

Next

by Guillaume MUSSO

Novel

**Partial translation (chapters 1 to 6) by Heather allen for
submission purposes only**

...for you know that love
Will creep in service where it cannot go.
William SHAKESPEARE

Part I

A Chance Encounter

Day One

Among the Ghosts

You are not the one you see in the mirror. You are the one who is shining in the eyes of others.

Tarun J. TEJPAL

**Harvard University
Cambridge, MA
December 19, 2011**

The crowded lecture hall was surprisingly silent.

The hands on the antique wall clock's bronze dial indicated 2:55 P.M. The philosophy teacher's lecture was drawing to a close.

Twenty-two-year-old Erika Stewart sat in the front row staring intently at Matthew Shapiro. For the past hour the young woman had been trying, with little success, to attract her professor's attention, drinking in his words, nodding from time to time in agreement. Her efforts so far had gone unrewarded, but the teacher's hold on her continued to grow with each passing day.

His charm was undeniable—boyish features, cropped hair and a three-day beard. It had caused quite a stir among his female students! With his faded jeans, beat-up leather boots and turtleneck sweater, he could almost pass for a post-graduate student himself, a far cry from the stern and ascetic-looking faculty members so often encountered on campus. But Matthew was more than just another pretty face: his magnetism lay in his powerful eloquence.

Matthew Shapiro was one of the most popular teachers on campus. Every one of the five years he had taught at Harvard had earned him a larger following of impassioned students. This semester alone, his courses had an enrollment of over eight hundred. His class was now meeting in Sever Hall's largest auditorium.

PHILOSOPHY IS USELESS IF IT DOES NOT REMOVE
SUFFERING FROM THE SOUL

The words of Epicurus, written on the blackboard, were central to Matthew's view of teaching.

Aimed at a wide audience, his courses weren't encumbered by abstruse concepts. All of his arguments were anchored in reality. In each of his classes, he attempted to forge a link between philosophical concepts and everyday life, examining real-world problems familiar to his students: broken romances, the pressure of doing well in school, the demands of fitting in or the relevance of a college education... After raising a certain number of fundamental questions, Matthew would then introduce the great thinkers of history—Plato, Seneca, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and so on. Through his vivid presentation, they would momentarily seem to jump out of the textbook into real life to provide Matthew's students with counsel and comfort.

With intelligence and humor, Matthew also incorporated a sizable chunk of popular culture into his course work. Movies, songs and comics—anything was a pretext for philosophizing. There was even room for TV shows: Doctor House helped to illustrate experimental reasoning, the castaways of *Lost* offered a description of the social contract, and the macho ads of *Mad Men* provided a gateway for examining the evolution of gender roles.

Yet this pragmatic approach to philosophy, which had made him a star on campus, had also generated a good amount of jealousy and anger among colleagues who judged his methods superficial. Luckily, both the achievement data and exam results of Matthew's students were on his side.

A group of students had even filmed his lectures and posted them on YouTube. The lectures had attracted the attention of a *Boston Globe* reporter, who wrote an article that was picked up by the *New York Times* and eventually led a publisher to commission a book. The resulting “*modern skeptic's guide to philosophy*” had sold well but Matthew's growing reputation hadn't given him a swollen head. His commitment to both teaching and students remained unchanged.

Then, without warning, his world came crashing down. The previous winter, Matthew's wife died in a car accident, a sudden and brutal loss that left him utterly distraught. He had continued to teach—or to go through the motions of teaching anyhow—but he was no longer the uniquely inspired and inspirational professor he had been.

Erika squinted, her eyes riveted on Matthew.

Something inside of him had broken since the tragedy. His features seemed to have hardened, his eyes had lost their spark; yet mourning and grief had given him a new air of melancholy and mystery, which only added to his irresistible

charm.

Lowering her eyes, Erika listened to the hypnotic sounds of the deep measured voice resonating through the lecture hall. A voice that had perhaps lost some of its charisma but none of its power to soothe. Sunlight poured through the windows, dancing across the hall's central crossbeam and warming the enormous room. The reassuring tones of the voice filled Erika with a sense of peace and well-being.

But her blissful state shortly came to an end. Erika jumped at the clamor of the bell. She carefully gathered up her belongings and waited for the hall to empty before nervously approaching her teacher.

"Erika, what are you doing here?" Matthew asked, surprised. "You took my course last year. You don't have to attend this lecture anymore."

"I'm here because of what Helen Rowland said. You know, the quote you often referred to..."

Matthew raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"The follies which a man regrets most in his life, are those which he didn't commit when he had the opportunity."

Then, gathering up her courage, she explained.

"I don't want to have to have any regrets one day, so I am about to commit a folly. Next Saturday is my birthday, and I wanted to... to ask you out for dinner."

With a look of wide-eyed disbelief, Matthew immediately attempted to dissuade her:

"You're an intelligent young woman, Erika. So I'm sure you know there are dozens of reasons why I'm not going to accept your offer."

"But you do want to say yes, don't you?"

"Please, that's enough," Matthew cut in brusquely.

Erika felt the blood rush to her face. She attempted a few words of apology then exited the lecture hall.

Putting on his coat with a sigh, Matthew looped his scarf around his neck then walked out to the campus in turn.

*

With its extensive lawns, stately muted brick buildings and Latin-inscribed pediments, Harvard had all of the elegance and timelessness of its more ancient counterparts in Britain.

Once outside, Matthew rolled a cigarette, lit up and strode quickly away from Sever Hall. Slung his messenger bag over his shoulder, he cut across the Harvard Yard, the campus's large grassy quad crisscrossed by yards of paths serving classrooms, libraries, museums and dorms. The Yard was drenched in gorgeous autumn light, the abundant sunshine and unseasonably warm temperatures of the past ten days having brought to New England an exceptionally late and

pleasant Indian summer.

“Hey, Mr. Shapiro! Heads up!”

Turning at the sound of the voice, Matthew caught the oncoming football just in time, then passed it back to the quarterback without breaking stride.

Students with open laptops had taken up every available bench in the Yard. Sounds of laughter and lively conversation drifted across the lawn. Differences of origin and nationality were not an issue at Harvard. On the contrary, the cultural mix was seen as an asset. Crimson, the renowned university's official school color, was everywhere, proudly sported on jacket, sweatshirt and tote alike, the sense of belonging to the Harvard community transcending all differences.

Matthew took a drag on his cigarette as he walked by Massachusetts Hall. The imposing Georgian-style building housed the offices of the university's president as well as the freshman dorms. Standing on the steps Ms. Moore, from school administration, gave him a furious look followed by a reminder of school policy (“Mr. Shapiro, how many times do I have to tell you, smoking is prohibited on campus...”) and a spiel on the hazards of smoking.

Completely unfazed, Matthew walked past her without so much as a look. For a moment, he was tempted to tell her that dying was the least of his worries, but then he thought better of it. Leaving the university grounds through one of the campus' majestic gates, he entered Harvard Square.

*

The square was beehive of perpetual activity, the historic center of Cambridge packed with shops, libraries, small restaurants and cafes—from whose terraces students and professors were putting the world to rights, or simply pursuing their studies. Matthew dug around in his pocket and pulled out a subway pass. He had just stepped onto the crosswalk on his way to the T stop—and the red line which served the center of Boston in less than fifteen minutes—when a backfiring Chevy Camaro came around the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Peabody Street. Matthew gave a startled jump back onto the sidewalk just in time as the hot red coupe came screeching to a stop right in front of him.

The front window rolled down revealing red locks belonging to April Ferguson, who had been Matthew's housemate since his wife's death.

“Hey, handsome! Wanna ride?”

The roaring V8 engine struck a jarring note in the eco-friendly enclave of bicycles and hybrid vehicles.

“No thanks. I'd rather take the T,” Matthew declined. “This isn't a video game, you know!”

“Come on, don't be a wuss. I'm a good driver and you know it!”

“No more please. My daughter's already lost a mother. I don't want her to end up an orphan at four and a half.”

“I get the picture, OK. No need to exaggerate... Well? Hurry up, scaredy-pants! I'm blocking traffic here.”

Urged on by the honking, Matthew sighed and reluctantly climbed into the Chevrolet.

No sooner had he buckled up than the Camaro made a dicey U-turn—breaking every rule in the book—and began heading north at full throttle.

“Hey, Boston's the other direction!” Matthew objected loudly, holding on to the car door for dear life.

“I'm making a slight detour through Belmont. It's only ten minutes away. And don't worry about Emily. I asked the babysitter to stay on an extra hour.”

“Without even running it by me? I'm warning you, April, if...”

But Matthew's protests were cut off mid-sentence as the young woman expeditiously shifted gears and stepped on the accelerator. Once the car was at cruising speed, she glanced over at Matthew and handed him a portfolio:

“Turns out I might have a client for the Utamaro print.”

April ran a gallery in the South End, an exhibition space specializing in erotic art. She was exceptionally good at digging up undervalued works, and reselling them for a tidy profit.

Matthew slid the elastics over the portfolio's corners then opened the rag paper folder protecting the Japanese print: a *shunga** from the late 18th century representing a courtesan and a client performing a sexual act that was as sensual as it was acrobatic. The crudity of the scene was softened by the print's graceful lines and lush textile motifs. The geisha's face was extraordinarily delicate and refined. It wasn't surprising that similar prints had influenced the likes of Klimt and Picasso.

“Are you sure you want to sell it?”

“I was made an offer you can't refuse,” she answered, doing an imitation of Marlon Brando in the *Godfather*.

“By whom?”

“An influential Chinese art collector, in Boston visiting his daughter. Apparently he is ready to do business, but he's only in town for a day. An opportunity like this doesn't come along that often...”

The university neighborhood behind them now, the Chevrolet was cruising down the parkway along Fresh Pond, the largest lake in Cambridge. A few miles further on the vehicle arrived in Belmont, a small residential town west of Boston. April entered an address into her GPS and was duly guided through the upscale residential neighborhood. The car

* erotic Japanese print

went past a school with lovely grounds, a playground, park and playing field, and even an ice cream truck straight out of the fifties! Totally disregarding yet another traffic regulation, April passed a school bus and turned onto a quiet residential street before coming to a stop.

“Do you want to come in with me?” she asked, picking up the portfolio.

Matthew shook his head.

“No thanks. I'll wait for you in the car.”

“I'll be as quick as I can,” she promised, as she arranged her hair in the rear-view mirror, a stray lock of wavy hair covering her right eye Veronica Lake fashion. Then she applied a fresh coat of lipstick and, with a final tug of her skintight red leather jacket sported over a low cut tee, her *femme fatale* look was complete.

“You don't think you're overdoing it a bit, do you?” Matthew asked dryly.

“I'm not bad, I'm just drawn that way,” the gallery owner simpered with her best Jessica Rabbit pout.

Unfolding a pair of lanky legs encased in skinny jeans, she got out of the car.

Matthew watched as she walked away and rang the doorbell of the largest house on the street. On the scale of sex appeal, April was off the charts: a perfect hourglass figure, a slender waist and breasts to die for. But this living embodiment of every male fantasy was a woman's woman only, and she displayed her sexual preference loud and clear.

It was actually one of the reasons Matthew had agreed to share his house with her in the first place. He knew there wouldn't be the slightest ambiguity. April was also funny, smart and full of beans. She was of course a real hothead, an incorrigible guttermouth and prone to tantrums. But she could make his daughter smile like no one else, and that to Matthew made it all worth it.

With April no longer in sight, he turned his attention to the opposite side of the street. A mother and two young children were putting up Christmas decorations in the yard. All of a sudden, it dawned on Matthew that Christmas was less than a week away. The observation hit him like a tidal wave of grief and panic. The dreaded first anniversary of Kate's death loomed before him: December 24, 2010, the fateful day that had toppled his existence into suffering and depression.

The pain of the first three months had been unrelenting. Every second of the day was devoured by devastating grief: an open wound, a vampire bite that had sucked the will to live from him. More than once, he had been tempted to take the final radical step—throw himself out the window, put a noose around his head, gulp down a handful of lethal pills or put a bullet in his head—to bring it all to an end, that is. But the thought of hurting Emily had stopped him every time. He

simply wasn't allowed to leave his little girl without a father – to ruin her life – and that was that.

The anger and the pain of the first few weeks gradually mellowed into an endless tunnel of grief. Life seemed to have come to a stop, numbed by listlessness and sorrow. Matthew wasn't at war, he was merely despondent, crushed by bereavement and shut off from life. His loss was unacceptable. His future had been wiped out.

He had taken April's advice and gone to a help group—once. He attended a meeting, tried to “share” and put his suffering into words. But he shunned all forms of false compassion, ready-made formulas and life lessons and had ended up isolating himself, drifting aimlessly through a ghostlike existence for months on end, utterly devastated.

For the past few weeks the pain had been gradually letting up, however. He couldn't quite say he had “come alive” again—waking up was still incredibly hard—but at least at Harvard anyhow he was able to pretend, giving lectures and attending orientation meetings, with less enthusiasm but on a more stable footing.

Not that he was trying to rebuild his life; rather he was gradually coming to terms with it, thanks namely to some of the ideas he taught in his classes. Part Stoic fatalism, part Buddhist impermanence, he now saw life for what it really was: a highly precarious and unstable phenomenon, a constantly changing process. Nothing was permanent, least of all happiness. Fragile in nature, it could be smashed in an instant; fleeting, it could never be claimed as an acquired right.

But he was beginning all the same to enjoy the little things of life again: a walk with Emily on a sunny day, a game of football with a group of students or one of April's well-told jokes—reassuring signs that had prompted him to try to contain his suffering, to try and build a dam to keep his sorrow in check.

But this state of remission was precarious. The pain was still there, lurking in the shadows, ready to catch him unawares. And it could strike without warning, conjuring up cruel memories at the drop of a hat: a woman in the street wearing Kate's perfume or raincoat; a song on the radio reminiscent of brighter days; a photo stuck in the pages of a book...

The last few days had been particularly difficult, perhaps heralding a relapse. The decorations and excitement of the holiday season, the approaching anniversary of her death... Everything reminded him of his wife.

He had woken with a start every single night this week, heart pounding, soaked in sweat and haunted by the same memory: the nightmarish scenario of the last seconds of Kate's life. Matthew was on the scene when she had been transported to the hospital. Her colleagues—Kate was a doctor—had been unable to revive her. He had looked on helplessly as death

abruptly deprived him of the woman he loved. They had only been granted four years of perfect happiness. Four years of true togetherness, just enough time to lay down the foundations of a relationship that was destined to be cut short. You only got a chance like that once in life, he was sure. And the thought of it was too much for him to bear.

Matthew's eyes filled with tears as he fidgeted with the band still on his ring finger. He had broken into a sweat and his heart was pounding. He lowered the window of the Camaro and reached for an anti-depressant in his pocket. Placing the tablet under his tongue, the medication slowly dissolved, chemically alleviating his symptoms of anxiety in a few minutes time. He closed his eyes, rubbed his lids and breathed in deeply. To calm himself completely, he needed to smoke. He got out of the car, locked the door and took a few steps. Lighting a cigarette, he inhaled deeply.

The sharp sting of nicotine coated his throat. His heart rate returned to normal. He felt better already. He closed his eyes, his face tilted upward into the wind, and relished the cigarette. It was a warm day. Sunlight was filtering down through branches overhead. The air was so fresh it seemed almost unreal. He stood still for a moment or two before opening his eyes. A small crowd had gathered in front of a house at the end of the street. Curious, he walked toward the typical New England dwelling: an enormous clapboard house with a gable roof, dormer windows and decorative wood trim. They were having a rummage sale. One of the region's typical "yard sales," since the average American moves more than fifteen times over the course of their life.

Matthew joined the other bargain-hunters milling about the expanse of lawn. The seller was about his own age, a frowning man with a receding hairline carefully avoiding eye-contact from behind a pair of wire-rimmed glasses. Dressed in black from head to toe, he had the rigid austerity of an early Puritan. A cream colored Shar-Pei gnawing a rubber bone was standing next to him.

As school was just getting out and the weather was mild, there were a lot of people out looking for bargains. The tables were covered with a hodgepodge of items: wooden oars, golf bag, baseball bat and glove. An old Gibson guitar and, leaning against the fence, a BMX bike, the Christmas must-have of the early 1980s. A little farther away, a pair of roller skates and a skateboard...

Matthew ferreted among the stands for a while, uncovering a host of toys reminding him of his childhood: wooden yo-yos and a Frisbee; Hungry Hippos, Mastermind and a Rubik's Cube; a giant teddy bear, an E.T doll and Star Wars action figures... The prices were low; obviously the owner wanted to quickly move as many things as possible.

Matthew was about to leave the yard when he spotted a

laptop: a 15-inch MacBook Pro. Not the newest version but the previous model or the one before. Matthew picked up the computer and examined it carefully from every angle. The aluminum shell was personalized with a vinyl sticker on the back of the screen, depicting a Tim Burton-like character: a sexy stylized Eve that seemed to be holding the famous manufacturer's Apple logo. In the lower corner of the illustration the name "Emma L" could be seen, a signature suggesting either the name of the artist or the former laptop owner.

Why not? he thought, glancing at the price. His old Powerbook had finally given out on him last summer. He had a PC at home but needed a new laptop, an expense he had been putting off for the past three months.

The asking price was \$400, a pretty reasonable price he thought. And the timing was perfect: He wasn't exactly rolling in money these days. He made a decent salary at Harvard, but after Kate had died he had wanted to keep their house on Beacon Hill at all costs, even though it was beyond his means. He had decided to take a housemate. But even with the rent money from April, the loan repayments swallowed three-fourths of his income, leaving little room for extras. He had even been forced to sell his collector motorcycle, a 1957 Triumph that had been his pride and joy.

He approached the man in charge of the sale, indicating the Mac with a nod.

"The laptop works, right?"

"No it's a decorative item. Of course it works, otherwise I wouldn't be asking that much for it! It belonged to my sister, but I formatted the hard drive and reinstalled the operating system myself. It's like new."

"Fine. I'll take it," Matthew decided, after a moment's hesitation.

He dug around in his wallet but only had \$310 on him. Embarrassed, he tried to bring the price down but the seller wouldn't budge. Annoyed, Matthew shrugged and was about to walk away when the cheerful voice of April piped in behind him:

"Let me get that for you!" she said, signaling the lawn sale man to stay put.

"No way, April. It's absolutely out of the question!"

"To celebrate my selling the print!"

"Did you get what you were asking for it?"

"Yes, but it wasn't easy, believe me. The guy thought the price also entitled him to testing one of the positions of the Kama Sutra!"

"'All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone.'"

"Woody Allen?"

"No, Blaise Pascal."

The guy from the yard sale handed him the computer packed in its original box. Matthew thanked him with a nod while April paid. Then they hurried back to the car.

Matthew insisted on driving. While stuck in traffic on his way back to Boston, Matthew little suspected that the purchase he had just made was about to change his life forever.

Miss Lovenstein

*Dogs never bite me.
Just humans.*
Marilyn MONROE

The Emperor
Rockefeller Center, New York
6:45 P.M.

On the top floor of Rockefeller Center, the Emperor bar and restaurant looked out over the entire city, offering spectacular panoramic views of Manhattan. Its interior was a skillful blend of traditional and contemporary design. The original woodwork, Art Deco tables and leather club chairs had been carefully preserved during renovation, giving the establishment the cozy feel of a London gentlemen's club. They were offset by more contemporary items like the translucent frosted-glass bar which ran the entire length of the room.

The slender and graceful silhouette of Emma Lovenstein moved gracefully from table to table, pouring wine, suggesting vintages and expertly explaining the origin and background of each. The young sommelier's enthusiasm was contagious. The graceful movements of her hands, the precision of her gestures, her open smile: everything about her reflected her passion and her desire to share it with others.

A perfectly choreographed ballet of waiters brought out the second-to-last dish.

“A *tartine* of Parmesan crusted *pied de cochon*” Emma announced, to a chorus of approving murmurs.

She served each dinner guest a glass of red wine, carefully hiding the label, then spent a few minutes answering questions and dropping hints.

“It's a Morgon, Côte du Puy,” she revealed at last. “A

musky yet racy Beaujolais vintage with pungent red fruit aromas and a lingering finish. The perfect sparring partner for the tough guy character of the pig's feet.”

She had come up with the idea of a weekly pairing menu which, through word of mouth, was becoming more and more popular. The concept was simple: Emma offered a selection of four wines accompanied by four dishes created by the restaurant's world-renowned chef, Jonathan Lempereur. Each pairing menu had a specific theme, grape or wine-growing region, the perfect pretext for an entertaining introduction to oenology.

Emma went behind the counter and motioned to the waiters to serve the last dish while she glanced discreetly at her cell phone. The message notification light was flashing.

I'm in New York this week. Dinner tonight?
I miss you.
François

The SMS hit her full on.
“Emma?”

The sound of her assistant's voice jolted her back into the present. She pulled herself together and addressed her dinner guests:

“To conclude tonight's wine pairing menu, pineapple with magnolia petals and toasted marshmallow ice cream.”

She opened two new bottles of wine and served her captivated audience. After another round of guessing games, they were told:

“A *moscato* d'Asti, a white Italian grape from the Piedmont region. A slightly sweet, sparkling wine with delicate floral notes whose fine bubbles and rose petal aromas are the ideal accompaniment to tonight's refreshing dessert.”

The evening came to an end with a final round of questions. Some of the inquiries were about Emma's career. The young sommelier was happy to answer, and let absolutely no sign of her inner turmoil show.

Emma was from a poor family in West Virginia. The summer she was fourteen, her father, a truck driver, had taken her family on a trip to California's wine country. The journey had delighted the young girl, sparking an interest and a passion in wine that had morphed into a natural calling.

After high school, she enrolled in a culinary institute in Charleston that had provided her with a solid background in oenology. Upon graduation, she left the small town behind her—no regrets!—and headed to New York. She first waited tables at a casual eatery before becoming head waiter at a fashionable restaurant in the West Village, where she'd worked up to sixteen hours a day as waitress, bartender and wine steward.

Then one day, a client unlike any other entered the establishment. She immediately recognized the face of her idol, Jonathan Lempereur. The critics called him “the Mozart of fine cuisine.” He was the chef of Manhattan's renowned *Imperator*, considered by some the “best table in the world.” The *Imperator* was indeed the high altar of dining, welcoming thousands of patrons every year from around the world. It could take over a year just to get a reservation. Lempereur and his wife were having lunch together that day, incognito. At the time, he owned restaurants all over the world and was incredibly young to be at the helm of such a huge empire.

Emma had gathered up her courage and dared to introduce herself to her “idol.” He had listened to her story with interest and, before he knew it, lunch with his wife had turned into a job interview with Emma. Success hadn't gone to Lempereur's head. He was demanding, but modest, and always on the look-out for new talent. When it came time to pay his bill, he handed Emma his card:

“You start tomorrow,” he said.

The very next day, she had signed a contract as *Imperator's* assistant head sommelier. For three years, she and Jonathan had made a formidable duo. Lempereur was tremendously creative and food and wine pairing played an important role in his cuisine. Emma had hooked the job of her dreams. But a year ago, after separating from his wife, Jonathan had handed in his apron and the restaurant had changed hands. Even though Jonathan Lempereur was no longer in the kitchen, the chef's spirit permeated the premises. And his signature dishes were still on the menu.

“Thank you for coming. I hope you enjoyed your evening,” Emma said, wrapping up the event.

She said goodbye to the customers, rapidly debriefed her assistant before gathering up her things to go home.

*

Emma took the elevator was at the foot of Rockefeller Center in seconds. It had been dark for a while and was so cold out she could see her breath. The icy wind sweeping the plaza hadn't discouraged numerous onlookers from pressing up against the barrier to get a picture of the huge Christmas tree towering over the skating rink, however. The 100-foot-tall tree was laden with strings of electric lights and ornaments. It was an impressive sight but tonight Emma found it depressing. Cliche or no, the weight of loneliness really did seem harder to bear during the holiday season. Standing on the edge of the sidewalk, she adjusted her hat and tugged at her scarf while eyeing the taxi cab roof signs, hoping with little conviction to get a ride. Unfortunately it was a busy time of night. The stream of passing yellow cabs were all occupied. Giving up,

she pushed through the crowd and walked hurriedly toward the angle of Lexington Avenue and 53rd Street. She made her way into the subway station and took the downtown E train. The car was predictably packed and she was forced to stand, crammed up against the other passengers.

Despite the jolts and bumps, she pulled out her telephone and reread the text message she already knew by heart.

I'm in New York this week. Dinner tonight?
I miss you.
François

Fuck you, asshole. I'm not at your beck and call! she thought, silently fuming at the screen.

François was the heir to a major Bordeaux vineyard. She had met him two years earlier during a trip to France to study wine grape varieties. He had made it no secret at the time that he was married and the father of two children, but she had nonetheless responded to his advances. Emma had extended her trip and the two had spent a perfect week exploring the famous wine region: the “route du Médoc,” with its *grand crus classés* and prestigious Châteaux, the “route des coteaux,” with its Romanesque churches and archaeological sites, as well as the fortified towns and abbeys of the Entre-Deux-Mers and the medieval village of Saint-Émilion... A passionate and destructive two-year relationship had followed. They would see each other whenever François was in New York on business and had even spent a week together on vacation in Hawaii. Two sporadic years of intense disappointment. François was always on the verge of leaving his wife. Emma didn't really believe him, of course. But she couldn't get him out of her system...

And then one weekend when they were supposed to be going away together, François sent her a message: he still loved his wife and was ending their relationship. Emma had played with fire before—she had flirted with bulimia, anorexia and scarification—but the breakup had brought her to an all time low.

A devastating feeling of emptiness had come over her at the time, shaking her to her very core. Her fragile side seemed to have infected her entire being. It seemed like life had nothing more to offer. Her existence was reduced to pain. The only alternative she could think of was to lie down in the tub and slash her wrists. She made two deep gashes with a utility knife on each of her wrists. It wasn't a cry for help. She wasn't pretending. The onrush of suicidal feelings had been triggered perhaps by her unhappy love affair, but the damage had been done a long time ago. Emma wanted her life to end, and she would have succeeded if her idiot brother hadn't shown up unannounced at that very moment, barging into her apartment

to complain that she hadn't paid the bill for their father's retirement home that month.

The memories sent a cold shiver down Emma's spine as the train came to a stop at 42nd Street, the Port Authority Bus Terminal. Most of the passengers got off here and she was finally able to find a seat. Just as she was sitting down, her cell phone vibrated. Francois again:

Call me, darling, please. Tell me we still have a chance.
I miss you so much.
Your Francois.

Emma closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Her ex-lover was a self-serving, manipulative bastard. He knew only too well how to turn on the charm and play the dashing hero type. And she was putty in his hands. He had ruthlessly exploited her weaknesses, undermining her confidence, baring her emotional neediness and opening old wounds. Above all, he was a master at glossing over reality, always able to turn things to his own advantage—even if it meant passing her off as delusional.

She turned off her phone so she wouldn't be tempted to answer. She had worked too hard to get him out of her system. She wasn't about to fall for his tricks again just because it was Christmastime and she was feeling lonely.

Because *she* was her own worst enemy. Not Francois. She couldn't accept living life without passion. Funny and capable on the outside, she was impulsive and emotionally unstable underneath, and her mood swings, when they took over, could send her spinning from episodes of near euphoria to deep depression.

She was wary of her own fear of abandonment which could kick in any time and plunge her into bouts of self-destruction. Her romantic life was littered with painful, broken relationships. She had wasted a lot of love on people who didn't deserve it. Bastards like Francois. But she was driven by something she didn't understand, something that was beyond her reach: a dark force, an addiction pushing her into the arms of married men. She was chasing an illusion, looking for a soul mate, knowing deep down that relationships based on passion alone could provide neither the security nor the stability she so desperately craved. But she couldn't help it, and loathing herself all the while, she agreed to the cheating and broke up families, despite her own values and aspirations.

Luckily, she'd been in therapy for the past few months and it was helping her more clearly assess her emotional needs. She knew now that she had to protect herself by steering clear of certain risky types.

The train came to the end of the line at World Trade Center. The southernmost part of the city had been devastated

by the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Construction was still underway. Soon, a new group of glass and steel skyscrapers would dominate the skyline of New York City. The symbol of Manhattan's ability to come back from adversity stronger than before, Emma thought, as she climbed the stairs of the Greenwich Street exit.

A case in point...

She walked briskly to the corner of Harrison Street and cut across the plaza of a housing complex made up of tall brown brick buildings built in the early seventies. Back when Tribeca was still a warehouse district. She punched in the digits of the entry code and pushed open the heavy cast iron door with both hands. For years, the three 40-floor buildings at 50 North Plaza had had hundreds of affordable apartments. Prices in the neighborhood today had skyrocketed, however, and the building was scheduled for a long-overdue renovation. In the meantime, the lobby had a sad, dilapidated look: crumbling plaster, dim light and grime. Emma looked in her mailbox then headed, via one of the elevators, to her apartment on the next to last floor.

“Hey, Clovis!”

The minute she opened the door her dog bounded over to greet her.

“Let me shut the door at least, will you!” she scolded, rubbing the wrinkles of the Shar-Pei's short, rough coat.

She put down her bag and played with the dog for a few minutes. She loved her pet's sturdy frame, his thick snout and triangular head, his deep-set gentle eyes and his air of sweetness.

“At least you'll always be there for me!” she said, rewarding him with a big bowl of kibble.

The apartment was small—not even 450 square feet—but charming: unfinished wood floors, exposed brick walls and a large plate glass window. The open kitchen space was separated by a dark sandstone island with three brushed-aluminum bar stools. As for the “living room,” it was overrun with books taking up every spare inch of shelving: American and European fiction, film history books and books about wine and gastronomy. The building had its drawbacks: old plumbing and leaky faucets, a laundry room infested with mice, elevators always breaking down and a faulty air-conditioning unit. Not to mention the paper-thin walls that shook during thunderstorms and left nothing of the neighbors' intimacy to the imagination. But the unobstructed view of lower Manhattan was breathtaking: the buildings lit up from within, the piers of the Hudson River, boats gliding across the water...

Emma took off her coat and scarf, changed out of her suit, which she carefully hung on a dressmaker's dummy, and slipped into a pair of old jeans and an oversized Yankees t-shirt. Next she headed to the bathroom to take off her makeup.

The image in the mirror reflected the face of a youthful thirty-three-year-old with wavy dark brown hair, light green eyes and a delicate nose dotted with freckles. On her good days – her really good days – she bore a slight resemblance to Kate Beckinsale or Evangeline Lilly. But today was not a good day. Making a last-ditch effort not to be overwhelmed by sadness, she smirked at the image in the mirror. Removing her contacts, which were making her eyes itch, she put on a pair of thick-lensed glasses and went back to the kitchen to make some tea.

Brrr... it's freezing in here, she shivered, wrapping a wool throw around her shoulders and turning up the radiator.

While waiting for the water to boil, she grabbed a stool at the kitchen island and opened up her laptop.

She was starving. Logging on to the website of a Japanese restaurant, she placed an order of miso soup and a sushi-sashimi combo.

After receiving a confirmation email, she checked the order and delivery time then looked through her other messages, dreading an e-mail from her ex.

Fortunately, there were no more messages from Francois.

But there was something else, an intriguing e-mail from a certain Matthew Shapiro.

She'd never heard of the guy.

But he was about to change her life forever...

The Message

*When suffering is an old
acquaintance, giving it up is an
ordeal.*

Michela MARZANO

**Beacon Hill
Boston
8 P.M.**

“Mom's not coming back, is she Dad?” Emily asked as she was buttoning up her pajamas.

“No, sweetie, she's not. She's *never* coming back.” Matthew replied, giving his daughter a hug.

“It's not fair,” the little girl went on, her voice trembling.

“No, you're right. It's not not fair. Life is like that sometimes,” he answered awkwardly, sitting her down on the bed.

The small bedroom was charming; it had none of the cutesy motifs or pastel colors so often found in small children's bedrooms. When they were renovating the house, Matthew and Kate had tried to preserve the original character of each of the rooms. In Emily's bedroom they had simply knocked down a partition and stripped and waxed the old parquet floor, restoring it to its former glory. The room was furnished with antique shop finds: a plain wooden bed and a pickled dresser, a hemp covered armchair, a rocking horse and a studded leather steamer trunk for toys. Matthew touched his daughter's face gently and gave her what he hoped was a reassuring look.

“Do you want me to read you a story, honey?”

With lowered eyes, Emily shook her head sadly.

“No, that's OK.”

Matthew winced. His daughter had seemed anxious in recent weeks, as if she had soaked up some of his stress. The

thought made him feel guilty. He'd tried his best to hide his sadness and anxiety from her, but it was no use. Children have a sixth sense for those kind of things. But worse, no matter how hard he tried to reason with himself, Matthew was constantly worried about his daughter's safety; he was haunted by the irrational fear of losing his daughter, on top of losing his wife. He had convinced himself that danger was lurking everywhere. This fear led him to overprotect Emily at the risk of suffocating her and destroying her self-confidence.

The fact was, parenting was getting harder and harder for Matthew. In the first weeks after the accident, he had been thrown off balance by Emily's almost total lack of response to her mother's death. At the time the little girl had seemed impervious to grief, as if she didn't really understand her mother was dead. The doctor at the hospital had explained to Matthew that it was not uncommon for children to react this way: to protect themselves, some children voluntarily distance themselves from a traumatic event, unconsciously waiting to be strong enough before confronting a situation.

Emily's questions about death had come later. For months Matthew had answered as best he could, turning to the therapist, children's books and metaphors for help. But Emily's questions were getting more and more concrete and her father had no idea to how to handle them. What is a four-and-a-half-year-old child's conception of death? He didn't know what kind of language to use, wasn't even sure which words she was old enough to understand. The psychologist had told him not to worry, explaining that as Emily got older she would come to understand the finality of her mother's death. His daughter's questions were healthy, the doctor explained. They allowed Emily to externalize her feelings, to banish taboos and ultimately free herself from fear.

However, Emily had clearly not reached this liberating stage yet. On the contrary, every night at bedtime she showed the same signs of anxiety, asked the same painful questions with the same painful answers.

"Come on, time for beddy-bye!" Matthew said, trying to change the subject.

The little girl slipped under the covers.

"Grandma says that Mommy is in heaven..." Emily went on.

"Mommy's not in heaven. Grandma's talking nonsense," Matthew cut in abruptly, cursing his mother to himself.

Kate didn't have a family and he wasn't close to his own parents, a pair of egocentric retirees who were living comfortably in Miami and hadn't the slightest inkling of what he was going through. They had never really liked Kate in the first place, accusing her of putting her career before her family. A mind-boggling reproach, coming from parents who had put themselves first come hell or high water! In the weeks

following Kate's death, they did come to Boston to support Matthew and take care of Emily. But their involvement hadn't lasted. Now they simply called once a week to see how they were getting on and to fill their granddaughter's head with nonsense.

It was infuriating! There was no way he was suddenly going to accept the hypocrisy of religion. He didn't believe in God and never had; and his wife's death wasn't going to change any of that. For him, being a "philosopher" implied a kind of atheism, and Kate had felt the same way. Death was the end of everything. There was nothing else. No afterlife. Just emptiness, absolute and total nothingness. It was out of the question for him to lull his daughter into a belief he himself didn't accept. Even to reassure her.

"If she isn't in heaven, then where is she?" Emily insisted.

"Her body is in the cemetery. You know that. But her love didn't die," he admitted. "It's still in our hearts and memories. We can continue to remember her by talking about her and remembering the good times we spent together. We can look at pictures and visit her grave."

Emily nodded, unconvinced.

"You're going to die too, aren't you, Daddy?"

"We all are," he acknowledged, "but..."

"If you die who is going to take care of me?" she asked, anxiously.

He gathered her more closely in his arms.

"I'm not going to die tomorrow, sweetie! I'll be around for a hundred years. I promise."

The words were just air, but he repeated them even so: "I promise."

He held her for a few more minutes, then tucked her in and turned out the lights, leaving the nightlight on over the bed. After one last kiss, he left the room, leaving the door cracked and promising April would come say goodnight soon.

*

Matthew went downstairs to the living room. The ground floor of the house was bathed in soft light. He had lived in the red brick house on the corner of Mount Vernon and Willow Streets for three years now. The attractive townhouse with a massive white door and dark wooden shutters looked out over Louisburg Square.

He walked over to the window and stared absentmindedly at the blinking electric lights hanging on the park gates. Kate had dreamed of living in the historic heart of Boston her entire life. A tiny enclave of narrow cobblestone streets lined with beautifully preserved Victorian houses, shady trees, flower boxes and antique gas lamps. Time seemed to

have come to a standstill here, and the buildings in the neighborhood were wrapped in an old-world aura of bygone days. Living in such an elegant part of town would have normally been beyond the means of a doctor working at a university hospital and a college professor who had barely paid off his student loan! But it would have taken a lot more than that to discourage Kate. She had combed the neighborhood for months on end, putting up small want-ad posters. An elderly woman about to move into a retirement home came across one of the ads. The well-to-do Bostonian hated real estate agents and wanted to choose for herself the next owner of the home she had lived in her entire life. Kate must have made a quite an impression on her, because the woman miraculously agreed to lower her asking price, on condition that the young couple make up their minds in just twenty-four hours. Even at a much lower price, it was still a very large sum of money for them. The commitment of a lifetime. But Matthew and Kate were confident in their love for one another and the future they would have together. They had decided to go ahead with the project, taking out a thirty-year mortgage and spending all of their weekends up to their ears in plaster and paint. Neither one of them had ever picked up a paintbrush in their entire lives, but both were soon “experts” in plumbing, wiring and wood floor restoration.

They had developed an almost sensual relationship with the old house. Their home was a comfortable haven, *a shelter from the storm*, as Bob Dylan said. It was where they planned to raise their children, where they would grow old together...

But what was the point of all that now? Kate was dead, and the house was full of painful memories. Everything reminded him of her: the furniture, the decor, even the lingering scents of potpourri, incense and scented candles. It all gave Matthew an eerie feeling, as if his dead wife were haunting the place. That said, he felt no desire to move; he didn't have the strength. In his present state of emotional instability, the townhouse was one of the few bearings that remained. But only part of the house was frozen in the past. April had brought life back to one attractive bedroom and bathroom, a large dressing room and a small office on the top floor of the house had been enlivened by the presence of April. Matthew and Emily's bedrooms—and the one for the second child he and Kate had hoped to have soon—were on the floor below... The ground floor had been remodeled into a large open-space living area and kitchen.

Matthew pulled himself back to the present, opening and closing his eyes a few times to chase away the painful memories. He walked over to the kitchen where he and Kate had so often enjoyed breakfast together. Where they had sat in the evenings, side by side at the counter, talking about their day. He went to the fridge and took out a six pack of lager. He

uncapped a bottle then reached for another anti-depressant, washing down the tablet with a gulp of beer. The cocktail of Corona and pills was his favorite way of numbing his senses to fall asleep quickly.

“Hey there, handsome. Careful. That kind of mix can be pretty dangerous, you know!” April called out as she came down the stairs.

She had changed to go out and looked drop-dead gorgeous, as usual.

Perched on a pair of vertiginous heels, she was wearing an eccentric but elegant outfit, slightly prone to fetishism but with a disconcerting natural flair: a transparent top trimmed in burgundy, patent leather shorts, opaque tights and a black studded bolero jacket. She had tied up on top of her head, and had used a sheer foundation to create a diaphanous look, highlighted by blood red lipstick.

“Why don't you come with me, instead? I'm going to Gun Shot, a new bar in Back Bay. Their fried head cheese is fabulous, not to mention their mojitos. It's where all the prettiest girls in town are going these days.”

“What, am I supposed to just go out and leave Emily alone, asleep in her bedroom?”

April swept aside his objection.

“We can ask the neighbor's daughter to come over. She's always up for babysitting.”

“I don't want my four-year-old daughter to wake up from a bad dream in an hour to find out that her father has abandoned her... to go drink mojitos in some seedy dive for satanic lesbians.”

Annoyed, April adjusted her Moorish-looking cuff bracelet.

“Gun Shot is not a lesbian bar,” she snapped. “Anyhow, I'm serious, Matt, it would do you good to go out and see new faces. To turn on a bit of the old charm. To hook up with someone...”

“How the hell am I supposed to start seeing someone? My wife...”

“I'm not talking about feelings here,” she interrupted. “I'm talking about getting laid! A good roll in the hay, a little fun, carnal pleasure... I can introduce you to some of my girlfriends. Uncomplicated girls just out for a good time.”

He stared at her as if she were from another planet.

“Fine, I give up,” April said doing up the buttons of her short jacket. “But has it ever occurred to you what Kate would think?”

“What Kate would think?”

“Yeah, if she could see you from up there, how she would feel about your behavior.”

“You're not going to start in on me with that stuff too, are you? There is no up there!”

“That's beside the point,” April countered. “I'll tell you what she'd think. That she'd like to see you move on. That she'd want you to get over your grieving and at least take a shot at enjoying life again.”

Matthew could feel his anger rising.

“How dare you tell me what she'd want! You didn't even know her. You never even met her!”

“Maybe,” April shot back, “but I do know that you're letting yourself wallow in grief – hat you're feeding it, for that matter. Because it's all you have left. It's your last tie to Kate and...”

“Spare me the insipid psychobabble, will you,” Matthew exploded, losing his temper.

April didn't bother to answer and stormed out of the house slamming the door behind her.

*

Left alone, Matthew moved to the comfortable security of the couch, finished off the bottle of beer then lay down and rubbed his eyes.

Fuck...

He had absolutely no desire to make love to another woman, to caress another body or kiss another face. He needed to be alone. He wasn't looking for companionship or consolation. He just wanted to sleep off the pain with his trusty bottle of meds and a good-old Corona.

The minute he shut his eyes, images flashed through his mind like a movie seen dozens of times. Back to that night, December 24th 2010. Kate was on duty at the Children's Hospital in Jamaica Plain, the MGH1 annex. She had called him at 9 P.M. at the end of her shift.

“My car broke down again. I'm stranded in the hospital parking lot, honey. You were right as usual. I really should get rid of this old jalopy.”

“I've told you a thousand times...”

“I know but I love my Mazda! It was the first car I ever bought, when I was a student!”

“That was in the 90s, Kate, and it was second-hand even then...”

“I'm going to try and get the T.”

“Are you kidding? At this time of night, in that neighborhood? It's too dangerous. I'll come pick you up with my bike.”

“It's freezing out, Matt. And sleeting. It's not safe!”

But he had insisted and she had finally given in.

“All right, but be careful!” she had said hanging up.

Matthew had jumped on his Triumph right away. But

just as he was leaving Beacon Hill, Kate must have managed to start her engine. Because at 9:07 P.M. a delivery truck on its way into downtown Boston hit her full on as she was pulling out of the parking lot. Her car was violently propelled against the wall of the hospital grounds, before flipping over and landing on its roof. Unluckily, the truck tipped over, landing on the sidewalk and pinning the car beneath its weight.

When Matthew got to the hospital, the firemen were busy trying to extract Kate's body from the compressed sheets of metal. It had taken over an hour for the paramedics to pull her out of the wreck. She was sent to MGH where she died from her injuries later that night.

The truck driver had escaped without harm. Toxicology tests performed on him after the accident had come back positive for cannabis, but the driver had testified during the inquest that Kate had been phoning at the time of the collision and had ignored the right of way. His story was corroborated by footage from the surveillance camera at the entrance of the parking lot.

*

Matt opened his eyes and sat up. He shouldn't let himself go like this. He had to cope, if only for Emily's sake. He got up and looked around for something to do. Correct papers? Watch a basketball game on TV? Then he saw the large bag containing the secondhand computer he had purchased earlier that day. He sat down at the wooden counter-top, took out the computer and plugged it in, noticing again the unusual aluminum shell with its sticker of "Eve and the Apple."

He opened the laptop and found a post-it stuck on the screen. The garage sale guy had remembered to leave him the access code to the "administrator account."

Matthew turned on the laptop then typed in the password to access the home screen. At first glance, everything was normal: desktop, wallpaper, the usual Mac icons. He entered his user ID info, connected to the Internet and then spent a few minutes making sure all the applications worked: word processor, navigator, messaging service, image organizer. After starting up the last application, he was surprised to discover a series of photographs.

That's odd, he thought. The seller assured him he had reformatted the hard drive...

He pressed the application's slideshow key and watched the album's dozen or so pictures fade in and out. Postcard-like shots, obviously taken on vacation: turquoise waters, surfboards planted upright in white sand, a man and a woman holding hands, immortalized in the glorious light of the setting sun...

Hawaii? The Bahamas? The Maldives? he wondered,

imagining the sound of crashing waves and the feeling of the wind in his hair.

The seaside gave way to the countryside as pictures of rolling hillsides, villas, vineyards and village squares filled the screen.

France or Tuscany, he guessed.

Intrigued by his discovery, he stopped the slideshow and clicked to open each of the photographs and access more information. Along with the technical characteristics, each of the photos was marked emma.lovenstein@imperatornyc.com.

Emma Lovenstein...

He immediately made the connection with the name in the illustration on the outside of the computer.

“Emma L.”

Clearly the former owner of the computer.

He selected all of the photos with the touchpad, dropped them into the trash can and was about to permanently delete them. Then he hesitated. Just to be sure, he typed a brief email.

From: Matthew Shapiro

To: Emma Lovenstein

Object: Photographs

Hello Ms. Lovenstein,

I'm the new owner of your MacBook.

There are a few photos from the old hard drive still on the computer.

Would you like me to email them back to you or should I delete them?

Thanks for letting me know.

Regards,

Matthew Shapiro

4
Strangers in the Night

*I don't believe in living alone.
Alone we are not complete.*
Virginia WOOLF

From: Emma Lovenstein
To: Matthew Shapiro
Object: Re : Photos

Dear Matthew,
I think you've got the wrong email address. I do own a
MacBook, but I haven't sold it! The pictures on your computer
aren't mine ;-)

Sincerely,
Emma

*Emma Lovenstein
Assistant Head Sommelier
Imperator
30 Rockefeller Plaza New York, NY 10020*

2 minutes later

Sorry I bothered you!
Matthew

PS: Do you work at the Imperator? Maybe we've met. My wife and I
celebrated our first anniversary there!

45 seconds later
Really? When?

60 seconds later

A little over four years ago. October 29th.

30 seconds later

A few weeks before I started then! How did you like it?

60 seconds later

We loved it! I still remember what we ate: caramelized frogs legs, sweetbread with truffles and a rice pudding macaroon!

30 seconds later

What about the wine? And cheese?

60 seconds later

I'm going to disappoint you, Emma, but to tell you the truth I don't drink wine, and I never eat cheese...

60 seconds later

What a shame! Next time you come to the restaurant, I'll introduce you to some good wine! Do you live in New York, Matthew?

30 seconds later.

No in Boston. Beacon Hill.

20 seconds later

You're right next door! You should come back with your wife next fall. To celebrate your fifth anniversary!

3 minutes later

I can't do that. My wife is dead.

60 seconds later

I'm so sorry.

My apologies.

60 seconds later

There's no way you could have known, Emma.

Good night.

*

Matthew pushed back his stool abruptly and stood up. That's what you get for talking to strangers on the Internet! Why in the world had he started such a bizarre conversation in the first place! With a resolute keystroke he deleted the pictures, no regrets. Then grabbed another bottle of Corona.

Not only had the conversation annoyed him, it had made him hungry too! He walked over to the fridge and looked inside. Empty, as usual.

It's not going to fill up all by itself, after all... muttered a little voice inside.

Matthew dug around in the freezer, pulled out a pizza and stuck it in the microwave oven. After setting the timer, he returned to the computer screen.

There was another message from Emma Lovenstein...

*

Damn, why do I always put my foot in my mouth! How was I supposed to know his wife was dead? Emma chided herself.

The exchange had piqued her curiosity, however. She googled “Matthew Shapiro + Boston” to see what came up. The links at the top of the page were to the website of Harvard. She clicked on the first one. It pulled up the profile page of one of the professors in the university's philosophy department. Her mystery correspondent apparently taught at the prestigious establishment! There was a picture alongside his resume. Judging by the photo, Matthew Shapiro was good-looking, dark-haired, about forty. She hesitated for just a second and then typed the following:

From: Emma Lovenstein
To: Matthew Shapiro
Have you had dinner yet, Matthew?

*

Matthew frowned at this new intrusion into his private life, but immediately shot back:

From: Matthew Shapiro
To: Emma Lovenstein
If you really want to know, I just put a a pizza into the microwave.

30 seconds later

Forget about the frozen pizza, Matthew. This is what I suggest you do. Do you know the emporium on Charles Street, Zellig Foods? They have a great selection of cheese and cold cuts.

If you want to have something really good, go have a look.

Try one of their delicious goat cheeses. One of the specialty cheeses, for example, with figs or wasabi. I know it sounds like a funny combination, but they're heavenly with a Sauvignon Blanc from the Loire—either a Sancerre or a Pouilly-Fumé.

I also recommend you try the pistachio-foie gras *pâté en croûte*, a perfect match for the velvety tannins of a Burgundy Côte de Nuits. If you find a 2006 Gevrey-Chambertin, grab it!

There! That's my suggestion. Take my word for it. It's better than frozen pizza...

Emma
PS: I just checked online.

From Beacon Hill you can make it to Zellig's on foot. But hurry! The store closes at 10 P.M.

Matthew shook his head, amazed. It'd been a while since somebody had taken such a personal interest in his well-being... But then again, he thought to himself, annoyed, who did this Emma Lovenstein think she was, telling him how he should spend his evening?

Irritated he closed his e-mail and launched his navigator. Letting his curiosity get the better of him, he googled "Emma Lovenstein + sommelier." He clicked on the topmost link. An online article from the Wine Spectator dating back to last year entitled "Ten Young Talents to Follow." It was a portrait of the up-and-coming generation of wine stewards. Surprisingly, the majority of the "young talents" were women. The second to last write-up was about Emma. It was illustrated with a photograph with good depth of field taken in the Emperor's high-tech wine cave. Matthew zoomed in to enlarge the picture. No doubt about it: the young sommelier and the woman in the vacation photos on his computer were one and the same person. A pretty brunette with laughing eyes and a mischievous smile.

Odd... Why had she pretended the computer wasn't hers? Out of embarrassment? Or modesty? Maybe, but then why had she pursued their conversation?

The ring of the microwave announced his pizza was ready.

Matthew ignored it and reached for the phone to call his neighbors instead. He asked if their daughter Elizabeth could look after Emily for half an hour. He had something to pick up at Zellig's and had to go out immediately. The store closed at 10 P.M.

*

**Back Bay
Boston
1 A.M.**

The throbbing sound of electro-dance beats filled the bar. April elbowed her way through the crowd to the Gun Shot's exit to smoke a cigarette outside.

Oops! Must be a little tipsy, she thought to herself, stumbling over the curb. The night's fresh air did her good. She'd had enough drinking, dancing and flirting for one night. Adjusting her bra strap, she glanced at her watch. It was getting late. She reached for her cell phone to order a cab then, cigarette between her lips, dug around in her bag for her lighter.

Where the hell did the damn thing go?

"Is this what you are looking for?" a voice in back of her inquired.

April turned around and saw Julia, the young blonde with pearly-whites she'd been staring at all night but who had ignored all of her signals. Perched atop a pair of stratospheric

heels, the young woman was exactly April's type: cropped sun-kissed hair, bright eyes and a lithesome figure.

"You forgot it at the bar," the young woman explained, firing up the pink mother of pearl lighter.

April lowered her head to light her cigarette, transfixed by the young woman's translucent skin, sensual mouth and delicate features. She suddenly felt a burning desire in the pit of her stomach.

"You can't hear a thing in there," Julia remarked.

"You're right. I'm getting far too old for that kind of noise," April joked.

A flash of headlights caught their attention.

"It's my taxi," April said, pointing to the car that had pulled up in front of the bar. "If you need a ride..."

Julia pretended to think it over—she was in charge and she knew it:

"Sure, thanks for the offer. I won't take you too far out of your way. I live right around the corner, on Pembroke Street."

The two women climbed into the back seat of the car. As the cab left the dock area of the Charles River, Julia lay her head lightly on the other woman's shoulder. April was dying to kiss her but was held in check by the cab driver's insistent stare.

If you think you're going to get an eyeful, buddy, think again... she thought, staring back defiantly in the rear-view mirror.

It was a short ride. In less than five minutes the car had come to a stop on a narrow tree-lined street.

"If you'd like to come in for a drink," Julia offered casually, "one of my old college friends just sent me a bottle of aloe pulp alcohol. Amazing stuff. She made it herself! You'd really like it."

April gave a faint smile, delighted by the invitation. Yet just at that critical moment she paused, a muffled sense of dread counterbalancing her desire. She was completely taken with Julia, but Matthew had seemed particularly depressed when she had left earlier that night, even on the verge of doing something stupid... A ridiculous thought, but she couldn't shake it. She imagined herself getting home and finding him hanging from the rafters, or in a drug-induced coma.

"Listen, another time I would have loved to, but tonight I—"

"Never mind, I get it..." Julia broke in, offended.

"No, wait! Give me your number. We could..."

Too late. The gorgeous blonde had already slammed the car door shut.

Damn it...

April sighed and told the driver to take her to the corner of Mount Vernon and Willow, worried sick all the way there. Matthew and Emily both meant a lot to her, though they had

known each other for only a year. April was sorry for Matthew but there was nothing she could do to help: He was utterly devoted to the memory of his wife, and April couldn't imagine another woman finding a place in his life any time soon. What kind of woman would stand a chance against the young, brilliant and selfless Kate, the heart surgeon who had looked like a model?

The car came to a stop in front of the townhouse. April paid the fare, walked to the front door and entered the house as quietly as possible. She had expected to find Matthew sprawled on the couch snoring, knocked out by a cocktail of beer and anti-depressants. Instead he was comfortably seated behind the screen of his new computer, his head keeping time to a jazz tune, a cheerful smile on his face.

“Back so soon?” he asked, surprised.

“Try not to look so happy about it!” she said, relieved.

On the kitchen island she spotted the open bottles of wine and the rest of the cheese and pâté en croûte.

“Looks like someone's been having a good time! You went shopping? I thought you didn't want to leave your lair?”

“I'm sick of frozen food,” he attempted awkwardly.

Eying him suspiciously, she moved closer.

“Having fun with your new toy, I see” she drawled, leaning over his shoulder.

Matthew closed the screen abruptly, clumsily trying to hide the photos he had recovered from the recycle bin and just printed out. But April, too quick for him, snatched them up.

“She's cute,” she remarked, studying the pictures of Emma. “Who is she?”

“A sommelier. She works at a famous restaurant in New York.”

“And what's up with the music? I thought you didn't like jazz?”

“It's Keith Jarrett, the Köln Concert. Did you know music can actually influence the way a wine tastes? Research has demonstrated that jazz in particular can stimulate the part of the brain that allows us to perceive the characteristics of a good wine. Can you believe it?!”

“Fascinating. I suppose that's what your new girlfriend told you?”

“She's not my 'girlfriend', April. Don't be ridiculous.”

April pointed an accusing finger at Matthew.

“To think I passed up a great lay all because I was worried about you!”

“That's really big of you, April! But I didn't ask you for a thing.”

April continued, raising her voice:

“There I was imagining you, all by your lonesome, depressed and suicidal. But no, you were having a little shindig

and drinking fine wines with some girl on the Internet!”

“Wait a minute, here. You're not going to go all jealous on me, are you?”

The sexy art dealer poured herself a glass of wine and gave herself a few minutes to cool off.

“All right, then. Who is she?”

Matthew went on to tell her about his evening—only after leaving her hanging a while longer—from how he had found the pictures on his computer's hard drive to the unlikely discussion thread that followed. For almost three hours, Matthew and Emma had exchanged views on countless subjects, one email after another. They discovered their shared passion for Cary Grant, Marilyn Monroe, Billy Wilder and Gustav Klimt, as well as the *Venus de Milo*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *The Shop around the Corner*. Then they took up such existential questions as: Beatles or Stones? Red Sox or Yankees? Audrey Hepburn or Katharine Hepburn? Frank Sinatra or Dean Martin? They had clashed over *Lost in Translation*, “hugely overrated” in Matthew's view, “an absolute masterpiece” in Emma's. They had debated over Stefan Zweig's greatest short story, Edward Hopper's most moving painting, Nirvana's best song on the album *Unplugged*. They had argued the respective merits of *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice*, compared reading on an iPad to turning the pages of print, hashed out whether *Off the Wall* was a better album than *Thriller*, whether *Mad Men* was the best series on TV today, whether the acoustic version of *Layla* was as good as the original, whether *Get Yer Ya-Ya's Out!* was the greatest live recording ever, if...

“OK, OK. I get it,” April cut in. “And besides all that, did the two of you treat yourself to a little session of cybersex?”

“Are you out of your mind, April!” Matthew exclaimed, incensed. “We talked. That's all.”

“Yeah, right...”

Matthew shook his head. He didn't like the direction this conversation was taking.

“And how do you know this cyberspace pen-pal of yours is really an attractive brunette?” April asked. “Identity theft happens all the time on the Internet, you know. Maybe you've been talking to some smelly old fart for the past three hours...”

“You really want to ruin my evening, don't you...”

“No, I don't. Actually, I'm glad to see you're perking up a bit. But I don't want you to get your hopes up. You could be in for a rude awakening, you know. This person may not be who you think she is.”

“Well what do you suggest I do, then?”

“Meet her in person. The sooner the better. Invite her out to dinner.”

“No way!” he shook his head. “It's much too soon. She'll think that...”

“She won't think anything at all! You have to strike while the iron's hot. That's the way things work today. You've obviously been out of the loop for ages.”

Matthew paused for a moment, lost in thought. Things were starting to spin out of control. He didn't want to rush things, let alone let himself get carried away. After all, he didn't *really* know this Emma Lovenstein. Admittedly the two of them had seemed to hit it off, had both enjoyed the exchange of emails, the few pleasant hours amid the gloom of everyday life. And he liked the romantic aspect of their encounter too. The role played by chance, or maybe even destiny...

“Ask her out as soon as possible,” April insisted. “If you need help, I can take care of Emily.” Matthew's housemate stifled a yawn and looked at her watch. “I've had too much to drink. I'm going to bed,” she informed him, with a wave goodnight.

Matthew returned her wave as she made her way up the stairs. The minute she was out of sight, he opened his laptop and hastily refreshing his email page. Nothing new from Emma. Maybe she'd had enough. Maybe April was right. Maybe he'd better not wait too long.

There was only one way to find out:

From: Matthew Shapiro

To: Emma Lovenstein

Object: Dinner?

Are you still up, Emma?

60 seconds later

I've gone to bed, my laptop is next to me. I downloaded your *Modern Sceptic's Guide to Philosophy* on my e-reader. I can't put it down! I didn't know Ciceron means “chick pea” in Latin ;-)

Urged on by an invisible force, Matthew decided to go for it.

45 seconds later

I want to ask you something, Emma. I know a little Italian place in the East Village, south of Tompkins Square Park. It's called *Five*. My old childhood friends, Vittorio Bartoletti and his wife, are the owners. I have dinner there whenever I'm in New York, usually to take part in a lecture series at the Morgan Library. I don't know what their wine list is like but if you like arancini bolognese, baked lasagne, tagliatelle with meat sauce and Sicilian cannoli, you'll like the place. Would you like to have dinner there with me?

30 seconds later

I'd be delighted Matthew. Will you be coming to New York anytime

soon?

30 seconds later

My next lecture is scheduled for January 15th, but maybe we could have dinner before then. How about tomorrow night, say 8 o'clock?

*

Tomorrow...

Tomorrow!

TOMORROW!

Emma felt like jumping up and down on her bed. It was too good to be true!

“You hear that, Clovis? A cute professor just invited me out to dinner! A sexy philosophy teacher likes me!” she blurted excitedly to the dog sleeping at the foot of her bed.

It took more than that to impress the Shar-Pei, but he politely grunted all the same.

Emma was in seventh heaven. It had been the perfect unexpected evening. With just a few emails, Matthew Shapiro had restored her confidence and brought new sunshine into her life. And she was going to meet him in person, tomorrow night! Except that... tomorrow night she was working.

Suddenly worried, Emma propped herself upright against the pillows, almost knocking over her mug of herbal tea in the process. The one big drawback to her job was her schedule: She was never off in the evenings. She still had some vacation time due, but she couldn't take off on such short notice. Requesting a day off was a complicated process. And December was a very busy month.

She thought it over for a minute or two, then decided not to worry. She'd ask a colleague to cover for her. It'd mean a little fancy footwork, of course, but it was doable. Anyhow, there was no way she was going to miss the romantic date with her new “gentleman friend,” as her grandmother would have said.

Smiling from ear to ear, she wrote one last email for the evening:

From: Emma Lovenstein

To: Matthew Shapiro

Object: Re : Dinner?

That'd be fine, Matthew. I'll figure out a way to free up my schedule.

Thanks for such a nice evening.

See you tomorrow!

Sleep well.

PS: I love lasagna and arancini...

And tiramisù!

Day Two

5
In Between

Even if you are playing your own role, you still need stage makeup.

Stanislaw Jerzy Lec

The next day

Boston

12:15 P.M.

Matthew closed the door behind him and walked down the flight of stairs leading from the house to the street. It had rained the night before, but the narrow streets of Beacon Hill were flooded with sunshine. A smell of damp undergrowth hung over Louisburg Square; golden sunlight heightened the park's brilliant foliage. His messenger bag slung over his shoulder, Matthew buckled the strap of his streamlined helmet, got on his bicycle and, whistling softly all the way, reached Pickney Street in a few good pedal strokes. He hadn't felt so lighthearted for ages. For almost a year now, he'd been sleepwalking through life. But today he had woken up with a clear head. He had taught three one-hour tutoring sessions at the university that morning, had exchanged jokes with his students and rediscovered the joy of teaching.

The knot in the pit of his stomach seemed to have melted away. He could feel the world around him, buzzing with life—and he was back in the thick of it once more! Bursting with energy, he picked up speed and veered smoothly into Brimmer Street, the wind in his face. Quickening his pace again as he caught sight of the Public Garden, he sliced through the air, at one with his bicycle, with an intoxicating sense of freedom. He coasted alongside the park, enjoying the moment, then turned right onto Newbury Street.

With its trendy cafes, art galleries and boutiques, Newbury was one of the most popular streets in Back Bay. Its sidewalk terraces were packed at lunchtime when the weather

was good. Matthew locked his bike in front of an elegant brownstone whose ground floor had been turned into a restaurant. Bistro 66 was their usual haunt when he and April met for lunch. There was only one available table outside, which he quickly occupied after motioning to the waiter. He pulled out his new laptop, connected to the bistro's Wi-Fi and, a few clicks later, had booked a flight to New York. Delta's 5:15 would get him to JFK at 7:00. Just enough time to make it to his dinner date with Emma. Then Matthew phoned *Five*. Connie picked up. The two friends hadn't seen each other for ages. She was delighted to hear his voice, and had a million things to tell him, but it was the middle of the lunch rush and one of her waiters was sick. She took down his reservation, promising she'd catch up with him later that night.

"Is this seat taken, young man?"

Matthew hung up and gave April a wink.

"Not if you're sitting in it."

Settling on a chair under the patio's overhead heater, she motioned to the waiter, ordering a glass of pino grigio and a plate of crab cakes for herself.

"What about you, Matt?"

"Just a small Caesar salad and a glass of water, I think."

"What's up? Are you on a diet or something?"

"No, just saving room for tonight. I'm going out for dinner."

"You're kidding! You're taking out that pretty little sommelier of yours? Congratulations, Matt, I'm proud of you."

The drinks arrived and April gave his glass a lively clink.

"By the way, have you decided what you are going to wear?" she asked, a hint of worry creeping into her voice.

Matthew shrugged.

"Nothing special, really. I thought I'd go like this."

April knit her brows, giving him the once-over.

"With those baggy old pants, a hooded sweatshirt, a pair of Converse high tops and a military parka? You've got to be kidding! Not to mention that bushy mop of yours and your Neanderthal man beard."

"Come on, April, you're exaggerating!"

"No I'm not, Matt! Think about it for a minute: we're talking about a young woman who works in one of the best restaurants in Manhattan. Important business men, big wigs from the art world and fashion industry eat at her restaurant every day. These people are elegant and refined. They dress to the nines. She's going to take you for a country bumpkin or an overgrown teenager.

"But I don't want to pretend I'm someone else!"

April refused to see it his way.

"A first date requires serious planning, Matt, and that's that. Appearances do count, you know. And first impressions

have a lasting effect on people.”

Matthew was annoyed.

“Loving someone for their appearance is like loving a book for its cover,¹” he countered.

“Fine. Go ahead. Toot your own horn with another one of your quotations. But you won't be feeling so high and mighty tonight when...”

Matthew heaved a sigh, his face clouding over. He rolled a cigarette, resisting the urge to light it, and a few seconds later gave in:

“OK, you win. I'll need a few pointers...”

*

New York City

1 P.M.

“Lovenstein! Are you out of your mind?” Peter Benedict yelled, bursting through the door of Emperor's wine cellar.

The head sommelier stormed over to his subordinate busy organizing bottles on a metal rack.

“What in God's name were you thinking?” he screamed, waving a purchase order printed on a sheet of off-white paper in her face.

Emma glanced at the document. An invoice, topped with the letterhead of a website specialized in exceptional vintages. Three bottles were listed:

1. Domaine de la Romanée Conti, 1991
1. Ermitage Cuvée Cathelin, J.L. Chave, 1991
1. Graacher Himmelreich, Auslese, Domaine J.J. Prüm, 1982

A legendary burgundy of rare opulence, a sophisticated syrah with a generous finish and a complex Riesling with a delicate palate. Three *grands crus* from perfect vintages. The three best wines she'd ever tasted in her life... But she hadn't ordered them.

“I didn't place that order Peter. I had nothing to do with it.”

“Don't play games with me, Lovenstein: the purchase order has your signature on it, and the Emperor's bank details are on the bill.”

“That's impossible!”

Benedict continued his diatribe, livid with anger.

“I just called the shipper, Emma, who confirmed the delivery was made. So I want to know what happened to those bottles, and make it snappy!”

“Listen, it's obviously some kind of a mix-up. It's not a big deal, I just have to...”

1 Quotation attributed to the Franco-Canadian novelist Laure Conan

“Not a big deal? Those bottles are worth over \$10,000!”

“I know it's a lot of money, but...”

“Do whatever you have to, Lovenstein, but I want this invoice voided by the end of the day!” her boss roared, waving a menacing finger in her face. “Otherwise, you can start packing!”

Spinning around, he left the cellar without further ado.

Emma stood there a few seconds, motionless, stunned by the altercation. Peter Benedict was an old school sommelier who thought the wine cellar was no place for a woman. And he had good reason to feel threatened by his assistant: Just before his sudden departure, Jonathan Lempereur had promoted Emma to head sommelier. The young woman should have replaced Benedict earlier that year but he had somehow managed to convince the new management to cancel her promotion. He'd been dead set on tripping up his young colleague ever since, to be rid of her for good.

Emma looked at the invoice and rubbed her forehead in amazement. Peter Benedict was bitter and spiteful but he wasn't crazy enough to pull a stunt like this.

But who was?

The three wines in question hadn't been ordered by chance. They were the exact three vintages she had mentioned during her interview with the Wine Spectator the week before. A journalist was doing an article on today's new generation of sommeliers. She tried to think: the interview had taken place in the public relations offices, under the watchful eye of...

Romuald Leblanc!

Emma sprang into action, hurrying out of the wine cellar and taking the elevator to the reception area. Without waiting to be announced, she descended on public relations and asked for the computer maintenance intern. She rushed over to the designated office and burst through the door, shutting it carefully behind her.

“Game's up, four-eyes. I'm on to you!”

Taken aback by her sudden interruption, Romuald Leblanc gave a start from behind his computer. He was a slightly overweight teenager with a greasy bowl cut and a pale face framed by a pair of heavy square-rimmed glasses. Torn jeans, a grungy zipper hoodie over a Marvel comics T-shirt and a pair of flip-flops completed the young man's get up.

“Hello miss, uh... Lovenstein,” he greeted her, with a thick French accent.

“Well, at least you recognize me. That's a good start,” she said, moving menacingly toward him.

She cast a glance at his computer screen.

“Is that what the restaurant pays you for? To drool over pictures of naked women?”

“Uh, no, ma'am. It's just, I'm... I'm on break.”

The French teen sank back into his chair uneasily and

reached for the half-eaten candy bar on his desk, taking a bite in an attempt to save face.

“Stop eating, you little creep,” she ordered.

Pulling the invoice out of her pocket, she waved it in his face.

“Did you place this order?”

The teenager's shoulders slumped and he lowered his eyes. Emma continued:

“You heard me when I was talking to the reporter, didn't you?”

Romuald didn't say a word. The sommelier raised her voice.

“Listen carefully, numbskull. I'm not going to lose my job over this. So you can just sit there like a clam for all I care, but in that case I am going to ask the management to call the cops and you can have it out with them.”

The threat affected the kid like an electric shock.

“No, please, don't! It's... it's true. I was intrigued by what you said about the wines, I wanted to taste them...”

“You wanted to taste wines worth over \$3,000 a bottle! You must be soft in the head! And how, may I ask, did you go about ordering them?”

Romuald nodded toward the computer.

“It was a cinch: the computer system isn't secure. It took me about twenty seconds to hack into the restaurant's accounts.”

Emma's heart started pounding in her chest.

“And the bottles you ordered, did you open them?”

“No, they're still here,” he answered standing up.

He dragged himself over to a metal locker and took out a wooden crate—containing the three precious vintages.

Thank God!

Emma carefully inspected each of the bottles; all three were intact.

She immediately called the supplier and explained the Emperor's account had been hacked. She offered to return the order at her own expense and asked them to cancel the invoice. An enormous wave of relief came over her when they agreed to do it.

She stood there, motionless... She wasn't going to lose her job!

Only then did she remember her date with Matthew—and was immediately overcome with anxiety. Hoping to reassure herself, she looked at her reflection in the mirrored surface of the cubicle window. What she saw made it even worse: she looked awful. Her hair was damaged and dull, and it badly needed cutting. One thing was sure, she wasn't going to catch Matthew Shapiro's eye looking like that. Sighing, she suddenly remembered the intern's existence.

“Listen. I'm going to have to report you to the

management. What you did is extremely serious.”

“No, don't! Please!”

The teenager burst into a flood of tears.

“Right, have a good cry,” she remarked dryly. “You won't have to pee so often.”

She handed him a Kleenex, then waited for him to stop bawling.

“How old are you Romuald?”

“Sixteen-and-a-half.”

“Where are you from?”

“Beaune, south of Dijon. It's...”

“I know where Beaune is. Some of France's best wines are produced in the region. How long have you been working at Imperator?”

“Two weeks,” he said, taking off his glasses to rub his eyes.

“Do you like your job?”

He shook his head and tilted his chin at the PC screen.

“That's the only thing I'm really interested in.”

“Computers? Then why are you working in a restaurant?”

He confided he had followed his girlfriend, who had come to New York as an au pair after graduating from high school in France,

“And then she dropped you?” Emma guessed.

A little embarrassed, he nodded yes.

“Do your parents know you are in the United States?”

“Yeah, but they've got other fish to fry,” he answered evasively.

“But how were you able to get a job here, in New York. You don't have papers, you're not even of age...”

“Oh, I kind of whipped up a temporary work visa for myself, and made myself a few years older.”

Whipped up a visa? No wonder he didn't want to attract the attention of the police or the HR department.

Emma looked at the teenager, clearly concerned yet captivated.

“Where did you learn to do all that, Romuald?”

He shrugged.

“You can do a lot of things if you know how to use a computer,” he said.

Emma insisted on hearing more, so Romuald continued: At thirteen and a half he'd spent a couple hours at the police station for having posted on the Internet a pirated translation of the latest Harry Potter book. Another time, he had hacked into his high school's website, altered his grades and sent wacky emails to the PTA board, just for fun. The previous June, a few clicks had given him the topic of the science *baccalauréat*, and he had offered his girlfriend an honorable mention. And lastly, in early July he had briefly hijacked French president Nicolas

Sarkozy's account, a sophomoric stunt not at all to the liking of the Élysée Palace. The authorities had managed to track him down. Given his record, he was sentenced to probation and strongly recommended to stay away from computers.

While listening to his anecdotes, Emma had a flash. "Go back to your computer," she ordered.

He complied, touching the keyboard at random to light up the monitor.

She pulled up a chair next to him.

"Look me in the eye, Romuald."

The teenager nervously put his glasses back on, but only held her gaze for a second or two.

"You are... you are very pretty," he mumbled.

"No, actually, I look awful today. But thanks to you, that's going to change," she said, indicating the screen.

She typed in the address of a hair salon and a minimalistic website came up. The words "*Akahiko Imamura, Airstyle*" danced across the screen.

"Akahiko Imamura is a Japanese stylist who revolutionized the world of hairdressing," she explained. "He is Manhattan's hottest commodity, THE master of hair coloring and cutting. Angelina Jolie, Anne Hathaway, Cate Blanchett... all the stars get their hair done there. And during fashion week, everybody wants him for their show. They say he is a true magician, and that's what it's going to take for me to look decent tonight. The problem is it takes two months to get an appointment..."

Romuald had caught her drift immediately and was already busy hacking the hair salon's reservation system.

"Imamura has three salons in New York," Emma went on while the geek's fingers flew over the keyboard. "One in Soho, another in Midtown and one in the Upper East Side."

"That's where he's working this afternoon," Romuald announced, pulling up the hairdresser's list of appointments.

Impressed, Emma bent over the screen.

"It's the same way you make an online booking for a restaurant," the young Frenchman explained.

"Can you change the customers' names?"

"Of course. It wouldn't be any fun, otherwise! What time?"

"Can you get me a 5 o'clock appointment?"

"Piece of cake..."

He typed Emma's name in, in the place of the client originally scheduled, without forgetting to send the latter an email postponing her appointment.

The young sommelier couldn't believe her eyes.

"Way to go, Houdini!" she congratulated him, kissing him in the cheek. "You are a magician, too!"

Romuald's pudgy face turned bright red.

"It was easy," he answered modestly.

“You wouldn't know it by looking at you, kid, but you're pretty smart,” she said opening the door on her way back to work. “This stays between just you and me, of course, *capiche?*”

*

**Brooks Brothers'
Boston
3:30 P.M.**

“You look great,” April promised. “The classic cut definitely suits you best: structured shoulders and a tapered waist, but roomy. Timeless elegance itself!”

Matthew stared at his reflection in the luxury store's full-length mirror. Clean-shaven, neatly cut hair and buttoned into a perfectly tailored jacket, he hardly recognized himself.

When's the last time I wore a suit? he thought.

He was distressed by the answer echoing around in his head.

Since my wedding.

“For you, I could almost go straight!” April guaranteed him, doing up a button.

He forced himself to smile to thank her for all her help.

“Now all you need is a plain wool overcoat, then off we go to the airport,” she declared, looking at her watch. “There's always a lot of traffic at this time of day, and no way are you going to miss that flight!”

Matthew paid for the purchases and they headed to April's Camaro, direction Logan Airport. Matthew was silent the whole way. His high spirits and enthusiasm had progressively dwindled as the day had gone on. The date with Emma Lovenstein didn't seem as good an idea as it had the night before. The more he thought about it, the crazier it seemed: the result of a spur of the moment decision made under the influence of alcohol and medication. He didn't know this woman from Adam. They had both let themselves get carried away by a brief exchange of emails. Meeting in person could only lead to mutual disappointment.

The Chevy turned onto the ramp to the passenger drop-off area. April made a short stop at departures to let her friend out of the car. As they hugged goodbye, the gallery owner tried to find an encouraging word or two.

“I know what you are thinking, Matt. I know that you're scared, that you regret having made this commitment, but don't back out now. Please.”

He assented with a nod of the head, shutting the car door behind him, then got his bag out of the trunk and gave his housemate one last wave as he entered the building.

He strode through the hall quickly, going directly through security—he had checked in online—to the boarding area. When it came time to board the plane, however, he was overcome with doubt and fear. He broke into a sweat, all kinds of contradictory feelings rattling around inside him. Kate's face flashed before his eyes with surprising clarity for a moment, but he refused to let himself feel guilty. He blinked a few times to chase away the image then presented his boarding pass to the stewardess.

*

**Bergdorf Goodman's
5th Avenue, New York
4:14 P.M.**

Feeling slightly out of place, Emma wandered among the displays of the elegant New York City department store. Everything about the place intimidated her, from the grand marble building itself to the sophisticated sales women—with fashion model looks—who made you feel shabby. Deep down Emma knew that stores “like this” weren't for her—you didn't look at prices here and you had to be rich, attractive and confident to even *try on* a garment—but today she felt capable of overcoming her inhibitions. It was completely irrational, but she had high hopes for tonight's date. She had hardly slept at all the night before and, today, impatient, she had gotten up early and spent over an hour inspecting the contents of her closet for just the right outfit. After numerous fittings and hesitations, she had decided on a rich brown bodice embroidered with coppery thread and a black silk pencil skirt with a high waist that showed her figure to advantage. But to complete the outfit she needed a coat worthy of the name, not the shapeless horror she usually wore. Ever since entering the store, her feet had kept taking her back to a magnificent brocaded three-quarter length jacket. She fingered the intricate silver-gold thread weave of the delicate fabric. It was so beautiful Emma didn't dare try it on.

“Would you like some help, miss?” inquired a saleswoman, who had caught on to her little game.

Emma asked to try on the coat, which looked great on her but cost \$2,700, an extravagance she certainly couldn't afford. In appearance, she made a decent salary. But this was Manhattan and living in the city cost an arm and a leg. Especially since a good part of her savings went to paying weekly appointments with a shrink. A vital expenditure. Margaret Wood, her psychotherapist, had rescued her when she was in very bad shape. Since then she had learned to protect herself by putting up barriers against the fear and depression that threatened to swallow her up.

And here she was again exposing herself to danger.

Emma managed to get a hold of herself and came out of the dressing room.

“I’m not going to take it,” she said.

Happy not to have acted on impulse, she headed toward the store exit, making a detour by the shoe department, where she cast an admiring eye on a pair of Brian Atwood powder pink leather heels. The display model was her size. She slipped her foot into the shoe and immediately turned into Cinderella. The distressed python-print pumps had glints of lilac and sky-high lacquered heels. The kind of shoe that could completely transform an outfit. Her good resolutions vanished. Emma got out her credit card to buy herself a dream. Purchasing price: \$1,500. On her way to the cash register, she impulsively retraced her steps and scooped up the fabulous brocade coat. The upshot of her little shopping spree: one and a half month's salary up in smoke in a few minutes time.

Coming out on 5th Avenue, Emma was gripped by the bone-chilling temperatures. Frozen stiff, she tied her scarf and lowered her head, trying unsuccessfully to protect herself from the wind's sharp sting. An icy blast froze her on the spot, numbing her face, arms and legs. Eyes running and cheeks burning, she walked to the edge of the sidewalk and hailed a taxi. She couldn't face the idea of continuing on foot. She gave the driver the address of the hair salon, asking him to first swing by Rockefeller Center, where she left a bag containing her old coat and shoes with the Emperor's doorman.

Located in the heart of the Upper East Side, Akahiko Imamura's salon was airy and spacious, with putty colored walls, white oak shelves, comfortable leather couches and acrylic accent tables topped with orchids. Emma gave her name to the hostess who checked the appointment on her tablet. Everything was in order; Romuald's computer wizardry had worked. While waiting for the renowned stylist, an assistant washed her hair and expertly massaged her scalp. Thoroughly enjoying the attention, Emma relaxed, forgetting for a moment her wild spending spree, her butterflies and worries, completely surrendering to the refined comfort of the place. Then Imamura came in and greeted her with a stiff bow. Emma took a magazine clipping of Kate Beckinsale from her bag.

“Could you do something like this?” she asked.

Imamura ignored the photograph, studying his client's face at length instead before muttering a few words of Japanese to the hair colorist expert. Then, equipping himself with a pair of scissors, he began to cut a few strands. A good twenty minutes later, he handed her over to the colorist who evenly applied a coat of daring auburn to her hair. Once the color had set, Imamura rinsed her hair personally then gave her cut a few finishing touches. Next, he wound the lengths of her hair into fat curlers, one strand at a time, before drying her locks,

removing the curlers and reworking his creation with his fingers.

The result was stupendous. Her hair was swept up into an elegant French twist: a subtle, sophisticated style that gave her face a soft glow and set off her light green eyes and delicate features to perfection. Emma approached the mirror, fascinated by her new image. A few rebellious locks loosely framed her face giving the twist a more natural effect. As for the color? It was absolutely perfect—better even than Kate Beckinsale's! She'd never looked so good in her entire life.

Feeling wonderfully lighthearted, she hopped in a cab to go to the East Village then took out her makeup kit to complete her look: a touch of pale blush, shimmery gold eye shadow and coral red lipstick.

It was 8:01 P.M. when she entered *Five*, the small Italian restaurant south of Tomkins Square Park.

*

Delta flight 1816 landed at Kennedy Airport a few minutes behind schedule. Seated towards the back of the plane, Matthew cast a nervous glance at his watch. 7:18 P.M. The minute he got off the plane he rushed over to the line of taxis and waited a good ten minutes before getting a cab. He gave the driver the address of the restaurant, promising him a good tip—just like in the movies!—if he got there on time.

In New York, too, it was incredibly warm for the month of December. There was traffic but not as bad as he had imagined. The yellow cab sped through Queens and over to the Williamsburg Bridge in record time and was soon making its way through the streets of the East Village. The car pulled up in front of *Five* at exactly 8:03 P.M.

Matthew took a deep breath. He was on time. Possibly even first. He paid the fare and stepped out onto the sidewalk, both nervous and excited. With another deep breath, to regain his composure, he pushed open the door of the Italian restaurant and went in.

Chance Meetings

*...Time's the king of men,
He's both their parent, and he
is their grave,
And gives them what he will,
not what they crave.*
William SHAKESPEARE

Five
New York
20:01 P.M.

Her heart pounding, Emma walked over to the bar and was greeted by an attractive woman with a friendly smile.

“Good evening. I'm here to meet Matthew Shapiro. He's booked a table for two.”

“Really? Matthew is in New York?” the woman exclaimed. “What good news!”

She looked at her reservations book. Matthew's name didn't seem to be listed.

“He must have called directly on my husband's cell phone. Vittorio's so absent-minded, he forgot to tell me. Don't worry, I'll find you a good table on the mezzanine anyway,” she promised, coming out from behind the counter.

Emma saw that she was pregnant. Really pregnant, even.

“Can I take your coat for you?”

“No thanks, I'll keep it with me.”

“It's gorgeous.”

“I'm glad you like it, considering what I paid for it!”

The two women exchanged a smile.

“My name is Connie, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you. I'm Emma.”

“Right this way, Emma.”

The two women went up a flight of wooden stairs which led to a cozy mezzanine level with low ceilings.

The restaurant owner motioned to a table overlooking the dining area below.

“Can I get you something to drink? A glass of mulled wine, perhaps? It's pretty cold out there tonight.”

“I'd rather wait for Matthew, thanks.”

“OK,” Connie replied, handing her a menu before slipping away.

Emma looked around. The restaurant had a cozy, intimate feel, exuding warmth and a good vibe. A blurb on the menu explained it was called “Five” after Joe DiMaggio, the legendary Yankee's uniform number. A photo on the brick wall depicted the baseball great with Marilyn Monroe, insinuating the couple may have eaten at the restaurant. Hardly believable, but romantic all the same.

Emma looked at her watch: It was 8:04 P.M.

*

Five

New York

8:04 P.M.

“Matthew! What a surprise!” Vittorio exclaimed, seeing his friend come through the door.

“Hi, Vittorio! How are you doing?”

The two men gave each other a big hug.

“Why didn't you let me know you were coming?”

“I spoke to Connie earlier this morning. Isn't she here?”

“No, she had to go home. Paul's been having ear infections lately.”

“How old is he again?”

“He'll be one next month.”

“Do you have any pictures?”

“Of course I do,” Vittorio smiled, reaching for his wallet and pulling out a picture of a chubby toddler. “Look how he's grown!”

“Looks like he's a pretty solid fellow already,” Matthew commented.

“Sure is, it's all the pizza I give him at feeding time,” the restaurant owner joked with a glance at the reservations list.

“I see you've requested our romantic “dinner for two” table! Good for you! I hope you've found yourself a looker.”

“Come on, Vito, knock it off,” Matthew entreated, embarrassed. “Isn't she here yet?”

“Nope, the table's still empty. Come on, it's over here. Can I get you something to drink?”

“No thanks, I'd rather wait for Emma.”

*

Five
New York
8:16 P.M.

Well, Matthew Shapiro, your parents certainly didn't teach you that punctuality is the politeness of kings... Emma thought, with an impatient look at her watch.

She could see the door of the restaurant from where she was seated, expecting to see Matthew Shapiro walk in the restaurant every time it opened. Annoyed, she turned her head to look out the window. It was starting to snow. A few fluffy white snowflakes could be seen swirling in the halo of the streetlamp light. She sighed quietly and took out her smartphone to see if she had any new messages.

Nothing.

After a brief hesitation, she decided to send her tardy dinner date a quick email. Just a few casual sentences to hide her growing impatience:

Dear Matthew,
I'm at *Five*, waiting for you inside.
The pizza with artichoke hearts, Parmesan and arugula looks divine!
Hurry up, I'm starving!
Emma

*

Five
New York
8:29 P.M.

"Your little lady's certainly taking her time now, isn't she!" Vittorio teased, joining his friend on the mezzanine.

"She sure is," Matthew admitted.

"Don't you want to call her?"

"We didn't exchange numbers."

"Come on, Matt, don't worry. This is Manhattan. You know how it is here. New Yorkers have a very flexible idea of punctuality..."

Matthew cracked a nervous smile and decided to send her a message instead:

Dear Emma.

My friend Vittorio is dying to have you try one of his Tuscan wines. A Sangiovese from a small property near Siena. He swears Italian wines are the best in the world. Come soon so he'll put a lid on it!"

Matt.

*

Five
New York
8:46 P.M.

Emma was mortified. The guy was a total jerk! Forty-five minutes late and not even an email or a call to the restaurant to apologize!

“Maybe I should try calling Matthew on his cell phone,” Connie suggested, seeing how upset Emma was.

Embarrassed, Emma hesitated:

“I... I guess so. Thanks.”

Connie tried Matthew's number but got his voicemail.

“Don't worry. He'll be here. It's probably because of the snow.”

Emma's phone “beeped,” signaling an incoming email.

Emma glanced at the screen. It was an error message, “recipient unknown,” informing her the message she had sent Matthew hadn't gone through.

Strange...

She double-checked the address then tried sending the email once more. It failed again.

*

Five
New York
9:13 P.M.

“I guess it's too late now. She's not going to come,” Matthew remarked resignedly, accepting the beer in Vittorio's outstretched hand.

“I don't know what to say, my friend. *La donna è mobile, qual piuma al vento*¹...”

“You can say that again,” Matthew sighed.

He had sent Emma two more emails without getting an answer. Looking at his watch, he stood up.

“Can you order me a cab for the airport?”

“Are you sure you don't want to sleep at the house?”

“Positive. Thanks, though. Sorry I took up one of your tables for nothing. Give Connie my love.”

Matthew left the restaurant at 9:30 P.M. 40 minutes later he was back at the airport, having confirmed his return flight on the way there. He checked in on the next to last flight of the day. The flight left New York on schedule and landed in Boston at 12:23 A.M. Logan was half-empty at that time of the night. He caught a taxi the minute he left the terminal and made it

1 Woman is flighty, like a feather in the wind.

home by 1 in the morning.

April was already asleep when he walked through the front door of his house on Beacon Hill. He looked in on Emily, who was sound asleep in her bed, then went back down to the kitchen. He poured himself a big glass of water then mechanically turned on the laptop on the kitchen counter. He checked his emails and saw there was a message from Emma Lovenstein. Oddly enough, the email hadn't shown up on his smartphone.

*

Five
New York
21:29 P.M.

Emma shut the door of the restaurant behind her and climbed into the cab Connie had called for her. The wind had quieted but the steadily-falling snow was starting to stick. In the car, she tried to contain an onslaught of negative feelings, but it was no use. She was too angry, felt humiliated and betrayed. And furious with herself for having let a man get the better of her yet again, to have fallen for mere empty words and to have been so naive. When she got to 50 North Plaza, she went down the lobby stairs to the basement. The communal laundry room was empty, and depressing. She walked along the dingy gray corridors until she reached the trash can area, the darkest and grimmest corner of the building. In a rage, she broke the heels of her Cinderella shoes and threw them into one of the metal bins. Then she ripped the fabulously expensive coat with her bare hands and tossed it in after.

In tears, she took the elevator up to her apartment. She opened the door and, ignoring her dog's greeting, took off her clothes and stood under a spray of freezing cold shower water. She was overwhelmed by the old irrepressible urge to hurt herself, to turn the rage swelling up inside of her against her own person. She hated herself for having no control over her emotions. It was exhausting and terrifying. How could she go from a state of elation to a state of depression in a mere few minutes time? How was she able to swing so quickly from the most intense joy to such utter blackness?

Her teeth chattering, she left the glass shower booth and wrapped herself up in a bathrobe. Then, after taking a sleeping pill, she crawled into bed. But the pill was no use. Emma couldn't sleep. She tossed and turned, trying to find a comfortable position, then gave up, staring at the ceiling in despair. It was obvious she was too upset to fall asleep. Around one in the morning, she'd had enough. She turned on her laptop to send one last email to the man who had ruined her evening. Furious, she opened the lid of her computer—adorned with a

stylized sticker of Eve.

*

Matthew was appalled as he read the email Emma had sent him.

From: Emma Lovenstein

To: Matthew Shapiro

Object: Jerk

You really had me fooled. Turns out you're just another jerk with no manners, and no sense of decency. Don't get back in touch with me. And don't send anymore messages.

From: Matthew Shapiro

To: Emma Lovenstein

Object: Re: Jerk

What are you talking about, Emma? I waited for you at the restaurant all evening. I even sent you two emails that you didn't bother answering!

Sure you did! Do you think I'm some kind of an idiot, or what? You could at least try to come up with a phony excuse: the cold, the snow. There are a million things you could think of...

What snow? I don't know why you're mad at me, Emma. You're the one who stood me up!

I showed up, Matthew. I waited there all evening. And you didn't even send me an email!

Then you must have got the restaurant wrong.

Hardly. There's only one restaurant called *Five* in the East Village. I even talked to your friend Connie, Vittorio's wife.

That's a lie: Connie wasn't there tonight!

Of course she was! The pretty dark-haired woman with short hair, at least eight months pregnant!

What the hell are you talking about? Connie's baby was born almost a year ago!

Before hitting "enter" to send the last message, Matthew looked up from the screen. The conversation was going nowhere. Emma seemed to be telling the truth, but her excuses made absolutely no sense. Her arguments were completely irrational.

He took a sip of water and rubbed his eyelids.

She had mentioned snow, and Connie's pregnancy...

He frowned and began to carefully examine all the emails Emma had sent since yesterday. All of a sudden something caught his eye—a detail really, yet not even that. A crazy thought crossed his mind...

What's today's date, Emma?

December 20th, as you know perfectly well.

December 20th of what year?

Sure go ahead, laugh at my...

What year is it, Emma? Please...

This guy is completely nuts, she thought, her fingers tensing up on the keyboard. To set her mind at rest, Emma checked all of Matthew's emails. They were all dated December... 2011.

2011. Exactly one year later, to the day.

*

Overcome by a sense of dread, she shut down her computer.

It took several whole minutes before she even dared to articulate the situation in her mind:

She was living in the year 2010; Matthew was living in 2011.

For some unknown reason they were able to communicate, but only through the laptop computer.