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IN ENVY COUNTRY

Stories

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Rochelle appeared at the office one day looking young and somewhat frightened, walking with tentative steps on the arm of her husband, who soon broke away like a discreet booster rocket and disappeared down a stairwell door, leaving her to walk forward alone, more abashed, to meet the rest of us. She was to interview for an accounting position.

My boss, the former kitchenware magnate Gerald Riding, led the way, stepping forward in that strange, tentative toe-walk—it made him look like he was trying to sneak up on something, or as if he might change his mind at any moment and race away. Gerald had finally fired his longtime accountant. What had driven Gerald past his limit was her handwriting, which was not just indecipherable but weirdly ugly. Even a
line of it gave the observer an immediate sense of imminent, hideous chaos. Gerald Riding was a tolerant man, himself eccentric—but among his extreme habits was a strict demand for neatness, brevity, coherence. Sometimes Gerald thought he should have been a lawyer. He liked the word “remedy.” Old Sarah was asked to turn the business records back over to us.

And Rochelle Remington Banks was hired, straight from her interview in response to the ad Gerald placed. She looked, as I say, young. Pale and timid and countrified, a far different image from that which would replace it in time. Her hair was a wild thatch, I remember; her clothes frowsy and earnest, like the skirts and blouses fading in windows of small-town shops. Her eyes were Betty Boop’s: huge and black. Eyes eager to persuade you of their natural sympathy without revealing the least trace of a thinking agency behind them. Those big wet black eyes managed, while taking in great gulps of information, to convey not one fleck of autonomous thought or opinion.

Eyes that waited, rapt.

Rochelle’s behavior made the same warrant of empty-vesselhood as did her eyes and even her voice, a piping sing-song. She presented herself in those first weeks with self-conscious erectness, a debutante balancing a book on her head—such eager, open disponibilité it couldn’t help slightly alarm us. For it didn’t take long to see that whatever the context, however breathless the words and reverent the posture, Rochelle wanted something.

At first it was information. Sources. Resources. Later it was favors. Might you be kind enough to mail this. Could you phone that, arrange the other. At first I only thought her terrified of making a misstep—that her Sunday school manners, so theatrically inflected, were part of the natural caution at any job’s beginning. Jobs fell apart so amusingly later—that was the joke of it. People slouched and slurred and kicked things around after dwelling years together in the same rooms, as if married too long. But beginnings were routinely stiff with performance anxiety, brittle with shiny representations straight off the resumé. Reliable. Self-starter. Multi-tasking.
I worked in the bullpen, as we called it: the reception desk for Gerald’s printing firm. My desk was positioned smack in front of the elevator, so that the elevator doors opened like theater curtains on a passenger who’d find himself facing an audience of one: me. The joke went that any discontented client or random lunatic might step through those sliding doors one day brandishing an automatic weapon, unloading on whoever was first in view. One old spy movie began exactly this way, and sometimes I did worry about it. Take this for your typos, you clowns. And this for your rush charge!

My chores were clerical, comical in retrospect—to include simply letting people in and out of Gerald’s building. Yes, the entire building. Lord knew how many millions the old edifice was worth in that upscale section of the city—a zone where successful film stars and rock singers bought mansions, even if they never bothered to live there. Gerald had dipped into his Ridingware dividends to renovate the structure. Amazing, what money could achieve. Once a grimy gray parking garage, now painted and rewired and clean—from the street Gerald’s building resembled a snowy, three-layered wedding cake replete with frosting ribbons and chevrons. A television screen on my desk showed me clients approaching the front entrance. When they pressed the downstairs bell an electronic dingdong sounded at my station. I’d push the little black button that unlocked the entrance doors—several times in rapid succession, so people below could hear the clicking and realize they should push through. All day long that dingdong assailed me, and all day I watched visitors struggling to manage the logic. I came to feel like part of some whimsical social science experiment.

In fact this was not far from true. Gerald enjoyed the doorbell apparatus, having rigged it himself. He had a taste for odd experiments; gathering human beings into unlikely combinations was only one facet of that taste, in perfect calm equivalence with a host of odd others. Gerald had so many oddnesses no one thought twice about them, except as an extension of who he was. He insisted only clear glass plates and cups and bowls be kept in the office kitchen. Any coffee grounds that scattered
sent him into a frenzy—we had to blot up each infinitesimal grain. Gerald hauled his daily materials—binders, papers, books, computer parts, a ratty blue sweater—to the office every day in a cardboard box, lugged with both hands as he walked his toe-walk. And yes, he liked to collect people and set them upon each other—but like splashed colors of paint, or instruments for some loony orchestra. Once he’d introduced people he tiptoed away.

His energy bewildered us. A man of sixty, he couldn’t have slept more than a few hours a night. At day’s end people half his age would be wilted and aching to go home, but Gerald—though the indentations beneath his eyes ran bluegreen—would eat an egg salad sandwich and make a cup of black tea, and stay on into the night. He could be glimpsed through the window at dusk from the street below, sitting at a computer under the second-story’s fluorescent ceilings, his scalp glowing pink where his hair was parted. Gerald received income from his shares of the cookware empire which still bore his name, a production imported by plucky immigrants whose business, right from the start, seemed to enjoy sunny popularity no matter what the national economy was doing. Ridingware expanded during the sixties to include dining settings, a kind of American faience, modernized in due course to be ovenproof and then microwave-proof, priced to appeal across a broad demographic. With this money, Gerald—who gave not one damn for cooking or dining tools, having less use for them than a badger might—turned to what he’d always loved: printing. Words. Type on paper. The names of the typefaces stirred him: Goudy, Helvetica, Electra, Caledonia, Metro. The names made him think of futuristic cities, or planets in a comic-book galaxy. He would sit in the city library for hours leafing through the back pages of old novels for the lovely final paragraph, “A Note on the Type,” its little sketch of historical eras and period styles, its thumbnail biography of the designer, the lore of peculiar difficulties . . . a practicing type founder in Leipzig who, despite illness and loss, was able to create two more original faces . . .

The wily variousness of each letter, even as it conformed to the visual elements of its alphabet family, drew Gerald as if to
an elegant mathematical proof. It must have soothed his longing for a controllable order that expressed, nonetheless, real beauty. We sometimes wondered why Gerald had not opted for a career in calligraphy. I decided his inventor's mind craved the purity of exactitude. Words were still needed—but with computers you could pour words, never spilling a drop. He kept several big books of type fonts on his desk, and carried several more around in his cardboard box. Though our business advertised as print-on-demand, and though it was true we mostly churned out throwaway flyers and business cards and posters stapled to telephone poles—what Gerald loved was designing handbills for civic events, like the renaming of a street, or the city opera’s annual fundraiser. Concert programs. Consulate cocktails. Broadsides for dance recitals, eco-festivals, poetry readings.

Those jobs made Gerald happy. And when Gerald was happy we could all let down a notch, and be cautiously happy ourselves. Office atmosphere turned on Gerald’s mood. When Gerald was angry he went cold and abrupt, and his features took on a pig-faced harshness. Gerald’s money made him supreme in that queer, private kingdom. You sometimes hated him, but guiltily, because he’d saved you. Plucked you from the daily floodtide of the lost and lonely—a tide still visible out the office windows, lapping the building’s edges in the street below—people slumping along, limp and soggy and faded among the discarded labels and candy-wrappers. Yes, he’d found me among them. A vague, melancholic art student on scholarship; short-tempered, leary, with no living family and no real prospects. Whenever I’d walked past Gerald’s building on Hyperion Street I’d notice his firm’s posters pasted up on the glass front doors. Someone in typography class told me Gerald was a typeface freak. I walked into his building one day and petitioned Gerald for work like a foundling. When he learned I could type fast and spell well, he hired me on the spot. The entire staff was composed of other versions of me. Two impoverished single mothers, a drug casualty, an aspiring actress. All single women. All needful. All eager to please.
But our staff’s collective memory of Gerald’s rescue had dissolved over time, as memory will, giving way to a notion of entitlement. We imagined we owned the jobs he’d kindly dreamed up for us, here in this pretend-business that never made money but served as Gerald’s hobby. Gerald paid everything: salaries and supplies and property taxes, even medical expenses. Every week he bought lunch for staff meetings wherein we’d “clarify our direction.” People bullied each other, gossiped and fumed. We played at business like kids playing house.

The irony was, Gerald took the printing as seriously as if it gave him his livelihood. He came from great wealth—a county back east was named for his family—and he had never been formally employed in his life, except to attend a tearfully boring Ridingware board meeting in Manhattan once a year. So we would clench up in those bleak moments when he barked at us, his features tightening piggily—and I’d wonder silently, sullenly, when did you ever have a real job.

Ah, but Gerald liked women.

Surrounded himself with them. And Rochelle was pretty. Not remarkably so, but her youth and Betty Boop eyes, her pleasantly slender body, gave her a capable, winsome aspect. In fairness, women were easier for Gerald to be among. Men would have scorned him, or been baffled by him. We hirelings formed a protective harem, no denying it, most of us in our early thirties then. At the time we found the harem idea amusing—one of a multitude of glib images to try on, like costumes. We took turns teasing Gerald when we knew he was in a mood for it, laughing and squeezing his arm, a ragtag of spirited colts.

Gerald himself looked like a turn-of-the-century portrait, missing only the bowler balanced on a proffered elbow. His hair was pepper-colored, parted on one side and pasted down with a damp comb. His body was queerly undeveloped, never subject to athletic exertions of any kind. His shoulders were a little boy’s—narrow and sloping. In fact Gerald was the shape of an oversized toddler, including a slight potbelly, which after a while I came to believe was the place he put his longing.
Gerald married an anxious young Russian woman he’d met in college. Ludmilla was big-boned with warm, smooth skin—an ad for facial soap—and she, too, came from wealthy importers. But her manner was tentative and importuning, often ending her sentences with a little self-deprecating half-laugh, *eh-heh*. She nonetheless bore Gerald two sturdy daughters, each stamped with a cheerful combination of both parents’ features like limited-edition coins. Gerald seemed fond of his family, but at the same time it was clear that family duty chafed and plagued him—slung him with that many more dreary chores, and fewer defensible escapes. How often I answered distressed, fluttery phone calls from Ludmilla—*Oh hi Merin eh-heh, is Gerald there eh heh?*—when she frantically needed him to show up at this place or that. Sometimes I thought Gerald’s marrying must have solved a two-pronged problem: it softened his sharp loneliness, but it also veiled his burgeoning strangeness. Thus, he bore the baggage of *pater*hood as stoically as he could. Anyone could see that Gerald would always rather be left alone—except, perhaps, for a bit of female admiration.

The more familiar we were, the better. He’d think of things to say to egg us on, exaggerating the situation we’d named just to hear us howl. It wasn’t for titillation: Gerald stood so far outside the living, so apart from any conventional idea of belonging to the regular skirmishes of survival, that people who actually appeared to be grappling with life, cursing and wiping off sweat—these were the real curiosity to him. His own life had been so thickly cushioned—doting aunts and sisters, and always, always, the money—that he could never, as one observer suggested, “slam a door.” Gerald was a *voyeur* ogling the phenomenon of mortal engagement.

Rochelle started small.

It was a matter at first of little favors. Finding files for her, or phone numbers. Then it became a series of perky requests. Rochelle sought those comforting services that one needs straightaway in a city: drycleaner, dentist, health food
store. A good happy-hour bar, a good Mexican diner. The list blossomed—dance clubs, travel agents, extension classes, gynecologists—and didn’t take long to grow braver: used BMWs, discount wine imports, psychiatrists, apartments to let. (Gerald wound up renting her a property of his own, at princely discount.) In each case Rochelle would approach her target with that unmistakable posture—buoyant, erect and sparkly, an adoring child bursting with a delicious secret. The trick of her manner was to flatter her mark, whipping this spell into a sweet foamy froth, installing a kind of fond delirium before the recipient had time to brace for what came next. Rochelle’s eyes and face brimmed with admiring delight: O wonderful one! You radiant spectacle you, you ice cream sundae you. Her voice all but squealed, coy and Boop-a-doopy, and the target would be temporarily blinded by the sudden atmospheric dazzle while Rochelle tiptoed closer: a favorite daughter approaching her indulgent daddy.

I remember a day I wore a jacket she fancied. It was old brown leather, oversized, from the secondhand store. I’d no idea she fancied it, nor had she in fact—when all at once she burst from her office. She had to race down the street. It was chilly out there. Quick, Merin: loan me your jacket? I tossed it to her just before the elevator doors closed. When they reopened she stepped forth wearing the jacket in her debutante position: intent, smiling. At me.

Merrrrin? Her voice glided upward. Her eyes shone.
I have a proposition for you.
This uttered with twinkling portent.
If I pay for its next cleaning, why don’t we share this jacket! She spoke the word share in a delectable rush, as if Christmas were about to fall through the ceiling on my head. Rochelle wanted to be anointed, that minute, as half-owner of my leather jacket. Why? Because what Rochelle desired, she absolutely believed she deserved. Like the notorious French king who had shrugged, on being asked his motive for some crazy edict, car tel est mon beau plaisir. Because such is my royal pleasure.
In the next year, Rochelle had a baby and divorced her husband. Stanley Banks was a tall, homely fellow who’d become a sales executive for a telecommunications franchise. He drove a white convertible and began dating again at once. A vain, irritable man whom no one at the office cared for, Stanley was never missed.

Meantime, Rochelle commenced a friendship with Ludmilla Riding. Little gestures at first. Offers to run errands. Lunches. Shopping. Soon the two were confessing their life’s dreams over glasses of merlot, and Rochelle had elicited Ludmilla’s most cherished theories of childrearing and world harmony.

I remember the day Rochelle emerged from the elevator in her best posture, and with a flourish plonked a basket on the countertop fronting my bullpen. Women on staff came running from every direction while I stood up and gazed in: a tiny pink creature with Rochelle’s pug nose wrapped papoose-tight in blankets, nested in her Moses-like carrier of woven reeds. Windowlight from the street played over the pink baby, who stirred and grimaced. Rochelle stood by, glowing with authorship as the women made the noises women make when they flock to view a new infant—but Gerald was nowhere to be seen. Where is Gerald?, someone finally thought to ask. I found him a room away, crouched at his terminal as if in a dugout trench during mortar fire. Gerald, c’mon, I urged him: Rochelle’s baby is here! He edged toward the infant, glanced, nodded nervously as we commanded he admire the blinking yawning Delia, her squinched face and fine fuzz of blonde down.

That’s very nice, he said at last, rocking slightly from heel to toe. Very nice.

Then he darted away.

Rochelle tried bringing the baby to work a few more times, perching the basket at her feet next to her desk, but Gerald’s discomfort was plain. Soon she had arranged to give the baby during the day into the care of Ludmilla’s Salvadoran housekeeper,
Alma. What was another little baby to Alma, who capably handled her own three small children, the Ridings’ two girls, and housecleaning into the bargain? Once again the cost to Rochelle was nil. Likely Gerald and his wife viewed his new young accountant to be caught in a poignant jam. She was now divorced, working fulltime, and deserving—as Ludmilla reminded her husband, hands on hips—of the same consideration he’d want for his own wife and children, was she not?

After a brief trial period Rochelle went to Gerald to assure him it was absolutely necessary she have an assistant to handle monthly payroll, taxes, and all regular payables and receivables. Gerald agreed at once, and a shy Swedish grandmother with short white hair came to perform these tasks three days each week. Rochelle’s child was being minded all day, and her main work was delegated. What did that leave Rochelle to do?

It left her free.

Free to arrange things. Rochelle commandeered her private office phone. Bikini waxes, psychic readings, makeovers. Scuba lessons. Spanish lessons. Acting lessons. Singing lessons. Yoga. Home and garden shows. Car shows. Rebirthing sessions. Deep tissue massage. We grew accustomed to seeing Rochelle trip in and out of the office all the business day, tossing a quick, joyful word to me about her official (wink) whereabouts for the next few hours. Slipping into the elevator and taking her debutante position—shoulders back, brimming with anticipation—the elevator doors slid together over her image like the closing segue of a movie segment.

At these gay farewells I always nodded, relieved to be rid of her. By then none of us was any longer much fooled—at least, none of us on Gerald’s staff—by the flung-glitter of Rochelle’s act. Where Rochelle was, unease crept in. A funny taste filtered through your awareness in her wake, like after you drank milk that had turned.

But it was too late for Gerald, trussed now by so many interlocked strips and layers it would be like peeling off skin to undo. Ludmilla had felt very pleased and excited when she persuaded Rochelle that toddling Delia should attend the same pri-
vate school (feeder preschool and kindergarten) as did the Riding girls. Naturally Gerald, who happened to be co-founder of that exclusive school, would authorize the scholarship for the struggling single mother. Soon Rochelle and toddler Delia were asked to accompany the Riding family on holiday retreats to the Riding country home, a jutting wooden structure in the mountains just a stone’s skip from the sapphire-colored lake. Alma was by then also cleaning Rochelle’s apartment, located a few convenient blocks from the Riding mansion. Rochelle and Ludmilla began setting off together to hear lectures by visiting spiritual leaders—Ludmilla felt deep stirrings of connection to specialists in past-lives, to channelers of the wise ancients. Rochelle acted on Ludmilla’s behalf during these outings, as scout and escort. She navigated them through lobbies, steering Ludmilla’s arm, negotiating tickets and directions and exits, waiting patiently for Ludmilla at restroom doors, ordering for them in noisy restaurants. Their children now played together after school every day like siblings. Rochelle had entered the family.

At the same time, she never lost sight of Gerald.

The two met in late morning with the office door closed. Together they reviewed the personal entreaties that poured in for Gerald, and Gerald would dictate his responses. People the world over knew of the eccentric heir to the Ridingware fortune, and the schemes begging his funding arrived daily, various as snowflakes. This one proposed selling pieces of the recently decimated Berlin Wall. That one sought to scan satellite-video relays. Save the Earth. Save the Whales. Save the Organic Farmer. Rochelle came to assume an air that announced her representation—her protection—of Gerald Riding. She became, in effect, his agent. She accompanied him to ceremonies, even spoke for him. Rochelle took the podium with the same book-balancing posture, but now with stricter authority. She would glance at her notes as she spoke, raising her head periodically to meet the eyes of people around the room, just as she’d been coached by her private, Gerald-paid, tutor. Rochelle gazed with calm pride at her listeners, with all the warm dignity the occasion could want.
By this stage, Rochelle sported a trendy haircut and vivid clothing. Tasty little suits, higher heels, chic boots and trench-coats, bags of rich leather, makeup that emphasized those lustrous, black eyes. She took facials and mudbaths, manicures, pedicures, papaya-enzyme purges. She had colonics, aura-manipulations, electrolysis. She ordered regular shipments of expensive vitamin supplements. An ion-cleanser, which resembled an oblong car radiator, buzzed away in her office. I never heard Rochelle ask the price of anything. I never learned what Gerald paid her. I tried not to think about it.

For myself? I was an art student, remember. I rented a studio out by the park, near an avenue from which, if you gazed to where it met the horizon, you could see a thumbnail-tip of blue ocean. My little place was a handy block from the main streetcar line. I thought of it as a second-floor shoebox, with holes cut in the lid. Stashed my charcoals and drawings there, and when I wasn’t brooding over these spent many hours on the floor nearest the wall heater, legs propped straight up against it, reading or watching television with a glass of wine. From time to time the office or one of its clients threw a party, and out of boredom and loneliness and some infernal spark of annoying hope, I’d force myself to shower and change and catch the streetcar to these evenings.

I remember one New Year’s Eve bash at the famous old Italian restaurant, for which we printed menus. The dimmed light of the wharfside bar made its picture-window views mysteriously luminous—graygreen sea at dusk, ferries motoring along strung with lights—while inside, a mist of champagne-filled glasses shimmered against the candlelit satin of women’s cocktail sheaths. Ludmilla was elsewhere that night, helping with one of the children’s holiday pageants. Restaurant workers danced and joked with guests; noise and recklessness ruled—that unique, sad abandon of another year marked done.

In the roar of the midnight countdown I glimpsed Rochelle, in a brilliant red silk dress, appear suddenly as an appari-
tion before Gerald, throw her arms around his neck and kiss him. The dress was sleeveless and diaphanous; a length of it flowed back over her shoulders. Her upper arms were white and full. Womanly ripeness swirled so easily with daughterly intimacy, there was no telling where either began or ended. Streamers and confetti were raining, hand-blown horns and noisemakers honked and bleated, and someone near the light switches flicked them rapidly off and on to make the soft bulbs blink in a strobe effect.

*I love you, Gerald*, Rochelle’s mouth shaped the words in the din as she held his face in her hands. (I could read the words easily enough, though it was impossible to hear.) Her eyes sought his teasingly, endearingly half-lidded, the way a poodle-owner might speak to her beloved pet.

Everyone by then was well-dosed with champagne.

Gerald blinked at her as though a trance had been interrupted: pleased, curious, a kid becoming aware he’d just tasted something good. He wore his same old blue sweater. Abruptly, his eyes crinkled merrily. *I love you, too, Rochelle*, his mouth shaped the words back to her. But as I watched I saw that Gerald was not breathing hard; not heavy-eyed. Not thickened and slowed with desire. Instead, he was cheerful. Imitative. Game. A happy parakeet mimicking human speech, or a space alien learning traffic signals. That was when I began to comprehend Gerald’s confused innocence. Of course he had his fantasies, but they were desperately mixed up with a kind of permanent wonder at the gestures of adult life. Though he had sired children, his inmost sensibility remained a child’s. Gerald would do his best to ape the apparent currency of the culture at hand. If custom dictated one kissed and declared love at midnight New Year’s Eve, why, he’d do as the aboriginals did.

Soon enough, Rochelle began dating.

*Exploring the opportunities,* she called it. *Taking initiative.* She placed ads for her ideal mate in the city’s weeklies and on internet bulletin boards. Her calendar must have been busier
than a president’s. I watched her come and go. If you had set up
a camera in front of my desk and filmed her various forays, then
fast-forwarded the film, it would have looked like a frantic old
silent movie: Rochelle ratcheting in and out of the elevator a
thousand times, each time pausing a millisecond to make elab-
orate gestures, mouth working, open shut open shut, giving care-
ful, explicit instructions to me.

An assortment of males began to appear. They’d walk out
of the elevator toward me—casually, because to show eagerness
was bad form. They’d lean on my countertop.

Hi. Rochelle here?

Just a minute, please. I’d buzz Rochelle and she’d promise
to appear in a moment. Then the boy would wander around,
staring at some of Gerald’s posters on the walls. Cool, he’d
sometimes remark politely. Unfortunately Gerald’s posters were
all the same. Since he craved minimalism and symmetry, all his
printed announcements took the shape, from a distance, of a
Rorschach inkblot test or a multi-tiered candy dish. And despite
his access to every typeface on earth, he always used the same
font. Garamond.

The boy would soon wander back to me and lean against
the front of my bullpen. I had to make small talk. So. What do
you do?

One was a stockbroker. Another, a small-plane pilot. A real
estate sales guy. An ad agency guy with a wee ponytail. A sous-
chef. An actor. One ran a sensitivity-training retreat in Carmel.
They were prospectors, just like the ones who’d staked claims in
Colorado or the Sierras, or the young soldiers waltzing young
women around in old Russian novels. Perhaps each of us only
amounts to some form of this in the end: perhaps it is only a
matter of degree. Rochelle would return to the office after each
tryst to tell about them. A picnic at Land’s End. Dancing at the
Stardust Lounge. At first the rest of us on staff listened like
chorines in a Broadway musical. We tried to track each episode
and to cheer for whomever it was Rochelle seemed to want. (The
real estate guy owned a property on a wealthy island in the bay.
Rochelle wanted to share the estate with him, the way she’d
offered to share my jacket. He stopped phoning.) Soon we wea-
ried of listening. Her reports began to wane. I knew Rochelle
was growing impatient. A new tack was needed, a new target. It
wasn’t long before she’d crafted her answer.

The city at hand wasn’t bearing fruit? Travel out of it.

Rochelle chose Greece. The island of Paros. Someone told
her it was still unspoiled—one of those secret destinations
of the avant garde, Rochelle confided to me in lilting, jubilant
tones. She had no difficulty persuading Gerald that her jour-
ney would be good for everyone and everything. It made
me wince later to consider that conversation. Rochelle would
never describe it. But she did insist, after everything else had
happened—after all of it was over—on telling me the rest.

What she did not supply, I could certainly envision.

Rochelle flew to Athens, which looked like one vast, seedy
miracle-mile, crumbling sheds and shacks and tire shops,
scraps and auto parts, garbage and noise. Athens frightened her
with its beggars and wizened grifters, its miles of dust and
chaos. It was August, chokingly hot. She found a bus to the har-
bor, paid her ticket for a big interisland ferry to Paros. Gulls
cried and wheeled, the late afternoon sun grainy through a haze
of seasalt, diesel fumes, dust. From the dock the ship loomed
like a skyscraper, boarding cars, trucks, huge cargo-containers,
lines of people streaming like ants into its cavernous hold. She
feared for the vessel’s floatability, but was glad to finally watch
the hot brown mainland recede, with a single visible brooch in
its filthy bosom—the Parthenon, small and mute and bone-
white, shrinking as the distance opened between her ship and
the city, wind riffling the gray water. As darkness came she slept
in her passenger chair; others on the carpeted floor, others on
the wide-slatted deck while the cement craft motored its course.

Dimitri Diamantis was waiting with the others as the giant
vessel hefted into the port at Parikia. You didn’t notice anyone
standing there until you’d made your way down the steep gang-
plank with the dozens of other backpackers. A scraggly lineup of
indifferent faces. A few old women in kerchiefs. Men with tight cotton shirts and pants. Boys racing in circles. Dust and smells of bundled fruit, frying meat, and the salt-sea surging around the ship, falling over itself at the edge of land in weak blips.

He looks like an actor, was Rochelle’s first thought. Soft brown hair, curling, slicked back on the sides. Dense dark brows permanently bunched over squinting eyes. His skin wasn’t good but it was strangely provocative, rough. He stood quietly, ignoring the clamor on all sides—as if not deigning to squander a moment’s awareness on it.

Mitso—she soon took up the local diminutive—was one of those types who could have come from anywhere, could have been Italian, Welsh, Israeli. The thing he clearly wasn’t was American. A traveler abroad soon recognizes American DNA—that fleshy insouciance feeding into lips and hair, the meaty way the body sheaths its bones. There was the quiet absence in Mitso of an American’s raw assumption of space. Instead, the young man was made of something more compressed, not as well nourished. The volatile Other. The mystery ride. So alike, on blurry face of it—humanoid, biped, westernized—yet so utterly not.

You need hotel. He asked it—stated it—as if someone else had said it, and he’d casually overheard.

Rochelle did, in fact.

You come my hotel. Big, clean, very beautiful. On beach. Beautiful white beach.

Again, he recited these facts as if patient, but bored. Smells of frying potatoes drifted from the harbor. Around them flowed people speaking many languages, animals, crates and big coarse burlap bags, a squawking, scurrying throng. After establishing the hotel’s reasonable price, Rochelle accepted. It was a bright, hot morning, the sunlight bouncing blindingly off sea and white sand. Mitso had a hotel bus; she was very tired; other tired backpackers had accepted. If it proved a scam she’d already be stationed in town in the middle of day, on the main road by the glittering water.
Mitso made it easy for Rochelle.

He was at her side at breakfast, which she took on the outdoors deck, consisting of a bowl of coffee lightened with milk, bread with butter (curiously, always slightly rancid) and honey. His family—grandparents, mother, younger brother—owned the little beachside hotel, living behind and above it in a series of small apartments—and Mitso had acted some years now as its chief mascot, advocate, and procurer. Mitso told Rochelle he was a law student at the university in Athens; he was just now having his summer holiday. He meant to practice in Athens, he said. Corporate law, he told her. In two years, when he passed the bar.

In the foreground he cut a handsome, lonely figure.

He would appear from the lobby doors on the patio where she sat alone at one of the little white plastic tables, drinking her bowl of milky Nescafé. When he emerged he’d typically look pale and badly used; God knew how many Santé cigarettes and ouzos had coursed through him. He was thin, wore clinging dark pants and almost transparent white cotton shirts open to the navel. Against his smooth chest rested a gold chain at whose vortex dangled an old-fashioned crucifix. Rochelle knew he had seen her sitting there, but instead of coming directly to her he would cross to the railing enclosure and look out to sea. Warm ozone haze already draped the shimmering blue air, which still breathed morning sweetness: the light more like mist, topaz blue, reverberant from above and below. The mountains, Rochelle noted, were like the desert mountains she’d driven through with Stan in Arizona, big benign curves, arid and scrubby brown, but here they were set on an island in the sea. They looked like pictures from children’s Bible stories. Pigeons and gulls strutted boldly around the white plastic table legs, turning their heads to the side, eyeing the cement floor for crumbs. Mitso would light a cigarette and squint out at the misty blue light. His face always seemed rumpled and pained with some profound complication. Rochelle could never
suppress the reflex that his dolor was something she should address—something it was in her power to cure.

Finally he would float forward as if by chance, to speak with her. Have you seen the island, all around, he murmured the first time. No, she hadn’t yet ventured beyond the beachfront strip where she’d encamped the day the Athens ship brought her. If you like I show you, he said, his brown eyes regarding her as if from beneath cool rippling pools. Rochelle believed she would like that. She climbed onto Mitso’s mihanaki behind him while he held it upright for her, snuggled her arms around his lean waist—he smelled like cigarettes and sugar—and off they sped spewing smelly exhaust, making a sound like an angry tree-saw. They zoomed past young men walking, past skinny dogs and sunburnt tourists. They saw the weatherworn houses tucked in the wild brush on dry, remote terraces. They stopped to buy her a straw hat against the merciless sun. They stood at cliff’s edge to regard the dim outlines of the island Antiparos, and the ploio, the boats on the shining afternoon water. They tramped up a steep dirt path to a restaurant where Mitso knew the owner, and in the blessed cool of the dark canteen they drank frappés of heavily sweetened coffee, while through the open door swallows flittered and chuckled in the branches of the olive trees.

Rochelle wrote postcards to Gerald and Ludmilla praising the beauty of the island, but she did not mention Mitso. How far her old existence—its shoulder pads and face-care systems, its time-management urgencies—seemed from the lazy warmth of this seaside town! How much more sense the pace of Mitso’s world made! Rochelle thought she should by rights be able to transplant her life here: to this sunbleached hotel across the street from the turquoise ocean, with nothing more to do each day than tote her paperback and bottled water to the beach, wander back at night for some dinner; later walk into town to the blaring disco bars with Mitso—while he was home on breaks from school, of course. Her mind cupped protecting hands.
around the image: vibrant American wife to handsome young Greek lawyer. She’d heard that tony neighborhoods were to be found outside Athens, some with real villas, surrounded by pines. Or perhaps she and Mitsos could make their home right here on Paros—she’d glimpsed the ranch-style houses popping up in its hills. Mitsos could commute to Athens by vapori. Of course, Rochelle missed Delia. She phoned the girl every two days; Delia was playing contentedly with the Riding sisters in their nursery. They had visited the circus, she informed her mother. Rochelle was thinking quickly, flitting and light, like a bat feeling out the parameters of a room. Delia could live here most of the year with herself and Mitsos: Stanley could have her on holidays. If there were no English-language schools Rochelle could hire a bilingual tutor—a tutor for herself and for Delia. Mitsos would adore the child. The Diamantis family would take the blonde toddler to its heart. Teach her the folkways. Care for her while Rochelle and Mitsos made getaways to other islands, to Paris or London or Madrid. Rochelle woke to these visions each morning, stretching dreamily inside her clean, starched sheets. If she bore down on the notion with all her ferocious will, something would happen.

Something had to.

After a week’s time, Mitsos asked her to meet his family. Rochelle’s chest squeezed.

But I speak no Greek, she demurred, taking his hands. They’ll think I’m just another dumb tourist.

Mitsos shook his head, smiling sadly. You very important, very beautiful, he said. I want they see. He pressed his lips to the knuckles of both her hands, his eyes never leaving hers.

Rochelle believed she’d made a hit with the Diamantis clan. A bit dazed, she’d sat down beside Mitsos at an oilcloth-covered table upstairs and nodded and smiled with painful brightness as his extended kin roared all around her, arguing and joking in Greek, passing delicacies—lamb stew, potatoes in garlic and oil, hunks of tough bread, salad of tomatoes and cucumbers, goat...
cheese, yogurt with honey. They pointed at her with their sodas and lemonade and retsina; they smacked Mitso on the shoulder, talking and laughing raucously. “Fili,” they grinned at him. When they laughed their mouths opened widely and Rochelle could see their teeth, yellow and snaggled and cracked, some of them gold, some missing completely. Mitso did not share their hilarity, nodding or shrugging tightly as he ate. He translated for her only when Rochelle prodded him.

They say you very smart, very beautiful, he said. Then: They want you tell them about California, he added with dark embarrassment.

Rochelle dutifully described the state’s northern half, its deep woods, mountains and beaches, orchards and vegetable farms. Mitso translated in rapid, somewhat irritated fashion. Rochelle guessed he felt possessive of her, and this touched her. The family listened: black-skirted yia yia with her fierce brows, pappou listlessly agreeable in his trousers and sweat-dampened shirt, bustling aproned mother and skinny little brother and who knew how many “cousins,” their eyes darting, mutely flickering with a light that Rochelle couldn’t identify. But she felt sure she’d made an impression, insisting that Mitso repeat to them how much she admired the island, their food and hospitality. As soon as he could, Mitso excused the two of them and asked her to walk with him on the beach, under the moon. They stepped around rocks in the sand. Mitso turned to her mid-step, and told her he loved her.

Rochelle went back to Paros to see Mitso once more, after the difficulties had begun. None of us knew, just then, what was wrong.

We only knew that not long after her first visit to Greece Rochelle began arriving to work at the office pale and distraught. It was late autumn by then. The air had sharpened, leaves of trees along the walks turning pewter, light over the city diffuse and fragile. At the time we did not question her, and she did not volunteer anything. We all went about our normal duties

A Note on the Type

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and tried to reincorporate Rochelle into the slangy rhythms of office gossip. She smiled, listened wanly, and soon withdrew to her desk. Something about her was altered, but none of us could pinpoint it.

She had first arrived back from her vacation tanned and euphoric. We knew she had met someone called Dimitri in the Greek islands, about whom she’d initially raved—I’d spotted several calls to Parikia on the company telephone bill—but she’d soon gone silent on the subject. I never saw her speaking directly to Gerald during that period, though sometimes when the door to Gerald’s office was closed I knew both were inside. I could hear their voices, low and urgent, though I couldn’t make out the words. At about the same time I noticed Gerald’s moods becoming shorter, his mouth pursed in that sour line we’d learned to dread. He didn’t respond to our teasing, nor initiate any of his little mischiefs. He sat all day at his computer fussing with type—trying to perfect the curve on a serif in blocky blown-up pixels, never pleased with the scaled-down result. Some days he didn’t appear at all. My co-workers, sensing a bad patch, moved softly. Even the front-entrance dingdong seemed mournful and plaintive.

Outside, the streets glistened silver with winter rains.

Rochelle’s chummy dates with Ludmilla lapsed. She tended to go straight home after picking up Delia, and during the business day I no longer watched her flash in and out of the elevator, taking her debutante position with its pert, expectant glow. Instead as the doors closed upon her I saw a different Rochelle, a Rochelle Picasso might have painted: broad cheekbones at disjointed angles, hair lifting in cockeyed lumps, skin porous and custard-hued, gaze glassy—staring at something invisible, and far away.

I learned long afterward that Rochelle had returned to Paros the second time on a mission. She had made a discovery shortly after returning to the American mainland, and she had placed
several phone calls. She had conferred with Gerald privately. Then she went back to Parikia to make her most impassioned stand.

She found herself sitting at the edge of the sagging single mattress in Mitso’s bare room out behind the hotel, talking to his back. It was broaching winter, and the room was gray and cold. Mitso was wearing a Yale sweatshirt, standing before a clouded mirror propped on a wooden bureau, combing his soft brown hair.

But I am carrying your child, she heard herself pleading. Though she had waited weeks and flown many hours at extreme cost to say it, the actual predicament imbedded in the words—words from daytime television serials—still so astonished her it splintered open in her mind like a dashed bottle as she spoke, filling her throat with shards, making her voice break.

Mitso flicked an exhausted glance sideways at her in the mirror. His brown eyes were dull and hard. You never understand. I am kamaka.

He turned to face her, hands braced behind him on the bureau. You know what is kamakia?

Rochelle didn’t know. Kamakia—the singular meant harpoon—were the young men who picked up tourist women in the ports. Many kamakia kept a running tally of their conquests during a season. Tourist women were easier and less expensive than paid prostitutes. And without risk to the family.

The family!

But Mitso, your family liked me!

His upper lip lifted, a brief curl. I told them fili. Friend, he said.

My family curious, he went on. They like hear you tell California. They want visit California. I too, want visit California! he added fiercely, stabbing his thumb at his own chest.

But the Diamantises had well understood what their eldest son, their hotel’s procurer, was about. It was a silently acknowledged axiom that his position gave constant access to attractive female travelers. Rochelle was one in a long line. In any case, the Diamantis grandparents and mana and adelphos with whom
Rochelle had dined were not the only family Mitso was talking about.

He looked at her. I am married, he muttered, looking away.

Mitso kept a wife and three small children on the island of Syros.

Nikos, Spiros and Irini stayed with his wife’s mother, who rented out her own set of pension apartments. It was cheaper. Mitso visited when he felt like it, sent what bits of money he could. Everyone on Paros knew. What was more, Mitso was no law student. He was no student at all. He would take over the hotel operation when his grandparents, and then his mother, died. It was the best he could aspire to.

He looked at Rochelle bitterly. She would have opportunities he could not dream of. And now his escape to them, through her, would be cut off.

You know these things! Why you come back here? Why act like you not know?

If Gerald Riding was detached from human strife, he was the more terrified of getting into the ring with it, of getting bloody. He loved running away, slipping from the room before he could be called on for an opinion. He kept a big sign in the lobby, hung at eye level just by the elevator doors: *Any work produced by this firm is in no way meant to represent the philosophy or beliefs of this firm.* How that sign annoyed me—his skittering dread of taking any kind of stand. Maybe he wanted to avoid the messy, repetitive work of it—of maintaining and defending a stand. Maybe he found it embarrassing. But beneath that, if I am honest, I know Gerald was afraid.

When a week passed after Rochelle’s final return from Greece and she had not shown up at work, I recorded the time as sick leave. The Monday she did appear she was paler than ever, but steady. For all I knew, she’d soon be plotting her next wily campaign. She kept to her office all day, as did Gerald; they were not seen together amidst the building’s usual noisome Monday traffic.
But they were heard.

I swear I had not meant to eavesdrop that day, while the late afternoon light, delicate as pollen, deepened to translucent teal. I simply found my cold hand unable to place the phone receiver back into its glossy black-plastic pod, after intercoming the office Gerald and Rochelle shared. Gerald had barked at me to hold all calls, and I could hear Rochelle weeping.

What are you saying, what are you saying, I heard her sob.

Placing my free hand tightly over the mouthpiece, I swiveled my chair toward the fading light of the windows and hunched down with the receiver.

Gerald spoke like a machine. The voice of the ticket-spitting device at a parking garage. He kept repeating the same sentence. You will abide by the conduct code . . . until such time as you decide to leave the business and the family.

You will abide! Until such time as! Gerald must have written the sentence out and memorized it like a mantra, before he faced her. Was he even looking at her as he spoke?

Rochelle was still crying. But I’ve not harmed you, Gerald. I’ll pay you back. No one knows. I’ve not brought disgrace—

Each time she tried to speak his voice cut her off, repeating his mantra. A robot voice: the voice he used to rebuff telemarketers. Flat, nasal, pseudo-neutral, no punctuation. A child banging his own ears and chanting, so as not to hear. Thank you very much I’m not interested. Thank you very much I’m not interested. Again and again, each time Rochelle tried to engage him. It might have been the sound of rhythmic slapping.

Gerald had been obliged to pay for Rochelle’s entire Greek saga, including its culmination, its little murder. He, Gerald Ingersoll Riding, had enabled, willingly or not, what is briskly called in obstetrics-gynecology a termination.

The thing inside him that dreaded moral involvement had screamed and writhed. The only way through it was to become someone else. Someone who could wall out such fright forever. Demand fealty to the kingdom, or decree banishment from the kingdom.
That which had been Rochelle’s playground became her prison in a stroke.

In theory, of course, Rochelle could have walked out that very hour. And then?

Collect her child from Gerald’s mansion; move out of Gerald’s apartment that evening? Start again in this city, or another? First and last months’ rents? Decent schools for Delia? Childcare? Clothing, food, travel? With what pay, from what job, for what actual work? So deeply had Rochelle burrowed into the Riding family, gorged on its syrupy blood—it seemed impossible to crawl out, to create it all again.

I thought then of a television documentary about the heiress Doris Duke and her domestic entourage—cook, butler, chauffeur, maid. These characters fought viciously, after she died, for pieces of her estate. A Polaroid showed them posed around the aging Duke—her senses steadily draining from her—like demonic family, crouching and ruddy. Her staff had grafted to her like ticks. Part of the organism. Oh, there was no thought of leaving. No universe but the kingdom at hand.

Rochelle kept crying and crying. That’s all I heard through the intercom after a while. With excruciating care, I replaced the receiver.

I left the printing office soon thereafter and moved to a tiny north coast town—village, really—to teach art in the little grade school. It feels far away here, wrapped in sea-smelling fog; low horns warning where the shore goes rocky, long grass in the dunes. On the rare occasions when I drive down to the city for supplies, it’s like sightseeing from a time machine. I still prowl the car slowly past the wedding-cake building on Hyperion Street, straining my eyes at the second floor. The windows are always empty.

Once, years ago, as if in random answer to my formless wondering, Rochelle Remington phoned me: a question about my address, for a tax form. It was then she told me the events of Greece, and its aftermath.
Her voice was what struck me. Nothing like the stagy warble we used to flinch to hear. All that bursting, witless cheer—entirely gone. I wondered briefly whether she were on something. She told me she still worked for the Ridings. Delia was growing up. Stan had remarried. The printing business was defunct, but everything else, Rochelle declared, was the same. No—she answered quickly—she was seeing no one. There were no plans to change that.

Rochelle’s telephone voice that day told me what had changed. Her words edged along some terrible abyss, such as you hear in the voices of scarcely recovered alcoholics or drug addicts. As if an operation had been performed. Scooped out were the debutante’s wiles, the flounce and flourish, the gloat- ing, reckless entitlement of *mon beau plaisir*. Replacing all that was the sound of something dazed—trained to venture so far, and no farther. How palpable, how reliable to our landscape is the force of personality! A vitality gone missing, even when wicked, accuses us somehow—of something unspeakable. Against all reason, one almost wished the whole blind over-bright project were restored to her—that self-help world like a shiny board game, with its hyper-earnest tenets, its gleaming appliances, its deadly innocence.