watches him. He flirts with other women and laughs with his friends.

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It's dark. She's on her fourth Chablis. She's inside the house, sitting on a lazyboy, which she has fully reclined. There is another lazyboy next to her, a nicer one, full black leather with cupholders, a built-in television remote, shoulder and lumbar massage systems. He sits down in it, twirls it in a half-circle so he is facing her. He speaks.

You lived in Indianapolis.

You from there?

Nope. You also lived in Barcelona.

I know you're not Spanish.

And you lived in Boston and Atlanta.

No accent, so you're not from either of those shitholes.

I'm from Albany.

Albany?

Where you went to school in first, second, eight and ninth grade.

I went to an all-girls school.

With my sister. I was a year older, went to the boys' school.

Your sister's name?

He smiles again, gets up, walks away.

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Her friend wants to leave. She wants to stay. Her friend says there's another party. She tells her friend to go without her.

He plays ping-pong in the backyard. She watches him through a sliding-glass door. He plays well, has a nice spinning serve. He knows she's watching him.

He leaves the table even though he hasn't lost. He walks inside. She watches him, he smiles at her. She's sitting at a table with a group of people she doesn't know. They're talking about agents and auditions, friends who have become famous and forgotten them. He stops in front of her.

Come out front with me.

Why?

Because I want you to.

Why?

He smiles takes her hand. He guides her from the chair. He leads her to the door and opens it and they walk outside.

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They have been standing beneath a light in front of the door for twenty minutes. When they got outside he turned to her and put his hands on her waist and leaned towards her and gently kissed her. She didn't resist, couldn't resist, he felt right, smelled right, tasted right. They kiss, their mouths slowly opening, exploring, their hands slowly moving, their bodies tense and relaxed, their bodies becoming closer, closer, closer.

James Frey