

EPIPHANY

The instant she stepped out onto the sidewalk, the sky cracked open and thunder echoed all around the office buildings like a car bomb. A few large spots of rain started to patter onto the concrete, and so she ran to the corner of 49th Street and waved frantically for a taxi. She was wearing her new cream linen suit and her new Manolo Blahnik shoes and she had just had her hair cut at Vidal Sassoon.

Like a happy miracle, a taxi with a lighted FOR HIRE sign came jouncing down Lexington Avenue toward her, and she stepped out into the road with her arm still lifted. As she did so, however, a sandy-haired man in a loud green summer suit pushed right out in front of her and let out a piercing two-fingered whistle. The taxi pulled over and the man opened the door, just as the rain began to lash down in earnest.

“Excuse me!” Jessica screamed. *“Excuse me! That’s my cab!”*

The man was half-in and half-out of the taxi door. He blinked at her as if he couldn’t understand what she was talking about.

“This is my cab,” Jessica repeated, possessively gripping the top of the door. The rain was clattering onto the taxi’s yellow roof and soaking her shoulders.

“Your cab?” The man looked around in mock-bewilderment. *“I’m sorry. I don’t see your name on it anyplace.”*

“It’s mine because I hailed it first, the driver was slowing down for me.”

“Listen, I think I was nearer to the cab than you were. What do you want me to say?”

Still she clung onto the door. *“You asshole. You unmitigated asshole! You know this is my cab.”*

“Hey lady, you getting in or what?” the taxi-driver wanted to know.

“You saw me first, didn’t you?” Jessica demanded. *“You were stopping for me.”*

“I just want to get the hell out of here, all right?”

Jessica tried to seize the sandy man’s shoulder but he twisted his arm away and slammed the door, breaking her middle fingernail. The taxi pulled out into the traffic and sped off down Lexington, leaving her standing in the middle of the road.

She tried to hail another taxi, and there were dozens of them, splashing across the intersection like shoals of bright-yellow dolphins, but the rain was really hammering down now and every one of them was occupied. She had never hated anybody in her life,

not really, but when she saw those smug, dry people sailing past in their taxis, she wished they would all have cardiac arrests over their lunch-tables, or choke on a fishbone. Her linen jacket was almost transparent and her strappy little shoes were filled with water, and her hair was sticking to her forehead. There was another flicker of lightning, followed by a deafening thunderclap.

Miserable, furious, she retreated to the nearest doorway. Even here the rain bounced against her shins, and the temperature was beginning to drop, so that she started shivering. She turned around to see if she could find any shelter inside the building. It was a small private art gallery with heavy glass and stainless-steel doors. She pushed her way inside and immediately found herself in a world that was hushed and warm, thickly-carpeted, with bronze mirrors all around, and elegant arrangements of arum lilies in glass Japanese vases. The walls and the furnishings were pale and beige and restful.

She took off her shoes and wiped the insides with a Kleenex. Three hundred and eight dollars, and they were ruined.

Two young men were sitting talking at a creamy marble desk, both of them dressed in expensive suits, their shirts gleaming white and their hair glossed back. The taller one turned and stared in surprise at her bare feet. “*Ye-e-es?* May I help you?”

“I, er...I just came in to take a look around, if that’s okay.”

“Please do...you’re more than welcome. My God, you poor thing, you’re *soaked!* Listen – why don’t you go to the restroom and dry yourself off. We have some lovely Turkish towels in there.”

“Well, thank you, I appreciate it.”

She went into the silent, expensively-fitted restroom. The mirror was tinted a flattering pink, but she still looked as if the coastguard had just fished her out of the East River with a billhook. She opened her purse and tried to comb her hair, but her feathery brunette bob had been ruined, and all she could do was slick it straight back in a style that was strangely reflective of the two young men.

When she came back out the two young men were waiting for her, smiling. “Better?”

“Much, thanks.”

The taller one opened a drawer in the desk and took out a thick shiny catalog. “Here...you’ll probably want one of these. Seventy-nine fifty, I’m afraid.”

“How much?”

“Oh, don’t worry. It’ll be worth *twice* that in six months’ time.”

She took the catalog and somehow she felt like a Dayak tribeswoman being handed a Manhattan telephone directory.

The young man smiled and said, “The prints are all for sale, too, starting at twenty-five.”

He gave a little cough and added, “Thousand.” Then, “Each.”

Jessica looked down at the catalog. On the front cover there was a black-and-white photograph of a young Mexican man. He had gappy teeth, and he was smiling wide-eyed and mocking at the camera. About twenty feet behind him, on a wide verandah, a silver-haired white man in a light-gray suit was looking over a garden of impossible lushness, crowded with orchids and ferns and amaryllis. The brochure was entitled *Queer Nation, the photography of Jamie Starck*.

Oh my God, she thought. She had read about this exhibition only yesterday. Jamie Starck had been a protégé of the notorious homosexual photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, and this exhibition had been furiously and publicly condemned by Mayor Rudolph Guiliani. The mayor had tried to close it down, but there had been demonstrations in Gracie Square by hundreds of gay rights activists, and in the end the mayor had been forced to give way. Or at least to come up with the grudging acceptance that “graphic depictions of alternative lifestyles, in context, may not be wholly deleterious to the city’s moral fabric.”

“I ah – I seem to have made a mistake,” she said, trying to hand the catalog back.

“Of course you haven’t,” the young man replied. “Or, even if you *have*, how will you know unless you see for yourself?” He was handsome in an other-worldly way and perfectly groomed. His skin was exfoliated and honey-tanned, and his fingernails were lightly-polished. His necktie was silk, an Impressionistic splash of carmine and gold. His spectacles were fashionably lozenge-shaped, and immaculately clean. He wore a loose gold wristwatch by Jaeger-le-Coultre and a spicy and expensive cologne. Jessica could imagine that his underwear was Calvin Klein, blindingly white, without a single stain.

“I’ve come to the wrong gallery, that’s all.”

But the young man said, “Does it matter?” and took hold of her arm, and guided her toward the exhibits.

“Honestly,” Jessica protested, “I only came in here to shelter from the rain. I really didn’t -- ”

It was then that she saw the first photograph. It was black-and-white, as all of them were, taken on a high-intensity film that gave startling clarity to every single hair, every single goosebump, every single blemish. It was a picture of two young men – one black, one white, facing each other with their arms loosely linked over one another’s shoulders. They were both slim, muscular, and almost laughably good-looking. Both of them had fully-erect penises, and their glans were touching each other, almost kissing each other. The photograph was labeled *Racial Accord*.

Jessica stood and stared at it for nearly ten seconds. Then she turned to the young man in the lozenge-shaped spectacles and looked in his face for an explanation.

“You’re looking for a meaning,” he said, as if he could read her mind.

She shook her head in confusion. “I never thought that -- ”

“I know. This exhibition strikes everybody the same way, men and women both. They come here with all kinds of preconceptions, ‘I hate queers’ or ‘I’m straight but curious’, but they all walk out enlightened. Like Saul, you know, on the road to Damascus.”

Jessica moved to the next photograph, and the young man followed her, although he kept his distance. The photograph depicted a naked Arab, kneeling in the desert, his cheek pressed against the hot sand as if he were listening for the sound of distant hoofbeats. On the far horizon there were sand-dunes, ribbed by the wind, and a cluster of palm-trees. Close to the palm-trees stood a white-bearded man wrapped in Bedouin black, holding the halter of a highly-disinterested camel.

The Arab was pulling apart the cheeks of his bottom to expose his anus, in a gesture of extreme submission. His penis was erect and the glans was seasoned with grains of glittering sand. The title of the photograph was *Abid*.

“In Arabic, *abid* means ‘slave,’” said the young man, although he still kept his distance.

“I, ah -- I think I should go now,” said Jessica.

“Well, that’s up to you. But you’ll never see anything like this again, ever. Jamie’s dying of AIDS, and he’s already lost eighty percent of his sight.”

As if she were dreaming, Jessica moved to the next picture. It showed a very thin middle-aged man lying naked on a chaise-longue. His eyes were half-closed as if he were dozing, and his hair was long and blond and wavy, like a woman’s. On the elaborately-tiled floor beneath him lay a Borzoi dog, sulking, as Borzois do. A young Moroccan man in a huge top-heavy silk turban was kneeling next to the chaise-longue. His turban was draped with strings of pearls and he wore large dangly earrings. The young man’s lips were closed around the Englishman’s penis, while one long-fingered hand was cupping his testicles. The young man wore an embroidered waistcoat, but he was naked from the waist down, and semen was dripping like strings of pearls down his thighs.

“What does it mean?” said Jessica. “Is it just perversion, or what?”

The man in the glasses gave her a strangely confidential smile. “Perhaps it means that people should be free to express themselves in whatever ways they wish, no matter how bizarre.”

“Oh, yes? And perhaps it’s nothing but hard-core porn, masquerading as art.”

The man approached the photograph, and said, “You see it though, don’t you? Each picture is a mystery but each picture is also an answer.”

“So what’s this picture an answer to? Some bony old faggot’s prayer?”

The man laughed. “I like you...you’re very direct. That’s unusual.”

“I think I should leave now,” said Jessica. “I recognize the quality of this photography, and I guess it’s arguably art. But if you really want to know, I find it embarrassing.”

“All right. At least you’re honest.”

She gave him the catalog back. “Good luck, anyway.”

On her way out, she caught sight of a photograph that she hadn’t seen before, because the light had been shining on the glass, and obscured it. She stopped, even though she didn’t really want to. The man in the glasses waited so close behind her that she could hear his measured breathing. I’ll bet that even the hairs in his nostrils are immaculately-trimmed, she thought.

The photograph had been taken on the landing of a grand marble staircase, with high leaded windows that let in a thin, restrained light. A young man of nineteen or twenty, naked except for thong sandals, was leaning languidly against a marble pillar. He looked Thai, or Cambodian, and his hair was fastened with chopsticks in a geisha-like bun.

His skin shone with a silky, almost unearthly radiance. His nipples were like ripe sultanas. His penis was half-erect, with a foreskin that looked as if it were just beginning to slide back, and his scrotum was the texture of crumpled silk. A single sparkling drop of liquid quivered on the end of his penis, like a diamond.

More than anything else, though, it was the expression on his face that caught Jessica's breath. He had high cheekbones and large, dark, unfocussed eyes, as if he were drugged, or hypnotized. He was utterly exquisite.

"Ah," said the man in glasses. "All our women fall in love with Lo Duc Tho."

"That's his name? Lo Duc Tho? Who is he?"

"He was actually Viet Nameese. Jamie found him in a grand house in Paris, next door to the apartment building where Marlene Dietrich used to live."

Jessica approached the picture and touched one finger lightly against the glass. Lo Duc Tho stared back at her enigmatically. *Each picture is an answer, but each picture is also a mystery.*

"What was he doing in Paris?" she asked.

"He was a toy. I think that's the best description. The house was owned by a very wealthy lady whose father had made a fortune in Viet Nam when it was still owned by the French. After the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, when the French were forced to give up all of their possessions in Indo-China, her father came back to Paris – bringing not only his daughter but the orphaned son of one of his servants, a child of ten years old, and that was Lo Duc Tho.

"Lo Duc Tho was fed well and educated by private tutors and pampered in every way that you could think of. But in 1962, when he was eighteen, the father died suddenly of a stroke, and his daughter took over Lo Duc Tho's upbringing completely."

"You called him a toy."

“Exactly so. Lo Duc Tho was mademoiselle’s plaything. After her father’s death, she expected him to amuse her all day, playing the violin for her, singing for her, dancing for her. She also expected him to be nude at all times, except when they went out.”

“Nude? Like, all day?”

The man leaned against the wall beside her and nodded. “She made him pose for her in all kinds of exotic positions and sit close to her so that she could fondle him whenever she felt like it.”

“That’s extraordinary. What did Lo Duc Tho think about it?”

“I don’t have any idea. But he didn’t appear to mind, because he never attempted to run away. He hardly ever spoke, and when he did he used to refer to himself in the third person, as if he were talking about somebody else.”

“What a strange life.”

“You don’t have any idea. Mademoiselle used to invite her friends for afternoon tea, and Lo Duc Tho would be sprawled on a chaise-longue next to them, so that these thirtyish ladies could kiss him and caress him and even fellate him, if they wanted to. Jamie told me that madame’s friends use to smear the boy’s private parts with raspberry preserves so that they could lick it off.”

“My God. Talk about decadent.”

“I don’t know. I’ve heard about worse in New York. Guinea-pigs, being used in all kinds of inventive ways, things like that. And at least the French make very decent preserves.”

“You’re teasing me.”

The man gave her the faintest of smiles. “Tell me now that you won’t leave here feeling enlightened. Or *different*, at least.”

“Well, I guess you’re right. I will. Do you know what happened to Lo Duc Tho? He must be middle-aged himself now.”

“Mademoiselle became very ill and the house had to be sold. Jamie made some inquiries, but nobody found out where Lo Duc Tho disappeared to.”

The man accompanied Jessica to the front door. It had stopped raining now and the sidewalks were blinding with reflected light.

“Thank you,” she said. “It’s been very interesting. Possibly obscene, but very interesting.”

“The pleasure,” he assured her, “is totally mine.”

“So how was *your* day?” asked Michael, pouring himself another large glass of chardonnay.

“Unusual,” she said.

“Oh, yes? Unusual in what way?”

“I did something I never imagined that I would ever do in a million years. I went to see that Queer Nation exhibition. Well, I didn’t actually go out with the intention of seeing it, but I got caught in the rain and that’s where I ended up.”

Michael blinked at her. He was thirty-one, two years younger than she was, but his short-cropped iron-gray hair made him look much older. He had very pale blue eyes, the color of bleached denim, and a broad, Scandinavian-looking face. He was wearing a blue-and-white striped English-tailored shirt and a pair of expensive fawn slacks, and no socks. His ankles were still tanned after two weeks’ filming in Bermuda.

“And?” he said, at last. “What did you think of it? The exhibition?”

“I was...corrupted, I think.”

“Seriously? You’re serious?”

“It was strange. I don’t know exactly what I felt. Some of the pictures were very beautiful and they were all technically brilliant. But there was something *poisoned* about them.”

“Maybe you’ll make a point of taking an umbrella next time.” He checked his heavy steel wristwatch. “Jesus, look at the time. I have to call Bertrand in Vancouver.”

“Can’t you just finish your dinner?”

“Listen, I’m going to miss him if I do. He’s flying to Montreal this evening and I have to talk to him about the Harrington account.” He took his glass of wine and left his half-finished tagliatelle on the plate. He went across to the living area and sat on the large black leather chair next to the window, where the phone was. Jessica stayed at the table with its shiny black glass top and continued to eat and watched him while he talked.

Outside the window she could see the sparkling lights of the Jersey shoreline, and two helicopters circling like fireflies.

Both Michael and she worked in advertising. He was a freelance director for TV commercials while she was a senior copywriter at Nedick Kuhl Friedman. They had lived together for eleven months now, renting between them this huge condominium overlooking the Hudson. They had furnished and decorated it in minimalist style, but very expensively. On the opposite wall, discreetly lit, hung a dot painting by Damien Hirst for which they had paid \$78,000.

Michael said, "We could meet up in Cancun on the twenty-fifth. Yes, that's right. I need that very special light they have on the beach there. No, the Gulf Coast is no good at all. Far too harsh. What are you talking about, filters? If you want perfection you have to *start* with perfection."

Jessica wound her tagliatelle around her fork. She couldn't help thinking about Lo Duc Tho, and how he had wandered around naked all day. She could almost imagine him sitting in the large leather chair opposite her, his hair pinned up like a geisha's, one leg insouciantly slung over the armrest, his eyes as dark and blurry as a court portrait by Velasquez. He would be idly playing with his half-erect penis, rolling his foreskin backward and forward in a slow, dreamy rhythm.

"I need at least two lighting cameramen. Well, I'd prefer David Weill, but if you can't get him...Yes, I know all about budget, Jim. But you're talking false economy here."

Perhaps she would beckon Lo Duc Tho and he would rise from his chair and walk across to the table. He would lay one long-fingered arm on her shoulder, respectfully, as lightly as a humming-bird. She would beckon him again to stand even closer, so that she could see every vein beneath his ivory skin. His pubic hair was like shiny black silk, and pomaded, and combed, so that it stuck to his stomach in waves.

"I'm telling you, if we shoot it and it doesn't work, which it *won't*, the way you're describing it, then we'll have to shoot it over, and that's going to cost us more than double."

She took hold of Lo Duc Tho's penis and gently massaged it. It grew harder and harder, until the foreskin peeled right back and the glans swelled as dark as a damson

plum. She gripped it even tighter, as tight as she possibly could, but when she looked up at Lo Duc Tho he did nothing but give her the most abstract of smiles, as if he were thinking about something else altogether.

Between finger and thumb, she lifted a strand of tagliatelle from her plate. She encircled the shaft of his penis, and tied the tagliatelle in a slippery little bow. Then she took another strand, and another, until his erection was decorated with eight or nine ribbons of pasta.

“Now for some sauce,” she told him. She took a handful of garlic and tomato sauce out of the bowl and smeared it all over his scrotum and between the cheeks of his taut, rounded bottom. “You like that?” she asked him, gently rolling his testicles between her fingers. “Now you’re a meal in yourself.”

She leaned forward and licked his wrinkled, tomato-tasting skin. She nuzzled him and sucked him, sucking each testicle one after the other. “You’re beautiful, aren’t you?” she said. “You’re absolutely gorgeous.”

She took the swollen head of his penis into her mouth and slowly slid her hand up the shaft, so that one by one the ribbons of tagliatelle slipped over his glans and into her mouth. When she had swallowed them she stuck out her tongue and probed the hole in his penis with it. As she did so, she rubbed him harder and harder. “Come on, you can give me my dessert now. Don’t be shy.”

It was then that she became aware that Michael had finished his phone call to Bertrand and was standing staring at her. Immediately, embarrassed, she sat up straight, and it was then that she realized that there was nobody there, no Lo Duc Tho, and that she had been smearing tomato and garlic sauce all over her chin and her cheeks and beating with her fist at nothing but thin air.

Michael slowly pulled his chair out and sat down, still staring at her. “What the hell are you doing?” he asked her, at last.

“I’m, ah – I seem to have made a bit of a mess.”

“What is this? Some kind of attention-seeking stunt? Listen, I’m sorry I had to call Bertrand right in the middle of dinner, but for Christ’s sake, look at you.”

Jessica wiped her face with her napkin, and then stood up. “I was – I don’t know. I was trying to eat it the Italian way.”

“I’ve been to Italy six times and I never saw *anybody* eat like that. I never saw anybody eat like that *ever*. Maybe my sister’s two-year-old kid.”

“Well, I just wanted to relish it, that’s all. Like really, really relish it.”

With that, she threw down her napkin and walked stiffly to the bathroom. She stood in front of the mirror staring at herself. She still had tomato and garlic sauce in her hair, and the front of her cream cotton blouse was spattered all over, so that she looked as if somebody had hit her in the nose.

How could I have done that? she thought. I was sure that I could see Lo Duc Tho. I was sure that I could actually *taste* him. God...maybe I’m working under too much pressure. Maybe I’m cracking up.

She looked down at her hand, and slowly reproduced the rubbing motion she had used to stimulate Lo Duc Tho’s penis. She could still feel his hardness. She could still feel his foreskin, as slippery and pliable as a won-ton. She took a deep breath and then she unbuttoned her blouse, filled up the washbasin with cold water, and pushed it in to soak.

When they went to bed, they both read for half an hour. Then Michael abruptly slapped his book shut, put on his American Airlines sleep-mask, and heaved himself sideways, with his sun-freckled back to her.

“Goodnight, then,” said Jessica, but Michael didn’t answer. He didn’t like weirdness, or anything unpredictable (like his partner smearing her face with tomato and garlic sauce) and he was obviously making a point. One of the things that had first attracted her was his solidity, the feeling of security he had given her, but as time went by she was beginning to find it increasingly repressive, like living with a disapproving parent.

She had been reading Coleridge, an old dog-eared copy she had found in a cardboard box in the cellar. It wasn’t easy to understand. Yet she felt that it was just like Lo Duc Tho’s photograph, a mystery and an answer, both at the same time.

“In his loneliness and his fixedness he yearns towards the journeying Moon, and the stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward; and everywhere the blue sky belongs to them, and is their appointed rest, and their native country, and their own natural homes, which they enter unannounced, as lords that are certainly expected and yet there is silent joy at their arrival.”

She felt as if Lo Duc Tho had been waiting in the wings of her life ever since she had first felt sexual stirrings. Thinking back on her reaction this afternoon when she had first seen his picture, she realized now that what had stopped her in her tracks was *recognition*. Here was the man who would sit beside her under the journeying moon and the lordly stars, and offer his nakedness and his docile beauty so that she could discover the true meaning of pleasure.

She laid her book on the nightstand and switched off the light. In the darkness she could hear the plaintive mating-call of a ferry crossing to the Jersey shore. Michael had started that persistent *pish, pish, pish*, which meant that he was already asleep.

She was very tired. Before she had been caught in the rain she had been working for more than five hours with her creative team, trying to develop a series of magazine advertisements for Moist-Your-Eyes anti-wrinkle cream. Then – after she briefly come home to change – she had gone down to Ray MacConnick’s studio in the Village to supervise a three-and-a-half-hour photo-shoot.

All the same, she found it difficult to sleep. She couldn’t stop thinking about Lo Duc Tho, and the way in which he had seemed to materialize in front of her. She couldn’t stop thinking about his strange, detached smile, and the feeling of his skin.

She turned over, and as she did so she felt fingers trailing gently down her back. “Not now, Michael,” she murmured. But the fingers kept on tracing patterns around her shoulder-blades and down her spine, and back again. The touch was so light that it made her skin tingle.

“Michael -- ” she said, but then she heard him grunt and stir and start that monotonous *pish – pish – pish*.

“Michael?” She propped herself up on one elbow, and looked around. Michael still had his back turned toward her, and he was deeply asleep.

She looked around the darkened bedroom, frowning. She even slapped the comforter, as if there could be somebody hiding underneath it. Nobody. She must have imagined those fingers, or maybe they were nothing more than the draft from the air-con unit.

Uneasily, she lay back down again. It was true that she had been working far too hard for the past three months, but she knew that if she could pull off a really successful campaign for Moist-Your-Eyes there was a vice-presidency waiting for her, and \$25,000

more salary. She didn't want to come to pieces, not now. Not when everything for which she had sacrificed so much time and so much effort was right within her grasp.

She tried to empty her mind, the way that she had been taught at her yoga class. Imagine your thoughts pouring out of your ear, and soaking into your pillow. Imagine blackness, infinite blackness. No sound, no sensation, just seamless darkness and total detachment. But then she felt the fingers again, delicately teasing her shoulders, and following the curve of her body so that she shivered as they reached her hips.

She turned onto her back. Immediately -- without a sound -- Lo Duc Tho materialized out of the darkness and lightly climbed astride her. She let out an 'ah!' of shock, but he pressed his fingertips against her lips. He sat gazing down at her, his face barely visible in the gloom. .

"You're not real," Jessica breathed. "There's nobody here but me and Michael."

Lo Duc Tho leaned forward and kissed her lips, and she was sure that she could taste lemon grass on his breath. As he kissed her, he took hold of her right hand and guided it toward his penis, so that she could feel it rising between her fingers. He showed her how to roll it against her nipples, round and round, and it gradually grew so hard that it felt as if it were carved out of polished ivory. Her nipples stiffened in response.

Her breathing began to grow shallow. With her left hand she reached between Lo Duc Tho's thighs and fondled his testicles, tugging at the skin of his scrotum with her sharpened fingernails. She tugged harder and harder, but Lo Duc Tho didn't utter a sound, although the head of his penis was slippery now, and so were her nipples.

This was a kind of heaven...to have a beautiful and exotic young man who didn't speak or argue or complain. A young man with whom she could have any variety of sex she wanted, whenever she wanted. She closed her eyes and already she could feel a dark, compressed sensation between her legs. It was the first stirring of an orgasm that she knew would be almost unbearable. She pressed his penis harder and harder against her breasts, and kept up her rhythmical pulling at his scrotum.

He suddenly arched his back and ejaculated. Warm sperm flipped against her cheek, and then anointed her neck, and then her breasts. Lo Duc Tho sat utterly still for a moment, and then he began to stroke her face and massage her breasts until the sperm

began to dry. She closed her eyes and she could smell him and she felt as if she had never been so pampered in her life.

Then he disappeared. She didn't know how he did it, but he simply unraveled in the darkness like a knotted silk sheet, and he was gone. She sat up again, trying to see if he was hiding behind the armchair, or buried in the shadow of the armoire, but there was nobody there.

She couldn't have imagined him. She touched her breasts and she could still feel his sperm on her. She waited for a long time, almost five minutes, to see if he would reappear. She didn't call out.

At last, exhausted, she lay back and closed her eyes. Michael grunted and turned over again, and his arm dropped heavily across her.

"Got to call Henry," he mumbled.

During her lunchbreak the next day, Jessica went back to the gallery. The smart young man with the glasses was still there, but this time he was alone. Jessica went directly to the picture of Lo Duc Tho and stood staring at it, as if she expected it to talk to her.

"You're back, then?" said the man, circling around behind her. He was wearing a smart navy blazer and a very white shirt and his aftershave had strong notes of vetiver grass.

"I wanted to take another look, that's all. You were right. This exhibition is a revelation. The trouble is, I can't work out what it's a revelation *of*."

"I think you will, if you give yourself time."

"Tell me more about Lo Duc Tho."

"There's nothing more to tell. He was content to be used, that's all. Whatever mademoiselle asked of him, he obliged. I suppose you and I find it difficult to imagine anybody being so docile. But there can be great spirituality in such docility. I think that Lo Duc Tho was closer to heaven than we can possibly imagine."

"You knew him yourself," said Jessica.

"Yes, I did."

"In fact...you're Jamie Starck, aren't you, and you're not dying of Aids at all."

The man gave her a smile that was almost coy. “Well guessed. I tend not to advertise my identity. When they find out, some people react in a very negative way. Negative – I suppose that’s a joke, for a photographer.”

“I need to find out who Lo Duc Tho actually was.”

Jamie Starck took off his glasses and looked at her seriously. “You *need* to?”

“Yes, whatever you know. Anything.”

“You’ve seen him.”

“No. But I imagined that I saw him.”

“It counts for the same thing.”

“Who is he? *What* is he?”

“I can’t really explain.”

“Is he a ghost? Is that it?” She didn’t even know how she could bring herself to think such a thing, let alone suggest it out loud, on a bright summer day.

Jamie Starck shook his head. “I don’t think that I believe in ghosts. But perhaps I believe in the overwhelming power of human desires – particularly sexual desires. Think about it – Sometimes we can almost bring ourselves to orgasm, can’t we, just by thinking sexual thoughts. Lo Duc Tho is one of our desires, and that’s what gives him such a grip on our imagination.”

Jessica said, “You’ve seen him too, haven’t you? I mean, after you took his picture? Did he come to your bed?”

Jamie Starck said nothing. Jessica hesitated for a moment, and then she said, “He’s very alluring. I’m not sure what to do.”

“No, it isn’t easy, I’ll admit. It’s that mixture of absolute innocence and absolute corruption. Let me tell you...I walked into mademoiselle’s salon one afternoon when she and her friends were gathered for tea. Lo Duc Tho was sitting on the chaise-longue, wearing a girl’s velvet hat, his cheeks rouged, his eyes made up with eye-shadow, his lips painted with lipstick. His legs were wide apart and he was erect. An elegant woman in a Balenciaga suit was sitting beside him, a truly classic French beauty of a certain age, and she was slowly pushing her long pearl necklace into his anus, pearl by pearl, right up to the clasp, and then slowly pulling it out again, over and over, until he climaxed all over her skirt. She laughed with delight.”

“Is he dead, do you think?” asked Jessica.

“I don’t know. Probably. Even if he isn’t, I wouldn’t even know where to start looking for him.”

That night Michael had to take three of his clients to Le Cirque, so Jessica spent the evening alone, washing her hair and giving herself a pedicure. At 11:00 pm, Michael called to say that he was going to be very late, so not to wait up for her. She went to bed with the television switched on but the sound turned right down and tried to read, but she was too tired to make much sense of Coleridge.

“And all should cry Beware! Beware! His flashing eyes, his floating hair! Weave a circle round him thrice, And close your eyes with holy dread, For he on honey-dew hath fed, And drunk the milk of Paradise!”

Without realizing it, she fell asleep, and the book dropped out of her hand and onto the comforter. And it was only a few minutes afterward that a young long-fingered hand gently lifted the book away, and stroked her forehead and her hair, and kissed her cheek.

She opened her eyes. Lo Duc Tho had climbed onto the bed next to her, on all fours. His glossy black hair was hanging loose, so that he looked like a wild young animal. He was staring at her intently, his lips slightly parted, but he didn’t speak. She could see between his thighs that his penis was already stiff, and that his testicles were as tight as two walnuts.

“What do you want?” she asked him, and her voice seemed unnecessarily loud. The light from the television gleamed on his naked back. “Are you alive? Or dead? Or am I going mad?”

He kissed her again, and then he drew down the comforter. She was wearing a pink sleep-T, and he reached down with both hands and softly squeezed her breasts through the warm brushed cotton. She no longer felt frightened. She could see now that Lo Duc Tho was everything that Jamie Starck had described. He was everything that she had secretly desired, and never dared to tell anybody, come to life.

She sat up in bed, crossed her arms and took off her T-shirt. She stroked Lo Duc Tho’s cheeks and upper lip, and pushed the tips of her fingers into his mouth, so that he could kiss them and lick them and nip them with his perfect white teeth. Strongly but

gently she pushed him onto his back, and then she sat astride him, as he had sat astride her. With both hands, she moved his penis up and down, quite forcefully, so that on her downward stroke his foreskin was stretched right back.

“Are you never going to talk to me?” she said. Lo Duc Tho gave her his abstract smile, but still didn’t speak.

“I suppose that’s the nature of fantasies,” she told him. “They don’t argue with you and they don’t involve you in idle conversation.”

She leaned forward so that her nipples touched his chest, and she swung her breasts from side to side. “I think we’re going to have to decorate you a little,” she said. “How about some silver rings through your nipples, and some tattoos? You’d look gorgeous with a few flowery tattoos.”

She kissed him and ran her fingers deep into his clean shining hair. His skin was absolutely flawless, except for a tiny star-shaped scar on his right shoulder. “Touch me,” she said, sitting up again; and he slid one hand beneath her thigh and stroked her clitoris with the tip of his middle finger, so lightly that it was almost like being licked. She was so aroused that his stroking made a wet clicking noise like somebody softly smacking their lips.

She raised her hips, and took hold of his penis in her hand, and positioned it between her thighs. Then she sank down on it, all the way down, until she could feel his scrotum squashed against the cheeks of her bottom, and she let out a long quavering moan of absolute pleasure. If this was nothing but a fantasy – if this was nothing but her own desire – it was a fantasy of unbelievable intensity, and she didn’t care if she was going mad or not.

“Lo – Duc – Tho -- ” she breathed, again and again. “Lo – Duc – Tho – ”

He felt so long and hard and slippery that he seemed to penetrate deeper into her body than any man who had ever made love to her before. She could almost believe that the head of his penis would nudge her heart.

“You’re driving me out of my mind,” she gasped. “You’re killing me.” They were both glistening with sweat and yet Lo Duc Tho still didn’t appear to be exerting himself, or involved in what he was doing to her in any way. She rode up and down on his penis even more forcefully, *smack, smack, smack* against his thighs, and she caught him

closing his eyes for a moment, as if at last he was beginning to feel something like the same pleasure that she was.

Exhausted, she lifted herself off him and rolled onto her back. Lo Duc Tho rose up next to her, as if he was going to climb on top of her, but she threaded her fingers into his hair and said, "You're *my* fantasy, remember? I want you to lick me." This time, *she* wanted an orgasm, too. This time she urgently needed one.

In silent obedience, Lo Duc Tho crawled down the bed and lay between her thighs. She watched him enthralled as his narrow tongue flickered on her clitoris, and he watched her back, never taking his eyes off her once. The feeling he gave her was so strong that she felt as if they were on a raft, on the ocean, at night, being washed out on an overwhelming swell.

Jessica had an orgasm that made her deaf and blind. It went on and on, until she couldn't tolerate any more back-breaking spasms, and she reached down to push Lo Duc Tho away from her.

Except that Lo Duc Tho wasn't there any more. She was lying alone on the twisted sheets, with the silent television still flickering, and her book of Coleridge lying on the floor where she must have dropped it.

She couldn't move. She knew that she should have got up, but she couldn't. She lay staring at the ceiling and breathing like a marathon runner. She thought: *what's happening to me? I've never had sex like that before, ever. But maybe I haven't had it even now.*

She was still lying there when the bedroom door and Michael came in, tugging off his stripey silk necktie. "Hey, there! You still awake? Jesus -- I thought those guys were going to go on drinking all night."

He came over to the bed and sat down beside her. "You look hot, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm okay."

He reached out and touched her forehead. "Jesus, you're burning up. I'm not kidding you -- you look like you're going down with the flu. You should keep yourself warm, not lie here undressed like this."

She couldn't think what to say. She couldn't stop trembling and she was still short of breath.

“I’ll call Dr Biedermeyer first thing. And there’s no way you’re going into work tomorrow.”

He came back with two glasses of milk. “How are you feeling now? I should have known something was wrong when you had that accident with the pasta sauce.”

She was sitting up straight in bed in a black silk kimono, with her hair in a towel turban. “That was no accident, Michael.”

“I don’t get you. You didn’t make all that mess on purpose?”

“Michael, there’s something I have to tell you.”

He took off his robe and climbed into bed next to her. “You’re very stressed out, honey. I know that. That’s why I’m going to call Dr Biedermeyer. He can give you something to keep you together until this Moist-Your-Eyes account’s all wrapped up. You know, maybe Prozac.”

“I don’t need Dr Biedermeyer, Michael, and I don’t need Prozac. I’ve been seeing somebody.”

Michael had just taken a mouthful of milk but now he slowly put his hand to his throat as if she had told him that she had poisoned it “You’ve been *seeing* somebody? Who?”

“It’s not what it sounds like. I haven’t been having an affair. I’ve been seeing somebody, like an hallucination. Here in the house.”

“*What?*” he said, with a disbelieving laugh that was almost a bark. “I don’t understand you.. An hallucination? Like, a mirage?”

“More like a ghost. Except that he doesn’t walk through walls or anything like that. I can feel him. I can actually smell him.”

“A *ghost*? For Christ’s sake, Jessica. I thought you were the most pragmatic woman I ever met.”

She was tempted for a second to tell him the truth, but then she decided that he wouldn’t be able to take it. Apart from being very straitlaced about sex, he was also fiercely possessive. Even the thought of a *ghost* making love to her would upset him.

He took hold of her hands. “Listen, sweetheart.. I still think this is definitely a stress thing. You know and I know that ghosts don’t exist. What you’re seeing, what you’re feeling, it’s all in your head. You remember Chet Lewis, who used to work with

Langton & Clarke? He got so overworked that he started believing that black dogs were chasing him down the street.”

“Please, Michael. I don’t want to see Dr Biedermeyer and I don’t want Prozac. This is nothing to do with stress. I guess the best way to describe it is that it’s some kind of epiphany.”

Michael looked completely baffled. “An epiphany? Like a *revelation*? The burning bush, something like that? Jesus, you *do* need a doctor.”

“There’s only one way I can explain it to you, and that’s to show you. Meet me tomorrow lunchtime on 49th and Lex.”

“This is crazy, Jessica. This doesn’t make any sense at all.”

She leaned forward and kissed him on the lips. “Michael, I love you. When you see this for yourself, I promise you, you’ll understand.”

“I don’t know...I’m supposed to be meeting Ron Shulman at twelve.”

“Meet me at eleven-thirty then. Please.”

He puffed out his cheeks. “Okay, if you insist. But I still think you need some help with this. Really.”

It was raining again when she met him outside the gallery. He stepped out of a cab, paid the driver, and came over with his coat-collar turned up. Then he saw the poster outside announcing *Queer Nation* and even before he said “hello,” he said “*Here?* This is where you had your epiphany? I can’t go in here.”

“Please, Michael, you must.”

He looked around uneasily. “For Christ’s sake. Supposing somebody sees me.”

“It’s a legitimate photography exhibition, Michael, and you’re a professional photographer.”

“I don’t think so, sweetheart. This kind of thing really isn’t my scene.”

“I need you to understand, Michael. Please.” She grasped his hand and led him through the door into the softly-carpeted interior. Jamie Starck wasn’t there today, but his young assistant was. He came over with a wonderfully hip-swaying hands-flapping walk and said, “Hel-*lo!*”

“Hi,” said Michael, in the gruffest of voices, and held onto Jessica’s hand as tightly as he could.

“Come for another peek?” the young assistant said. “You’re in luck, we close tomorrow. Next week it’s the Reuben French, the Gray Period. Very *dour*, Reuben French.”

Jessica said, “My partner and I just want to take a quick -- you know -- ”

“Professional interest,” put in Michael. “I’m photographic director for J.D. Philips.”

“Oh, I *am* impressed,” the young assistant told him. “Do feel free, won’t you? And if you need anything...” and here he gave Michael a long, lingering look “...you won’t shy away from asking me, will you?”

“Yes,” Michael told him. “I mean, no, we don’t need anything.”

As they walked into the gallery, Jessica said, “You’re not coming down with a cold, are you?”

“No, why?”

“You were talking like *thursss*,” she said, mimicking his gruffness.

“I always talk like that.”

“You mean you always talk like that when you think another man’s taken a fancy to you.”

They reached the photograph of the Arab boy bending over in the desert. Michael stopped and said, “Oh my God.”

“*Abid*,” Jessica explained. “That means slave.”

Michael didn’t say anything but slowly shook his head.

“Anyhow,” said Jessica, “that wasn’t I brought you here to see.”

She led him around the corner and there was the photograph of Lo Duc Tho. Michael looked at it for a moment and then turned his back on it.

“This?” he said, pointing his finger over his shoulder. “This faggot is your epiphany?”

“You don’t see it?”

“I see a dirty picture, that’s all.”

Jessica approached the photograph and stared into Lo Duc Tho’s unfocused eyes. “He was a plaything,” she said. “He would allow women to do anything they wanted.”

Michael turned back. "I can't see what you're trying to show me."

"He was naked all day, so that women could touch him and kiss him and pet him. Don't you understand? He was completely open, completely unthreatening, completely compliant. Men expect that in women, but sometimes women need that in men."

"I'm sorry, Jessica, I really don't get it."

"Look at him, Michael. Look at his face. Look at his eyes."

Michael looked at him, and then he shook his head. "You've lost me, sweetheart. You've completely and utterly lost me."

Michael took her to the Park Bistro on Park Avenue that evening, where she toyed with sautéed skate wing in vinegar sauce while he had a messy saddle of rabbit, and kept tearing off large lumps of bread and stuffing them into his mouth.

"They have the best bread here. They fly the flour in from France."

"I'm sorry about today," she said. "I guess you're right. I've been trying to take on too much."

"Don't even think about it," he told her, with his cheeks full like Chip'n'Dale. "You ought to try some of this rabbit, it's out of this world."

That night she thought about Lo Duc Tho, but she was too tired to want him to visit her. All the same, she wondered what it would be like if she tattooed him all over – his back, his buttocks, his thighs, his face. She would cover him in large blue chrysanthemums, like the chrysanthemums on her silk scarf from Galeries Lafayette. She would decorate his nipples with gold rings, and his belly-button with a gold stud. Then she would have a large gold ring pierced through his foreskin, so that she could lead him all the way around the apartment by a long silk cord.

In his sleep, Michael grunted, "*Won't.*"

The following evening she had to stay late at the office to finish off the last of the Moist-Your-Eyes layouts. She didn't finish until way past one o'clock in the morning, and she was hyped up with too much coffee. She caught a cab home, and the seats were sticky and smelled of sick.

The apartment was in darkness when she let herself in, apart from the silent-movie flickering of the television under the bedroom door. She went into the kitchen and poured herself a large glass of Evian water. She could see herself reflected in the window, and she thought that she looked almost like a skull. White face, high cheekbones, dark rings under her eyes. She finished the water and rinsed the glass under the faucet.

She opened the bedroom door and at first she couldn't understand what she was looking at. Michael was crouched on the bed on all fours, and he didn't see her at first because his face was turned away from her. It was only when he slowly turned around and lifted up his head that she realized that he wasn't alone. There was a slight, mottled figure crouched beneath him.

In the stroboscopic light from the television, she saw that it was Lo Duc Tho, his long black hair hanging loose on the pillow, his thin elbows propping him up. He was decorated all over in chrysanthemum tattoos, and she saw the sparkle of nipple-rings. Michael was hunched over him in the way that a stallion covers a mare.

"Michael?" Jessica whispered.

Michael sat up, withdrawing himself, his penis gleaming, one hand laid protectively flat on Lo Duc Tho's slender back. He said nothing at all, but simply stared at her, caught in the act, waiting for her to say something.

Jessica approached the bed.

"Michael?"

Lo Duc Tho turned his head toward her and smiled at her slyly, his face half-covered by his hair, like a girl.

"I fell asleep," said Michael, in a parched voice. "I felt somebody touching me and I thought it was you."

"I never knew you – well, I never imagined you ever wanted *men*."

"I didn't. I mean I don't." Michael's penis was sinking. Lo Duc Tho reached around and took hold of it, and started lasciviously to rub it. All the time he kept on smiling at Jessica in that secretive, superior way, as if he knew that she wouldn't do anything to stop him.

Michael said, "He's not a man, is he? He's just an illusion."

“If he’s such an illusion, why is your cock going hard?”

“You were right. It’s just like you said. It’s an epiphany. It’s like understanding what you want for the very first time.”

Jessica stood beside the bed for the time it took her to breathe in and out, in and out, ten deep breaths. Then she unfastened the buttons of her thin ribbed cardigan, and pulled it off. Neither Michael nor Lo Duc Tho said a word, but both of them watched her unblinkingly.

She unfastened her bra and dropped it on the floor. Last she stepped out of her pale silk La Perla panties. Michael held out his hand to her and she climbed onto the bed next to him. Sweat was sparkling in his sandy-colored chest-hair.

“What are we doing?” Jessica whispered, kissing Michael’s lips, kissing his nose, kissing his eyes. All the time Lo Duc Tho kept massaging Michael’s penis, deliberately rubbing it against Jessica’s thigh, so that she could feel its snail-slime on her.

Michael said, “Maybe this is what we always wanted, both of us. Maybe this is what we always needed.”

He pushed her back gently onto the pillow, and parted her thighs. Then he helped Lo Duc Tho to climb on top of her. With two fingertips he opened her lips and guided Lo Duc Tho inside her. She felt Lo Duc Tho’s long smooth penis slide so deep that she couldn’t help herself from quivering. Lo Duc Tho’s hair trailed all over her face, and when she looked up she could see him staring at her, with that same distant but strangely self-satisfied smile.

It was then that Michael mounted Lo Duc Tho, and forced himself into him in one powerful thrust. Lo Duc Tho arched his back and uttered a single, high-pitched “*oh*,” as if he were practicing his pitch for an aria.

After that the three of them were silent, Lo Duc Tho pushing himself as far into Jessica’s body as her imagination would allow, and then further; and Michael gripping Lo Duc Tho’s hips and rhythmically forcing him backward and downward. Jessica reached down between her legs and felt four slippery testicles jostling with each other, and it was then that she started quite unexpectedly to climax and couldn’t stop.

She lay in the flickering light from the television for a long time afterward, staring at the ceiling. When she sat up, Lo Duc Tho had dematerialized, and there was only

Michael lying there, already asleep. She started to reach out to touch him, but then she changed her mind. She began to wonder if she still loved him any more.

The next day she finished work early. She had lunch with her old schoolfriend Minnie at Dosanko noodle restaurant on Madison Avenue and then she went home. When she opened the front door she was surprised to hear music playing from the living-room, one of Michael's favorites, *Samba Pa Ti*.

"I didn't know you were taking the day off," she called, kicking off her shoes. "I met Minnie for lunch. You could have joined us."

She walked into the living-room. Michael was lying on the couch, naked except for his Argyle socks. Lo Duc Tho was kneeling on the carpet next to him, his skin still tattooed all over with chrysanthemum patterns. His shining black hair was draped all over Michael's lap and his head was bobbing up and down.

"Christ, Michael, what's going on?"

"What? You're going to start getting all censorious? You were the first one to conjure him up."

"I know. But I don't know what to say. I never knew you were gay."

Lo Duc Tho's head kept on bobbing and in the end Michael had to grab hold of his hair to stop him. Lo Duc Tho looked up, and turned around, and when he smiled at Jessica his lips were glistening.

Michael said, "It's not a question of being gay, is it? It's a question of finding yourself."

"Don't you understand?" Jessica retorted. "He isn't even real!"

"Then it doesn't matter, does it? Maybe you'd like to have sex with another woman, but if she wasn't real, that wouldn't make you a lesbian, would it?"

"I don't know. I can't handle this, Michael. I don't *want* to handle it."

"Lo Duc Tho gave you your revelation, didn't he? He gave you yours! Well, he gave me mine, too! He made me realize what I was and what I really wanted!"

"You want other men? Is that it?"

"For the first time in my life somebody allowed me do what I've always wanted to do. Without any shame. Without any guilt. Without making me feel disgusted with myself."

“So where does that leave us?”

“Why should it affect us at all, except to make our relationship more exciting, and more honest?”

“You call it honest when I come home in the middle of the afternoon and find you with another man?”

“You said it yourself, he isn’t real. We’re imagining him, that’s all.”

Jessica knew this had to stop. Lo Duc Tho was still kneeling beside the couch, still fondling Michael’s softening penis, and the expression on his face told her what she was already starting to suspect. His appearance wasn’t an sexual epiphany at all. It was a revelation of something much darker than that. It was the beginning of a downward journey into sexual self-indulgence that could only end in acts so obscene that they scarcely be imagined. It was the ground opening up, right beneath their feet.

“Jessica! Listen to me!” Michael demanded. But Jessica went through to the kitchen, opened the cutlery drawer and took out the largest knife she could find. She returned to the living-room, where Lo Duc Tho had risen to his feet and Michael was standing with his arms wrapped protectively around his narrow shoulders.

“Don’t touch him, Jessica. You’re not thinking straight. Put down the knife and we can talk this over like sensible adults.”

Jessica approached them with the knife held out stiffly in front of her. “This isn’t something you can talk about, Michael. This is corruption, mine as well as yours.”

“Jessica, put down the knife before somebody gets hurt.”

She came closer. Lo Duc Tho was staring up at her with his dark, inexplicable eyes, his lips slightly parted. He was tattooed all over in the way that she had imagined he would be. His penis was half-erect and there was a large gold ring through the end of it.

Michael held out his hand. “Come on, sweetheart, give me the knife, will you?”

Jessica put the knife behind her back. With her left hand she took hold of Lo Duc Tho’s erection, slowly massaging it up and down. He grew harder and harder, until he was fully erect. Jessica looked at Michael and Michael looked at Jessica and there was caution in Michael’s face but also expectation, as if he were waiting for her to say that everything was going to be all right, and that they could share Lo Duc Tho between them. After all, if he were nothing more than a fantasy, what difference did it make?

Jessica rolled the ball of her thumb around the head of Lo Duc Tho's penis and at the same time she stared into his eyes. She didn't say anything, but she wanted him to know that she understood what he really was.

"Can we -- ?" Michael began, and it was then that Jessica swung her arm around from behind her back and cut with a gristly crunch clean through Lo Duc Tho's penis.

Michael shouted, "No!" Like a curtain caught by the wind, Lo Duc Tho melted away in front of Jessica's eyes but suddenly the world was smothered in blood – the carpet, the couch, the cushions. There was blood all over Jessica's hands and blood all over her blouse and blood was spraying in her face.

"*Oh God! Oh God!*" Michael was screaming and clutching his hand between his thighs. Blood was spurting out from between his fingers and halfway up the wall.

Jessica stepped back. One step and then another. She looked at the knife in her hand and then she dropped it.

"Call the paramedics! For Christ's sake! Call the paramedics!"

Michael fell onto his knees, his forehead pressed against the floor. Blood was streaming down his thighs in dark red rivers. He started to sob, but all Jessica could do was stand and watch him.

"Call me the fucking paramedics for Christ's sake you witch!"

She didn't say anything, couldn't understand what was happening. Lo Duc Tho had vanished but after all he wasn't real and now she had proved it.

Michael collapsed onto his back. He stared up at her glassy-eyed, gasping. "Help me," he croaked. "Jessica, for Christ's sake help me."

He slowly lifted his hands away from his thighs, and Jessica could see that all he had left was two crimson testicles and a two-inch stump, which was still pumping out blood. "*Jessica, help me!*"

But Jessica couldn't, or wouldn't. She turned away, and there on the arm of the couch she saw her chrysanthemum scarf from Galeries Lafayette, and the gold scarf-ring that went with it. She picked up the scarf and pressed it to her lips, and it was cool and silky and smelled just like Lo Duc Tho.

Two months later, a thirtyish woman wandered into the Wabash Gallery in Chicago. She stopped, looking bewildered. An immaculately-dressed man rose from his desk and approached her. “Yes, can I help you?”

“I don’t know. I think I must have come to the wrong gallery. I was looking for the Edward Hoppers.”

“Last week, I’m afraid. But you’re more than welcome to take a look around here.”

She frowned at the poster. “Oh, no. I don’t think this is quite me.”

The man took hold of her sleeve and guided along the soft-carpeted corridor. “How will you know, if you never even have a look?”

With a smile, he steered her toward her epiphany.

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