

CHAPTER TWO

Strangers in the Night

“I get up by climbing out

How did I get home?

I’ll survive the situation

Somebody shut the door

Beautiful

Beautiful

Climbing up the wall

I get by on automatic

No surprise at all.”

~ “I Get Wild/Wild Gravity,” The Talking Heads (1983)

Monday Evening, July 6, 1987

Things. They have a life of their own in my apartment when I’m gone all day. Cut flowers shrink and desiccate. Sliced lemons develop green fur. Garbage molts and dust emerges from theoubliette of unattended corners. Framed prints create bleached rectangles behind their backs, while the sleeves of my blouses engage in silent wrinkling as they crush each other in the dark prison of my closet. My busy home awaits, beloved refuge whose magnetic pull restrains me mornings past the requisite departure time (I’m perpetually late to work), and whose Velcro reliability reattaches me each night.

I have spun my own cocoon here, in which I curl with the pending revelation of all larval occupants. On my wedding day, I am expected to emerge as the white-winged creature everyone anticipates, trailing my lacy wings with a virginal battement that all will recognize and award the name of triumph. I am to sacrifice one individualism for another, more circumscribed, in which I am to live not for the aloneness of my single self, but for the equally solitary existence of another person—my husband.

Privacy. The ultimate luxury that sets the rich apart from the poor. The flint-eyed roaring bliss of Mine never touching, or ever being seen by Yours. As history unfolded, this was thought to be the criterion, the very essence of freedom. Fighting our way out of crowded centuries of being forced to share under scarcity has given certain kinds of collectivity a reputation for oppression. Self-contained idealists, our class is reluctant to admit to those collectives we hold dear: family, alumni, club members, corporate colleagues. Groups of pre-packaged persons sharing not one another but rather, a name, a reputation, a status, an ideal.

Since the age of ten, I've had treacherous leanings. Secret yearnings for the dangerous loss of particularity through mass-generated world-historical events. The appeal of class action, the self-effacing discipline of an organization devoted to a vast spectrum of Others. A marginal longing to flout disaster through insubordination in messy mobs. The muted calling of a world my mother warned me about. "Always live your life so that no one can ever blackmail you" is the sort of thing that composes the agenda of Barbara Hall's worries. Commonness and breach of etiquette are greater threats than nuclear war.

As I unlock the half-dozen security devices on my Manhattan apartment, I am admitted into my sacred space, yet feeling obscured once again by the murky haze that crept up on me at the office; a drowning blindness of fatigue that blocks the usual pleasure of reentry. I locate a lemon yogurt in the fridge and follow it with chamomile tea. All I seem to want or need is calling me from the five feather pillows heaped upon the quilts in airconditioned calm one room away.

Here on Lexington Avenue at Eighty-Second, the only sound is the cricketing of muted traffic and the chorusing of coolers. There isn't even an electric view but only trapped air filling the shaft across from my window. The ancient bathtub has feet and wears the ring of my domestic revolt, a sign of how tired I am of everything and everyone. Normally, I am a neat person. My spinet piano fits into a corner stacked with music scores, and there's a warming red Tabriz beneath the indigo sofa and a comfy Queen Anne armchair; a green glass shade near my books and records, and quality framed engravings brought from France.

Ridiculous, going to bed at half-past nine. But I reject the courage demanded by the act of opening mail, the self-awareness necessary for washing dishes, or the enormous fortitude that television requires. Lacking the confidence to take on the gargantuan task of undressing and undertaking the nightly ablutions, I simply strip and crawl under the covers.

The bed is cool and smooth. I imagine myself a pure glass creek against worn pebbles flashing mica up through reflections into sky. I stretch, enjoying the fact that my heels stick over the end of the mattress. It's funny, I'm a kid again. In bed, walking up the wall with my feet, my nanny running to investigate the noises that kept me from the bogeyman. Or was it just to be perverse. The crisp linen smell of the sheets Express Mails me into precious oblivion.

I am swimming in darkness, tossed among piano keys, my father's voice echoing as from a well, and someone is ringing, ringing, ringing.

"Hello?"

"Meese Ashley Hole?"

"Hnh." Crap. What time is it?

"Meese Hole?" A Hispanic-accented voice is saying "Miss Hall."

"Yeah already. Who's calling."

“A friendly party. Please do not be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid, just mad. What time is it?”

“We are sorry to have awakened you. It is only half-past ten.”

“Well, who are you, and what do you want.”

“We would like you to help us with a very important cause.”

“I gave at the office.”

“We think you would be very good for this job. We think highly of your merits.”

“Who is this?”

“Please do not worry. We are not crazy people and we have no intention of harming you. we would like to enlist your assistance in a project we think you will find satisfying.”

“I don’t know why I’m not hanging up on you.”

“Then may we talk?”

“Yeah, but” I begin to have an intuition that this is a conversation better not had over optical fibers. “Are you sure you want to talk on the phone?” Probably drugs. They want me to unload their coke or smack for them because I couldn’t look illegal if I tried. Couldn’t pretend to be a criminal even if I wanted to. That’s New York for you. Drugs and real estate. Maybe they want me to sell a hot condo. No. How do you steal a condo? I’m really not awake.

“Would you like to meet in person?” the voice asks.

“Look, maybe. I don’t know. This city is full of nuts and weirdos and you are a man, so how the hell do I know what you’re up to?”

“Please be assured this is quite legitimate. But you are correct that the telephone is not the best to discuss business. We will contact you soon. Thank you for speaking with us. Goodnight.”

“But?” Nothing. Only the mournful wail of the disconnected instrument peals into the blackness.

Dammit. Probably Armando in one of his coked-out highs trying to freak me. Armando, a petite Cuban exile romance novelist whose sexual preference has nothing to do with his heroines. He favors shiny organ-hugging pants and Qiana shirts in danger of rupturing should he breathe deeply, as well as an assortment of gold jewelry and a pomaded pompadour that would make Wayne Newton jealous. Madame P. employs him as a typist, which is how he knows my phone number. I press the illuminator button on the digital clock beside me: 10:35:23. They were right, it’s not even eleven. My tranquilizing night invaded by strangers. Tomorrow I’ll have a rotten headache from having my rems rerouted.

Tuesday Morning, July 7, 1987

Ante meridiem. A.M. Time for most New Yorkers to hurtle themselves into screaming airless tunnels, nightmares of danger and speed through solid granite, the press of cramped angry flesh, each unit seeking to defend itself inside a newspaper or extended sleep facsimile. Drugged by morning, purposefully amnesiac, I fail to notice why the subway car I enter is only half-full at the apex of the rush hour, until my nasal alarm directs my attention to an empty bench filled only by a homeless man. I feel sorry for him, but must move to the next car, there laminated to the other cowards, all sweating—some more politely than others—in the regrettable lack of coolant.

A Puerto Rican couple in disco-tight jeans and abbreviated T-shirts loudly demonstrate their juvenile attraction to one another in a nonexistent space by the motorman's door. This causes a nearby woman in a navy blue linen suit and running shoes to peer twice as hard at her double-folded "Wall Street Journal." A Hassidic Jew is seated opposite my knees. He's the first one I've ever seen wearing a Sony Walkman. The Torah on tape? An Asian woman in a rose-flowered dress reads a "National Enquirer" that boasts, "Woman, 87, Gives Birth After 61-Year Pregnancy!" As we reach Grand Central an enormous exodus belches out onto the platform. "Leddemoff, leddemoff, watchaclosindoors, watchaclosindoors," the conductor intones. I move to a better seat.

"Greetings, earthlings!" A saxophone rift shimmies through the car. "My spaceship has crashed on your planet, and I find I have no earthling currency so I can get it fixed." Another blast on the horn, shades of Albert Ayler. A tall, African-American man, he's wearing a child's joke antennae on his head, the gumball tips wiggling around on springs. "Now if you earthlings will make a donation to repair my ship, I'll gladly blast off from your planet and take Ronald Reagan with me." Sparse applause. But the passengers are smiling in spite of themselves. "And Nancy, too!" Change purses begin to open. He plays the theme from "The Twilight Zone." I wonder if he knows it was written by the modernist composer Marius Constant. Duh-da-duh-da, duh-da-duh-da. The over-30's are especially enjoying this clever beggar. He collects their compliments in a Styrofoam cup and parks himself against a pole, where he belts out club-quality jazz just as the Spring Street stop screeches into view.

Meese Hole. Suddenly, as I'm exiting onto the street, I remember. We will contact you. Armando and I will have to have a little chat.

The building that houses P&P was once beautiful, the grandiose construction of the belle époque when architects must have thought no other edifice would follow. Each surrounding block is a similar constellation of cast-iron façades and wide sidewalks, no room for subtraction or multiplication, only the addition of garish signs and torrid storefronts, as the century-old acanthus leaves, colonnades, and stone arabesques are now disguised by extraordinary filth.

Lower Broadway, a Third World bazaar; its cacophony of delivery trucks, street vendors, garment workers, and art punks jams the sooty maze whose still remaining cobblestones are strewn with broken glass and fabric scraps. A quiltmaker's paradise.

P&P's halting, graffiti-scarred elevator isn't working again, and I'm obliged to transfer to the freight lift around the corner I have just passed, where I dodge shouting workers and their racks full of ready-to-wear in plastic bags. Getting to work requires a great deal of transit in closed spaces, both horizontal and vertical, each an assault on the senses. I am grateful that I'm not claustrophobic.

I come up into the warehouse, a pleasant enough area with more character than the front office despite the roaches, rodents, noise, and dusty disarray. Here, some potted trees grow near the oversized windows, and the commune listens to sixties music on a fifties console stereo Neil found in the trash. Neil is the warehouse manager, a good-natured homegrown midwestern boy your mom would invite for dinner and he'd stay to wash the car. So, I often wonder, what's he doing mixed up with One Hand Clapping? They find everything. Nice blouse, Marigold, where'd you get it? Lulu found it in the trash at St. Mark's Place. New lamp, Danny? Doreen found it, dumpster on Canal Street. I've stopped asking.

In a way, their humbleness is touching. No one and nothing is rejected. All is admitted, acceptable, and cared for. Want the rest of my fruit salad, Myra? Sure. Keith, want my half-eaten muffin? Thanks. Their openness is a larger form of generosity that can be reciprocal as well. Often they bring me things—"Ashley, we thought of you"—usually pretty nice stuff, too. Flowers, factory glass, once a Japanese obi, its silken brilliance a startling gem in the gray and white bureaucratic chic of the P&P offices.

The spirit of One Hand Clapping suffers not from an intrinsic value flaw, but rather from excess and isolation. Twenty years ago they embraced the unruly mores of a decade in upheaval, a time that burst with cries for freedom from enslavement or conformity of every kind. Feldstein's bad Beat poetry was the "Playboy" philosophy in coffeehouse drag, a resounding "No!" to the repression of truth and feeling by which America survived its postwar boom. There were to be no secrets. A two-bit Wilhelm Reich, he preached the sexual revolution well before it hit the pages of "Newsweek." A man wounded by the mannered lies of his childhood, Feldstein swore to uncloak all love, all pain, stripped of the social graces that overlay his stilted upbringing. But among his followers, his gospel of candor and sensitivity has, since his death been rarified to an extreme, its fullest realization a cruel reversal into the despair of overfeeling and unkindness, heartbreak and betrayal. For, like all utopians, they are bound by an unsympathetic world and the human limits of idealism, subject to the entropy of every closed system.

Armageddon, the orange Tabby we keep as a ratter, runs toward me with a "meow" of welcome. "Hi there, kittenoid," I reach down to offer a friendly scratch behind his ears. Without warning, from behind a loaded hand truck, April shouts at me. "I hate you! I hate you!" Yesterday's rejection seems to have pushed her off the Richter Scale.

Without intending to be, I am nevertheless shocked by this attack. "Life is tough," I retort. She runs away, sobbing at great volume, as she carries her woes to Myra and Taylor. That couple is in charge of shipping and mailing. Myra is plump, a poodle-haired Earth mother in harem pants, good

for dispensing hugs. Her mate, Taylor, who looks like a mute axe-murderer as he lifts heavy crates with a soundless grin, is simply the commune's hugest member, a southern gentleman gone haywire.

"Good morning, Meese Hole!" Armando is by the postage meter, his leather pants shrunken impossibly against his tiny ass.

"What was that all about last night?" I bark.

"Well, I am sure I don' know . . ." He raises his eyebrows in mock seduction, jutting one hip in my direction as he feigns a feminine rearrangement of his curls.

"Cut it out. The phone call, I mean."

He holds up his hands in surrender, his lips a helpless pucker of appeasement. "I didn't call you at all, my dear. I was busy working on *Inflamed Desire*. You know, the prequel to *Burning Regrets*."

"Really? You didn't?"

He clucks negation and lowers his thick eyelashes, pouting at my assumptions. "But I have some shocking gossip for you, if you have a minute."

"Sorry, not now. I'm late enough as it is." I push my way past the mail table and grab an empty book carton, into which I deposit my purse and briefcase, covering both with a few copies of a title just off the press. I walk casually out of the warehouse into the connecting offices, passing the receptionist who waves at me, entirely convinced that I've been there all along and have gone back for a box of books.

That's Stacey Bellack for you. A California blonde who's been hit in the head with a surfboard once too often. In her pink blouse, white slacks, white beads, and matching pink and white high heels, she does a good job of convincing front office visitors that this place is halfway normal—although her voice has been rumored to rupture certain membranes in listeners' heads when she laughs.

"Nice try, but she's not in yet," Sally Mason, my Assistant Editor, informs me, referring to our boss.

We share an office, and no matter how early I come in (which is rare), she is always there ahead of me. A Good Girl of the first magnitude, she reminds me of a fifties' movie about small-town girls from Ohio who come to New York to work in publishing and either marry a millionaire, get discovered for the Great White Way, or end up in the Bowery. A translucent-skinned, anorexic, strawberry blonde, Sally desperately wants to be a woman of the boulevards, and yet remains fatally a girl of the patios, a young lady of suburban backyardage whose degree from Bennington hasn't made a dent in her mind that's so preoccupied with "Playbill."

The guys at TKTS know her like family; every usher on 44th Street has nightmares of her face; and her bulletin board is a jungle of Sunday "Times" theater ads. Her idea of urban sophistication is The Stage—no matter that her knowledge of the world is troglodytic. I become instantly fatigued at the sight of her, knowing that she will want to tell me in her upbeat squeak every endless detail of yet another silly Broadway plot—I, who despise even the titles of musicals.

"Oh, Ashley! I went to see "Belles on Parade" last night! It was wonderful! There's this girl who—"

"—Look, I really can't, right now. I've got a lot of work to do on the Jaroslav. Later, okay?"

"All right. Gee, that's a pretty dress you're wearing!" One more enthusiasm out of her, and I'm going to ship her to my mother in Connecticut for use on the Welcome Wagon.

Ten thirty, and I'm finally in my chair, just as Mimi's heraldic yap announces the arrival of Madame P. I yank the cover off my typewriter and stow it in the wastebasket (no time to fold it into the drawer), liberally sprinkle some files and miscellaneous page proofs across my desk, throw a handful of blue and red pencils over the papers, grab a pica ruler, lean my chin on my hand, and intently stare at the excellent mess I've created.

"Ah, you are both hyir, turning your pages like good little editors."

We murmur good morning as she proceeds on to the inner sanctum, an office the size of a decent Manhattan studio apartment. The walls are blanketed with opera posters; glossies of her in costume; framed watercolors of stage designs; photographs of Kasimir; and portraits of Czar Nikolas and Czarina Aleksandra, as well as paintings of various Metropolitans of the Russian Orthodox Church. A Byzantine icon lit by a red-glassed votive lamp hangs above a curio cabinet; behind its locked glass panels glows a collection of Fabergé eggs and exiled silver and porcelain.

Lydia views her office as warm, sentimental, a delight and a comfort to visitors. In fact, it feels like a mausoleum and the staff experience a suffocating descent of sensibilities whenever we are corralled in there for a meeting.

"Ashley? A letter, um, came for you earlier this morning. But, like, it was in my box instead of yours. I was just so, like, way busy, I forgot to give it to you." Stacey hands me a sealed envelope with no postage on it, and flounces back to her desk—thank goodness.

Gingerly, I turn it over in my hands. The paper is a sort of newsprint, speckled with rag fibers. It smells foreign. My name is typed neatly on what must be one of the world's earliest models, judging from the partially filled-in letters and fuzzy serif style. Clearly, it was not conveyed here by the United States Postal System. Without knowing why, I'm afraid to open it. The phone call. We will contact you soon. This is soon, all right. Probably more jokes from Armando, I try to tell myself, pretending I don't feel spooked. Maybe I should read it in the restroom.

“I’ll be back,” I tell Sally, who’s sitting erect at her neat-freak’s desk, delicately gnawing her cuticles.

By the bathroom, Ann and Dwight are arguing. They are wearing unkempt Indian clothing of no discernible color, and both appear to spend a lot of time in the company of mushrooms, possibly moles. Sunlight has evidently never kissed their bodies. Both have beady eyes and are prematurely gray. She’s a computer genius; he beats her up. How that kind of abuse squares with One Hand Clapping, I’ll never understand.

“Scuse me, folks.” They ignore me.

“... so you’re saying that you need to help me move the terminal,” Ann whines.

“I feel guilty that I want to be involved,” Dwight sighs.

“You’re making me feel guilty that I can’t do it by myself.”

“It’s hurting me, you’re so angry.”

“It pains me to upset you. Can we cry together? Let’s cry together.”

“*Ex-cuse* me!” I push them away, to carry on their exchange farther down the corridor. Settling onto the closed seat in a locked stall, I open the strange missive:

Dear Miss Hall, [a cordial enough beginning]

We would like to offer you the opportunity to do something highly interesting and worthwhile that will be of benefit to many poor and suffering people in our country. We think you will welcome this chance to . . .

You’ll have to read *Foreign Friends* to find out what happens!