

I



I ONLY MET TAMARA DE LEMPICKA because I needed a hundred francs. This was sixteen years ago. I had just learned that if I had a black dress with a white collar, I could take over my flatmate's department store job. In 1927, you could get a bed or a bicycle for three hundred francs; one hundred was a fair price to pay for a ready-made dress, but I didn't have it.

I would try my friend Maggey first: I had given her money once when she needed to see a doctor. After my interview at the department store, I looked for her in the Bois de Boulogne.

Maggey went by the name of her place of employment, a magnolia tree on the southernmost lip of the bigger lake, close to the road. I could see a man turn as I walked by, and as I approached the magnolia tree (where was Maggey?) I could see another, a man in a *fiacre*, pointing me out to his driver.

For my part, I couldn't help noticing the jewel-green motorcar parked on the grass up ahead, out of which emerged a woman with a dog. They formed a triangle at the edge of the trees: greyhound,

green Bugatti, slim stylish woman. Her bobbed hair gleamed pale beneath an exquisitely useless aviator's hood done in putty-colored kid. Her dog's whole body strained toward the trees, yet he stood as still as a hound in a medieval tapestry, quivering patiently until the woman unclipped his leash. He looked up at her, waiting. "*Vas-y!*" she cried, and the dog vanished into the green, a long-bodied blur.

I reached the neck of land between the two lakes, and saw neither Maggey nor the overdressed boyfriend she sometimes brought along. I would walk as far as the Chinese pavilion on the island, I decided, and if I didn't see Maggey when I came back, I'd give up and ask my flatmate, Gin, for the money. Unfortunately, I couldn't ask for her uniform: Gin had the boyish, birdlike looks that were in vogue then, while next to her I felt heavily, irredeemably, New York Italian. But if she could give me both of her uniforms, I thought, maybe I could use fabric from one to work goes into the other. That would take time, though, and I needed the dress first thing the next morning. The sunlight broke the lake into a thousand hard-edged mirrors, but the pines were cool overhead, their needles fragrant on the ground. One of the men on the path said something to me and I looked away. But then I heard footsteps behind me, and a woman's voice. "Where did you get your dress, Mademoiselle?"

I had chosen my lucky blue dress for the interview at Belle Jardinière precisely because it often drew comment. I looked back: it was the woman with the green car. She didn't speak French like a French person, but she spoke it better than I did. "I made it," I said, struck shy by her beauty and her obvious wealth.

In her twenties, the woman stood as tautly slender as her grey-

hound, yet her Eastern European features suggested a fleshy, languid ease. “*Comme c’est joli*,” she said.

I pointed at the Bugatti. “I was just admiring—” I said, or hoped I said.

“It’s not mine—should I speak Italian to you? English?”

“English, I guess,” I said in English, embarrassed. But I switched back to French, explaining, “I try to practice—”

“—but I am thinking I might buy myself a car like this one,” she said. Her English was like sandpaper, Slavic and pained. *That’s* why her French sounded strange, I thought. Was she Russian? “Would you like to help me try it out?”

I laughed uncomfortably, and looked over at Maggey’s tree. No Maggey, so I lingered with the woman as she called her dog. “Seffa!”

“Seffa?” I had to repeat the woman’s explanation out loud to understand it. “Zee Vest Vind? Oh!” I said, catching on.

More gale than zephyr, Seffa suddenly burst out of the trees, carrying a bloodied rabbit. He tossed his prey to the ground and rolled around on the torn body, legs in the air. “No, Seffa! That’s enough,” the woman said in French, and the dog stood, trembling. He was slow to let her open his jaws and pry something out. When she leashed him, he stood close by her side near the car, but looked back, openmouthed.

The top of the car was down. The woman reached inside for a copy of *Le Temps* and opened a sheet of newsprint across her dog’s back. She wiped the blood off him, and he whined when the corners of the paper nipped at his legs. “In,” she said, and in two leaps the greyhound was helming the backseat, eyes and nose trained on his

relinquished prize. “See?” she said to me. “Now we can go anywhere you like.”

“You’re kidding,” I said, laughing again.

The woman laughed, too, but her gloved hands wound together. Her red mouth moved before she spoke. She seemed afraid she might offend me. She looked down at my sad old shoes, and suddenly I knew we were thinking the same thing: she had money and I needed it. It was the Bois de Boulogne, after all. What was *she* doing here? “I ask because you are beautiful,” she said, “and I am a painter. I paint nudes. Please, may I give you my card? May I paint you sometime?”

Was that all, then? I looked at her carefully. Whatever she had in mind, I figured, I could get out of it if I needed to.

The woman was named Tamara, she said. Her studio was in the Seventh, a quick ride. Her car shone bottle-green, a praying mantis, a cunning toy. As I stared at it, a man in a fedora addressed me in flat Chicago English: “Well, can I paint you too?”

I glanced over at him: a nattily dressed midwestern boy, standing too close, but smiling so hopefully I felt a spike of pity for him. I relished it. “Sorry, Charlie,” I singsonged, and then someone called out to him in French.

I watched the American and his friend spar in greeting like boxers, glancing over at me from time to time. It felt good to harden my face against them the way Tamara did, to turn away. And toward a car that wasn’t a taxicab, at that. I looked up at her. “Would you think about it?” she said.

“For a hundred francs, I would do it,” I said. “I would do it right now.”

“A hundred francs for five hours, yes?”

I could have Gin's job and owe her nothing. I looked back again toward Maggey's tree: still no Maggey. "Let's go," I said.

It was a warm day, but between the cool Bois and the open car, my summer dress was what seemed impractical, not Tamara's thin cape and aviator's hood, not even her long driving gloves. I felt a little breathless in my gray leather seat: I'd never gone so fast before. At one stoplight, Tamara asked my name and wrote herself a note. "Rafaela," she repeated, drawing out the middle two syllables. She had a stainless-steel mechanical pencil and a creamy little notebook, exquisitely plain. I wanted both. At another stoplight, she reapplied her lipstick. I had never seen a mouth so red. Her bloodied gloves were the pale yellow of her hair, her cape and hood the gray of her heavy-lidded eyes.

The trees flashed by. As my skin puckered into gooseflesh, I was glad for the heat that seeped into my thighs, glad again when we burst into an open field and, briefly, heat poured into me through the windscreen. I leaned back for a moment, basking in the hot light, the speeding car, Tamara's beauty: this was why I had come to Paris, I thought. Back home, a year ago, one glimpse of a Chanel dress had made me crave glamour, and now I had found it. Tamara's eyes flicked toward me, the color of chrome. It was too loud to hear what she said, but I smiled in reply. She reached over and touched me under the chin with a gloved finger, tipping my face toward her. Her eyes moved from my face to the road and back. She gave me a last, approving look and took the wheel in both hands again. I had seen that look before, on Hervé's face. On Guillaume's, too. I would ask for the money first thing.



We burst out of the green silent bubble of the Bois into a hot bright day crowded with scrambling taxis and squawking claxons. People flooded the little streets. Pushcarts crammed with vegetables, flowers, and books inched through the crowds. When we stalled behind an orange-and-brown horse-drawn sewage truck, Tamara grimaced at the smell, then pitched her car into a pedestrian square and passed the horses, frightening two nuns up onto the plinth of a statue. Tamara looked back at them and laughed, and I nervously followed her lead. We sped along the river and crossed the Pont de la Concorde. The Seine glowed like a sheet of lead foil.

Tamara parked in front of an apartment house in the aristocratic Seventh. I followed her—led by Seffa, clawed feet clacking—up two flights of stairs to an apartment much grander than any I'd ever lived in. "My daughter's room," she said, pointing to a door off to the side. I caught a glimpse of a kitchen, too, before we reached the apartment proper: three wide handsome rooms, each one leading to the next through French doors, all hung in the same gray velvet as the low couch where Tamara seated me. Both sets of French doors stood open: from the middle room I could see both the dining table at one end of the apartment and the starkly elegant bed by the far wall of the other.

On a low marble table before me sat a glass jar containing the remains of what might have once been a hair ribbon, burned to a stiff charcoal curl. Beside the jar sat a bottle of mineral water and a glass, a bunch of grapes, and the skull of a small animal. When the dog sighted the skull, Tamara moved it to a sideboard behind us and poured me a glass of water. "We can eat this still life. It was no good,"

she said, glancing down by way of explanation at the one hint of disorder in her cool, bright flat: a torn sketchbook page on the floor.

As I nibbled at a proffered grape, Tamara moved quickly through the three rooms, wiping down her dog and gloves with a wet cloth, hanging her cape and hood, shaking out her bobbed blond hair. Something about Tamara's apartment made me think of the street where I lived, which was home to a series of art dealers, but it wasn't the paintings on the walls: the art dealers, as if trying to outdo each other in drabness, hid away their wares like gold bricks. It was the smell, a resinous vapor that spindled the room. "What's that?" I asked, sniffing.

"*Huile de lin,*" she said, gesturing toward a table full of brushes and glass jars. "Is that *linen-seed oil* in English? And *térébenthine*. I do not know the word."

I nodded. "The grapes are delicious," I said. Even mixed with the sharp oil smell, I liked them: tart skin and sweet pulp, but full of seeds.

"Once, when I was very poor, I brought home some pastries to draw. I set them on the table here, and then I am sitting down with my tablet, here, and I look and I look, and all the time my stomach is saying, 'Eat them, eat them.'"

"You ate them?"

Tamara pulled off her driving gloves while she spoke, revealing long wrists, long fingers, red-painted nails, and a wealth of rings, one with a square topaz as big as a walnut. It flashed as she nodded, repeating my words, Slavic and vehement. "I ate them."

"Are you very poor now?" I asked, pretending to joke as Tamara vanished behind her bedroom doors. "Should I worry about the hundred francs?"

“No, no, no, no, no, no, no. No!” Tamara called from the next room, as she exchanged her mauve crepe afternoon frock for a black cotton housedress and a white chef’s apron. Reëmerging, Tamara looked at me. “You understand the job? You do not move. I will paint you for forty-five minutes. Then you will rest for fifteen. Then forty-five again, and so on for five hours. It is noon now. We will stop at five.” Belle Jardinière would close at six. I needed to show up in uniform at nine the next morning, before the store opened. I nodded.

“The WC is down the hall, or you may go behind the screen,” she said, pointing at the dining room. “You change there.”

I knew I had agreed to model, but here it was: I would have to take off my clothes. “How many people come in and out of this apartment?” I asked warily.

“No one all day,” Tamara said, spreading both hands in a gesture of fiat. “And then at five, the housekeeper will come by and make dinner for my mother and daughter.”

“Your mother lives here too?”

“Oh, no. We are just myself and Kizette. My mother lives close by, and she looks after Kizette when I go out at night.”

“And your husband?” I asked, before I could stop myself.

“Is in Warsaw,” she replied curtly. And then, as if to forestall further questions, she crossed the room again. “This is for you,” she said, unlocking a drawer. She drew a banknote from a gray satin envelope-style purse and set it on the table by the grapes. One hundred francs: a black dress with a white collar.

“Thank you,” I said. I was relieved to see she was serious about paying me, but even so, I took a long drink of water. I wanted to make it last, the moment she owed me, before I picked up the money

and owed her. I proudly set down my glass. "I'll take it when I go," I said.

Behind the screen in the dining room, I discovered a bathtub, a chamber pot, and a hook on the wall with a single empty hanger. *I guess that's for you*, I thought, addressing my lucky blue dress. *Here we go.*

Just one look at a dress had been enough to lure me to Paris. The summer before I met Tamara, I was living in the Bronx with my stepfather's mother, my Nonna Gioia. The farthest she let me out of her flat on Grand Concourse Boulevard—a cell of furniture polish, porcelain figurines, and Italian prayer cards—was onto her tiny balcony, to water the plants. I didn't miss looking after my brothers, four boys between the ages of nine and three, but I was so bored without them, I watered those plants twice a day. Nonna Gioia disapproved of her next-door neighbor, a pretty, young widow named Theresa, but I liked peeking into Theresa's apartment from the balcony. She went out often. From five on, Theresa sat near the window with her hat on the table beside her, until a black motorcar pulled up outside. Then she pulled her cloche so low it covered her eyes, tripped outside in her long light coat, and got into the back of the car without talking to the driver. Sometimes she didn't come home until morning.

Every afternoon, Theresa went out to the balcony to drink a cup of coffee and dry her shining bobbed hair. One day, after sweating at the stove for Nonna Gioia all morning, I stepped out onto the balcony, panting, to find myself face-to-face with my neighbor,

dressed radiantly in rose, black hair wet from the bath. “Oh!” she said. “I didn’t know Mrs. Russo lived with anyone.”

“She’s my grandmother. My stepfather’s mama. I’m just here for the summer.” I looked behind me, into the apartment: Nonna Gioia was at church and could come back any moment.

“You in trouble?”

“Sorry?” Did I look as unhappy as I felt?

“You in trouble?” she repeated.

“Well, my parents are sending me back to Italy to get married,” I said.

“Oh, after the baby comes,” she said. “That’s convenient for everybody, huh?”

I stared at her. What baby?

She reached over the railing and touched my shoulder. “You’ll have another one someday,” she consoled.

“I—”

“And meanwhile”—she shrugged, giving me a smile like a secret handshake—“you only lose your reputation once, right?”

“You think I’m pregnant,” I protested awkwardly. “But I’m not.”

Theresa’s smile, startling in its sudden warmth, vanished. “Oh,” she said. “Sorry, sweetheart. A girl goes away to live with her grandmother for a few months, and . . .” She gestured in a way that made me self-conscious about my all-too-female body. “. . . Sorry.”

“I see,” I said. “I understand. Don’t worry.”

“And I never see you outside,” she added in her defense.

“It’s really all right,” I assured her. “She keeps me pretty busy in here.”

“Well, come outside sometime. The nice weather won’t last.”

“I like your dress.”

“You do?”

I nodded. Theresa was wearing a solid pink drop-waist sheath with an extra pleat in front, knit out of light wool that clung without bulging and made her long legs look all the stemmier. Four ribs knitted into the fabric gave the dress the sleek, metallic look of a motorcar, while a row of soft loops at the neckline doubled as buttonholes where the vee of the dress closed, showcasing a ridge of pink buttons that plunged almost all the way to Theresa’s navel. I stared at the wink in the fabric: I had never seen a girl’s navel through her clothes before. I had never seen a dress so simple, yet so stylish, so seductive, yet so classy.

“It’s from Paris, sweetheart,” she said, both relieved that the awkward moment had passed and genuinely proud of her dress. “Coco Chanel.”

Theresa and I did not speak again after that fumbling exchange. More than once I’ve thought about that smile she gave me, a smile quickly offered and as quickly retracted, a smile that intimated we were two of a kind, that we two alone had somehow bested all the others. When I first met my flatmate in the barroom of the Vaudeville restaurant in December of ’26—the men we were seeing then made us climb up on chairs with them and sing “La Marseillaise”—Gin’s slender, nervy poise had made me think of Theresa in her little ribbed dress. Since then, I’d seen Gin go off in a taxi just as effortlessly as Theresa had. I’d seen her reappear a day later, just as coolly buoyant. Until Gin had met her current banker, Daniel, she and I had often exchanged Theresa’s conspiratorial smile.



My lucky dress, inspired by Theresa's Chanel confection, was cut from a sky-blue blend of raw silk and linen that caught the light like sequins when I went outside. It fit like a coat of paint. If I wanted a change from baguette and cheese at home, I could wear that dress to a café and, every time, someone—though rarely anyone I liked—would take me to a restaurant. As I stepped out of that dress behind the screen in Tamara's apartment, the painter's high heels crossed the room toward me. She passed me a handful of fabric. "Wear this," she said.

The dress Tamara handed me was a far cry from mine: a dull brown cotton sack-like affair with wide straps for sleeves. Though the garment looked finished enough on the outside, I was surprised when I pulled it over my head to discover raw fabric against my skin. I felt a little superior as I smoothed down the selvage that lumped under the bodice: I knew how to finish a *seam*. Had Tamara made the dress herself? Had she been looking for a girl whom she thought this odd costume would fit? Walking back into the salon, I felt like a sausage in my sack.

"Sit," she said, pointing to a café-style table and chair. "Good. Lay the right hand here, on the left wrist. Good. Stay there. First I will draw you for ten minutes."

Sitting opposite me on the gray couch, a tablet braced against her knees, Tamara held a slender twig of charcoal and looked at me. Her eyes were like mercury. They moved over me with a flat, empty look that made me uncomfortable. When her gaze flicked down and her hand moved over the page, I looked away, relieved.



More stylish even than Theresa, more coolly poised even than Gin, Tamara reminded me of a third woman, someone I had met just three months after seeing my neighbor's pink dress, the day I first entered Chanel myself, on the well-upholstered arm of my boyfriend, Guillaume. After whisking me up a mirrored staircase, he had me fitted for a tight satin ruby-colored cocktail gown by the most sophisticated, the most *competent* woman I had ever encountered. The way Tamara spoke to me, without hesitation, without doubting herself, made me think of that tailor at Chanel, uncowed by Guillaume's age, bulk, and money as she was by the shining, buttery fabric in her hands. As the seamstress draped and pinned the satin on me, I could not speak, awed. When we left, Guillaume took me across rue Cambon into the Ritz, where we cut through the city block using a plush corridor that ushered us into the octagonal, moneyed hush of Place Vendôme. "*C'est beau, n'est-ce pas?*" he said. It *was* beautiful: the silent column, the airy beveled square bounded by arches. I nodded, still dumbfounded.

I never did wear the red satin dress. While we were together, Guillaume kept me in a flat with a doorman, a lift, steam heat. He had a beautician pluck my single brow into two arches and a coiffeur bob my hair. He dressed me in new clothes, from Perugia pumps to a Lanvin cloche, from silk stockings to a fox-collared coat. He sent me to the Alliance Française and paid for classes. However, the day I graduated from *Is this a salad?* to *Why do you like me?* he stopped. "*Ça commence à bien faire!*" he said, meaning he was fed up. I stared at him, baffled. *It begins to do well?*

Within a week, Guillaume had moved a mutely bewildered Swedish girl into the apartment next door to mine. When I met her, I thought, *You found another duckling to swan, is that it?* I didn't wait around to see if we'd go back and collect my dress. Instead, I slept with one of his employees, a man too young to have even fought in the war, named Hervé. By the time I made it back to rue Cambon with Hervé's money, the red dress was gone.

I smiled wryly to myself in Tamara's apartment: I couldn't just nod and simper at my rich boyfriend, not even for a gown from Chanel, so now here I was, posing by the hour to pay for a dress off the rack. *A uniform.* "You must not move," Tamara said.

"Sorry."

Tamara switched from black charcoal twigs to yellow-brown bars of pigment, using a heel of bread to erase her stray lines. I glanced outside. Tamara's parlor window cleared a low carriage house across the street, so the wide room shone in the hard north light. The most magnetic thing in the apartment, short of Tamara herself, was her couch. Low and wide and covered, like the walls, in gray velvet, it glowed with a pearly sheen, as sleekly featureless as a doctor's examination table. I wanted to lie down on that couch like a child and push my cheek against the nap of the velvet. I wanted to fall asleep on that couch for hours. Tamara's eyes met mine and she smiled. "It's pretty," I said, stupefied, pointing.

"We will talk later," she said. Embarrassed, I looked away again, this time at the canvases that surrounded me. Tamara's dining room, lit green by the ivy framing her window, contained no artwork, but her bedroom and parlor shimmered with paintings: they hung on

the walls; they perched on easels; they leaned edgewise in stacks in the corners of the rooms. The largest of them hung over Tamara's bed in the next room: a portrait of a woman dressed as a man.

"You may rest a moment," Tamara said, massaging her shoulders.

"You painted that?" I asked. Tamara gave me a patient, sarcastic smile. I crossed the room for a closer look. The painting was taller than I was. Its width enclosed my width. The woman in the painting wore a long black coat, a white collared shirt, riding trousers, and tall shiny black boots. She looked like a dandy or a dictator, posed in front of a city as if she owned it, half her body standing and victorious, half slouched against a table hidden in drapery.

"The Duchesse de la Salle," Tamara said. "The mother of a friend of mine. But I painted her as Violette Morris, the athlete."

Violette Morris was often in the papers. A professional soccer player, she had also become the French national champion boxer in 1923, after defeating a series of male opponents. Her hobbies, I had read, included motorcycle racing, auto racing, and airplane racing. Her lovers, it was rumored, included women as well as men. I had seen her picture quite a few times. More than any physical or sartorial similarity, Morris and the duchess shared the same smug look, the same arrogant *froideur*.

I stepped back from the painting. *What does Tamara's husband think of waking up to that every morning?* I thought, looking down at her big gray velvet bed, decked out in pillows of darker gray satin. That's when I noticed the headboard: carved into the gray lacquered wood was a line drawing of two ladies in a dreamy, stylized landscape, their naked bodies interlaced. And what did he think of *this*? "How long has your husband been in Warsaw?" I asked.

“He is not coming back,” Tamara said coolly.

I should have guessed, but I had never met a woman of her type. *Donna uomo* was how your mother warned you’d turn out if you were too lazy to bleach your moustache. Two women in bed was something your boyfriend wanted to watch. I looked over at Tamara, nervous. Well, I thought, it seemed like she did only mean to paint me. And I could leave anytime, I reminded myself. I felt less afraid than uneasy as I stepped back into the middle room, where Tamara’s most prominently displayed works rested on four wheeled stands. “There he is,” she said, pointing to a line drawing of a man charcoaled onto a panel of canvas. Her husband’s coat was not so different from the Duchesse de la Salle’s. His hard, hollow expression made me turn away.

“Who’s that?” I asked instead, pointing to a second canvas, on which a half-painted young woman sat by a window, wearing a schoolgirl’s shoes and socks and a rather adult expression. Pinned to the stand I saw a photograph of the same girl, age eleven or so, also sitting by a window, looking guardedly up at me.

“My daughter. I use the photograph during the day, and then Kizette sits for me after school.”

“But it’s summer. She’s in school?”

“She has had a difficult year,” Tamara said sharply, her face closing.

Backing off, I turned to the third painting on a stand: two ladies with bobbed hair stood close together, one dreamy, looking upward, one alert, watching for something just past me. “*Die Dame* asked me to do some cover paintings for them,” she said, naming a glossy German fashion magazine. “This is the first. I just varnished it.”

“Beg pardon?” I couldn’t understand her accent for a moment.

“The clear coat on the painting. *Gomme dammar* dissolved in *térébenthine*.” I could see the shiny finish on the painting then. I could even see ripples in the sheen toward the top edge, as if the image lay just below a thin skin of water. I had not seen many paintings, and had never looked at any so carefully. For a moment, I could suddenly see three layers at once: the varnish, the paint, and the weave of the canvas beneath it. And then, just as suddenly, the painting ceased to be a thing and became a picture again. “Who are those people?” I asked.

“My friends Ira and Romana. Romana is the Duchesse de la Salle’s daughter,” she said, gesturing absentmindedly toward the Amazon in the bedroom. “But pfff! *That* one was the real model.” She pointed to a frothy orange scarf around the watchful girl’s neck that took up almost a third of the canvas. “Temperamental,” she said, as if pleased with herself for knowing the English word. “Demanding. Never stayed in one place. Drapery has no memory, so you have to get it all down at once. The *painting* has to remember. Charcoal cloth is fun for practice,” she said, pointing toward the burnt curl of ribbon in the jar. “But you can get spoiled.” Now that I looked at the painted and charcoalized fabric side by side, I could see how she had learned from copying the hard edges of the latter.

“What’s the scarf made of?” I asked, pointing. “Chiffon?”

“Why chiffon?” Tamara asked eagerly.

I pointed again. “It’s light. It’s soft, but just a little stiff. You can see through it a little, but not loads. And look, rolled hems,” I added.

Tamara’s face lit with pleasure. “Well done,” she declared, and

went into her bedroom to dig something out of a drawer: the very same scarf, a thin peach-colored silk that lit the gray room gold. “What a good eye you have,” she said. “Here, take.”

“I couldn’t,” I protested, though I couldn’t take my eyes off it.

“Just wear it someday. For me,” she insisted, pressing the soft film into my hands. Embarrassed, I thanked her, and turned to the painting on the last stand. Only the head was finished: I saw a sad woman with a small, nervous face. Below it, the large seated body was just a few charcoal lines on the canvas: arms, a pair of crossed hands, a crude sleeveless dress—oh!—like mine.

“This is the wife of a Polish friend, an art critic. He has been so good to me in the newspapers,” she explained. “This is a gift for them.” She saw me glance from painting to dress and back again. “The woman goes back to Poland before I finish, and I think, what can I do? But then I meet you and your body is just like hers: beautiful!” The gesture she made in the air was almost obscene. “So now I can finish. Last time you sat five, ten minutes. This time you will sit thirty.”

I took the chair again and crossed my hands like the Polish wife. My eyes climbed the walls. Nude or clothed, everyone Tamara painted looked majestic. Even the mannish duchess seemed princely. The Polish wife, however, looked pinched and squalid. In the mirror behind the screen when I changed, I had seen that the straps didn’t trace my back: they sagged away from it. Whoever made this dress was impatient, I thought. She cut the straps straight across instead of angling them and testing them on the model. Perhaps Tamara would correct the straps in the painting.

As the minutes passed, I realized I no longer felt uneasy. I felt jealous. Why did I get the ugly dress, the ugly painting? And why didn’t Tamara paint my face? The painting next to the mannish

woman showed a nude—sleek, modern, Olympian—with her arm across her face. Was this Tamara’s kink? She didn’t paint faces? No, I saw plenty of faces in the room, some, to be honest, not as nice as mine. It was as if, by putting me in the ugly dress, she had made herself blind to me. *Beautiful*, she’d said. Did she really think so? I wanted to take off my dress and lie down on that velvet couch for her: I wanted her to *see* me in the grand way she saw the others.

So this was what artists did: Tamara looked up, looked down, moved her hand, looked up again. Choosing among the many slender, long-handled brushes she kept in a green glass bowl, Tamara dabbed a sheet of white wood with a dozen different shades of an earthy yellow she called ochre. When she hit on a set of shades she liked, she used a different brush for each color, holding as many as four brushes at a time in her free hand, cleaning each frequently with a wet rag. When she swirled a brush in a jar of clear liquid, I realized *térébenthine* was French for “turpentine.” As I watched her move small amounts of paint from palette to canvas, I noticed she didn’t have a single stain on her clothes: not only were her paintings precise, she worked precisely, too.

My attention began to drift. Thinking about the *donna uomo* on the wall and the naked women tangled on Tamara’s headboard, I remembered the one time my flatmate and I ever monkeyed around. It was Yann’s idea: he was Gin’s boyfriend before Daniel. One night he brought over a leather cock, and after we all got high the two of them begged me to give it a whirl. I did my best to look sultry while Gin got it up in me, but really, we both kept laughing. I mean, it was *Gin*. “You know, if you give me a bladder infection, I’ll kill you,” I told her.

“At least you don’t have to wear this thing!”

“*Parlez français!*” Yann protested.

“Inky dinky *parlez vous!*”

After Yann left the next morning, I told Gin over breakfast that the only good part had been how much more fun it was to put on a show for her boyfriend than for mine, because the thing wasn’t *his*, you know? “Of course!” She laughed. “He wasn’t attached to it!”

I snorted, spraying a mouthful of coffee on the table. “That was pretty bad,” I said.

“Wasn’t it?”

I was glad we could laugh together about it, but all the same, that night spooked me out of taking any more cocaine. I didn’t mind that we’d fooled around, but I minded how easy the high had made it. If Gin hadn’t had a sense of humor, I could have lost a friend. She broke up with Yann a couple of weeks later, after he took her to an exclusive club that turned out to be a dirt-floored shack by the Seine where half-dressed lowlifes, college students, and society slummers groped each other in the dark. “He wanted us to take turns with some dirty sailor,” she said. “Ew.”

During my fifteen-minute breaks, Tamara and I ate a little: over the course of the day we polished off a baguette and half a cobbler of creamy, acrid Maroilles. Twice she took her dog for a walk, and once she brushed a stretched canvas with a mixture of plaster and glue. “This is to give the painting a hard, clear finish,” she explained when I asked why. Time skipped and pooled while I posed. Eventually, I felt neither nervous that she might touch me nor jealous

that she hadn't. Long slow hours passed, and all she did was look, move her hand, look again. I felt like glass: looked at and looked through. My arm ached, then froze. I got so bored I itched all over. At one point I made Tamara stop a dozen times in as many minutes so I could scratch. During one break, I ate all the grapes on the table, and during another, I fell dead asleep. During the last hour, my mind slowed, emptied out. I no longer felt compromised by the money: I felt paid. By quarter of five, when she offered me a glass of wine, I just wanted to go buy my dress.

"You will come tomorrow morning?" Tamara asked, taking my two hands in hers after I had changed back into my own clothes. "Come at ten?"

"I have plans."

"No. Do not say that."

"I have a job."

"Work for me."

"This isn't really for me," I said. "You saw, I got itchy."

"I do not care."

"Well, we'll see," I said.

Her reply came, formal and dolorous: "I will wait for you at ten, whether you come or not."

I reached Belle Jardinière just before six and bought my dress. I took it home to find a note tacked to the door. Gin had penciled it on a flattened pâtisserie box:

Darling—Daniel is HERE. Already! Please be a lamb and go sleep at the Ritz or something? He's going to ASK I think and

I want everything to be perfect—I don't want him getting cold feet if you come in all of a sudden. Pretty please?

I stood quietly at the door, hating her. I picked up the bag I'd set down. And then, in case Gin had heard me at the door, I took the stairs loudly to reassure her I was really leaving. I was so angry it felt good to run, my high heels ringing in the stairwell like shots.

When she asked me to stay at the Ritz in her note, Gin wasn't proposing that I check in to a room. We had friends among the hatcheck girls, and on a couple of drunken occasions they'd rigged up a pair of cots for us in the deserted coatroom, shooing us out the next day when the lunch shift started. A girl could splash a little water on her face in the powder room, but it wasn't cozy. To hell with Gin: no one we knew at the Ritz even *started* work until ten at night, and it was only half past six. I had enough money for a coffee and a magazine: I decided to take the Métro to Montparnasse and sit at a café with both.

Was Gin's banker really about to ASK, as she put it? Nose-to-armpit with a stranger in the Métro sweatbox, I clung to the pole beside me, thinking she *had* seemed awfully eager that morning when she insisted I go interview for her job. "Daniel found a place for us," she'd said, perching at the foot of my bed in the little nightgown I'd made her. "So I gave notice!"

"You're leaving?" Gin had been making noises about helping me find another girl to share the flat for weeks, but I hadn't realized just how serious she—or her banker—was until that morning. Blinking awake, I watched Gin rub a towel over her wet cropped head. "Really?"

“Madame Florin was so disappointed. I had to buck her up *somehow*.” Although she would admit, in confidence, to being from Colma, California, Gin’s let-the-servants-do-it British coo suited her so well, I didn’t even mind the affectation. “So I said you’d go interview today.”

“Me?”

“Rafaela, please. It’s good luck. It’s how I met Daniel.”

I rolled my eyes and put on a Mayfair accent of my own. “Why, you’ve never told me how you met Don Yell.”

“Come *on*. You know Madame Florin loves you.”

I had no great desire to sell gloves to my fellow English speakers, but as I sat facing Gin’s elegant, brown-lipsticked supervisor later that morning, the challenge had piqued me as much as scared me: Could I speak French well enough to get hired?

“You’re aware of our uniform?” asked Mme. Florin.

“Yours looks different from the others,” I noted. Although most women’s clothing in Paris at that time was made-to-order *couture*, a few pieces—coats, uniforms, shirtwaists, some foundation garments—were ready-to-wear *confection*. While the youngest employees’ uniforms were clearly the latter, Mme. Florin’s dress looked like it had been made for her alone: the cotton sateen draped better on her, seemed thicker. Her skirt, fuller than the others’, worked to her advantage. Her collar, whiter, set off her olive skin. If I worked here, I thought, I’d make myself a dress like hers. *En français?* “Nicer,” I explained.

Mme. Florin acknowledged my compliment with a nod. “Some of us do wear our own. You know how much we’ll miss Veer Zhee Nee when she’s married,” she said. Was Gin really getting *married*? “But you’ll catch on quickly here, no? Just make the Americans

feel at home, *et voilà*,” she explained. (*Et voilà*: hired!) After the war, Americans had more money to throw around in department stores than locals, and Belle Jardinière welcomed them by hiring girls like Gin. (And me!) Mme. Florin was *désolée* about the hundred francs, but we both knew jobs were scarce, and for non-French, even scarcer.

Where was I going to find a hundred francs? A recently sold strand of pearls—Hervé’s last gift—had paid my rent through the end of the month, and beyond that I had a little money left over: not a hundred francs, but a few days’ grace. *A few days’ grace*? As the escalator eased me down to street level that morning, it struck me: for the wage Mme. Florin offered, I could make the dress back in a handful of days. I could even save up, go back to Chanel, order something *I* chose this time. For some people, time meant money made, not money spent. What if I could be one of them, for as little as a black dress with a white collar?

I was starting to look forward to this job, I reflected, still on the Métro. Tomorrow I’d be fitting gloves onto the slender hands of wives and daughters and mistresses as their wealthy men looked on. I’d have a shining glass case to keep clean, and soon, a perfect black dress like Mme. Florin’s. The part of me that had gotten old and sad at sixteen was girlishly happy that Gin’s supervisor trusted me to handle money and nice things, to speak English and French to the customers, to look good for the shop. I’d go home with my own money at the end of each week whether I met my own Daniel or not. Proud of myself, I tightened my grip on my Belle Jardinière bag. I could feel the ghost weight of the pearls I’d sold lift a little from my neck.



There was the small matter of what to do next; I had planned on a quiet, cheap evening at home. A bath, a *tartine*. I'd been thinking I would hang my new dress up, so the wrinkles wouldn't hold, maybe let the hips out a little. Gin, however, had spoiled all that. Climbing up from the Métro to Boulevard du Montparnasse, I figured the chance of running into someone from my Alliance Française days—someone who might lend me money for dinner—was highest at La Rotonde: while not the most stylish of the cafés at the intersection of Montparnasse and Raspail, it was the hardest to miss. Le Sélect, La Rotonde, Le Dingo, La Coupole, Café du Dôme: Paris was compact already, but we English speakers made it just two blocks long by always drinking at the same five places near the Luxembourg Gardens. So it was only half a coincidence that the American slickster who had asked if he could paint me that morning walked by, together with his bear cub of a French friend. Painter Slick spotted me at my table and grinned like a kid at the circus. Though stocky, he was not tall: I could hurt him enough to get away, if I needed to, I thought. I might not tell him my real last name, if he asked, but I could give him a crumb of eye contact for now, just enough to let him know I remembered him. And who should reappear ten minutes later, sans friend?

Even if it was all a game, I liked that he took the table next to mine rather than ask if he could sit with me, that he met my eyes with a smile and settled in with his newspaper instead of chatting me up, that when he shook out a cigarette for himself, he offered me one, then returned to his paper. I smoked it and read my magazine,

marking the French I didn't know with my lip pencil: why didn't I have a stainless-steel pencil like Tamara's? The man was older than I but not yet thirty, and more down-at-the-heels than he first appeared. His clothes, though clean and sharp, were old; his army-style haircut, though fresh, looked cheap. Sideburns would have given his boyish potato face some cheekbones, but he seemed like—I let his flat midwestern accent color my judgment here—the kind of American who'd beat up any barber who tried to make him look fussy. More's the pity. But what he lacked in looks he made up for in quiet charm: when the point broke off my lip pencil, he handed me his penknife to sharpen it. "Another cigarette?" he asked later.

"Thanks," I said. "Sometimes you need it."

"You need it?"

"My flatmate locked me out, and I have no money until my new job starts tomorrow. I'm killing time until I can stay overnight at a friend's."

"That's a bum deal," he said. "How about a movie? There's a German theater playing *Metropolis*."

I didn't mean to sigh, but my sigh came out the way my coughs and sneezes did, like a much older woman's, like my mother's. "Can I borrow some money?" I said.

"My treat."

I was ready to bolt, but the American didn't try anything funny at his boring movie, nor at the quick bistro dinner that followed, nor in the taxi we took to the Ritz. His name was Anson Hall, Anson

for a Union army grandfather, recently deceased. He was, in fact, from Chicago: he freelanced for the *Tribune* as a sportswriter.

“You can live on that?” I asked.

“My old man helps me out sometimes,” he said, shrugging.

“Lucky you.”

Anson looked uncomfortable, and when an older couple he knew walked into the Ritz just then, he smiled extra-wide and trotted over to greet them. Either he was richer than he let on, or poorer. Or just ashamed of asking his parents for money. What did *he* know about shame? But even so, something about his discomfort—and about the way he tried to curry favor with the husband and wife who’d walked into the Ritz—made me want to protect him.

The woman glanced at me. “Where’s Mrs. Hall?” she asked.

“Honey,” said the man.

The woman looked at him, confused.

“Mrs. Hall and I have separated,” Anson said stiffly.

The woman’s hand rose to her mouth as Anson turned to order us a round of *marcs*. “He’s the one you told me about,” the woman half-whispered to her husband. “With that Piggott girl.”

Anson had heard her. His smile, already strained, popped a stitch.

“Honey,” said the man again.

“Pardon me,” said the woman to Anson, giving me another look.

I had troubles of my own, so I went looking for my friends. I found Laure, a thickset girl who lived with her family in the squalid Nineteenth. “*Pas de problème*,” she assured me. “We just have to

wait until all these people clear out.” That wouldn’t be until three or four in the morning, but I knew better than to complain: she *was* doing me a favor.

As I walked back to Anson’s end of the room, the bartender—a chilly young man who affected a monocle—intercepted me. “That gentleman asked me to bring you this.” He pointed to a frail, gray-ing, but very well-dressed specimen alone at a table, and handed me a tightly folded sheet of Ritz hotel stationery.

I did not meet the old man’s eye until after I looked inside—I found a key stamped with a room number, and a note: *50F?*—and that was to give him a look of disgust. Fifty francs wouldn’t even get me a subscription to the magazine I was reading. Before Anson could come back, I took out my lip pencil, added a zero to the old man’s figure, and folded the key back into the note for the bartender. In the bar mirror I saw the old man’s eyes widen when he opened the note. I turned to give him a superior look, and he met my eyes. And nodded.

Just at that moment, Anson reappeared, minus Honey and her husband, much drunker than I’d last seen him. “Wanna dance?” he asked.

Now I see that I didn’t need the old man’s five hundred francs. I had a place to sleep. I’d just been hired at Belle Jardinière. But I wasn’t in the habit of making money at a job in those days, and it was so *much* money, it made me laugh out loud. “Wait, Anson, one more sip,” I insisted, pouring some of my drink down the front of my dress. “Oh, heavens, no, darling, I have *got* to go to the powder room right now.” And I did go to the powder room first, but not without a numbing glug of *marc*. I took my Belle Jardinière bag with me.

I arrived at the old man's floor to find a boy from room service standing at his door with a bottle of champagne, so I could see before I walked in that there wasn't a gang of thugs waiting to rape and murder me. The awkward way the man tipped the boy made me conclude, in fact, that the thing I had to fear most was my own pity. The old man came from Seville, he told me in labored French. I looked like a girl he'd once known. I looked like his granddaughter, too, he said. I'd really rather not have known that. His odor was a smothering blend of cologne, cognac, and brilliantine, with fainter notes of urine, bleach, and loneliness. When he told me what he wanted, I made him pay me and braced myself against one of the bedsteads. At least I didn't have to look at him. I was glad it didn't hurt. I looked around the hotel room I couldn't afford, and tried to think about nothing, but instead found myself imagining the old man imagining me as his granddaughter. She had the face of the one Spanish girl at my school, sweet Beronica from Balenthia. *Stop thinking*, I thought. I wished I'd drunk more. To distract myself, I worried about the chilly bartender. Would he try to get me thrown out of the Ritz? A girl like me didn't raise the tone of a place. I worried more that he'd want me to buy his silence. Would he want money, or something else? And how hard would he try to get it? At the end of each of the old man's labored breaths came a faint whining sound, like the whistle of a radiator. What did they need me for, really? Why not just use some Vaseline? You won't be any less lonely when this is over, *Señor*, I thought, and then his grip tightened on my waist, and he released a steeper whine. When he finished, I tucked away the money and locked myself in the bathroom, availing myself of a long and thorough scrub.

The worst of my period had ended a couple of days before.

Soaking in the bath, I cupped a handful of water containing a last lazy drop of blood and tipped it onto the floor. *Thank God I can't get pregnant this week*, I thought. Guillaume had taught me to pay strict attention to my period and mid-month cramps, and how to look after him when there was a chance I could get pregnant: if I never take it up the ass again, it'll be too soon. I had learned, under his tutelage, how to laugh at jokes I didn't understand. I had learned to drink. I had learned how to move backward on a dance floor without incident: himself a workmanlike dancer, Guillaume enjoyed showing me off at the glittering nightclubs where his coworkers gathered. I had learned that if I acted like I was having fun, he had fun, and sometimes I even did, too. It might be tedious, until the fun caught up, but it wasn't difficult. Though I felt little for him but revulsion, compared with raising four little brothers, he was a vacation. And yet, though I learned how to make him want me like clockwork, I never stopped wondering why he wanted me in the first place. What did he see when he saw me? It was as if my body were a sign pinned to my own back, a sign I myself couldn't read.

I pictured the cot that awaited me in the coatroom once the dancing couples claimed their hats and stumbled home. It would be stifflingly hot in that windowless closet. Laure wouldn't even be able to get me in there for another few hours, and that was assuming the chilly bartender didn't rat me out. There was no way I was wasting good money on a hotel, so if I had to sit up at an all-night café somewhere, I would. *I wouldn't mind a nap first*. The Spanish grandfather had two beds, a window, moving air. *If he's still asleep when I come out, I'm just going to lie down on that other bed for an hour*, I decided as I dressed. *He'll never know*.

When I opened the door, I found him in bed with my new

uniform draped across his furred legs. Thick yellow toenails beclawed his veiny feet. Sheets of dead skin seemed to have formed on his real skin, beneath which varicose jellyfish floated, bluish. He was wheezing again. Though his fist worked the wattled misery in his lap, only his face was taut, a mask: when he met my eyes, a smile dribbled out to greet me. “Excuse me? That’s *my* dress,” I said, but it was suddenly too late. The resources available to me in the Ritz powder room wouldn’t make any difference, no matter how hard I worked the polished cotton. I didn’t want to touch it, anyway. I’d just have to buy another one. Angry, I picked up one of his wingtips—I’ve always been a good shot—and thought better of it. I didn’t want to make trouble for myself, or for Laure. “Aw, for crap’s sake,” I said. I said some other things, too, and then I stepped into my shoes and left.

In the lift down to the coatroom, I crossed my arms over my handbag, upset. What kind of a person would *do* that? Behind the silent lift-boy’s back, I exchanged a hollow look with myself in the mirror. I was glad for the money, and making so much at one go took the edge off. Hell, it even gave me a kick. I could go back up there and break the guy’s nose, if I wanted to. Rip out what was left of his hair. But really—I gave in, suddenly, to a silent, weepy gust of envy—I just wanted what Anson Hall had: rich parents to send me a little something every month. I could eat in. I could mend my own stockings. Even more than a dress from Chanel, I just wanted enough money to be left alone, to sit and think and study French and watch people and make things. I blotted my eyes as the lift-boy slid open the doors.

The chilly bartender’s back was turned. Good. But there, positioned at the bar where he could watch the lift, sat Anson,

drinking alone. I felt him watching me emerge an hour after I'd disappeared—with no makeup and wrinkles in my lucky dress—and I smiled weakly. I walked past the bar without going in, and he followed me.

“Come back and let me get you one more drink, to say good night?” he asked.

I turned. Fine, let the bartender think he'd have to fight this guy if he wanted any of my money, I decided. I steered Anson toward the farthest, darkest booth, and then we looked each other full in the face. I wanted to hurt him for what he knew. I wanted to make him go away. I wanted him to like me anyway. “I'm buying,” I said, putting five hundred francs on the table before Anson could take out his wallet. “Two *marcs*,” I said to the waiter, and then counted out the money from the change. “The movie. Dinner. Taxi. Drinks,” I said nastily, daring Anson to take it, daring him not to.

Anson slowly looked up from the money. I don't know what the look on my face was, but when he saw it, his own expression melted from affront to apology. “Even Steven, huh?” he said. “Wait.” He passed me back a few francs.

“What?”

“You got the last round, but I'm getting this one.”

I smiled back at him, my eyes suddenly wet again. “Thanks.”

I could tell Anson wanted to ask how I'd spent the evening—and the afternoon, for that matter—and I had some questions for him, too, but we kept our mouths shut, as if to see who would crack first. The next drink made me feel sick and sad, though, and when I

started crying in earnest, it was about Gin. “I don’t think that guy’s going to marry her, really. Do you?”

“Unlikely.”

“I wish I could prove it to *her*, though. I wish I could just show her the rest of his life and say, See, you think you have all of Daniel, but you only have half. A third. Ten percent!”

“Well, some people need to get hurt to be happy,” he said.

“I don’t know if she’s one of those,” I said. “I’ve never seen her lose her head like this before.”

“But if you really think she’d drop him if she knew the whole story—”

“Yes?” I prompted.

“Well, I might know somebody who could find out.”

“You do?”

He was drunk, too. As he leaned in to tell me, his eyes were glossy with excitement. “It’s complicated. And it’s kind of a secret.”

“*Who?*” I insisted, grinning back at him.

Anson took out a long narrow notepad from his jacket pocket.

“You really are a journalist.”

“Tell me the man’s name and the bank where he works, and I’ll talk to my friend.”

“Well, his name is Daniel Gordin,” I said. “Um.”

“Your roommate never told you where he works? Or”—at this, his voice colored with more judgment than it had when I’d walked out of the lift—“did you never pay attention?”

“Maybe a little of both?”

“C’mon, at least out of self-interest. He might have a coworker, somebody who could set you up sweet. It’s dangerous, running around hotels,” he said.

“Thanks, Mother.”

“I guess I deserved that. How did she meet this banker, anyway?”

“At her job,” I said, and told him their story.

“Belle Jardinière?” he said. “Jeez, that place is notorious.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I used to work in a newspaper office, and let’s just say everybody knew when there was a new girl working there, especially a pretty one. The boys liked to send over this kid named André. He’d snoop around and come back with a full report.”

“Who was André?”

“Just a clerk. But he was good-looking, and he had a special talent for sniffing out the girls who would from the girls who wouldn’t.”

We both looked away, embarrassed. I could see it all over again, my ruined black dress. It occurred to me that Daniel was not at that moment proposing to Gin. Showcased behind her glove counter, Gin may have believed she was getting her pick, but perhaps, forewarned by his own office’s version of André, Daniel thought he was getting his turn.

“Well,” Anson said, breaking the unhappy silence. “All the more reason to do some research. Maybe this Daniel’s a good guy.”

“Maybe he is,” I said. I looked down. Anson’s trousers were an inch or so too short, I noted. He had a foot propped on a neighboring chair, revealing a quarter-moon of badly scarred ankle above his sock. “What happened to you?”

“I got shelled on the Italian front.”

“That sounds awful.”

"I'm luckier than most," he said mildly. "Listen." He passed me a business card. "This is an office where I pick up messages most mornings. If you're serious about this—if you really want me to talk to my friend—call between ten and noon sometime this week, and ask to speak to me. Don't talk to anyone else."

"Yves Boulind et Compagnie," I read.

"*Oui*. He's a friend of the family. I call him Monsieur Bland," he said, barely altering the French name while giving me a look so blank, I laughed.

"You would really do this for me?"

"I don't know if my friend can help, but I can ask."

"Thank you," I said. We were the last two people in the bar, and the restaurant had cleared out as well. "Well, I'll go find my *copine*," I said.

"You don't want to come over for a nightcap?"

"And then where would I go?"

He smiled.

"Aren't you cute. *Where's Mrs. Hall? Where's the Piggott girl?*" I said, mocking Honey's accent.

"The old man had a ring on."

"The old man had five hundred francs."

"Sure, but I'm better looking."

"Don't push your luck."

He gave a good-natured shrug. "Well, I tried."

What little I knew of Anson's cluttered love life put me off, and his looks, whatever he thought of them, did little for me. However, the grace with which he gave in made me like him. "You're all right, Anson," I said.



The money was still in my bandeau the next morning when I woke up on the coatroom cot. I could buy another uniform, if I wanted it, but my vision of a clean shining glove counter was bleared over with milky spume, with old men and Andrés and *girls who would*. I opened the door a crack for some light to dress by and saw the clock in the lobby: nine-thirty. Late to work, on top of everything else.

I could go to Belle Jardinière, late, and beg Mme. Florin to let me spend another hundred francs, and then I could spend eight hours on my feet, fending off the Andrés of this world. Or I could go home. Five hundred francs was two months' rent: I could stay home for weeks before I had to look for anyone else. Sixty days to myself. Sixty days of not making nice, not to anybody. Of course, first I'd have to apologize to Gin for not taking her job. If she let me in at all. If she wasn't too busy with Daniel. Five hundred francs was only one month's rent if Gin was really leaving. And besides, in the quiet weeks ahead, did I really want that wheezy grandfather to be the last person I'd gone to bed with?

I shook Tamara's tightly wadded scarf out of my handbag: in the morning light, it was the color of apricots, light as breath. I held it to my face and inhaled tuberose, turpentine, sweat. I remembered that gloved finger under my chin, that velvet couch in the sun.

"I knew you would come back," she said when I knocked.