

[INTRODUCTION to the Excerpt: The following scenes take place in February 1988. Tennis player Emma Jasohn, winner of the 1987 US Open and a native New Yorker, is en route to the American South to play a season of tournaments on clay. German player Vivienne Helm is headed the same way along with her mother, brother, and dog. Both girls are eighteen.

Liz Mackie, March 2013]

From Famepunk Part 2: Middlemarch

Chapter 4 / Flight

Maria Helm looked at her daughter, the Wimbledon champion, and experienced a tidal surge of disappointment and dismay. Not above seasonal norms, but nonetheless severe: she felt her rocky calm eroding and braced herself with a hard frown. Everything her daughter did to spite her; everything. The way she sat, the way she breathed, the way she stared across the room at the girl by the rain-streaked window: in a way, this was nothing, nothing but one more minute among all minutes, all devoted to spiting the mother; nothing but more of the same. Why could her daughter not be more feminine? Maria Helm knew: that was a stupid question. She had eyes in her head and she was well aware, her daughter could leap like Margot Fonteyn to the forefront of every feminine category, if she only chose to. But she didn't. Because she lived to spite her mother.

Was her daughter such a disappointment? She'd named her Vivienne—what did people think? She wouldn't have minded, really, some sport: but in its place, one small part of the active lifestyle enjoyed by an elegant, accomplished, popular young woman of, yes, distinctly feminine mien: was this so wrong? To

wish the best of one's own youth—better, really, in these vastly better times—for one's only daughter? Vivienne was gorgeous, yet she wore her hair falling down all over her face as if to hide it. She looked furtive and ungroomed: her daughter. Vivienne had a beautiful figure which she was ruining with sport: this life would ruin her. Maria Helm had seen these women in ten years, in twenty; no. She wouldn't allow it.

Yet here they were, mother and daughter, Maria Helm and her world-famous daughter Vivienne—Wimbledon champion, Australian Open champion, US Open champion, too, had it not been for the girl by the window, the one reading a thick book with her pretty face full of incomprehension verging on alarm: that one. Miss I'm Gay, the new American. She'd beaten Vivienne again only yesterday. The whole family should have flown to Memphis then, last night, but Vivienne had refused to leave Washington. Lala was her friend and Lala had won her semi-final match against Freya and Vivienne wanted to go watch Lala play this girl in the US Indoor Ladies final. There was no budging her out of this typical spiteful insanity but it didn't matter: they'd booked everything in advance to allow for her playing in the final, they did this routinely now and it saved thousands. So, along with her coaches, Fred Helm had flown on alone, a businessman, leaving his wife with the dog and two children, who saved by staying the extra night. Vivienne had attended her precious final. Now they were trapped with the winner—and poor Lala was gone.

This horrible game—this horrible life! Which really didn't need to be so miserable as her daughter's spite made it, so constantly. The refusals to push her hair back, to sit up straight, to smile, to look at people: Maria Helm seemed to spend her days wading, sloshing through her daughter's dark and foul refusals to improve a single outward form. And while it was still possible to conceal—at least from the public—at least for

now—that Vivienne had bad habits and a vicious tongue, there was no denying what was obvious: she was solitary, driven, obsessed. She frightened people. Why did she frighten them? To spite her mother. Everything her mother said to be or do or feel, she was and did and felt the opposite; as if her neurons firing in their trillions had evolved this specialized response, a kind of magnetic repulsion from everything her mother wished, wanted, asked. Sometimes Vivienne would even have a psychotic episode in order to humiliate her mother and bring the threat of lawsuits on their home, where she raged at will. They'd bought her a valuable dog and still she was unhappy.

Maria Helm did not believe her own mother, to whom she was close, that she had been the same. Vivienne was far worse than she herself had ever been—and the reason was sport. In its place, in its place, a fine thing, admirable. No one should ever be fat, graceless, unable to compete, ever. But too much sport ruined girls. It ruined them physically, it ruined them morally. It made them masculine. First boyish, then mannish, they lost their looks, their glow, their market value, their appeal to normal men; they lost their femininity: because they didn't value it. They left it behind like a raincoat on a sunny afternoon school bus—honestly, as if they thought they'd never need it again. Heedless girls, heedless of everything but sport and skills and scores. And one another.

For other girls, with too much sport, became a problem; with all sport this was true. But tennis was the worst. There were deniers out there: Maria Helm wasn't one of them. Tennis caused lesbianism, no question. She lived with living proof. Naturally in her daughter's case the element of spite predominated: when Vivienne really turned lesbian, it would be to make her mother hate it. And her mother would hate it: because Maria Helm couldn't stand lesbians. She thought they were awful. She was not one of these bright blithering liberal

women who believe everyone to be equally fine—Maria Helm thought lesbians had something wrong with them. Because they did. *Bitte*. She told her daughter to stop staring at that girl and her daughter ignored her so thoroughly as to make her pause, doubtful for a moment whether she'd actually spoken aloud. This was what this was coming to.

As an icy east wind raised another wave of frozen spray between the lounge and its view of motionless tarmac, Maria Helm's regrets assumed robust proportions. This was what came of enlightened parenting. This was what came of allowing six-year old girls to pursue inclinations toward sport unchecked. This was what came of lessons and dawn practices and coaches and tennis camp, here was the prize, the reward for all sacrifice and hope. They should have let it go, should have kept Vivienne confined in youth soccer. Which, to be fair, she had loved just as well. This was what came of her husband's greed; her own, too, Maria Helm supposed. She'd always wanted a life of great wealth and now here: she had one. Flying First Class through sleet from America's capital to Memphis, Tennessee—two versions of Guam. Her daughter slouched beside her like a gleaming curse.

Vivienne Helm had a strange desire. She wished to hold a conversation. It was so rare for her to want to speak, at any length, to another person, that she knew her mother would be shocked were she to get up and actually do so. She didn't care: let her mother be shocked, let her mother feel electrocuted by the sight—this wasn't the problem. All that made Helm hesitate was what her mother would say, and say and say: Helm was sick of hearing her mother's views on lesbians. Helm was not a lesbian. Her mother was only being boring.

Emma Jasohn didn't even know she was in the room: Helm was sure of this. Curled up in her cushioned seat with her back

to the pouring window, her view of the door, she hadn't even looked up when the Helms had entered. She was studying the pages of a paperback with a thick orange spine, flipping back and forth a lot. In the seat to her left, a nice-looking middle-aged woman in glasses and headscarf, beige and pastels, knitted something purple; behind the next seat, with his wide black leather back to the room, a big man stood looking out: these were Her Russians, people called them. Otherwise that chain of molded chairs was empty. Now the girl uncurled and made another knot of her long body which was swaddled in black clothes—jeans and thick knitted sweater and socks—all black, like the pair of motorcycle boots beside her on the floor. With the purple strands depending from her needles, the knitting woman sat like an opal pressed in onyx. The girl shifted again and cocked her foot up and down to stretch the calf muscle. It felt strange to watch her do something so private and ordinary; now she even yawned. Was she bored? Did it bore her to be in the same room with Helm? Was this what this had come to?

So: this was Wolfie, looking very pale. The American girl whose image and innocent gangster connections filled Helm's daydreams because Helm was so bored, constantly, by her mother, by people, by everything. A pleasant way to pass the time, she'd found, was to think of being with Wolfie instead. Now here she really was again; and here was Helm, in the same room with her, in a situation where it would have been natural to look up and say hello and initiate a conversation—she had not looked up. Wolfie would have, this girl hadn't. This wasn't Wolfie—this was someone different: so.

Who was this person who had defeated her twice?

Finally her mother went away to have another precious cigarette. Helm bent down, took Elli from his case, whispered in his ear, and set him on the floor. The little dachshund dashed across the First Class lounge.

Emma thought that Middlemarch was probably very entertaining. She could feel herself being entertained by it, sentence by sentence; on some level, distant but distinct, it was holding her interest. She just wasn't sure she got it. The Saint Teresa stuff, she'd heard a lot of saint stuff in Catholic high school. Everybody starting with her mother had always explained to her that it was just a bunch of sex problems and not to get mixed up in it. Leave the saints alone: Emma respected the saints but they were like great big drag queens, she figured, best just to smile at and not get them all upset. So this chick in the book is like this huge teetering drag queen in a young girl's body with a lot going on in the hot to trot department. And then she meets this old guy, and this was what Emma didn't get, what was so wrong with the old guy. Her coach Sy Morgenstern was practically the oldest guy she knew and he got women right and left; they missed him when he was gone, too. Although his wife Minnie Morgenstern in her new maximum security nursing home probably didn't miss him, being so far gone herself, top housekeep still did. Emma was already missing his moral support. But having taken a bad beating during Minnie's last stand at Hanukah when she'd armed herself with brass, Doctor Morgenstern was in Japan with the narrator Ellen Nagoya recovering from his injuries and discovering her roots, or something; they'd both decided to forego these first weeks of Emma's clay court career on account of how she was going to stink in her shoes.

Even their old friend Solly wasn't coming along, for the same excuse: "Try not to disgrace us too bad down there, kid," he'd said, in reference to the Southern United States clay court season, just before heading out of Washington, DC by train with a ton of dough. Of which—she sighed. Business as usual, feeling short of cash. Although tonight's prize money wasn't

anything she was eager to see, handle, smell, hear about, be reminded of: let them take it far away, it felt better to have nothing. Emma tried again, and again found it impossible to believe that she was sitting here reading *Middlemarch* when she should have been out on a date dancing with Lala in a hot gay Dupont Circle club. This was really the problem, she supposed, the comparison between the two experiences, the distance between ideal and instead being way too enormously vast for a single living human mind to span. She flipped back a few pages to see who was this other guy, he seemed younger. Emma felt stupid, thwarted and doomed. She was dressed to die in a plane crash and fully expected to. Her fear was existential and her regrets seemed almost as numerous as the remaining pages of *Middlemarch*.

All at once a small brown dog ran up her legs into her lap and began licking her face. Gretchen gave a little whoop of surprise and Emma laughed: it felt delightful, warm, wriggling life leaving kisses all over her face. She kissed the dog back a bit and then looked up:

“Hi, Helm!”

She felt like she’d never been so glad to see another person in her whole life.

“I’m so glad to see you!”

“I,” said Helm.

“How are you?”

“Yes,” said Helm, and sat down in the chair to her right. She looked at Elli and spoke a low approving syllable that caused him to throw himself onto his back in a transport of pleasure; he lay with his head in the crook of Emma’s left elbow. Emma rubbed his belly and Helm removed *Middlemarch* from between Emma’s thighs where she’d tucked it. No great fan of the formalities herself, Emma liked Helm’s style. “This,” said

Helm. “You are reading.” She examined the cover, opened it at random, fanned the pages.

“Yeah,” said Emma. “Middlemarch. It’s really long.”

“You don’t.” Helm frowned and sort of pointed the paperback at the door. Emma had to think:

“Oh, no, I didn’t see you come in! Otherwise, you know.” Her voice trailed off. Helm had turned her frown upon the little dog and Emma stroked his muzzle. She threw a wild look at Gretchen: maybe this was First Class lounge etiquette, she should have watched for Helm and greeted her? Gretchen shrugged, smiled: no help at all. Emma looked back at Helm. “I’m sorry.” Helm was examining the book again, from different angles. “It’s written by a woman,” Emma explained. “Even though she used a man’s name.”

“Yes,” said Helm. “This is famous.” In your culture—your language; Helm didn’t pursue it. “You are studying, I think.”

“Oh, no. I’m just reading um, for fun and, you know, enlightenment.”

“Your college.”

“Oh I didn’t go! After all, I mean.” Emma was sure Helm had to know this; Emma had beaten her in the semifinals a day ago. “I got a deferment. Deferred admission.” This was the thing about Helm: she was a shy person who made other people feel shy; even Emma. Except at the net, and some unavoidable hellos, they’d never spoken. Helm didn’t speak before a match, she remained aloof. And coiled very tightly. Emma had respected her stance and hadn’t tried to make conversation; in truth, she still kind of worshipped the fleet-footed German, beating her twice hadn’t changed that. “But what about you, Helm? Everyone last summer was saying you were gonna quit tennis and come over here to go to Yale or some big timey place. I was so glad when you didn’t.”

“Yes.” Helm frowned and shook her head slightly. “What

was this?”

“You know—or, I dunno. There were all these stories about how you were looking up American colleges at a bookstore in Heisenberg or something.” Emma had done a lot of research in bookstores, too.

“Heidelberg,” admitted Helm. “Yes. This was.” She stared at the dog in a shy, half-stricken manner and remembered her excursion to read about Wolfie’s future school.

“Heidelberg, Heidelberg. So, that’s where you live?” Helm didn’t seem to understand the question. “In Heidelberg?”

“No.”

“Oh. But. Near?”

Helm considered. “No so. Very.” It was like a game.

“So, you got friends there?”

“No!” Although she probably did, people from classrooms. “I don’t know, it’s possible.” There was no harm in explaining Heidelberg: “Here in Heidelberg they are having many bookstores for the university.” Now Emma didn’t seem to understand. “The great—this is in Germany the great university. In Europe,” she added, just to be clear.

Emma got it. “So you went to like the top school in Europe to stand across the street in a bookstore reading American college guides.” Helm nodded—yes, exactly. “Wow.” Emma was impressed. “That’s a great insult, Helm, I’m really impressed.”

Helm blinked at her. Helm’s eyes possessed a marine quality that photographs didn’t really do justice. Someplace Emma had read that Helm’s looks resembled a Viking rampage; the guy had been in the throes of a giant crush, this was clear. But he’d had a point. There you were, the beautiful sea rolling in at you, when boom! here came the rest of her face with a will to overpower and pillage weaker people. Because hers was a hard, active, leave your homestead smoldering kind of merciless

beauty. A long face, the eyes set ever so slightly slantwise above high, pronounced cheek-bones, with a long narrow nose whose nostrils flared as she prepared to speak, and a wide full mouth a little twisted at the moment as she bit her lips instead: Brava was right about Helm. She had a face to sing opera—grand, in the big halls. Slightly awestruck, Emma smiled.

“You,” said Helm, again. There was another pause.

“So, hey. Do people call you Vivienne?”

“No.”

“Vivvy?”

“No.”

“So, Helm.”

She felt something scrambling to get out and answered, “Yes. How do you beat me?” This was what she wanted to know.

Emma bent down to the little dog and spoke to him laughingly: “Hey can you believe this lady? I beat her twice and she doesn’t even know my name! Lookit her!” Emma looked up. In Helm’s eyes a darkness passed, sudden and cutting.

“I know your name.” Now Helm spoke to the dog with her hand on his back paw, saying: “Em-ma. Her name is Em-ma.” Elli looked confused and Helm gave a sign to reassure him: he should ignore this. He’d gone to the right girl.

Emma took time to regroup. She felt a little startled, alerted by that look to slip out of the casual mood which, to give her credit, Helm hadn’t been sharing right from the get-go. “Is this your dog, Helm?”

“Yes. This is obvious.”

“Um. What’s his name.”

“Elli.”

“He’s nice.”

“Yes. He’s very small.” There was a touch of disappointment in her voice. In fact she’d wanted a big, a huge dog: but for travel this was impossible. Elli was portable.

“I seen,” said Emma. “Two dogs, this exact kind, I saw kill a man. On the beach.”

“No. Lie.” She was right. “So. Tell. How.”

“How do I beat you?” Emma watched Helm nod her famous averted head. By remaining calm, playing fearless and adventuresome tennis, and pounding Helm’s backhand without mercy: talk about obvious. “Well I suppose I understand you, Helm. I used to play as a blonde.”

“You.” Helm flicked her eyes and frowned at Emma’s black cropped curls.

“In a wig.” Emma told her straight out, to avoid misunderstandings and confusion: “I’m a performer.”

“Oh. Yes. This—I am reading. A little. But this is Man McKinley, yes? Man you perform in your wig, Em-ma. But she is not blonde.”

“She is, too!”

“No. Bleach.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“No.”

Emma thought of her McKinley chignon, now in storage, with the hand-darkened roots. It crossed her mind to wonder whether Helm had gone to special school. “Well gosh, Helm, I don’t know how I beat you then.”

“Yes,” said Helm. “You do.”

What, Emma wondered briefly, was happening in Middlemarch right about now? Plus: how had another expert in the third degree gotten into her life? She already had about a million billion of them—which was what was so nice about Lala. Or would have been! “Oh, who cares!” Helm looked shocked: good. Emma pursued her advantage and her eyes got teary. “Who cares about either one of us, really? At least I didn’t put you in the hospital, Helm, at least you’re still able to walk around and, you know, conduct your interrogations.”

“But. This.” The loser had gone down in the third set of their final—an excellent match—with a badly sprained ankle. Lala would miss the entire Southern United States clay court season.

Emma felt like a villain—a villain about to die in a plane crash. “Maybe that’s how I beat you, Helm, I’m just bad news.”

“Possibly,” said Helm. “I don’t think so. But this with Lala you aren’t causing.”

“Yeah. I did. I wrong-footed her on the approach when I gave her the eye in the—”

“No wo—be quiet. I will explain.”

“Thank you.” The big man spoke, still by the window. He nodded at Helm. “Listen to her, Emma. Truth.”

“Ja,” said Helm. “I know this. Lala.” How could she put it to a crazy person? “Lala fell. Em-ma. You played well and Lala played well and then she fell down, sometimes this happens.” The Russian couple smiled at her encouragingly, the woman even patted her hand where it rested on Elli next to the girl’s hand.

“This is your big explanation, Helm?” But Emma’s look and tone were bleak. “Lala fell down?” She looked over her shoulder at Ilya. “You hear that? Lala fell.” They all looked at Emma like she was an idiot. “Whatevuh.”

Helm smiled. “This is a risk in sport, Em-ma. Also you were falling down before Lala, maybe this would be an injury first—on your head I think.”

“Oh, I know! I couldn’t believe it!” said Emma. Elli flipped into a seated posture. “I told them that was gonna happen but they wouldn’t let me wear the earplugs causa not being able to hear the umpire. Pure beeswax! But I told them absolutely in advance, I did. That’s why they had the oxygen on hand, Helm.”

“Yes. I was glad.” She had fainted dead away.

“I’m really very strongly affected by Lala’s vocal noise.”

“I think so, yes.” The white-coated medics on the court with the tank and plastic mask; the ball girls and boys chafing wrists and holding ankles, tearful children all around; what seemed like hundreds upon hundreds of black women leaping to their feet to call upon the Lord to save the Alien; Lala, laughing and laughing: this was the circus-like atmosphere some people deplored and decried; people like Helm’s mother. But Helm found she liked it. She found it amusing. “Much better after you were playing, with your beeswax.” She’d heard they’d set attendance records for this final.

“Yeah, but losing that first game was crucial—cause if we coulda gotten outta there in two, you know.” Now her look was bleak and candid. “Before anyone fell, I mean, I was supposed to have a date with Lala tonight. Helm.”

“Ah.”

“We were gonna stay another night and everything—I mean we were, me and my friends.” She introduced her friends the Kasimovs to Helm. “And Lala’s friends knew four or five clubs to go to and I think there were people waiting for us and everything.” This was true: Helm knew Lala well and Lala’s fun entourage had told her all the plans; she’d been present that afternoon when another bar had muscled its way onto the program by telephone with the promise of a shrimp buffet. *Veni Vee! Veni!* Lala would have been happy to have Helm along but Helm would not have gone; although by the third set, she’d been thinking she might, probably. Then Lala had fallen down and Helm had lost her chance to dance with Wolfie. Stupid Lala.

“Yes,” said Helm. “Too bad.” She looked at the girl’s lips. They were pale, nothing special, they parted:

“You like to dance, Helm? Maybe—maybe you coulda come with us.”

“I am.” Why not? “Planning. Yes.”

“Oh. So that’s even worse, then.” She looked crushed.

“Yes. No.” Helm didn’t think this was so bad, this rainy non-musical otherwise, their casual conversation. Scrutinizing the famous face for its resemblance to Wolfie’s she perceived no glaring differences—of course, naturally, whatever. Possibly this girl was some months younger; her haircut was too short; her eyebrows were confusing—maybe Wolfie’s, maybe not. It felt difficult to remember, as they dipped in a frown: Why? With a start, Helm realized that she was seeing a thing she’d never seen before, outside of television cartoons: here was someone having an idea. A spark deep in the golden eyes kicked wider the pupils to admit a full-fledged new idea into the world, attended by wonderment:

“Huh!”

“What is this?”

“Are there Helm wigs?”

“What?”

Emma peered at her hairline, what she could see of it through all the bangs and wild golden by nature locks. “There must be—you’re really popular, there’s gotta be. I can’t believe I never thought of this before! I just—jeez, what a blind spot. I’m so sorry, I feel like an idiot, Helm.”

“This is something you are talking about.”

“As a blonde, Helm! I spent all that time learning McKinley-Freya and I never tried to learn you—and I shoulda!”

“No you should not.” Helm floundered. “This. Have.”

“Oh moy Gawd it would be spectacular! We could do a big Freya-Helm match so Shanaya wouldn’t have to learn another role and then, and then.” Helm watched another idea coming, she could tell it would be even more awful, it was: “You could come to Coney Island, Helm, and do a match with me—as you! Playing yourself, Helm!” Emma was so happy. Already from

reading fifty pages of Middlemarch she was smarter. “I mean, it would be historic!”

Helm was having difficulty breathing. “No. I don’t want. This. This.”

“But—c’mon!” She smiled. “They’ll love you in Coney Island, Helm, you’re so unusual.”

“Is impossible. This.”

“Oh, no, I can do it. I mean it’ll be a major challenge don’t get me wrong.”

“I don’t want you to.” Helm stared in horror.

“Emma.”

“I know your name!”

“So, okay, just, don’t decide all at once, think it over. I mean c’mon, you’re not Albert Einstein, right? Give it a few days to sink in and then see how you feel.”

Helm stood up, looked out the window, and saw the planet Earth, blue and brown and green and white and peaceful. Maybe they were on the Moon: no, there was the Moon; they must be further away. She didn’t know where they were. Helm sat down again and then stood up and walked back across the lounge to her own seat. She signaled to Elli to stay where he was—she didn’t want company. She took some water from her bag and drank it, keeping her back to the horrible girl and the space station view. Her mother was gone again but her brother Erich, who’d been watching them over the top of his book about insects of the Americas, thought Vivvy was brave to have talked to Emma Jasohn. He asked what was she like and Vivvy told him to stop speaking. The girl intimidated Erich, although she was attractive; very unusual coloring. Now she winked at him and he blushed scarlet. He was fourteen.

Straddling Emma’s lap, Elli gazed across the room at his mistress and trembled. She’d left a cold draft behind her, Emma felt the cold. She lowered her mouth to a long kissable ear: “Is

she always like that?” One moment friendly and easy to talk to; the next, a foe of reason.

“Emma.” Ilya loomed. “Be nice. This is good girl.”

“Yeah but she’s nuts! And inartistic!” Gretchen laughed softly. “She is!”

“No. Quiet voice. She is honest, good mind. Clean. Not for the Coney Island.”

“But she could rule Coney Island!”

“Big wonderful. You stop this. Pay attention to new life. Talk nice and be intelligent.” Gretchen murmured something. “Yes. Give time to her.” He clasped her shoulder, this daughter of his heart. “You need friend.”

She knew he was right. Through narrowed eyes, Emma rated Helm’s puffy black and purple jacket among the twentieth century’s top worst garments. A body like that, in that jacket: it was appalling; the stretch pants did a ton of good work and then the jacket just defaced it, like some crappy gang tag. This woman needed a sweater. Emma started telling Gretchen some ideas in a low voice.

The planet Earth: this was new. As she rummaged through her bag in search of nothing whatsoever, Helm wondered whether she had finally lost her mind. She’d seen green birds when they weren’t there; she’d seen red Indians in frock coats sitting in a row who hadn’t been; she was often seeing extra people in the room and almost always at tournaments her grandfather, who was dead. The stress of play and competition released itself in mental pictures, harmlessly. Her disquiet had always been harmless, brief, quickly forgotten; she never spoke of it. And they’d put her through so many brain scans by now, she knew it was nothing organic. In fact, it was nothing. She began to count to three and turned her head at zwei: rain on the window. She heard Elli whine softly.

“Here she comes again, that musta been the changeover,”

Emma told the little dog. “Or something—hey, Helm. Hang on a sec and take off your jacket so my friend can measure you.”

Helm found herself submitting to a cloth tape which Gretchen wielded gently, jotting down the numbers in a notebook as she went. Emma tossed her favorite jacket a few seats away. “Why is this?” Helm finally asked, sitting down again. She was wearing a thick gray sweatshirt for travel and she smelled good and Emma felt warm again; as a matter of fact, Emma felt remarkably glad that Helm was back—almost as glad as Elli.

“For a surprise, Helm. A present from me.”

Helm was startled and pleased. “Yes? Why?”

“I dunno. Just to be friendly.” She pointed at the needles and purple cashmere. “We’re making gloves for Lala now. Gloves are really hard.”

“But.” Helm frowned. “You are not. Em-ma, you are not making these and so from you, they aren’t.”

“Yeah but otherwise they’d be for me, Helm. So—is that your little brother over there?”

Helm focused in that direction. “Oh. Yes. Erich, my brother. He likes you.” Inventively, she continued. “He’s obsessed with you, I think.”

Emma nodded. “Intellectuals, Helm. They go for me.” Like that one article about her in the *New Yorker* which she’d set aside to finish reading when she had more time. She’d meant to pack it for the trip, but she had forgotten. “I’m like in Latin for them or something, they can’t get enough.”

“Yes, I see. Em-ma.” Helm had read the article, twice, and had found it ridiculous. “But he is studying insects all the time, he loves them.”

“Yikes! You mean he thinks I’m like an insect?”

“Possibly. I think so.”

“You think he’s gonna try to pin me up and dissect me or

something?”

“Yes. Soon. Be careful.”

“I will.” There was another pause. “And this is your mother coming back, Helm?” Familiar from television, a beautiful, mean-looking woman—she looked like a mean Russian. But she was German.

“She is. My mother, yes.”

A frowning, filthy look reached them from across the room. Helm bent down to Elli and petted him; their hands touched again. The mother lasted about fifteen seconds in her seat and then left again. Emma looked at Helm but could only see hair, lush and golden. She wanted to touch it. Their conversation, she realized, was flagging.

“Hey Helm, I didn’t congratulate you on winning in Australia, that musta been great.”

“Yes. You weren’t there—why?”

“Yeah, I couldn’t go. So is it great down there?”

“No. I hate. Why are you not going?”

“You hate a whole continent, Helm!”

“Yes. I wanted to see you.” Helm frowned. “Everyone did, Em-ma. Also in Tokyo.”

“What’s Tokyo like?”

“Bad.” Emma laughed at her. Helm couldn’t have that: “After New York you are saying you want to see me again and then you don’t play!”

“I did want to see you, Helm—I do!”

“Then why?” Helm had heard a lot of rumors and rather nasty suppositions and now she wanted the truth: “Is this true, you are a type of criminal and Interpol won’t let you?”

“Interpol! Listen, Helm, if I wanna see you, fuck Interpol—I’m gonna!”

“Emma!” Ilya did what he could about the language but only Brava was ever really effective here. “Tell truth. Is passport

problem,” he explained to Helm. “Paperwork is complicated.”

Helm didn’t understand: Americans never had passport problems. The whole world existed to serve Americans. They got everything they wanted and they were always allowed to go first. She was honestly confused. “But.” This expressed it.

“I don’t have a passport, Helm. It’s coming along, it may already be in the mail, already.” Ilya shrugged; anything was possible. “But for now I’m kinda stuck here.” She located a plus: “I could go to Canada, though.”

“You don’t.” Elli let out a yip, as if he couldn’t believe it either. “You.” Helm was dumbfounded, Emma could see. Everyone, she was getting the idea—in fact everyone else but Americans had passports as a matter of course; they got them as babies, possibly even as fetuses. Those weird underwater shots weren’t just for show and tell in other lands, maybe. She didn’t know. Her mother had refused to let her get a passport so her father couldn’t take her to live in Israel: was this even so uncommon? Emma felt put upon. Finally Helm could form a sentence. “You don’t have a passport!”

“Yeah, well, you don’t have a backhand!” The oceanic gaze heaved. “I dunno how you do it, Helm—you’re like a miracle baby or something.”

“I.” Helm stood up and looked out the window. There was an airport: too bad. She wished they were back in the space station so she could have thrown this girl out and watched her spinning away into oblivion, her long limbs flailing, her big mouth yapping and finally forming a big black round of dismay. Helm couldn’t believe it! She sat down again. The Kasimovs were making sounds of scolding and appeasement. Elli’s tail was wagging—he sensed war. Helm reached for the perfect retort. “You can’t throw!”

“I can throw.”

“No. You cannot.” This had happened during yesterday’s

match, between games, proof: Emma Jasohn had tried to toss a ball back to Helm's side and couldn't get it over the net. She'd persisted in trying, but she could not throw a ball ten feet, not accurately. The ball boys and girls had been scrambling all over the place to retrieve her failed attempts: it had been comical, really. Helm had laughed, everyone had laughed. Sometimes the tennis ball dribbled from her fingertips and bounced off her shoulder or buttocks—she couldn't even begin to throw.

“Oh c'mon—I was just having fun with you, Helm.”

“Yes?” Helm wasn't buying it. “Why?”

Emma smiled a little helplessly and turned up her callused palms. “What can I say?”

Helm found that remark quite idiotic. “You are asking me to say your answer? No. Here I ask, Em-ma, you say. You are not asking when I am asking, this is not—it's not fair.” Helm was really taking the high moral ground here, Emma could see. “If you don't know say you don't know. Simple.”

“Okay, you're right, that's—that is fair.” Emma was still smiling. “You have an interesting mind, Helm.”

“You think.” This compliment was one Helm had never received before. She supposed it was true, she supposed it was gratifying. But to feel pleased was incompatible with the rigors of argument. She got up and walked across the room to where her mother muttered quickly something Helm disregarded as she dug through her bag for a tennis ball; she squeezed them for exercise. Elli leapt down and was following but she signaled him to return to the girl's lap. She tossed her the ball, rather hard. “Throw,” Helm commanded.

In fingers lax and clumsy, Emma held the tennis ball. She made to throw, almost, then stopped. “Well I can't do it with everyone looking at me!” Almost thirty other pairs of eyes were lowered to books, magazines, anywhere.

“No!” said Helm. “Let them look—everyone look. She can't

throw.”

Obediently, everyone went back to watching Emma Jasohn. Who rolled her eyes and snapped the ball across the room; it landed in Helm’s palm with a twanging *thunk*. Helm flicked her wrist and set it back harder; harder still the ball returned to its point of release. A game of catch ensued: scary catch, right-handed and left-handed equally forceful, the ball not entirely visible for its speed which disturbed the air with dry, papery hisses. In a room full of seasoned First Class flyers, everyone had stories to tell about fame and behavior; they’d seen the famous overweening, snarly, recessive, shambolic. Athletes, who were always larger in person, tended to slouch, uncommunicative, plugged into headphones: when it came to really livening up a quiet first-class environment with mayhem, athletes—even retired ones—had nothing on virtually any renowned British actor. But there was a reason, which every now and then became clear, why athletes were kept confined to courts and fields, why all the pens, lockers, markers, lines, rules and referees. Athletes weren’t normal responsible humans, and that was a fact. While it might be a thrill, of a sort, to be witnessing this, two young tennis champions playing catch in the room—not that large a room, either—what if one of them missed? There was a window. Or someone else could get hit and it would hurt really badly; people also feared for the little dog, which had flattened itself along Emma Jasohn’s lap, any instinct to chase after the ball—a little dog’s natural instinct!—utterly stifled. Please, everyone was wishing the same thing, please would Vivvy Helm’s mother just stay the hell out of it, stop talking, stop waving her arms around: the threat of distraction she posed felt potentially fatal. Several heads turned to a congressman who was sitting there: what the fuck were these people elected for, when they didn’t do anything? He got the message, cleared his throat carefully, and began:

“Ah—ah think—ah for one stand convinced that both these young ladies can throw.” Reassured by the sound of his own voice, he continued: “A most enjoyable demonstration and, ah, display and ah believe everyone here will join me in thanking the both of you so very much for a most unique entertainment.”

He stood to applaud, muffledly with moist palms; others murmured or applauded; to no avail. Yellow streaked the close recirculated air. The two girls’ hands appeared to be connected by a yellow rope which hissed, a little snake-like, and popped like not-that distant gunfire.

Helm was remembering a day, it had been either very hot or very cold and she had been very young, with her grandfather, they’d visited a junkyard, he’d needed a part for his ancient Lloyd 300. The yard was a vast place with narrow roads winding among tower blocks of crushed and broken car bodies, crumpled trucks, shelled husks of buses, steeples of stacked tires. Hubcaps, a fame of the place, hung everywhere in decorative arrays, like ancient shields on trophy walls. Somewhere in all this, a well-run place, the men in charge had found the part for her grandfather. A little plug with a twisted pin; she’d held it. At this moment, a part precisely like that one—small, cheap, no doubt obscure—hid inside Helm herself, a part essential to restoring what had just broken down beneath the knowledge and the truth that this girl, this diabolical girl had tricked her yesterday. Helm had been tricked into laughing, she’d relaxed her justly famous steely poise just enough that she had lost, quite unexpectedly, again; and again rather badly, in two sets. Her emotions creaked and teetered, sprinkling rust. How could it be that she was really so fragile? Something was missing that was there, she just couldn’t reach, couldn’t find nor could she describe it—something buried in her walls. Helm threw the tennis ball with all her might at her reflection in the

night-black window.

“*Who!*” howled Emma. “Ilya Hernandez snares the errant pick-off throw to save a run and the Mets stay close!”

The room expelled breath as the big Russian slipped the ball into the pocket of his leather coat. Helm could tell at a glance that she wouldn’t get it back. She didn’t care. She strode across the lounge and sat down again in her seat. “Why are you so bad?”

“Huh?”

“Why!”

“What’re you tawking about?”

As if she didn’t know! “You are!” But she was so pretty, it was awful. “Em-ma. Bad. You do—bad behavior.” Much worse than Wolfie, this girl was no Wolfie, never. Wolfie was gone. Too bad.

She scoffed. “Never am I bad.”

“Hah,” said Ilya.

“Listen,” drawled Emma, she was in full juvenile delinquent mode, Ilya could tell and deplored it, “the two ah yah, fill me in—wouldja?”

Ilya turned to thunder. “Speech!” Gretchen poked Emma’s arm with a knitting needle, lightly, and motioned her husband to be calm. He didn’t like to be without his handgun, which they’d had to check with the suitcases; the hard brush with airline bureaucracy hadn’t made him any less edgy. He glared at Emma.

“Fine!” She crossed her arms to make her breasts look bigger and adopted her ladylike tone. “I’m very sorry if I’ve offended you somehow, Miss Helm.”

Narrowed eyes. “You are tricking me in this match—using tricks.”

“What!” Emma collected herself. “You mean the throwing thing?”

“Yes.”

“I was up a break in the first set when I did that, Helm—no, hey, I’m explaining now. You coulda come back any time but in the second you missed like fourteen first serves in a row.”

“Nein!”

“Yeah, well, nine was enough!”

Helm turned ferocious. “Where is your Yamaha?” she demanded. “You don’t play me with this racquet—why?”

“But.” She looked at her curiously. “I never play you with the Yamaha, Helm, I always use the Kneissls.”

Helm glared. This had bothered her so much before their match, she hadn’t been able to say a word. Five whole minutes she’d been dreaming in her waking mind about for weeks, for months, she had passed in contemplation of a racquet bag with no black shaft showing. And then she’d forgotten all about it. Until now: “So? I don’t deserve your famous racquet, only the great Freya receives this from you in honor? Why?”

“Be—because they wouldn’t let me bring the Yamaha, Helm, it’s too valuable causa what happened, they’re afraid I’ll break it or something, I can’t even practice with it at home, they got it locked up from me in a room which is like—”

“Oh.”

Unable to bring the word impenetrable to mind, Emma continued, leaning in now to spread a little cheer. “C’mon, Helm, don’t take it so hard, there’s always next time. Plus the people love it when you laugh and smile and have fun playing—they’re crazy about you.”

Helm had never heard anything less germane to her life. “So?”

“So? Whaddya mean, *So?* They’re buying the tickets, Helm, they’re making the effort to be there.”

“So? They don’t have to.”

“Yeah, they do have to cause it’s what they love and they

need it to feel happier.”

Helm couldn't believe she'd been put in the wrong. She wasn't wrong. “But you are bad, you are. You say bad things, you are saying I'm not Einstein.” Helm picked a better example. “You call me miracle baby.”

“Well you are a miracle, baby.” A winning smile. “I mean, lookit you.”

Helm shook her head in disbelief and bent down to Elli, who grinned and wagged, a little weak with gratitude. He was so glad she'd stopped frightening him. His mistress stroked his throat and sighed; the message in his liquid eyes was clear. “He wants to go back to Germany.”

“Do you?” Emma asked quietly. A pained expression crossed Helm's face which Emma caught a fraction of through all the hair. “I mean, I don't want you to. Either of you.” She petted the dog again and let their fingers touch again. She really meant it: she wanted Helm to stick around. Elli she also liked, although Emma was more of a cat lover. But dogs, for travel, were the only way to go, no question; cats would not like this. “Hey, Helm—guess what?” Naturally, Helm did not respond. She still looked at Elli. Emma continued, somehow it was just slipping out: “I've never been in an airplane before.”

“WHAT!”

Everyone jumped. The little dog sprang down at his mistress's shout and began yapping and running in circles to summon his personal equivalent of other, larger dogs: the mother.

“I've never been on an airplane—”

“What!”

Furious at being made to jump in her seat by her spitefully perverted daughter, the mother glared across the room but did not come to the little dog's assistance. He jumped back into Emma's lap, placed both front paws on her chest, and started

barking in her face. Helm was still too shocked at the recent information to move a single muscle other than the ones required to say “What,” as she did, once more, in a low and finally conquered tone.

Emma laughed and took the barking Elli in her arms as she stood to announce, since everyone was wondering: “Ladies and gentlemen, you might as well know it too—this is my first time on an airplane tonight.”

Now also the mother said “What!” as practically everyone said “What!” at the same time and then people kept exclaiming and talking in loud voices. Elli didn’t know what the hell was going on. Emma sat back down and he let her rub his belly while he thought it through. Then his mistress added her hand and he put the whole thing behind him.

“I was kinda keeping that quiet,” Emma explained. “You know. For obvious reasons.”

Helm had recovered one hundred percent. “No—no. It’s nice.” Helm felt herself smiling because she was smiling and not because she was trying to on command. Which meant that she wasn’t controlling the smile: she tried, and found that she couldn’t. Alarm shot through her spine, not unpleasantly. She looked at their fingertips touching on the pale ribs. Helm was a great champion, she could have what she wanted. “You are sitting with me, then. Em-ma.” She looked up at the girl who was pale and inexplicably upset. “Sit with me.”

But by now First Class had determined its course, the congressman having marshaled a quorum: the lounge applauded and whistled, even some hooting came as well, to welcome this glamorous newcomer onto the forward end of the skies; there was a little speechifying. Emma waved, smiled, bowed her head, all rather weakly, like Princess Diana. In truth, she was terrified. “Helm, I gotta tell you.” She was using her undertone. “I mean, why do you think I’m dressed up this way—this isn’t my style!”

“Yes I don’t think so!” Helm exclaimed in a whisper.

“The thing is, I have a really bad feeling about this flight, you know, tonight.”

“But air travel is safe.”

“Um. I dunno.”

Helm frowned: maybe this girl was a little unhinged after all. “Why are you afraid?”

“It’s not fear, it’s like—knowledge.” Emma couldn’t explain. “Plus I mean, you’re here. So don’t you see, now it’s like that Buddy Holly plane or whatever, you know, they get a whole bunch of us at once.”

“Who? Gets?”

“Um, you know.” The girl gestured vaguely at a large environment. “The star-killers, Helm. The greedy spirits. The whatevuh.”

“I see.” Not unhinged, just—primitive. The Whatever: nodding her head, Helm smiled down at Elli; he beamed back at her. “This is not happening. Not tonight. Em-ma. The star-killers are sleeping now.”

“But.” Emma leaned in. “You don’t know that, Helm.”

“Yes. I do.”

“Helm!” Emma was really whispering at this point. “Just because you’re not afraid doesn’t mean you know!”

“Beginner’s fear of flying!” Some lady New Yorker shouted, everyone seconded, all scoffed.

“Oh, yeah?” She spun upon the room and countered: “My uncle died in a plane crash his first time in an airplane, boom! So maybe it runs in my family, you know?” That shut them up for about five seconds. Then a score offered pills, there was a big noise of pill bottle rattles accompanying a litany of drug names and potencies. The Kasimovs were waving all this away, very firmly, as Emma flapped a long hand at the room: “Like I wanna sleep through death.” She gave a short laugh. Helm

wondered, a little wildly: What would this girl have made of Lala?

From a darkened deep-chaired corner came a deep familiar voice. “Emma.” The speaker made a move into the light.

“Oh, hey.” Emma Jasohn had a genuine beef with this person; but she couldn’t help it—she liked Arg Argyll. Who’d called that evening’s match from the booth for a limited national broadcast and would be reporting from the Memphis green clay tournament later that week. Right now Arg, encased in gray unisex slimness-accentuating ski clothes, was pretty drunk:

“Emma, you’re the noisiest girl in the world—”

“Hey!”

“And if you intend to board this airplane in the belief that it’s going to crash and we’re all going to die because you’re the next Buddy Holly, then every single person here would prefer that you please, take a pill. Please. Take a goddamn pill and go to sleep.” These sentiments, expressed by a famous and trusted voice, met with considerable accord which did not drown out Ilya’s flat “No pills!” but rendered Helm’s “Nein—no!” more or less inaudible. Helm wanted her awake.

Emma gave Arg a hard look. “Hey, listen! I don’t intend to disgrace the species or whatever, you know, you claim to represent here.” She took in the room again. “I mean, don’t worry about me, folks.”

“Fellow travelers—citizens, fellow citizens, and honored guests from other lands, just listen here a minute.” The congressman, feeling cued, began to offer a recitation of safety statistics interspersed with aside-style paeans to the domestic airline industry—a big contributor to his last three re-elections—which went on in the background as Emma continued:

“I got nerves of steel, Helm.” Quoting herself from a

magazine cover.

The greater champion smiled. “Yes I am reading this about you, many—many places, I think.”

“Yeah, it’s my top attribute.” Sports Illustrated, verbatim.

“Ja?”

“Certainly yah!”

“No I don’t think so. This is.” Helm could explain nerves of steel away easily. “No one has this. They are good nerves or bad nerves, everyone is having, good or bad—but steel, this is too much. It can’t happen.” Helm shrugged, dispassionate.

Emma stared. “You’re saying my top attribute doesn’t exist, Helm.”

Frowning slightly, the other girl considered. “Yes.” She shrugged again, with even less apparent interest. “Too bad.” She looked from one to the other Kasimov, both of whom smiled: they agreed with her. They lived with Emma in a small house and she did not have nerves of steel.

They did.

“Well, I’d love to sit with you, Helm.”

“You are, yes.” The room seemed to brighten.

“You know, if you don’t mind being next to my nerves of nothing.”

“No, I want this.” Helm felt that might have sounded blunter than it should have. Her eyes moved away and narrowed as she searched for a plausible reason—for any reason at all, really, with which to clothe the naked wish. She wanted to sit next to this girl the first time she flew on an airplane. Why did she want this? Because she did. Helm shrugged. “I do.” Now she watched the girl’s eyelids tighten as another inexplicable uncertainty took form. Helm felt a sudden impulse to move forward and heard herself saying: “I don’t think you will be afraid w—when we are flying. I don’t.”

“Oh.” Emma wasn’t buying that. “I’m pretty sure I will,

Helm.”

“No I don’t think so. Em-ma.” Helm smiled at her. “You’ll see.”

Helm appeared to have convinced herself, there was no point in arguing; Helm might even be right. Emma would find out. She said, “The thing is, though, we only have one First Class ticket and if the Kasimovs don’t get bumped up from the back we were gonna rotate so all three of us got to try it.”

“Yes? What? No.”

“No,” Ilya agreed: no rotation.

And now it really did get brighter in the lounge, with the call to board for Memphis coming immediately. Through the course of some confusion involving Elli and her mother which ended with her mother taking the dachshund in his case and Helm almost forgetting her jacket in the lounge, Helm gathered that Emma was flying on a ticket provided by the Memphis tournament, whose largesse had extended to an additional pair of seats in Coach for her friends—another couple hundred dollars was okay, the girl explained, but it would be stupid to get all obligated for the cost of two more First Class tickets which were really expensive when they’d probably just get bumped up anyway. While in theory, players on The Tour were expected to pay for their own travel, in practice all sorts of things happened and Helm was very far from being shocked to find the American champion flying for free; nor did she disapprove. Least of all was she surprised. Everyone on The Tour knew that Emma Jasohn had accepted—what was much, much worse—sizeable appearance payments from every prize-money grubbing tournament in the American South. They’d even discussed it in Players’ Council, how much it might be taking from their own takes. Helm had said she didn’t care: Good for tennis, finally doing something right, was Helm’s frank and unwavering appraisal of the situation, then as now.

She strapped the girl into the window seat next to her own on the aisle. Helm enjoyed holding isolated views.

Emma thought the safety belts were really snug but Helm seemed to know what she was doing, adjusting them carefully and at length. The Kasimovs had not received an upgrade after all, any empty spots in First Class having been assigned instead to more regular customers who hadn't made frightening scenes over disputed handgun permits, Emma surmised. She was in Helm's seat and Helm was in someone else's, that person, who now understood that if he wanted the seat Helm was using he should go win a Wimbledon title and then try coming back at which point they might conceivably discuss it, was now in the back of First Class where Emma would have been sitting. It was a small plane and the section ended in a grim gray-blue curtain—Emma sympathized with the guy, a little. Plus losing his big chance to sit next to Helm: the poor guy.

“So do you go out with Lala a lot, Helm?”

“All you are ever talking about is Lala.” With a furious frown she snapped open Emma's lap buckle and started tightening all the straps again.

“But.” Emma realized it was a struggle with Helm, keeping rational. Across the aisle, one row up, in a position of dominance, sat one probable source of the problem: Helm's mother. A real hostility artist.

“But?” Helm was frowning and tugging and asking, softly but not nicely.

“But what? We sit here in silence for ten minutes and I say one thing—”

“Five. Yes. That thing. One. Lala. Why?”

“Because—who knows why?”

“I know.”

“Oh yeah? Well then you tell me—ee!” A small yelp of alarm; the plane was moving towards the runway. “Uh-boy.”

She squinted out the window at the rolling rain-slick night. “What do you want to talk about, Helm?” Anything would do, it felt like. “So, tell me about Germany. I can never remember—are you from East Germany or West Germany?”

Helm blinked. “The.”

Maria Helm voiced disbelief that anyone might be such an idiot as to think that her daughter could possibly be an East German Communist—even this freak infant criminal prodigy with her friends from Moscow—seriously. Helm’s mother spoke excellent English and Emma understood her meaning very well. She looked a little disappointed.

“So you’re not a Communist, Helm?” The wealthy capitalistic German teenager shook her blonde mane back and forth: no, she was not, and never had been, a Communist. “Oh. Well, that’s okay.”

“It—yes.”

“But Lala’s a Communist, right?”

“She is. Yes.” This was true: Lala was a committed Communist. “But she—you know Lala is not coming from a Communist country. This is the mother’s family only. All the women in Lala’s family are Communists.”

“But doesn’t she take it really seriously?”

“Yes. She.” But who knew what Lala took seriously now, with all her pills? Helm was the wrong person to ask. Had Lala been taking this girl seriously? Here was the question Helm found interesting as it occurred to her, all at once, that Lala might have really liked this girl. In truth, Helm had been aware all along that Lala’s invitation to join them on their date had come more on behalf of her fun entourage, which loved drama, than on Lala’s own; Helm might not have been entirely welcome. Poor Lala. Helm smiled. “You like her so much!”

“Oh I do, I absolutely do.” Emma was candid. “I love her, I always have. It’s like an adoration that I have, Helm. I just

think—you know what? I had my people send her flowers tonight?” She paused to picture the bouquet. “White lilies. You know why? Because I think she’s like a saint—a saint in church.” Emma had just figured this out, but she knew it was true. “In fact she *is* a saint!”

Helm, who had spent enough time fending off Lala’s attempts to unfasten her bra to know that Lala was no saint, said, “You are thinking Lala is a saint?”

“She most definitely is a saint, Helm—she’s a gay saint. Gays love her so much, she’s everything to them. I mean, I been to a lot of Lala matches and I sit with these guys. They’re definitely praying to her, believe me. Because, you know, she’s so beautiful and she represents total human equality and she speaks her own language, she’s like—the better world. And plus it’s so international! You should see all the merchandise in the stores, all the costumes in the parades, from everywhere—full make-up! And—and.” Helm watched Emma Jasohn’s mouth fall open as it occurred to her now also for the first time to perform Lala on her Coney Island, possibly next she would be thinking of performing Lala playing Helm with Helm performing as herself; Helm didn’t know. She didn’t care to know. “The Lala wigs!” Helm started shaking her head again and just kept shaking it. “Aw, c’mon,” said Emma.

Meanwhile Maria Helm startled her son by explaining to him that this was a girl from the streets—a mentally retarded girl from the streets who might be more properly transported in a large animal crate in the hold of the airplane. Emma, whose grasp of German was limited, continued: “You see, your mother agrees with me. But this is the thing, Helm—I’m serious, pay attention. I put the saint of the gays in the hospital! I’ve lost the gays, Helm, they’ll never forgive me. Hey—Arg!” Sitting a few rows up, Arg was some kind of trannie, Arg would know. “Arg! Am I right?”

In fact Arg had undergone jawline reduction but was leaving it at that for now—Arg found surgery horrible. Considering Emma Jason, the broadcaster sighed. “Yes.” She was anathema, it was true. Then Arg considered gays more closely. “No. They’ll forgive you. You’re gay—they’ll have to forgive you.”

“Oh, no, Freya says I have to say I’m a lesbian now.”

“Ach!” cried Maria Helm. In his case under the mother’s seat, Elli awoke and gave a little yodel, he seconded.

“Honey,” said the congressman, “you got some bad advice right there.” Arg who could not have been further away from this goon on the political spectrum agreed with him completely:

“Use gay in public. People don’t mind it as much.”

“Amen.” Normally the congressman would have added brother or sister but Arg was a liberal so liberal you couldn’t tell which; like most of them.

Helm had been listening attentively but Emma couldn’t tell whether this gay saint stuff was new to her or not. “I mean, didn’t you notice all the men dressed up like pretty ladies? Didn’t you hear that huge gay scream when she went down, Helm—I could hear it through the beeswax!”

“I heard—you scream.” The engines were about to start whining.

“That wasn’t just me.” Emma blinked; she knew she’d made some noise. She’d been upset. “Was it?”

“Yes.” Helm was lying, just for the fun of it. She was having fun. “All else was quiet, no noise, no sounds.” Helm pictured the imaginary scene.

“Dead silence.”

“Ja. Ja, this is nice.” Helm really thought so. “Dead silence.” There went the engines.

“It was not.”

“No.” Helm supposed Lala was worshipped by many homosexuals, but there were oil sheiks and school children and

dictators and computer science students and the illiterate poor of Latin America worshipping Lala as well; for starters. The streets—what streets? This girl had led a sheltered life. “So this is what you were wanting tonight, I see. Em-ma. You wanted to dance with a gay saint.”

She gave an animated nod. “And instead I end up reading Middlemarch in a plane crash. Yeah, Helm, that’s exactly what happened.”

“I am so sad for you.”

Emma laughed. “Oh, Helm, we’re going really fast now.”

“Yes, stop talking. Put back your head.” Helm had set her own belts very loose so she could turn in her seat to watch this, what was occurring beside her in the person of this girl who was about to have for the very first time in her life one of Helm’s favorite bodily sensations: the one at the moment of lift-off. “Close your eyes.” Helm gazed at her. “Don’t be afraid. Just—feel.” She wanted to touch her: but where? Everywhere. The airplane rocked and Helm caught her breath. “It’s okay.” She let their shoulders meet.

One long roaring, screeching, jolting, sound of metal snapping crisis later, Emma opened her eyes; everything was smooth and peaceful now. Except for the muttering: that had been a rough take-off, people were saying. “But. What.” She turned to Helm with a smile. “Happened?” Helm’s face was closer than she’d expected to find it and Emma felt so powerful an urge to kiss her mouth that she started to ask for permission: “Um.” She felt a little dizzy, heavy, strange.

Helm toppled, her thoughts in avalanche. She dipped her head—she felt insane—and brought her lips to Wolfie’s long cheekbone; she held their faces pressed together for a moment; she wanted to cry out with happiness, as if she’d just won something. “Look,” she whispered. “Out. Outside. Look.”

Obediently she turned: “Oh! Helm! We’re flying!” It was a

wonderful surprise; she'd thought they'd either stopped or fallen. "Oh, those are cars! Oh wow!" She strained against her bonds for a wider view.

Helm rubbed her mouth against Wolfie's chain-stitched shoulder and touched her bicep, the left, like polished wood inside the thick black sleeve. So strong she was: maybe she was getting hot inside her sweater. Helm thought she would have to take it off. "Look Helm, there's the Washington Monument, that's a really famous pointy structure over here. And that's the one with the dome, that's probably the Capitol, and that's some big shebang with a lotta grounds—nice."

"Your White House this is wo—where your President is living." Helm smiled at the girl's heavenly reflection in the pane of window. "Your friend." Everyone knew she'd invited him to all her matches, but he hadn't come. Dozens of people had arrived with face masks of plastic and rubber, Ronald Reagan had been sitting everywhere among the stands. Wolfie's mouth dropped open.

"That's the White House? Are you kidding me? All that for two lousy people? Jeez! No wonder they didn't invite me ovuh, I woulda moved in." She grinned back over her shoulder. "What's so funny now, Helm? You know, this is why I like Lala—she's a serious person."

"Vivienne!"

Maria Helm didn't like to hear shouts of laughter from that source, of all throats. Her daughter knew this and defied her every time it happened, which was rarely; still, any failure of decorum was too much. Especially in front of Americans. As soon as they saw you sink to their level, they imagined they'd won something else.

Emma watched Helm fall away and return to her upright position, one arm on each armrest, her eyes shut tight. It was a kind of retraction, with the eeriness of film run in reverse:

Helm, as she'd watched, had gone backwards. Now she sat utterly motionless, like a hero in stone. Emma didn't see what Freya was all on about Helm being extra dangerously unstable and potentially violent for; Emma didn't get it. Helm was nice, friendly, intelligent, funny and—except for that one, brief look—not at all menacing. Maybe Freya didn't realize, maybe it had escaped Freya's notice, that Helm's mother was a Gorgon. Helm sat paralyzed. Emma covered Helm's hand with her own on her armrest. She wanted to see whether this would make a change in Helm but at a sight across the aisle turned hurriedly to her own window again. "Clouds! Oh!" Thick, tough, affronted clouds pushed back against the plane which bumped rapidly while rat-a-tat noises came from its fuselage. "Oh!" Then that was over, too. "Stars! Oh! Hi, Moon! Oh, wow." The endless silver field of cloud in the moonlight entranced her.

The other girl took a deep breath. She didn't know who she was, exactly, she was trying to pin it down. To some degree she could be defined anatomically, as a body bisected straight down the middle, head to heel; or not exactly. Bisected with detours. She observed herself, a self-enclosed person who disliked being touched, who found the touch of other girls especially revolting, naturally, almost always—even Lala wouldn't have attempted such a gesture as this with Helm—a person she could see, quite clearly, having to squirm away and take her hand away from underneath this other hand. Yet here sat someone enduring it quite calmly—Helm; but another Helm. Her other half. Which made no sense: it had to be more. The one that didn't mind this was the bigger being. Otherwise it would be over by now. Very carefully, Helm spread her fingers, raised them from the armrest and caught the other fingers between them. She rested again.

Her mother was right; she'd become overexcited. There was no need to talk, Helm didn't care about talking—the girl was

just talkative. In a way, Helm supposed, this was like playing with a noisy new toy before it grew boring. Toys bored Helm quickly. Puzzle games, electronic gadgets, even music devices, her absorption could be total but it would be brief. She liked to read but reading bored her, too, lately; she enjoyed watching movies although her attention would wander. These days, since last summer, her preference was to sit alone and daydream about Wolfie, about having Wolfie beside her, in conversation. It was so strange! Had this other girl with her cool hand been absent, Helm would have been in that seat, picturing her, instead—now it was as if the dreams of several hundred thousand air miles had accumulated to conjure a being of solid flesh into existence. Although: no. That didn't explain what had happened at all. Helm hadn't created this girl. She had captured her. Helm had crossed a room and she had seized her; she had secured her to a seat; now she was holding her hand. She, Vivienne Helm, had done this who supposedly possessed no communication or social skills of any kind. People were idiots. Helm's mother knew nothing about her, Helm proved this to her virtually every day.

Helm sat with her eyes closed. Soon enough, she decided, this trickster would start to bore her just as much as any other toy, any other person; probably quite soon. Until then, she was something different, new and noisy: so what? Helm deserved some amusement in life.

“Well hello there,” she heard.

“Oh, wow! Hi! Are you a stewardess?” This was Wolfie.

“I am.”

“Jeez. Do you ever work in the back or do they keep you mostly for First Class?”

“I'm in First Class pretty much full time.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Helm opened her eyes and was astonished at the quantity of

sex energy being exchanged by Wolfe and the stewardess, it was unbelievable, like someone throwing paint. She made a little noise, a kind of objection.

“Helm! I thought you were asleep.”

Was this an apology from Wolfie? No. Helm raised their linked hands a few inches off the armrest. “I am sitting here.”

“Yeah but—oh. Yeah. No. Yeah, I kinda see your point, Helm.”

“Yes? I don’t think so.”

“No I really do—”

“Um,” said the stewardess, to Helm. “Would you care for a glass of complimentary champagne?” Of course she would. “I’ll bring you one. And how ‘bout you, sugar?”

“Oh, no thank you.”

Helm looked at her quickly. “You don’t like champagne?”

“No.” She smiled up at the stewardess again. Having just remembered the girl’s famous admiration for black women, Helm felt something. It was bad. “You got other stuff?”

“I got whatever you want, honey-pie.” The gorgeous stewardess, who cohabited with unremittingly jealous and possessive lesbians in two separate hub markets, displayed her present lack of sympathy for Vivvy Helm through the addition of a warm undertone to these words which she followed with a blinding smile and coda: “You are by far my favorite passenger.” She was really getting her licks in here.

Helm tossed her head derisively and took back her hand so that she could cross her arms to make her breasts look bigger first.

“Um.” Emma considered. “Have you got a coffee milkshake?”

“No I’m sorry we don’t have those.”

“Strawberry milkshake!” Her eyes blazed at the wonder this would be.

“No I’m sorry we don’t have those.”

“Oh. I’ll have vanilla milkshake then.”

“I’m sorry we don’t have milksh—”

“No—a root beer float!”

“Or ice cream.”

This was kind of a blow. “What about egg creams—you got a vanilla egg cream?”

“No I’m sorry we don’t have those.”

“But.”

“Nothing,” Helm told the stewardess. “Bring nothing. Go. Leave.” She did, with a sidelong wink at the window seat passenger. “Why?” asked Helm.

“I thought you were asleep, Helm, I thought it was the etiquette to flirt with the stewardess, what can I say?”

Helm told her to be quiet. Emma looked impressed. “Gosh, Helm, you’re so imperial, you’re like Catherine the Great or something.” Erich Helm laughed: yes, the Great and Russian! This girl would say anything that made his mother furious—anything! He thought she was wonderful. Arg laughed: yes, she was close with that comparison. Closer than she knew. Their careless laughter floated in space, dangling its toes, and Emma watched that look pass across Helm’s eyes again, dark and driven, driving. The mother made unhappy sounds and Emma shrugged, continued: “Is that all they got up here is champagne? I thought there’d be a lot better selection.”

“No. It’s bad.” *Fuck Interpol!* Helm thought suddenly. She laughed. “I thought you were a famous world criminal.”

“She is,” said Maria Helm, “a criminal.”

The congressman did not like to hear the defending US Open champion being called a criminal by this German lady. Even if the girl was from New York City and had close ties to people from the Soviet Union and was gay—of course she was gay, she was a lady tennis player—even if she was a criminal,

frankly: she was an American citizen and this was America. Don't come over here and start calling people criminals if you're from Germany. He felt some words coming on; at the moment, however, the bigshot daughter had the floor.

This was the new Vivvy Helm, Arg reflected. The one who'd raised eyebrows in Australia with the tone of voice she'd raised to her mother once or twice, quite surprisingly. No one had ever heard Vivvy even disagree with her mother in public before, much less contradict her sharply. Mere weeks later, practically overnight, as daughters versus mothers go, she'd achieved something first-class. Vivvy must have been practicing at home, quite a lot. Arg sipped bourbon. If Vivvy had outgrown her mother's discipline entirely, this was a frightening development.

Emma didn't mind being called a criminal. She thought she probably was a criminal. But Jean Valjean had been a thief and a wanted man and look how good he turned out; plus, everybody was entitled to a point of view. Peaceful co-existence: this was Emma's watchword. Helm was so sexy when she spoke German in kind of a loud voice. When it was over, Emma shifted and voiced a request. "Can you make me looser?"

"I—I see. Yes. Not much." Helm let out Emma's safety belts an inch or two and unfastened her own. Then she reclined a little, crossed her arms again, released a puff of breath, and spoke. "Your etiquette."

"Yeah, for all the good it did me, jeez." Emma couldn't believe Helm was still mad about that. She turned in her seat and reached for a fold in the sweatshirt, very good quality material; she said so. She found a bicep through the fabric and touched it. "You like to fly, Helm?"

"I—I do like. To. Yes." This was true: Helm loved flying. Sometimes on long flights, she'd close her eyes and pretend that she was on the plane with no other people, not even pilots. Just

Helm, alone in the sky, controlling the plane with her mind. “I love.”

“You love to fly.”

Helm breathed. Whatever was happening, right now, out of nowhere, was highly forbidden. This girl should not be curled up next to her with parted lips, fondling her arm muscles, and Helm shouldn’t be enjoying it; and yet she was, and Helm was. Very much. This was more than not minding: this was liking. It was more than liking, though: already, that had been so fast, this was wanting more. Already, it was almost needing. In another instant, Helm was completely divided again: with everything, she wanted the fingers not to stop; and with everything else—just as much—she hoped her mother wouldn’t notice what was going on. To contain so much of both wishes felt almost unbearable. Helm gasped at the strain.

Oxygen-devouring teenaged girl hormones surged and swept through the First Class cabin and everyone experienced shortness of breath. It wasn’t just the embarrassment now: these girls were actually using up all the oxygen. That’s what it felt like. To Maria Helm, it felt much worse: she was alarmed, and she stood up. To the displeasing sight which greeted her she said, “Stop touching my daughter. You drug user.”

Helm made some more remarks in German to her mother, who explained to Helm that she was her mother.

“Missus Helm,” Emma explained forthrightly, “even I don’t smoke enough weed to qualify as a drug user.”

Maria Helm narrowed her eyes; further. “You. Dope.”

This Emma had heard so many times that it barely annoyed her. She turned to explain, “I’m not a dope, Helm, I had really high SAT scores on the total up and up.”

“I know w—” Helm paused with her mouth open. “I know what this is truth, true, yes, this way. Your school near Philadelphia is so selective.”

“I know!” Emma gazed at her with delight.

“Vivienne!” Helm turned a slightly stunned face in her mother’s direction and told her to go away. Her words had no effect. Maria Helm, her credulity strained by the persistence of a touch on her daughter’s arm to which her objections must have been clear enough, shouted at the idiot in black:

“Doping! You are doping!”

“Hey!” This, Emma minded. “I’m not doping anything—you!” Through a superhuman exertion of will, Emma refrained from calling Helm’s mother a motherfucking broad; barely. It helped that her voice got cut off when she threw herself forward into her safety belts.

The congressman had heard enough anyway. “If you’ll excuse me, my good madam, I would like to point out that here in the United States of America we have ourselves some laws we’ve set against a slanderous tongue.”

“Here in wonderful America you also have Soviet scientists, they’re paid to defect, you’re welcoming every inventor of sport doping—you think they change to live here?”

“Our immigration standards are airtight!”

“Yeah! Slander! I’m gonna sue you!”

“Hah!” With no holding back on the malice, or vapor, the mother barked her scorn at both of them; the little dog chimed in; the daughter started yelling.

“Maria!” As the voice of reason, Arg went for a high-volume setting. “They test her every two days—she’s clean!”

Maria Helm, to whom it was incredible that the offending hand was back on Vivienne’s arm, gave a shout of mirthless laughter. “Thank you, American media, always! More lies!”

Emma used her loud voice. “Listen Missus Helm, you better quit with the insults and abuse cause you’re way off base—plus your daughter is a grown-up by the way!”

Maria Helm started for her and would have continued had

the First Class curtain not been swept aside with the entrance of the girl's enormous Russian.

"You," he told Emma. "Fly Coach. Is time."

"But you said the rotation was off!"

"Before off. Now on."

"This is not." Helm tried to think. "Necessary."

"Yeah," said Emma.

"Belt," said Ilya. Helm undid her. "Apology," he told Maria Helm, and moved to stand with his back to her in the aisle. Emma got out and he motioned Helm into the window seat: "Please." Emma lingered.

"You get my free champagne," she told him.

"Good. Go sit. No fighting."

"Whatevuh. Okay. Well, goodnight Helm. I'll see you in Memphis."

"Ja ja." He'd already strapped her in, she couldn't even turn around for a last look. "Em-ma. Goodnight." And he drank Helm's complimentary champagne, as well, not entirely with her permission but he did not approve of young girls drinking alcohol, Helm knew this without being told. In fact he said nothing and neither did she. Nobody did. Silence reigned in the First Class compartment. This man had silenced her mother and Helm felt very safe with him. She let him tuck a blanket around her. She started thinking about Wolfie.

When Helm awoke it was broad daylight on the plane. Which was strange, they should have landed shortly before dawn. Instead of Ilya, she was sitting next to Gretchen Kasimov. It was strange to wake up to the sight of Lala's purple glove. Strangest of all was the voice on the intercom, an American speaking emotionally; she realized she'd been hearing the voice in her sleep. One of the pilots was reading the Bible over the intercom. *Not again*, thought Helm. Soon the other

pilot broke in with information for the sane. This time, Helm gathered, they'd lost a section of the landing gear at take-off so to meet the ground again would be difficult; moreover, they'd burned through so much on the runway that they were almost out of fuel—or they were already out of fuel, she couldn't tell, it wasn't clear. But they knew where they were, Memphis was below, they'd checked and every-thing. Which was good: in Helm's experience, all this and more and the wrong airport, too, were commonplaces. The Bible reading resumed.

Helm turned to address her companion, a plain woman with blonde coloring, soft outlines, weak eyes—hazel—and personal force; in fact the woman wasn't plain. "Excuse me," she asked politely. "Do you know, will there be breakfast served?" Gretchen shook her head. Helm gave a snort of annoyance that made her smile.

This girl was a tough customer—Gretchen really liked Helm. She remembered being like that, hating everything. She came from a strict Lutheran home in Wisconsin, she'd never been happy there. During her sophomore year at a Lutheran teacher training college, since defunct, she signed up for a cultural exchange trip to Moscow. She'd had a nervous break-down, not her first, a few weeks earlier and had not recovered by the time she left. But the Soviet Union had cured her. Far from Luther, far from God, finally the world had made sense to Gretchen. Things—just happened. People—just stood there, or moved. It felt wonderful just to be in the streets, soaking it in: the absence of religion. She refused to go back to America, she defected. Not coincidentally, she'd fallen in love with a man she'd met on a subway platform. Ilya was a gangster, a good job for an able, energetic man in the Soviet Union, and not much more risky than most. He'd been sent away twice but both times had escaped and come back to her. They were still in love. She'd hated to leave her adopted homeland but had never hesitated to

stay with her husband when he received the transfer to the Brooklyn operation. Back in America for nearly ten years, she lived as a Soviet émigré; she never spoke English; she disapproved of American culture, which had in fact deteriorated markedly since 1962 when she'd wiped it like dust from her feet. But Ilya and Emma made everything worth it: she loved her home with them, her life with them; she loved them. And they were bound and determined to travel this land, as well as the maximum number of others. They had a wanderlust. Gretchen missed Russia. She leaned back as Helm stepped into the aisle, where she stretched lengthily with her palms against the ceiling and her eyes fixed on the curtain wall of the First Class cabin. They listened to Emma, deep in Coach, talk back to the intercom:

“But that’s just stupid! Moses was so stupid! He’s in a strong position now—why not stay in Egypt and negotiate for wages and benefits and better working conditions and stuff! I mean there’s a lot of work there, it’s a prosperous civilization—why not stay and contribute? Why do you have to leave? What’s the rush? This is just a waste of life—it doesn’t make any sense, I don’t get it! Jeez!” Despite their language barrier, Gretchen served as Emma’s top expert on scripture and doctrine; she smiled proudly up at Helm, who appeared poised to make a dash to the back of the plane for exercise.

“Honey?” the congressman asked. “Why don’t you go on up there and tell that nice man to stop reading now.” Since the pertinent psalms, the reading pilot had been running low on solace fast—maybe he’d been in charge of the fuel, too. The German girl appeared mildly interested but it was the stewardess who went up and got the job done. The intercom fell silent. The American champion’s voice pierced the curtain once more:

“Thank you!”

Helm returned to her seat from a low-toned nasty

conversation with her mother and rang for coffee.

“You’d like coffee?” The stewardess was asking, just to be sure she’d understood her.

“Yes. Why not?” At least coffee she wanted; of course.

The stewardess gave her a smile. They were circling Memphis on empty with no wheels to speak of. “Would you care for a cup of coffee too, ma’am?” Gretchen nodded happily; she liked coffee on special occasions. The stewardess went and made coffee, everyone wanted some, and when everyone had been served, she sat down with a cup of her own, in full view, which made about a dozen rules she’d just broken; and she drank it, grateful to Vivvy Helm for the idea. In First Class, all remaining panic vanished. First Class sat and drank excellent coffee.

Ilya had returned to Coach around dawn, at the first announcements, to sit with Emma. He could handle her better in case she should panic and make for a door; both Kasimovs knew it might happen. It would make sense to her to take her own chances. So far, so good, she’d stayed in her seat. She’d found a long blonde hair of Helm’s on the sleeve of Ilya’s jacket which she’d wrapped around her fingertip for luck. She’d seemed cheerful, she’d even dozed a little. But awakening to find the situation unchanged and the talisman gone—she couldn’t find it anywhere and her search had been thorough enough to involve a modified handstand—her calm had been rocked. She complained of this Jesus freak guy with the worst reading voice: couldn’t they hire somebody? Emma was agitated, which made her prone to shout. She shouted at the intercom, and when it stopped, she shouted again.

“Peace,” said Ilya.

Emma sat and brooded. Coach was really cramped and the whole place smelled bad, like throw-up and chemicals. People were moaning and weeping and praying. Emma’s nostrils twitched. In a flash, she’d unfastened her belt and leapt onto

her seat; two women with bad hair were strapped to perches in the rear of the compartment. “Hey!” she addressed them. “They got coffee up there—can we get coffee? Please?”

There was some dialogue, some remonstrance and cajoling, some firmer refusals. Emma flopped back down into her seat and Ilya buckled her again—she still couldn’t quite get that part. The aroma of black coffee maddened her brain. They got all the good stewardesses up there, too.

“You know,” she observed in a penetrating voice, “I was in First Class before and I think it’s worth some money more but not that much. Rip-off.”

There was a pause in the lamentations. “They don’t care,” somebody told her. “People in First Class don’t pay. Their companies pay and they charge it back to the consumer.”

“Or to the taxpayer,” someone added. The congressman who was known to be riding in First Class had an oft-exposed reputation as a junketeer. Progressives despised him, they’d exposed everything, people kept voting him in. It was incredible.

“Yeah.” The first guy. “We pay so First Class doesn’t have to.”

Emma got it. “So they’re like parasites.”

“Exactly!” The close rows agreed, the kid got it in one. The way the world went was that honest people sat in the back, looking at parasites from behind: “The curtain is for us!” A progressive lady, yelling. “So we don’t have to see them!”

“Yeah!”

“I get it,” said Emma. “They’re the rich.”

“Yes! The rich!” People were full of agreement on this one. “Exactly!” Rich arrogant bastard anecdotes moved to the tip of everyone’s tongue—because, the behavior! Rich people!

“Yeah!” said Emma. “I mean we’re lucky they haven’t started throwing us off the airplane one by one to increase their own

odds of survival!” In First Class, Helm laughed and coffee spilled on the front of her sweatshirt; it was ruined. She didn’t care.

Really, the rich were so awful and they didn’t care. They just didn’t. And they wouldn’t change—this was a huge problem. Coach boiled with agreement on this point; Emma’s voice rose above an uproar: “We’ve gotta force them to change!” Then some new guy, possibly drunk, his reasoning processes certainly unclear, raised his voice to ask why should they change? Why should they have to? They’d earned it and it was theirs to spend any way they liked. Anyone in America was free to get rich and do as the mood prompted forever, as long as the money lasted, thereafter—this being the thing with a free country. Told by the progressive curtain lady to crawl back under his rock, the guy objected. Other people came to his defense, not that many but they had a lot pent up and they were loud. First Class relaxed again: safe in America. The stewardess started collecting the coffee cups as Coach turned on itself.

“You!” Some guy was contorting around in his seat to shout at Emma. “Lesbo! Go back to Russia!”

“Hey! I never even been outta the country before!”

“Screw you!”

“I know the President—*AARGH!*” Just then, the plane started landing.

Arg woke up asking Emma Jasohn, “What now?” Arg had hoped to sleep through death but could not get back to sleep with her shouting at the top of her lungs as the whole of Coach shouted along, much of it in hot dispute; one strong contralto repeated, insistently: “*Birds of prey! Birds of prey!*” It was surreal. The descent was awful, the touch down terrifying: Arg would have wished to sleep through all of this—plus death. But Arg stayed awake and nobody died.

“I was afraid!”

Helm followed the voice, hoarse, urgent, aggrieved, which led her back towards the arrivals gate where an over-lit gaggle of television and press had been waiting, collected by the news that they weren’t going to make it; Helm had brushed through. Emma Jasohn, disembarking some minutes later, had let herself be caught. She leaned into lights and microphones:

“I was afraid!” She was barking.

It was all they could get from her at the moment, and no one could think of a follow-up question. Who? What? Where? When? Why? Outside the windows, the fire trucks were still red; the sound of blasting hoses reached them through the glass: all those bases were pretty much covered. Wait—she was adding something, maybe:

“It was ten hundred times worse than the cyclone!” They were blank. “I was afraid!” she added.

Someone asked: “Do you mean—a thousand?”

“No—a million!” A stupid question. “I was afraid!” She felt it was significant; she was not a fearful person, save for her fear of sharks and falling off the Cyclone at Coney Island. Which was a special case: riding a steep rollercoaster made of decayed wood was supposed to be scary. Emma hadn’t been on that thing since she was twelve—her mother loved to ride the Cyclone; naturally. She had bad memories of this. She spotted Helm across the gate, zipped back into the horrible jacket, staring right at her. All at once Emma knew that if she’d stayed strapped in next to Helm, she wouldn’t have been afraid. Not in the least. It was a strange certainty, and not all that welcome, especially not in that jacket. Disturbed, Emma frowned at Helm who frowned and turned away, she moved off rapidly with lowered eyes, back to her mother. Emma looked around again. “I’m serious—I was afraid!”

A lot of Coach and a little of First Class as well had hung

around, all with stories, all survivors. The voices started coming in: *“Yeah, but so was I afraid!—We all were!—I was terrified!—I almost pissed myself!—I did piss myself!”* Under the lights around the US Open champion, the people started clustering. It turned into a chant, for the media:

“We were afraid! We were afraid! We—”

She was one of them.