

## FACT-CHECKED

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I'D NEVER WANTED to be like my father, a political reporter, but right out of college, I took a job in *Gentlemen's* fact-checking department. After a year, I got to be good, real good. I'd make certain the celebrity names were spelled properly, of course, I'd peruse the transcripts, too, and I'd also find documents such as Congressional-travel disclosures for Antiguan junkets. It turned out that our political stories were pretty interesting. Soon I was getting on the phone to do some real reporting. Like the time I rang up Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to interview him about trying a new suit style, but I also snuck in a question about the protesters mobilizing outside the United Nations in opposition to our impending invasion of Iraq. He told me that in a free society people were free to be wise and they were also free to be unwise, and it was unfortunate that we had entered a cycle of the latter with the anti-war emotions sliding the national-security debate into the insubstantial. *Gentlemen* bolded the quote beneath a photo of him in a slim-fit sports coat paired with skinny jeans. Others weren't as fearless. Off the record, President George W. Bush's spokesman accused me of being irresponsible. He was aggressive, doing what he could to kill a story. But I liked him. He was a talker, quick to return my calls. We spun around on the phone until I got my quote. Which was a non-quote evading my questions about the president being photographed at a Texas ranch with some unsavory banker.

Still. Great fun.

That's how it always played out. I'd whirl over the phone with lackeys that loved or hated me. Either way they'd work to make sure they had their say in how their bosses were portrayed. People were concerned with their agendas. Even me. Everyone in my department gunned for writing assignments. We wanted springboard stories about must-eat restaurants in flyover cities that nobody actually visited, or better yet, the New York joints where apple-polishers dined. At first I wrote that junk, but one day I stopped. I just preferred heading into the street to meet a writer to get the documents detailing, say, the crooked banker's questionable land deal in Antigua. That

night waiting outside a bakery on 6th Ave., Paul showed up with Shuhrat, a man dressed in a tailored suit. He fixed his French cuffs while I chatted with Paul, who pointed out all the transactions, itemized in loan statements, that he'd dug up when reporting on the island—Paul had the nuts. And a buzz. They had been smoking cigars, though their breaths really burned with whiskey.

Shuhrat pressed his nose to the window. Frosted cupcakes sat in light green and pink rows. "These are for eating? I can't imagine."

"You don't want to go here," I said. "Trust me."

"Never," Shuhrat said.

Paul put his arm around me. "If I had mailed those documents like I was supposed to, Shuhrat, who doesn't live here but loves New York, wouldn't get your expertise."

"I wrote about cupcakes last year," I said. "This way if you want a good one."

"I see. You the man?" Shuhrat said.

I stopped. "Are you implying something?"

"Cupcakes are for children, if I'm not mistaken."

He hailed a cab, hopped in, and disappeared into a traffic swarm.

Paul shrugged. "He's like that."

"Who was that guy?"

Paul smiled, eyes wide. "Let's find some pizza."

Over the next couple of days, we closed the banker story. Paul told the editor that I was smart and said, "Thanks." Writers rarely say that. He asked that I check his next story a few months later. It was about Bush abandoning Afghanistan for Iraq, how the soldiers in places like Khost Province weren't doing all that much. Paul convoyed with a unit to the Pakistan border where they launched some flares into the night, screamed, "Taliban, Taliban, come out, come out wherever you are!" and waited to be attacked. I spoke to all these soldiers, my age or younger—I was twenty-three by that time—about shooting this guy or that truck, about scraping body parts off the roads. I called Specialist Byrd while he was on leave down in Texas. He was working on his muscle car, an '85 Mustang GT, a little tried-and-true engineering simplicity that pumped an extra 35 HP over the previous year's model, or

so he was explaining when he asked me to hold on a second. He and his wife, twenty-three years old as well, screamed their mouths dry about which one of them would take care of their baby, Byrd apologizing, telling me the whole time to hold on, to please, please hold on, and then once back on the phone, his voice hoarse, he said, “Yes, correct, after the chopper launched the Hellfires into the ravine, I walked over toward the flames blasting my M4 because, well, I wanted to get mine.” We spoke at noon, a spring day with the sun and clouds out my window bright in the sky between the tall buildings, Times Square, New York City, the universe’s center. I noticed my reflection in the glass.

“Sir,” Specialist Byrd said, “You call again if you need me.”

I hung up and asked my colleague Kat to get coffee. We sat in Bryant Park at a café table on the lawn, the shade off the trees dancing on the grass at our feet: Shadows, then light, then shadows. I said soldiers were killing and dying and our magazine mostly talked about fucking shoes and the sexploits of celebrities. She told me I sometimes still acted like an undergraduate, duh, and added, “Don’t take the war story too lightly. It’s not all glitz and food.” In a few months inked snow—soot over white—covered the lawn. Kat, in a scarf, a slender pea coat, and her blonde hair in the wind, said coffee was the only warmth she had. She was worried about a senior editor who’d completely rewritten her *this-hot-electric-car-is-the-automotive-future-that-will-still-ruin-our-lives* story; she had “serious” questions about how our country could plug in to the electric grid without causing outages and while gasoline wouldn’t be burned off into carbon emissions, our continued reliance on coal-powered plants to charge the new cars would still emit CO<sub>2</sub>. Unfortunately, I was the checker who pointed out that she flubbed interpreting the data, and the editor had to save the piece by making the endeavor sound sexy because, hey, at least, the company was building the twenty-first century Model T, and that’s super cool. “Bro, I’m sorry,” I said, which made her laugh, but I could tell she was worried, though it was no real biggie since it was the nice editor, and he’d started off doing our job.

Still, Kat worried, and all I could say was, “Bro, I feel your pain.” I could usually tell when she was upset. Like when humidity made our cigarettes taste bitter on an early-August afternoon on 43rd St., the air like Chinatown

fish in the sun. We were discussing my birthday that upcoming weekend. I'd gotten a bar's backroom, a keg, and sandwiches. I nearly asked Kat if I was turning into an adult. Twenty-five. *Twenty-five*. Holy crap.

My cell phone buzzed in my pocket. "What?" I answered. "I'm on my break."

"You get my new story yet?" Paul shouted. "I said you have to be my checker."

Music was bumping and pounding on his end of the line. "Where are you?"

"Wait, you haven't read it?"

The connection went dead.

Kat was laughing, but she said, "Can we just stay out here for a bit?"

For such a slow day, we didn't need caffeine, but neither of us wanted to be at our desks, so we sat on a wooden bench, and I explained my career change: I wasn't unhappy, only bored brainless. I said in the autumn I was starting graduate school for international affairs, though I left out that I hadn't actually been accepted. It's just that I test poorly, and I couldn't tell anyone after already talking so much about applying. Besides, in two weeks I figured I'd tell the nice editor that I'd deferred for a year to go freelance, so I easily had more time to write—even if only about tie bars. I also hoped to start a blog, the subject TK, which I'd use to raise my visibility and land a book deal, that topic TK, too. I did tell Kat I'd sit in my Brooklyn backyard with a cooler of iced-down beer to watch bees, their wings kazooing inside the flower bells. There'd be no late nights for me like at the office. I'd be asleep by nine and up early to sip coffee. I hoped she'd stop by for happy hour.

"Once we finish this issue," I said, "that's going to be my vacation."

The cold lobby air of our building jolted me.

Kat smiled. Sort of. It was weak. "Who will stand on the street with me?"

The elevator opened. "I'll be in the city."

She was fiddling with her phone, checking for messages.

"We'll still be friends," I said.

"I know, I know, but not the same kind of friends."

My desk phone was ringing. I sat in my chair. "*Gentlemen*, Sam here."

"Did you read it?" Paul asked.

“I’m just opening the file—”

“You’re so lazy,” he said and hung up.

My phone blinked with messages from none other than Paul, who was dancing at some discothèque in Dubai and saying we must discuss his story. Now. I hit delete, delete. I opened my green folder, which was the worst color for assignments from my boss. Back when he’d hired me, he told me it meant the story was some serious work, not some fashion fluff piece—then added that the whole magazine needed to be without a goddamn mistake. (He’d gone to a hospital to see an ex-fact-checker who got his ass whooped, so I hadn’t sweated the harsh tone too much.) I started reading Paul’s story, the facts marked with notes from my boss: *Contact. Find quote. Denied? Source? Basis? Get documents.* Shuhrat, who the piece profiled, had been born in Petrovia, the youngest son of a high-level diplomat. During the late 80’s, after his mom succumbed to cancer, he left to study politics at the London School of Economics, but when he was expelled for not allowing his advisor to read his thesis (explanation TK, and I made a note so I wouldn’t forget to ask him why, otherwise I’d get heaps of grief from my boss for ruining Paul’s story), he set sail on an ocean cruiser for New York, which he hated, the bars, the oh-aren’t-I-witty-and-beautiful-crowd, the same old as now. He moved to Dallas, took a job in a diner as a deliveryman, and drove around that city, ending up standing in Halliburton’s lobby, the oil executives coming down to get their food and stiffing him on the tip. He’d wanted the anonymity but also resented it. Then the Soviet Union collapsed and sensing opportunity, he flew to his hometown, Neft, and found the capital courting a new identity. His father, Djamolidine, had married the youngest daughter of the Minister of Finance, and at family dinners they often discussed future economic growth, how it depended on oil. All these companies had been talking to the crony apparatchiks and wanted contracts. Djamolidine described the proposals, all the money to be made. Shuhrat soon had an idea, one inspired by a London oil fixer, a bit of a playboy who had often been written about in the British tabloid press. The practice, as done in other oil-producing countries, was simple: a fixer took millions from a company, deposited part into a Swiss bank account to pay off the local officials awarding the contracts, and then pocketed the rest. Djamolidine resigned from his post, started a business with his son, and they used connections to get rich.

My boss tapped my desk. "Checking this story. You're going out in style."

I shook my head. "This guy's business can't be legal."

He laughed. "It's your job to find out."

My phone rang. "Paul, Jesus Christ," I said. "You made up this story."

He also laughed. "It gets worse. Shuhrat doesn't understand what fact-checking is, doesn't understand why you have to ask about what he told me. I told him you just need to double-check everything, but he won't discuss his business on the phone."

"What the hell? Is he paranoid or something?"

"Saturday night," Paul said. "He'll be in New York. You can meet him."

"But it's my birthday. I got sandwiches."

"Uh-oh," he said and hung up.

The phone rang again. "Wait. Why didn't you invite me?" he said.

"Because you're in Dubai!"

"Still," he said. "I'd have liked to have been asked."

"So you're a girl," I said.

"Ha!" he said and hung up.

I called my friend Andrew, a press guy at President Clinton's Harlem foundation, hoping he could point me in the right direction. Every time we grabbed a beer he told me about some lobbyist wanting Clinton to speak on behalf of this endangered forest or that dying industry, so I figured he'd know someone steeped in U.S. oil policy abroad. I got voicemail at the office but caught him on his cell, the sound faint. He was in Kenya with the president, wrapping up a day with HIV-positive children whom Clinton had saved by strong-arming pharmaceutical companies into manufacturing drugs at a price poor people could afford. I told Andrew I needed to speak to someone about the oil-fixer business in a language I could understand. He said he'd shoot out emails. Next I got on the phone with Petrovia's embassy, and, yup, Shuhrat was a citizen, forty-three years old. They couldn't say much more, but they gave me the number for the Minister of Finance, not that I spoke Petroh. It didn't matter. Every time I rang up the office nobody answered. I searched the Internet for Shuhrat's picture. Zip. I found the photo editor Jonathan, a guy who, truth be told, gave me shivers. It wasn't that he was one-handed, though there was that; it was his lunches. Today, it was a ketchup-

turkey salad, his rancid trash overflowing the wastebasket.

I asked him to email the photos.

He kept his eyes on his computer screen. "Show them to nobody."

The first picture I opened had Shuhrat holding hands with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, although in 2001, the picture's date, he was just a prince. I jotted down the caption correction: Oh, it felt good to be bird-dogging facts one last time! An email from Andrew pinged up on my screen, no note, only the phone number to a lobbyist, a former big-shot exec who told me, Yes, fixers know all the leaders in the oil countries where business is usually personal and done with little more than their word. It's a tiny group; a handful of them in the world make deals. He'd met Shuhrat during a visit to Petrovia to negotiate a contract in that freshly tapped market back in 1998, winding up getting a straw-buyer to pay a gazillion bazillions for Grandma Ziyba's non-existent summer cottage overlooking a hulking and rusted ship in the cracked and salt-crusted bed of the dried-up Aral Sea. He would have preferred writing a check to Shuhrat, so to speak, but US law, unlike the ones in Europe, didn't allow corporate tax deductions for bribes. "The law limits our ability to do business," the lobbyist said, adding that whatever I needed to know, he'd discuss; the public had to understand how laws were crippling the United States of America! "Now I'm not sure if I should say this," he said, "but to celebrate, I had dinner at Shuhrat's, and when I arrived, I saw two men with AK-47s. I've always wondered about that." Over the next few days, I read about Shuhrat navigating the bureaucracies in the \$2 trillion dollar industry and spoke to an unidentifiable CIA agent who confirmed Shuhrat had frequently dined with Saddam Hussein at his palace. I'd stayed late, sipping on a beer, ordering in a pork burrito, but when I'd eat, I'd get sleepy, so I'd pick at it. At midnight I'd call China, where it was the next day—or the day before, I always forget which—to see whether I could get a Sinopec spokesman to address the fact that their company imports more oil from Angola than anywhere else in the world. I asked about Shuhrat's involvement, and they hung up. Still, it was good to try. I slept on our office sofa and drank coffee. I had to work long hours to learn about winning gas concessions in Africa. I called tons of people and read and read some more. I marked up the mistakes in Paul's story. I zinged along!

Kat shot my head with a sponge dart from a toy gun. “It’s almost your birthday.”

“Tomorrow. Or is it today yet?”

Light off the electronic billboard across the street flashed through the windows and over the walls. I leaned back in my chair and kicked up my feet onto my desk.

She wore her hair up, tucked behind her ears—like she’d been keeping it from falling in front of her eyes, so she could read copy. “It’ll be midnight in an hour.”

“My happy day!”

“My story just shipped. I’m done. People hooked up a new video-game system to the flat screen in the conference room. They’re playing some football game. They got beers. Want to go watch? Relax a bit?”

Yelling and laughter came down the hall. “I don’t think so.”

“Really?” she said. “Well, can I buy you an almost-birthday whiskey at Jimmy’s?”

“I just want my bed.”

“Tomorrow night will be fun, though.”

On the ride home, the FDR twisted along the East River, all the cars jostling to be in front of each other despite there being no room and traffic moving slowly. My cabbie asked which bridge I preferred taking, Manhattan or Brooklyn, but I didn’t care, which made him laugh. He asked me, his good friend, whether I was from the city. “St. Louis,” I said. “Ah, very beautiful,” he said. His first weekend in the United States, a winter day, he walked over the Mississippi River in the snow, with the Arch grainy in the gray storm. We were crossing the lower deck of the Manhattan Bridge, New York blurry behind the girders. It was fine by me. The skyline always saddened me. It’s a mistake to think we do anything but toil in cramped cubicles—so many of us ignoring our lives for our jobs.

“Turns out I prefer this bridge, lower deck,” I told him.

“It’s the best, my friend!”

Then he answered a phone call, and I closed my eyes.

That next morning I woke up hot. It was predawn, but no sleeping late even if I would have loved to curl with my pillow. Stupid sleep never works. I might as well have been crazed on six pots of coffee. I jogged through the



park on a dirt trail, the dust kicked up by my feet, and the morning was more running around to make sure the party was set, that the questions for Shuhrat made sense. I had a late lunch: A banana with peanut butter on bread. I grabbed my notebook, a pen tucked into the spiral, and caught the 6th Avenue Express. We clanked out over the churning river. Lit steel on the Chrysler Building spired high up into the dusk. We rocked back underground. A woman was chomping her gum. A guy's headphones bled music. I walked to the car's far end to lean against a door. On a long stretch of tunnel, the rumble of the wheels rattled all the passengers. Like the job, mistakes were everywhere. A kid dropped his open soda, which rolled atop the floor.

Transferring at the next station was a dumb mistake. I had to get from 34th to 49th quickly, with no service at the platform. *Due to an earlier incident, trains are running at slower speeds.* The crowd was three or four deep in that subterranean sauna. I rushed up through the filthy-tile-walled maze to Broadway to hail a cab, but there were no cabs; I had to jog, and though it wasn't even a mile, all the people, the tourists and theatergoers, walked two or five or seven abreast on the sidewalks, holding hands and stopping mid-stride to photograph the lights. It slowed me down. I wasn't too late, but with heat seeping out of the concrete, my shirt clung to my chest, my cords to my legs. When I entered the chilly restaurant, steam rose off my skin. Seriously. The maître d', dressed in a smart suit, shook his head but still escorted me through a grand wood-paneled room with white linen tablecloths on which sat slender glass vases sparingly filled with white snapdragons. In the kitchen, the chefs hovered over seared fish, the plates flying around. I was shown an office. On a desk papers were piled near a lamp but otherwise it just had a juice glass in one corner. Wine racks covered three walls, Bordeaux the only varietal I recognized.

A young man in yet another tailored suit poked in his head.

I offered my hand.

"I do apologize for these circumstances," he said, shaking firmly. "We understand it's your birthday and had hoped to treat you to dinner—"

"It's all right," I said. "I got a sandwich platter for later."

"That's the problem. Shuhrat is unexpectedly sitting down with an important—"

"So let's reschedule. What's he got tomorrow?"

“Nothing,” he said. “He’s leaving the country tonight.”

“You couldn’t have called? He and I can’t speak on the phone?”

“It’s last-minute and unprofessional, we realize, but Shuhrat had assurances that the fact-checking would take place in person. He doesn’t, as a rule, discuss business . . .”

“No phone. I know.”

“We’re happy to prepare you dinner in a private room. The Escolar and Kindai Muguro are something special, I must say. You’re free, of course—”

“Do you know Paul? Shuhrat’s business? Can you answer my questions?”

“We’re happy to trust Paul got his story right. If that works for you.”

“I can’t do that,” I said. “It’s our policy. It’s my job to—”

“Paul explained it’s vital to double-check.”

How boring to sit in an empty room. Though I did pour a glass of wine, the fruit and pepper sharp on my tongue, which I liked. So I had another, then one more. I called Paul but he didn’t answer and in my message I reminded him that while he was off doing god knows what in Dubai, I was fact-checking on my birthday. I told him he owed me something cool, like an Arabian horse, and hung up. Soon my phone buzzed: Great, Paul! Alas, it was my father, golfing in Arizona. He had sliced a ball deep into the desert, the course having no proper fairways, only grass islands in the sand. How missing a shot made him think to call with birthday wishes bumfuzzled me, but I didn’t say so. He said there were so many cactuses he felt like they were blow-darting thorns at him. He started to sing: “There is sadness in the air, people dying everywhere, but *oh happy birthday...*”

“Dad! Stop!” I was saying. “Dad, you do this every year!”

He screamed, “Fuck off, cactus!” and the line went dead.

I checked the time. It’d been over two hours.

In the doorway, the young man nodded at me. “Have you finished your call?”

“I’m late for my party.”

“Of course, we’ll get you there. Now this way out back,” he said.

A narrow walkway ran along a brick wall slick with grime and on into an alley courtyard with grease-stained pavement. Skyscrapers rose overhead, lighting the dark.

“Is this where you kill the pesky journalist?”

“If my boss gives the word,” he said.

I sped up.

Shuhrat leaned against a limo out on 52nd Street, the next block over from the restaurant’s entrance. He was smiling.

“What’s with all the cloak and dagger?” I said.

He shook my hand. “That’s Sobir’s job, so we’ll trust he has his reasons.”

“Makes me nervous.”

“It’s for me to feel safe, not you.”

Sobir opened the limo door, and we all crawled onto the leather seats. Traffic, as always, barely moved. Shuhrat talked about how unnecessary fact-checking seemed, but I insisted it was essential. “If I told the reporter,” he said, “why must I also tell you? Are you saying I lie? Or Paul?” I told him I caught mistakes, careless mistakes. He said Paul must be bad at his job, if he made mistakes. “Maybe you two should work for a cupcake magazine?” he said. I explained that reporters have lied, that I safeguard the integrity of *Gentlemen*. “What kind of magazine hires writers who lie and make mistakes?” he asked. Still, I insisted fact-checking mattered, that I re-report stories. Though I wasn’t sure what I really knew because while I spoke to experts over the phone, I read widely, and I always contacted sources, I’d never conducted an interview face-to-face, so what could I really know? It wasn’t as if I were the person out seeing, doing, reporting. It wasn’t as if I were out looking people in the... . I felt Shuhrat glaring at me, and then I noticed his eyes, the two smoking AK-47s in each of his pupils crisscrossed like the bones on a poison bottle.

“It’s true!” I blurted. “I’m little more than a glorified Spell-Check!”

“I’m sorry?”

I started apologizing for not being important like Saddam Hussein and for all the repetitive questions I was about to ask. I apologized for taking up his time and promised I’d do my best to be quick. I apologized for apologizing so much! The tires were now humming over the highway, the river trembling with lights, and Shuhrat said nothing. I finally regrouped with the first rule of fact-checking: “Would you please spell out your name as you’d like it to appear in print?” Shuhrat had the driver put back the sunroof so we could see a skyscraper he owned. I didn’t give up. I swung with all my questions like

a counterpunching champ. I cornered him up against the ropes and went for the TK.

“So, uh, will you tell me about not graduating?”

“That was nothing,” he said. “I wrote the thesis but then decided I didn’t want the degree. I was young, silly, and I didn’t want to wind up where graduation would have taken me. A job in London? Back home? I wanted something different.”

“So it was an act of defiance?”

A spotlight turned green, and we rounded a corner to the bar.

He laughed. “I think that must be how you see it.”

“Time’s up,” Sobir said, leaning over to open the door. “We have a plane.”

“I made millions with only my handshake,” Shuhrat said.

His palm, I noticed, was very smooth.

“It’s my word,” he said. “That’s all.”

“Happy birthday,” Sobir said.

I finished jotting down my notes, the limo fading down the block.

The bar’s neon lights anesthetized faces, though none of my friends were at the window tables, so I bounded into the backroom. The sandwiches had already been eaten, none saved for me, but the pale ale tasted bitter—just how I loved it. I threw down pints chased, every so often, by whiskey. My friends hugged me or kissed my cheeks. We all clanked glasses and danced. Kat and I hunched over our beers. She told me she’d miss me around the office and then Paul joined us, which surprised me. He said I looked as wide-eyed as Miss Muffet. He explained he was jetlagged yet awake and wouldn’t have missed it; Kat had emailed twice about partying into the dawn. I happily told Paul I had figured out the TK, but he told me he’d cut it. It was irrelevant. Kat noticed my disappointment and passed around cupcakes. After I blew out my candle, Paul shoved my nose into the frosting and my cupcake fell onto the beer-splashed floor. We shuffled between conversations, stopping at the bar every time. Soon it was just the three of us. Paul and I started talking up women, but when the lights blazed on, and we stumbled onto the street, our group fighting off the other drunks for cabs, it was Kat who got into one on the arm of a thin guy with a pencil mustache. I plopped into the next car, and as soon as I hit the seat, I passed out. Late the next afternoon I

finally peeled my face from Paul's leather sofa.

"There's my FactMan," he said.

"Please, god, tell me there's coffee?"

He poured me a cup. Voices were coming from the kitchen.

"This is cold," I said.

"It's iced," he said. "So good."

"I hate my life."

"How could you not!" Paul said.

"Please, louder. No. Please, shut up," I said, massaging my forehead

"Hate? That's sad," a woman said.

She was leaning against the kitchen door's frame. Her shiny black hair dulled at the bangs with gray wisps. A guy wrapped his hands around her hips and kissed her.

"My dear," he said.

"I love it," Paul said.

"Oh, it makes me sick," I said.

"No, that's because you're a ridiculous drunk," she said.

"We house-sat while Paul traveled," the man said to me.

"Ted and I used to be roommates," Paul said. "Before he moved to—"

"Don't knock Texas," she said. "Am I not feeding you boneheads? We're grilling steaks Lone Star-style, okay? And really? Coming home at sunup? How old are you?"

Paul slapped my shoulder. "You got the appetite for it?"

"Is she going to keep yelling? Paul, are you?"

"Ignore this fool," he said. "Let's head up."

"I need a minute," I said.

"Toilet's down the hall," she said.

At the bathroom sink, I wet my face and rinsed the charcoal bags under my eyes but still felt terrible. I slurped water from the faucet, the coolness punching my stomach, grinding my insides. I pressed my head to a window. The trees and brick buildings could have been any block, and I had no idea where I was in the city. I looked up at a thin strip of cloudless sky and tried to imagine how I would appear if I were up in it watching me in the window. It seemed so important. Time ticked past in the shifting angles of the tree-

trunk shadows. I suddenly became very afraid for Kat. How could I let her go home with a stranger who could have roofied her? How could I have left her all alone? I phoned her. She said I was blottoed last night and that she'd have to ring me back later. "I'm going to exercise," she explained. "I had only two beers, but four cupcakes. Disgusting, right?" I could hear the others on the roof, their laughter falling down to me. I climbed the ladder that went up from the fire escape. They made fun of me for not taking the staircase, but I hadn't known about it. The choppy Hudson hit below the tree-covered cliffs on the distant bank. I was on Manhattan's edge, the West Village, and I could see the hole that had been blown open in the downtown skyline. The grill was shooting flames, the mesquite chunks popping. The beers were icing in a tin pail, and the woman nodded for me to grab one. I put a dripping bottle to my head, took a sip, the first always the best. After sinking into a sun chair, I lounged, the sounds of the city, the sirens and music, mixing with her telling me stories about their honeymoon, how they planned to drive to Montreal in the morning. Night had risen. The smell of the grilling steaks nipped the air. In the dark, with the coal embers our brightest light, Paul told his friends about his latest story, how after I put in a few minor changes, he'd read the boards and be done. He said he felt good, that I should feel good, moving on to graduate school. I got quiet and kept glimpsing the hole in the skyline. When the woman stood, I noticed the loving way she ran her fingers along her husband's cheek and through his hair. They were laughing and talking. She served the steaks, the meat perfectly charred, but when I cut in, blood pooled over my arugula. I vomited in a nearby flowerpot, and they teased me for being such a lightweight kid.