

November 1990: In the Cubbyhole

Jennifer Lee was a lesbian but Shanaya Greene just thought boys were nasty. By which she meant unsafe; but also nasty. She didn't care for them. Still, Shanaya believed that on the Earth walked men, real men, and one day she'd find one. She always had known this and hoped this; moreover, while she and her girlfriend Jennifer didn't hold this particular ideal in common, Shanaya didn't mind. She didn't feel they needed to be equally lesbian. She was the one with the broad outlook here, the one who accepted the full human rainbow—who welcomed it far more, ironically, than her one-time minority mentor on the Stanford tennis team. They didn't disagree about it all that often, though. Instead of discussing their relationship's future, she and Jennifer mostly had sex. After three years they remained incredibly good in bed together.

But when they were out in public, as a couple, they'd argue. They were both twenty.

So here they were, this perfect couple, in Manhattan at Thanksgiving-time, a dream locale, ensconced nights and late mornings in a vast and luxurious Central Park area hotel room. Lucky possessors of a pair of box seat passes to Madison Square Garden for the duration of the biggest week in women's sports, bar none—all, by the way, through the virtuous offices of a champion incapable of meanness or sin, this bounty had come to them, at zero expense to them-selves—here they were out on the town, sitting side by side digesting lobster in a top historic lesbian bar of Greenwich Village. And it wasn't enough. The sniffing, the bickering—they weren't fun to be with, this was the melancholy truth whose distorted ripples fell to intertwining with the staleness of the pretzels in the small faux-bamboo bowl. Why did such sorrows occur? What made them? When there could be no establishment in history whose patrons went through more mini-pretzels per week—look at these women, some of them—not to serve fresh. Although it was probably a mafia supplier. Emma Jasohn frowned harder as from over by the ass-muffled jukebox it came, the inevitable question, rudely put:

“Hey, are you the tennis player or the stripper?”

“Hey!” she barked back. “I'm sitting here with the great Shanaya Greene—you think her mama raised her to hang out with strippers? Fuck you, go finish high school.”

It was the tennis player, all right. Disappointment rose in the Cubbyhole, disappointment and some fast-heating anger, too. She shouldn't even have been there. Still, it was worth putting up with her for the sake of this chance to be around her companions—now people recognized the famous couple. The great New Yorker from Brooklyn, outstandingly tall and broad shouldered, her somewhat breathtaking African features severe, her famous beads reduced these days to brass minimums weighting each of three dozen short immaculate braids at their tips; the Californian beside her, famously Asian—every woman in the Cubbyhole longed or had longed for an Asian girlfriend exactly like this one, somewhat to the southeast of Chinese (and, like Shanaya, pre-med at Stanford), svelte and subtly curvaceous, long unplaited hair reflecting like freshly-wiped vinyl the myriad strings of painted party lights hung across the ceiling: of course, Shanaya Greene and Jennifer “Scooter” Lee had been famously coupled for lesbians everywhere, by name, ever since the idiot champion Emma Jasohn's indiscretion had led to their young love affair's being outed over live satellite TV during the most-watched women's tennis match of 1987. Their story and their images had been widely published, not only at the time. While Shanaya was known to be mildly reclusive and sparing of words, Jennifer maintained an active presence in the alternative and lesbian press, a frequent go-to for opinion quotes on diversity and campus issues.

Emma couldn't stand her. She thought she was a nag. She'd met her yesterday for the first time and she'd nagged then, she was nagging now; it was too much:

“Listen, Scooter Lee, Shanaya's always been lazy and it never affected her at all.”

Because this was the argument now, that Shanaya didn't work hard enough to earn admittance to a Top Med School. She napped too much and smoked too much weed and then watched so much cable and spent so many hours chatting in coffee shops that her grades weren't so high—or they were high, yes, high enough perhaps; but could they be higher? Scooter thought definitely; Shanaya disagreed and thought it didn't matter. Emma wished she could be higher, she regretted the extinction of her crummy buzz as Scooter rejoined:

“And this, Emma, is, like, a perspective similar in any way to that of a Top Med School? The nostalgic impressions of a childhood friend? I don't think so.”

She raised half an upper lip. “Friend?”

Shanaya frowned across the tiny ill-balanced table and asked, “Who says I was lazy?”

“Oh come the fuck on.”

“Who?”

Whatever simmered between them spat hotly. They were exes. Emma looked away, she was careless and made too much eye-contact with strangers. One asked, “Where's your boyfriend?” She didn't answer, she looked back at Shanaya and noted for the record:

“You sleep over twelve hours a day.”

“Nine to eleven and I marshal my energies.”

“What—you cut down that much since high school?” They'd also been classmates and show-business partners. Emma knew Shanaya's sleeping habits well. “I'm impressed if that's true.” Shanaya, who had yet to play a single match for Stanford University, employed a toneless voice to emphasize her reply:

“It is true.”

“Is it?” asked Scooter Lee. “Is it? I'm not sure it is.” And they were off again—arguing data, Scooter called it.

Relieved at least that they'd stopped fighting about bisexuality, Emma tuned out. She almost wished for someone else to converse with but half the other women in the Cubbyhole hated her guts—and though they'd have fucked her, the rest didn't like her at all. She understood. She got the gist, at least. Partly it was that she'd worn shoes handmade from an endangered large cat species and no one believed she hadn't known; mostly it was that she'd claimed to be gay but she'd had a major boyfriend for a couple years now, she and he were always in the papers and she couldn't deny it. Some called her a fake; some bought the boyfriend and believed her locked deep in the closet; others were convinced she'd been mistaken in the first place: either way, anyway, she'd been a big disappointment to lesbians in the Being One of Them department. Bitterness prevailed—bitter and insulting laughter, actually, prevailed.

As an individual, she gathered, she compared unfavorably with the stripper who went around impersonating her in public sex acts with another stripper who played Grand Slam and Olympic champion Vivienne Helm. That girl, those girls both had all the good qualities: hot, mocking, brave, confrontational, highly into one another. Every now and then, snapped at a landmark, a shocking blur of Sapphic lust consumed half a page owned by Rupert Murdoch, in all markets—STRIPPERS BEAT SANTA TO MACY'S, for instance, just that morning. Whereas the real ones, the actual tennis players were screwed up and tiresome, she and Helm, they weren't even friends anymore, everyone knew. They were bores that way, aggressively boring in the typical manner of young prima donnas who pursue careers so public and all-consuming, their hearts could only be afterthoughts. Then they'd marry some rich guy. Meanwhile, compared to the older players, the ones from when tennis was better, neither one of them was even worthy of such a comparison—when compared to the great Freya, or to Man McKinley in her prime or remember poor Johnny Bone, certainly compared to Cookie Toms the greatest champion of all, she and Helm were emotional pipsqueaks. She'd overheard enough:

“Tennis is much better now than it ever was, c’mon!” Emma scolded the Cubbyhole. “A lotta those women are still playing, or they will be. Plus you got Theodosia now—and Lala’s still around.”

“Are we?” Scooter Lee started and stopped herself; Emma turned to see her blushing hard along both cheekbones. “I mean, like, will we be meeting Lala, do you think? This, um, trip? I mean, if she has time.”

“Oh, I dunno.” A little at a loss, Emma had to admit: “I can’t really control things like that with her. Helm maybe could, but—I mean, I dunno.” She ran long fingers through her curls. Was nothing enough for these two, she had to deliver Lala on top?

“What don’t you know?” asked Shanaya. “Besides most stuff.”

“I don’t know if Lala will be up to meeting new people this week, okay?”

“Don’t shout,” Shanaya complained. “You always shout.”

“I’m not shouting.”

“Is she okay?” Scooter Lee’s massive Lala fan fixation was no secret. “Is anything wrong with her? Does she have an injury? I know the basic diagnostic protocols for like five different forms of traditional Asian medicine.”

“No you do not,” said Emma. “You don’t—here is something, Scooter Lee, that you think you know five of like you think you know everything when in fact—”

“Just because,” was Scooter Lee’s response, beginning already, “just because I chose in fact to get an education and just because I’ve had the opportunity in fact and Shanaya your yes friend has had the opportunity to enrich our minds at a great university, in fact, your self-esteem is threatened and you can’t get over your resentment of us.”

Emma restrained the greater part of a gigantic scoff. “Are you kidding me? I been all over the world—I don’t resent people who sit around writing term papers. And I’m paying her way so I really don’t see the resentment, Scooter Lee, I think you’re wrong again. Just like you were wrong an hour ago when you said you and Shanaya coulda both played professional tennis right from high school.”

Scooter objected. “We could. Have.” Shanaya didn’t say anything.

“I don’t think so,” said Emma. “I think that’s wrong, and so is it wrong to act like Shanaya can’t get into any Top Med School she fucking desires, cause for one thing I’m paying, which means she’s paying full price and this is America, Scooter Lee, in America when you can pay full price you can get anything. The problems only start when they’re trying to figure out which poor people to let in for discount or free—which she’dah been anyway cause she’s black.”

“That,” said Scooter, “isn’t necessarily true. I mean, quota-based admissions are far less prevalent than most people assume.”

“Whatevuh.”

Emma’s dull and grudging tone caused Shanaya Greene to raise both eyebrows. “Really? You think your money’s going to waste? Is that what’s going on with you tonight?”

“What—Shanaya, I was defending you! What’re you turning on me for?”

“Don’t defend me. I don’t need that kind of defense.”

“That kind? What kind—huh? Tell!”

But now Shanaya wouldn’t engage, she only flared her nostrils and released through them a sigh: she was avoiding two particular subjects, this—Emma’s character—being one. Shanaya didn’t like unpleasantness, it wasn’t restful. “No one gets in for free,” she chose to explain. “Not anywhere.”

“Yeah well some people are pretty highly subdecided.” Emma saw Scooter’s jaw drop and kind of hang suspended; the rainbow colored lights reflected in her hair made a frame like they’d sell in a head shop. Admittedly, she was cute. Even while gaping: “What?”

Shanaya leaned nearer to Scooter and explained: “She gets a deal of information from my little brother.”

“So?” Emma retorted. “Gene knows stuff, he reads the Wall Street Journal.”

“He carries it around.” The fourteen year-old in question posed no mysteries for his long-suffering kin. “And Scooter’s right—I see resentment in you, too.”

Emma stared. She couldn’t believe it. When Shanaya had all the resentment on her side—and she had none! “You,” she began, “see resentment in—*hmm-uh.*”

Her breath was gone as if dismay had kicked her in the breadbasket; her big mouth might never close again. Beyond Shanaya’s shoulder, a commotion by the door had just concluded with a familiar but startling figure breaking free from a defensive mass; a woman. Who crossed the tiny floor with a bouncer sputtering in pursuit and stopped about a racquet length away:

“What does this person want, Wolfie?”

“Money, Helm.” Keeping calm. “There’s a cover, you gotta pay to come in.”

The blonde glanced around. “Why?”

“Cause—it’s custom.”

“But there is nothing in this place to pay for seeing.”

“Excuse me,” said the bouncer.

“I know, baby, but that’s just how things work here—um, did you follow me?”

She shrugged. “Pay, then. I won’t.”

Emma looked up at the bouncer. “You don’t hafta let her in.”

“She’s already in,” said the bouncer. “Pay.” Emma handed up some cash and the bouncer asked for more. “For her condition before midnight it’s fifty.”

“What! Fifty? We paid five dollars—she’s on her feet, lookit her.”

“She’s drunk.”

“So what?” said Helm.

“That’s their right, Helm, but it’s still extortion and I’m not paying fifty.” Helm said she was worth it but Emma told her that wasn’t the point. “I’m serious—what the fuck are you doing here? I didn’t tell you where I was going.” The bouncer shoved in a palm, upturned, empty. “Throw her out, then,” she answered. “Her way I’m not paying, not fifty—I didn’t invite you either,” she told Helm. Who’d just begun to reach, most unwillingly, for her own cash when a loud jokester’s voice came from the bar rail:

“Are you the tennis player or the stripper?”

Helm wheeled on the voice and flung clarity:

“Performance artist!”

They all watched her maintain her balance in a half-miraculous manner, toss back her shoulders and unbutton a black suit jacket somewhat the worse for wear, lined but too thin for the weather considering the nothing underneath but pale gleaming well-muscled skin and a dark brassiere of erotic character cupping peerless breasts, large ones. The intent and thorough scrutiny she turned upon the Cubbyhole’s patrons now brought her pivoting abdominals into relief; both sets. Every stick of furniture in the place let out a squeak.

“I don’t strip. Raise your minds—and put some fucking music on, merde.” she added.

“Oh brother,” said Emma. *Of course it was the strippers! Doing one of their free underground shows!* The whole stupid bar erupted in applause and rapturous excitement.

Emma was really starting to dread the sound of a sexy French accent. But the artist performing her these days came from a bad part of Nice or one of its nastier suburbs, this was what Helm had decided. She’d had an unlucky life, this artist, and was the product of a hard luck string of many bad happenings; Emma knew the hours Helm had spent telling her the story were many fewer than those she’d spent filling her notebooks with it at night when they were apart, as usual, and Helm alone in some hotel room. Helm was inclined to drink herself into frenzies and she was also smoking Emma’s weed, quite a lot, they argued about this lately, debating the limits of sharing and permission in loud voices. They argued as ever about Helm’s drinking, this hadn’t changed. Their

most recent fight with actual screams had occurred at Helm's hotel that same afternoon, right after Emma's match and right up until she'd slammed out the door; indeed, by contrast with the young couple sitting opposite they argued more or less constantly when they were alone together.

Out in public, they had sex.

"Yeah," said the bouncer. "I knew the two of you were definitely in town."

She walked away grinning and without the surcharge, though she kept the additional ten, Emma was not pleased to see. The jukebox kicked into life; nothing good. Helm would want to dance to Groove Is In the Heart which Emma hoped they wouldn't play; right now she was looking around for a chair. Emma told her, "Don't siddown, Helm, don't stay here." And there were no empty chairs until a stupid woman stood up and offered hers, another cheap-ass wood chair in a lucrative business establishment. "Don't give her your seat!" Emma objected. "You gotta cast on your leg."

This was true. "Touch football," the woman said proudly. "My ACL exploded."

A derisive breath moved Helm's bangs.

"Quelle idiote." She was hugely superstitious about knee injuries; they all were. The woman laughed: she was, she said, an idiot, she really thought so.

"You are," Emma said because it bore repeating. The great Freya had lost nearly half that year's play to a touch football injury; she'd spent weeks rehabbing and running her mouth at the Mansion on Long Island where Emma lived. To her great relief, Emma's coach had forbidden both of them the field in future perpetuity—Emma hated touch football, the rules mystified her and catching the ball hurt her tits. She put some extra effort into saying, "Please don't sit down, Helm."

But it was too late. The empty chair was beside her and now Helm was filling it, Helm's body was there, Helm's hand was on Emma's thigh and it was too late to reject her. She was a heat source and beautiful and Emma was still completely in love with her. Too, she worried all the time about her. Helm's face was close enough to kiss but for the moment she refrained.

With her other hand the newcomer was signaling for service, she wanted alcohol. The Cubbyhole didn't offer table service and Emma wasn't yet twenty, so they'd been nursing Perrier waters she'd fetched back from the bar in plastic cups. Now the visiting couple looked on alarmed as a flashy older personage appeared alongside their table and said, "May I buy you ladies a drink?"

"Non," said Helm. "I buy my own drinks. Whiskey." From some recess of her black suit jacket she produced a few crumpled bills; twenties. "Four whiskies."

"We're underage," said Scooter Lee and Emma at the same time.

The strange woman winked an unfocused eye. "Don't worry about it." She reached around and already the first tumbler was there, hand over hand came the rest, three more thick amber slugs. "S on me. Age is relative," she explained, raising her own glass for a toast: "To youth!"

"À liberté," said Helm, and drank a whiskey.

Then Scooter drank a whiskey and Helm drank another and Scooter drank the last one. Hating whiskey, she coughed a bit but kept it down, her face darkening by several shades of flush. As she would later explain, she'd seen no other alternative to letting an obviously drunk woman consume four more whiskies in quick succession since neither Emma nor Shanaya had made a move to help. Scooter Lee blinked tears from her eyes and focused. This was her first time meeting Vivienne Helm—not her favorite but certainly, unquestionably a great tennis player—and she was astonished to find her so drunk. Without a doubt also gorgeous yet worn-looking, and drunk.

Helm studied Scooter in her turn from across the narrow table and said, "You're pretty." At this point Shanaya announced that she and Scooter would be leaving as soon as they'd finished their Perrier waters. Helm shrugged indifferently and said, "Good. No one wants you here." The indifference she was faking but not the hostility, although they'd never met. Shanaya glared back, her face fearsomely expressionless. She hated the strippers, she thought they were deplorable. In her view, that they'd become a necessary fiction barely mattered; that half of what they did was

advertising was no excuse. She objected to their behavior—but she was keeping her mouth shut. Again. Except to say, “Pervert.” Helm shrugged again, she’d heard it before.

“Parasite,” she countered.

Shanaya frowned back. “Rapist.”

“Hey,” said Emma. “Don’t start, okay?”

Here making a timely return came the leg injury woman, supported on one side by a hefty young girl in thick-framed eyeglasses denoting college enrollment, Emma figured without enthusiasm. The youth broke out in crack-voiced praise for the couple visiting from California: “Listen we all just, we really want to say that, um, we think you guys are so cool. It’s like, first, I mean not only are you this long-term totally out lesbian couple and then, I mean—you actually show up in the community with the—the, these, incredibly amazing artists! I mean—thank you! And, you know—thank you for being so cool!” She raised the plastic beer cup in her hand. Voices rose in accord, there was some hand-clapping; a lot. Helm nodded, joined the clapping, nodding around:

“Yes,” she told the room. “They hired us.”

“Um, like, not exactly!” Jennifer Lee tried hard to be heard but too many people were applauding her and whooping. “Joke, people!” It was no use. Now she objected. “I object to that. As a feminist, okay? I’m objecting to this whole situation.” She was keeping her voice low. “I’m uncomfortable with what I think your—your performance is saying about women and, and sexuality and sexual responsibility. I don’t care to be associated with it, thank you.”

“Scooter Lee,” said Emma, “whatevuh.”

Repulsed as always by the mention of feminism, Helm tipped back her head and stared up at the ceiling full of string lights crisscrossing—a riot of glowing chili peppers and cactuses, sombreros and twinkling cows; she counted strawberries, then stars—then bent to Emma’s ear. “I like the lights, Wolfie. They remind me of you.” She kissed the ear, the curl behind the ear.

Leaning across the table to look straight at Emma, who was stroking Helm’s hair with the back of her hand, absently, Shanaya said, “You said a suite.”

“That’s a big room!” Emma’s shout jerked her body forward; she felt Helm’s upset resound with a pang through her own chest. “That’s a premium room, Shanaya, there’s suites smaller than that room.” Breath being expelled through dilated nostrils prompted her to add, “Uh-huh—plenty!”

“And you said on Central Park,” Jennifer complained.

“Central Park *area!*” Emma leaned in to emphasize that she was tired of explaining this. “It’s Central Park area, Scooter Lee—we have that here.”

“We.” Shanaya tossed her head. “Who are you talking we, Brighton Beach?”

“And, like, here?” added Scooter. “Like, I’m from Oakland.”

Emma flinched—they had a great baseball team, really enviable. At the thought of her own New York Mets, claustrophobia overtook her. Tired of the smoke and the alcohol fumes in the Cubbyhole, she wanted out, she wanted to leave, maybe walk to the river. Too late, she heard Helm answering Shanaya in the worst way:

“She’s saying we. We. Us. Les blanches. White women.” This was really so unhelpful. And exactly what she’d been talking about earlier that day, exactly why they’d argued—because Emma was engaged in a delicate diplomatic negotiating mission here and Helm scorned diplomacy. Any feelings that Emma’s long-ago best friend, bedfellow, sex partner and co-star might prefer to get tenderly mollified, Helm was determined to outrage. She wanted—because she was crazy, she wanted this—a fight with Shanaya Greene.

Who wasn’t going to give her one, Emma had explained this. “She’s not gonna fight with you, Helm,” she tried again. “Please, just try and be nice, okay?”

“Are you?” Scooter Lee seemed almost too startled to continue. She gaped at Helm. “Are you actually a racist on top of, like, everything else?” Helm laughed and even Shanaya shook her head at

that idea. Emma agreed, explaining:

“No, she’s not a racist, she despises all the races. She hates everyone—especially white women, doncha Helm?”

This was true. “Yes. No. Arabs, I like.”

“Oh, you like the Arabs now, baby? That’s nice.”

“Zhey’re zee future of France.”

“I see.” She knew Helm didn’t really believe that—Helm thought France had no future at all.

“How could she be so drunk?” Jennifer was flabbergasted. “I mean, this is extreme, this has all the signs of a serious drinking problem!”

To Emma, although she knew this was true, it sounded like more nagging: “But what’s she gonna do, Scooter Lee? Fly a plane? Perform a heart surgery? She’s a tennis player, she’s between matches—this is our leisure.”

“You’re co-dependent,” she told her. “You should like so go to Al-Anon.”

“I’m not going to fucking Al-Anon.”

“Do you even know what it is?” asked Shanaya.

“Um, yes.” This was true. Freya who’d explained it thoroughly told her all the time to go to Al-Anon. Freya wasn’t in charge, though. “And I’m not fucking going.” Indeed she didn’t really like the sound of it.

To all this Helm seemed inattentive. She was studying Scooter Lee and now resumed a theme. “You’re pretty.”

“You’re repeating, baby.”

But Helm had more. “You’re pretty but you talk too much. If I am fucking you I think I’m closing your mouth with” she gestured, graphically, while searching for the English “binding tape.”

“Helm, I’m serious. Shanaya is not gonna fight you—she goes by Gandhi, I told you, that’s it.”

“That’s true,” said Shanaya. She and Helm were both leaning in across the tiny tabletop, their eyes divided by a zone of excessive narrowness. “But I’m happy to hear her complaint.”

“Um,” said Jennifer. “In terms of that last—threat?”

But Helm said to Shanaya, “Who the fuck you think you are when you’re asking for sixty percent is my complaint.”

Here it was. “Helm, I so don’t need you to fight this fight for me, baby.”

“But it’s not for you,” Helm rejoined. “It’s not, it’s for—reason. Pure reason. It’s for what is true and most right—the highest, the best, you know? It’s for the truth that there are elites, Wolfie. In this world and in logic, the best prosper more.” Emma shook her head, she had to correct this way of thinking all the time:

“Not when there’s a paying audience involved, Helm, you can’t count on it.”

“Exactly,” said Shanaya. “Exactly. And I *am* the best,” she added.

“Well either way!” Quickly Emma got between them with a long arm and some upper torso. “It’s your audience—it’s Shanaya’s audience, it is.”

Which was precisely true—but not necessarily. Which—this—was the whole entire point of all the delicate diplomacy; yes, all the bribery (spat upon, Emma measured, spat upon and rejected—not!), all the lobster tails and green glass water bottles provided and stacked into pyramids of wishful thinking glazed with sales tax. She’d wasted her time. This fight had been coming—Helm wanted it too much, Helm who had an arm around her hips. The other hand stroked her shoulder for a moment. Then Emma felt herself returned firmly to her seat while Helm addressed Shanaya Greene front-wise:

“She won Wimbledon.”

This was true. Emma Jasohn had won the 1990 Ladies Singles title. She always played very well at Wimbledon. Freya, injured, hadn’t been entered so the achievement wasn’t taken all that seriously

where Emma lived; but that was another story. She had beaten Helm, though, pretty fair and square. Helm remained impressed and to some degree she dwelt and brooded on it—healthily or not, Emma didn't know. She wished Helm hadn't chosen this moment to bring the subject up again; not in this company. Indeed, Scooter Lee spoke up as if she were stating fact: "It's doubtful that she could have beaten Freya." Helm raised a hand to repeat the duct-taped mouth gesture and Scooter blinked eyes that sparkled. Emma didn't know whether to laugh or feel bad for her; Helm's hand was back, it was between her legs now. Emma's voice came out drawling:

"Are you gonna cry, Scooter Lee?"

"It's just so, like." She was pretty tough, however—sensitive, but tough. And really pretty. "I'm just so shocked. This is shocking."

"I know." Emma's answer had a vague air. She bent to Helm's shoulder and bit it softly through Armani tailoring.

"So what?" Shanaya Greene asked Vivienne Helm. "Who cares what she's won or hasn't won? This isn't about that. This is other."

Helm opined now: "In no other—in no world is it proper when she is on a tennis court with you, to pay you the more fees and revenue—never."

"I earn more," said Shanaya. But Helm said that wasn't possible, she rather spat it out, in French. Nuzzling her hair, Emma objected:

"Well, of course it's possible, c'mon—it's gotta be." Her voice bounced off the old break in the bridge of her nose. "Someone always earns more."

"Yes," said Helm. "You. The famous and successful one."

Shanaya's brass-weighted head clattered as it shook. "That doesn't mean anything either."

"You," Helm replied, "either are out of your mind or you're stupid. *Political reasons!*" she appended in a mocking tone.

Emma almost groaned at the ill-timing of this reference to a term featured heavily in Shanaya's father's counteroffer—Mister Greene being a political man in the community. "Is that a tu or a vous you, Helm?" she asked instead. "Because it oughta be vous, for respect, plus you're not that close, you're not friends—but please try to be nice, baby, c'mon. You don't hafta be tu, just be nice." Now she tried to get up. "Let's dance, then—let's go dance." There was the floorspace, miniscule, by the jukebox. But Helm could not be hoisted, she could not be budged through human agency so long as this long-sought confrontation lasted—so long as her challenge lay there on the table, she'd be staying to fight.

More than the latest Coney Island contract talks—a lot more—fueled Helm's stubborn indignation. Her disapproval had permanent standing where Emma's economic ties to Shanaya Greene, her first girlfriend, were concerned: these ties, to Helm's mind, represented a root cause of Emma's chronic fundlessness, a major barrier to wealth. Where there should have been more, her performance partner's relative poverty weighed like a huge fucking drag on Vivienne Helm, lesbian exhibitionism's answer to the complete works of Shakespeare. Wealthy herself, she wanted more equality of means so they could travel more and have public sex in more interesting places. She'd confessed to being very bothered by regrets over her youthful pledge never to give Emma money—and Emma never asked. Helm had many regrets and a whole lot of problems. Nonetheless, current events bothered her plenty. She wanted this Coney Island show to go on, she'd always longed to see one. "So?" she demanded.

Shanaya—neither crazy nor stupid—just sat there, she didn't say anything. They'd reached an impasse.

"It's an impasse, baby, let it go." But Emma's words had no effect. Here Scooter Lee, fresh from studying the situation with close attention, contributed her findings.

"You're a psychopath," she told the great German champion.

“She knows that,” said Emma. Indeed, Helm hadn’t reacted beyond twitching one eyebrow. And here Shanaya Green began to speak across the table in a measured fashion:

“Who are you to sit there and try to tell me what I’m worth in my city, in my neighborhood, in front of my people, in our house? Who are you to tell anyone anything about selling tickets—I hear they don’t even like you in Germany.”

This blow landed. Pausing to regroup, Helm kissed Emma on the mouth for half a minute. Excited voices rang out around the Cubbyhole but the clamor was quickly subdued. Nobody wanted to rush things past their natural pace.

Except Shanaya. “Excuse me?” she said. “I asked you a question?” A frown cast her eyes into dangerous shadows.

Refreshed and fuller-lipped, Helm shook her head back and forth; her long messy golden hair caught the colored lights and sparkled. Letting the flurry whip about her own features like hail, Emma whispered, “Please. Please stop now—no more fighting, please.”

All she had to do was talk the Greene side down to 50-50 and the show might go on—at least a 50-50 split Emma’s people would consider—at least she’d heard they might. The sell-out crowd was guaranteed. She and Shanaya hadn’t played the Coney Island Ice House in over three years. They could advertise this as a Christmas Season Spectacular Reunion and charge through the roof—six shows. But they’d have to start practicing this week or else it couldn’t happen. Emma was in, she was game, she wanted Helm to be there, she wanted to play in character, as Helm—this as a surprise—she’d bought the wig and everything. Shanaya had seemed less enthused all along, unexcited; Emma hadn’t been surprised. It was pretty expectable that she’d take persuading. Her father’s sudden demand for a spectacular sixty percent of box office plus all concessions on Shanaya’s behalf, however, had come as a shock. These were the trickiest of negotiations, the kind Henry Kissinger claimed to lose sleep over, the kind anyone might blow with a saboteur sitting right there in the next chair at the table saying things like, “Your people don’t matter.”

“Excuse me?” Shanaya Greene repeated. The iciness of tone, Emma recognized, was vintage and without flaw. Strangely unaffected, Helm proceeded to explain:

“It’s simple. Change the audience. Charge more and sell to people with more money—real money.”

“The tickets are already expensive, Helm.”

“Be quiet, Wolfie. Listen—there is interest in seeing this event, in many countries, interest because of you, Wolfie—people with wealth, people with professions will pay to come to your Coney Island—”

“It’s not,” said Shanaya, “her Coney Island.”

“I think so,” Helm disagreed. “I think so, it is. Why not?”

“Because—demographics.” Jennifer Lee had decided to get involved. “Coney Island is a predominantly black neighborhood.” She blinked at Helm’s lack of reaction and explained, “African American.”

This made Helm shrug. “So? Yes, it has bad demographics. It can improve, no?”

Jennifer was really shocked now, she made this clear in every possible way and it made no difference at all. Emma told her not to take it personally and she replied that she didn’t intend to take it personally; she was sore, though. Helm, who’d been sitting a little open-mouthed with surprise at being so lengthily interrupted, had a sudden major brainstorm and said:

“Wolfie, take this Scooter and go dance with her where I can see.”

“She doesn’t wanna dance with me, Helm—you’re the one who clearly fascinates her.” To her horror, Emma saw Shanaya getting out of her chair; Shanaya stood, attained her full sixty-five inches and leaned back down in Helm’s direction to say:

“Outside. Now.”

Helm moved to stand, she was backing up her chair but she was drunk and Emma was quicker to move. “No fighting!” She straddled Helm in her chair, front to front, Helm in her bra, restraining her. “*Here we go,*” came from a corner of the bar as applause broke out, many whooped and a few women whistled. Across Emma’s shoulder, Helm kind of sneered.

“The great Shanaya Greene—you demand sixty percent—you should get twenty percent—no! Ten. And same on concessions.”

“Helm! Please! This isn’t even any of her decision, stop it!” She slapped the sharp-boned cheek, lightly, three times, and squeezed thigh-wise until Helm’s eyes came to hers, Helm began stroking her shirt buttons. But now Shanaya’s ire comprehended Emma and her voice swept down like an arctic cold front:

“What do you mean it’s not my decision?”

Her lap-straddling posture wasn’t the best for debate, and she had her back entirely to Scooter Lee which was rude; feeling disadvantaged and rude, as well as being on the cusp of a sex act, Emma gave the best she could to answer: “But of course it’s not. Just like it’s not my decision, either. Yours is up to your dad. And his friends—right? Who didn’t even plan to cut me in, by the way, they offered a flat fee like I was back in eighth grade or something, it was insulting.”

Shanaya glared. “That has nothing to do with me. Those are the event organizers.”

Helm laughed. “Exactly! Time for new management.” At which Shanaya waved a dismissive hand—hand and dismissal, both, gigantically antagonistic. Grappling against Helm’s rush to heave herself upright left Emma tangled in the chair with her arms across the back in an iron cross-hold and Helm’s chin in her cleavage; Helm’s tongue. And Shanaya almost shouting at her:

“So? The point, then? Of all your largesse this week—why are you even bothering? If I’m so overpaid, why are you paying for our room.”

“But—I told you, Shanaya, that’s outta my cut for the suite and everything—”

“Room!”

“Whatevuh—I’m saying, I’m agreeing you should get more than fifty-fifty, okay? I’m giving you the more, that’s all it is. So when it comes time to do the split you’ll still get more no matter what it looks like on paper—no it’s not stupid, Helm.” That she was coping with a lot of hard-bitten womanhood at close range right now struck Emma forcibly and she let out a sharp groan to hear Queen Nag chime in as follows:

“But your people only offered hers twenty-five percent—even a suite wouldn’t bring it close to fifty.”

“Forget about the size of your free room for ten consecutive seconds, Scooter Lee—plus I already apologized about that, they never shoulda offered that, I told them it was a mistake, I told them—we’re equal. I can get them to fifty,” she added, over the other shoulder. Helm was making it difficult to carry on two additional spoken word conversations. “Brava said they might consider—and your people told the Daily News I wasn’t even worth forty percent anyway and, you know.” She didn’t want to mention Wimbledon again, not while riding the lap of the former titlist whose three-year reign she had toppled five months ago. “I’m a major tennis champion now,” she finished weakly.

Shanaya Greene just looked at her and sniffed. “You’ve never beaten me. And until you have, you can forget about equality. I’ll meet you outside.” This last was to Jennifer. Yanking an admirable leather garment from the chair back where she’d draped it, Shanaya turned and exited the Cubbyhole in three quick strides. Emma made a noise—disbelief—and Helm looked up from the skin below Emma’s left collarbone where she’d been grazing with the nerves of her lips. She gave a quick headshake to clear her view.

“She’s gone? The greatness?”

“The majority share, baby, yeah she left.”

“Why?” Emma didn’t know, she kept staring towards the exit. Helm asked, “What about the other?” Now Emma looked around—to her surprise, Scooter Lee was still sitting there. Emma couldn’t contain a warm-hearted outburst:

“Poor Scooter Lee, abandoned on top of such a small hotel room and everything!” Helm, for her part, smiled and told the pretty Californian to stay.

“I’m not staying,” she answered. Emma leaned back and started firing questions at her—barking them, really:”

“Was she even gonna play? She’s not—she never had any intention of playing, did she? When’s the last time she even really played, anyway? Huh? We were supposed to go five sets a night, six shows—how the hell was she gonna do that? She’s only half in shape plus she’s limping!”

Jennifer nodded, minutely. “There’s some mild tendonitis. Nothing to worry about—she’s never lost a practice match,” she added.

“Practice!” Emma seemed inclined to spit, but didn’t. “Whatevuh. I can beat her.”

“I doubt it,” said Jennifer.

Helm didn’t care. “You changed your mind—you’re staying, no?”

“No.”

Emma laughed. “You’re into her, huh, baby?”

“I think I want to see you fuck this one, Amour.” Here was the stripper from Nice talking again. Emma grimaced, skeptical.

“Uh-huh. You say that now and then ten minutes later you’ll be throwing her outta the limo with no pants on.” Naturally Helm refused to find any points of similarity between the now and then in question, she merely squinted and caressed Emma’s throat. Emma smiled. “Thank you for not fighting, baby,” she said, bending to kiss her. They kissed until she had to draw back, gasping slightly at the overwhelming size and brightness of the pleasure kissing Helm—as always—gave her; always at first it felt very destabilizing. Now Emma, feeling a tap on her shoulder, turned and blinked to see Scooter Lee persisting in the same seat, she was even speaking. “Huh?”

“I said, I think you should come with me. I mean we should leave, you and me, together. Now.”

“Oh, no,” Emma explained. “She’d have to, I mean she’d insist about coming along to watch—that would have to be part of it. Cause she’s deviant. But she’s super-jealous, too, so really nothing would happen. I mean, don’t even worry about it. And I can’t, you know. I’m sorry.”

Jennifer stared. “I’m not propositioning you.”

“Oh.”

“I’m trying to intervene in a compromising and dangerous situation for your own good—I mean, like, for the sake of your safety and moral health, I’m saying you need to get away from.” She paused for her face to fix itself along lines of alarm and revulsion. “This. Her. I’m trying to save you, Emma.”

“But.” Emma wasn’t sure what to say. “Why?”

Helm released a puff of breath and gave a tug to the black curls her breath had stirred at Emma’s jaw. “It’s feminism, Wolfie, let it go.” She wouldn’t, though:

“But how is that feminism? That’s not feminism, is it?” Scooter Lee nodded, her shapely mouth fallen open again, she was empty of words but she was nodding, yes: it was. “But how is that feminism to keep me from having sex in a lesbian bar with my girlfriend? I’m serious—what’s in that for women?”

Helm nodded: this was so true. She undid one of Emma’s buttons. “*Strip! Strip!*” A Strip chant broke out, sputtered, continued in whispers.

“You.” Jennifer didn’t know where to begin, either. “You’re in a bad relationship. Just—trust me. Come make it up with Shanaya, the two of you need to talk this other situation through to a better resolution. Friendship is the most important thing, Emma. Please.” She gestured: all her cards flat

on the table. “I want this event to go on—I’ve been waiting like three years to see it! Please, just, tell your people to take the forty percent, can’t you?”

“No! I’m worth more than that.”

“Are you?”

“Yes, Scooter Lee, I am!”

“So, like, why can’t it be enough for you to know your worth, accept the reduction on paper, and write it off to charity?”

“Charity! Whaddo they need charity for? They don’t pay any taxes at all. At least I pay some—even Helm paid taxes last year.”

Helm admitted, she had: “Very little, though, Wolfie. Almost nothing.”

“I meant,” said Jennifer, “that you could write it off as a charitable deduction.”

“But.” Emma frowned. “I think I am a charitable deduction. I mean, already.”

“For me, yes.” Helm thought this was funny. “You are.”

“Yeah, I don’t think I can take one when I am one—it’s like the end of Chinatown.”

“NO!” cried Helm. “No no no—it isn’t, it’s not in the least like the end of Chinatown, Wolfie, stop trying to understand that. Pick another movie, pick something—anything, other—no, it’s not!” With the ease of a fine seamstress handling a dress mannequin, she shoved Emma’s torso to one side; she had a face full of laughter—Helm was enjoying herself. “You, Scooter Lee—tell her! What she’s just saying in no way is it like the end of Chinatown.”

“The movie?” Jennifer was at a loss. “I’ve never seen Chinatown.”

“Is that sad but true, Scooter Lee?” Emma shared Helm’s reverence for Chinatown. “But you should see it cause it’s all about the water history of California and you’re from there—don’t worry, the evil Chinese part is just background.”

“Uh-huh,” said Jennifer. “I’m not Chinese.”

“So where?” Helm guessed. “You’re Siamese?”

“Oh no, they call it Burma now, baby. Burmese like the giant jumping rats of Burma.”

Jennifer said, “I’m American. And Roman Polanski is a rapist. Like you,” she added.

“*Ooof*,” said Helm, and rolled her eyes. “More feminism. Tell me, Scooter Lee, when and where and with whom can young unmarried females have sex in your model feminist society—maybe never, no? Or maybe only in their expensive student housing, I think, then it’s okay.” Jennifer was on her feet now—the attempt at intervention was over. “Only between equals, then it’s okay. You call me a psychopath but all you are is someone having a most stupid dream of the most boring life.”

“Yes, I was wrong, you’re not a psychopath,” she admitted. “You’re, like, nothing. Nothing but a rich amoral asshole bully—an abuser.”

“See!” cried Emma. “She’s right—that’s true, Helm, that’s what I always tell you, baby, see? There’s nothing seriously wrong with you, it’s just the choices you’re making.”

“Let it be on the record,” Jennifer, slipping on her nice hiking trail coat, enunciated, “that I tried to help you—for the record, I sat here and told you to leave, I offered you an alternative.”

“What record?” Emma waved long arms around; her shirt was completely unbuttoned now and most of one breast rose untucked above a lace bra cup turned stirrup. “What record?”

That was the last they saw of Scooter Lee in the Cubbyhole that night. People pondered the Why behind the West Coast couple’s departure for about two minutes, mostly deciding that it had been part of the performance. Then the jukebox changed songs, the show began in earnest, and truth be told, another dozen women followed the pair from Stanford right out the front door.

It just wasn’t everyone’s cup of tea.

Lala had changed parents again.

That is, Wolfie had noticed this time. It happened every twelve months, the new faces would appear in Australia, like clockwork; like most people, Wolfie barely ever looked at Lala's parents and she'd missed the switch last year. For her own part, Helm had just joined The Tour when it happened the first time—she'd noticed right away, both parents were completely different. Quite a few people had noticed; it was considered shocking at the time. But many people hadn't noticed and fewer noticed now, when no one discussed the phenomenon while it kept happening.

Indeed, the lack of notice was half-understandable. The parent sets were always very standoffish in manner, they stayed in the background and never gave interviews, they never attended a match unaccompanied by professional contacts towards whom they bent uninterruptedly in conversation—because they were constantly busy making money, making connections, pursuing investments; they worked as quickly as they could to make the most of this single year's opportunity to thrive fiscally in an atmosphere of wealth and social favor. This was from Lala's mother and her family, the Communist side, and these were their Communist comrades who parented Lala in pairs, they all had university degrees and were vetted for fitness by communal processes—Communism was still operating in their region. Someplace on the side of a South American mountain range covered in high jungle, big houses were rising from fresh foundations in a Communist community for which Lala's annual re-parentage represented an opportunity to practice its principles at the expense of modern capitalism; profit was accruing to the greatest number, two by two in turn.

Wolfie didn't buy it. "Oh yeah? You telling me the local Party doesn't get a cut?"

"So go fight with Chairman Mao, Wolfie, don't fight with me."

Strife—endemic between them—flared steadily over the issue, however. Emma for her part thought Helm was heartless. Emma was upset, she couldn't help it, that this was being done to Lala. Getting her attached to one pair of parents and then changing them out on her every year like prison jeans: poor Lala, who needed a family more than ever, more than most, Lala had worse than no family. She had a phony one that didn't care if she was a painkiller pill addict.

"Wolfie, they watch her very closely."

"She needs her family—at least she needs one setta parents—period."

"She has a family, she has enough family."

Lala had plenty of family. There was her Communist mother and her tall sponging father—he harvested and sold land sponges back home in South America; sometimes—whose contrastingly literate older brother, Tío Gnu, busily amassed collections of Lala memorabilia and hand-crafted homages with a view to opening a public gallery devoted to his niece—a Museo of her, someday to grace a major boulevard carved out of the pampas in a city whose commercial prospects had either dimmed or never been bright to begin with; Helm wasn't sure.

Emma didn't know at all. But still they were fighting about it, incessantly. Helm didn't think the situation was so bad and she refused to fake it.

"So her parents on the road are artificial, who cares? You have Ilya and Gretchèn, you aren't so different, Wolfie."

"No. I am. I'm going to the press—it just isn't right."

This was idiotic. "Nobody cares about Communism now, it's over."

How preferable the scene had she been otherwise, one of the mysterious duo with their strange obsession of renown. Equipped with costumes and wigs and the means of pursuit, they followed The Tour—women’s professional tennis, top-tier—an expensive proposition as it circled the globe. Who they really were, no one knew, whether there was more than one pair wasn’t even known, only their work was known; if it could be called that. Unpredictably, unannounced, they’d show up in public places and pretend to be famous young tennis champions while they removed clothes and pleased each other, often in the range of camera lenses. An oddity of the disturbing kind, somehow they weren’t widely reported on nor much investigated. Only The original player, by contrast, was a letdown.

Jennifer Lee was a lesbian but Shanaya Greene just thought boys were nasty. By which she meant unsafe; but also nasty. She didn't care for them. Still, Shanaya believed that on the Earth walked men, real men, and one day she'd find one. She always had known this and hoped this; moreover, while she and her girlfriend Jennifer didn't hold this ideal in common, Shanaya didn't mind. She didn't feel they needed to be equally lesbian. She was the one with the broad outlook here, the one who accepted the full human rainbow—who welcomed it far more, ironically, than her one-time minority mentor on the Stanford tennis team. They didn't disagree about it all that often, though. Instead of discussing their relationship's future, she and Jennifer mostly had sex. After three years they remained incredibly good in bed together.

But when they were out in public, as a couple, they'd argue. They were both twenty.

So here they were, this perfect couple, in Manhattan at Thanksgiving-time, a dream locale, ensconced nights and late mornings in a vast and luxurious Central Park area hotel room. Lucky possessors of a pair of box seat passes to Madison Square Garden for the duration of the biggest week in women's sports, bar none—all, by the way, through the virtuous offices of a champion incapable of meanness or sin, this bounty had come to them, at no expense to themselves—here they were out on the town, digesting lobster while sitting side by side in a top historic lesbian bar of Greenwich Village. And it wasn't enough. The sniffing, the bickering—they weren't fun to be with, this was the melancholy truth whose distorted ripples fell to intertwining with the staleness of the pretzels in the small faux-bamboo bowl. Why did such sorrows occur? What made them? When there could be no establishment in history whose patrons went through more mini-pretzels per week—look at these women, some of them—not to serve fresh. Although it was probably a mafia supplier. Emma Jasohn frowned harder as from over by the ass-muffled jukebox it came, the inevitable question, rudely put:

“Hey, are you the tennis player or the stripper?”

“Hey!” she barked back. “I'm sitting here with the great Shanaya Greene—you think her mama raised her to hang out with strippers? Fuck you, go finish high school.”

It was the tennis player, all right. Disappointment rose in the Cubbyhole, disappointment and some anger. She shouldn't even have been there. No one disagreed, though, that it was worth putting up with her presence for the chance to be around her companions—now people recognized the famous couple. The New Yorker, outstandingly tall and broad shouldered, her somewhat breathtaking African features severe, her famous beads reduced these days to brass minimums weighting each of three dozen short immaculate braids at their tips; the Californian beside her, famously Asian—every woman in the Cubbyhole longed or had longed for an Asian girlfriend exactly like this one, somewhat to the southeast of Chinese (and, like Shanaya, pre-med), svelte and subtly curvaceous, long unplaited hair reflecting like freshly-wiped vinyl the myriad strings of party lights hung across the ceiling: of course, Shanaya Greene and Jennifer “Scooter” Lee had been famously coupled for lesbians everywhere, by name, ever since the indiscretion of the idiot champion Emma Jasohn had led to their young love affair's being outed over live satellite television during the most-watched women's tennis match of 1987. Their story and their images had been widely published, not only at the time. While Shanaya was known to be a tad reclusive and sparing of words, Jennifer maintained an active presence in the alternative and lesbian press, a frequent go-to for opinion quotes on diversity and top-notch campus issues.

Emma couldn't stand her. She thought she was a nag. She'd met her yesterday for the first time and she'd nagged then, she was nagging now, it was too much:

“Listen, Scooter Lee, Shanaya's always been lazy and it never affected her at all.”

Because this was the argument now, that Shanaya didn't work hard enough to earn admittance to a Top Med School. She napped too much and smoked too much weed, she watched so much cable and spent so many afternoons chatting in coffee shops that her grades were not as high as they

could be—they were high, yes, high enough perhaps; but could they be higher? Scooter thought definitely; Shanaya disagreed and thought it didn't matter. Emma wished she could be higher, she regretted the extinction of her crummy buzz as Scooter rejoined:

“And this is from, like, a perspective similar in any way to that of a Top Med School? The nostalgic impressions of a childhood friend? I don't think so.”

Emma raised half an upper lip. “Friend?”

Shanaya frowned across the tiny ill-balanced table and asked, “Who says I was lazy?”

“Oh come the fuck on.”

“Who?”

Whatever simmered between them spat hotly. They were exes. Emma looked away, she was careless and made too much eye-contact with strangers. One asked, “Where's your boyfriend?” She didn't answer, she looked back at Shanaya:

“You sleep twelve to fourteen hours a day.”

“Nine to eleven and I marshal my energies.”

“What—you cut down that much since high school?” They'd also been classmates and show-business partners. Emma knew Shanaya's sleeping habits well. “I'm impressed if that's true.” Shanaya, who for political reasons had yet to play a single match for Stanford University, employed a toneless voice to emphasize her reply:

“It is.” Although her athletic scholarship was history, she still trained and practiced with the team; the other players benefited enough from the experience that she was paid a handsome stipend. Which she was putting towards car payments—she had a new Toyota. “It is true.”

“Is it?” asked Scooter Lee. “Is it? I'm not sure it is.” And they were off again—arguing data, Scooter called it.

Relieved at least that they'd stopped fighting about bisexuality, Emma tuned out. She almost wished for someone else to converse with but half the other women in the Cubbyhole hated her guts—and though they'd have fucked her, the rest didn't like her at all. She understood. She got the gist, at least. Partly it was that she'd worn shoes handmade from an endangered large cat species; mostly it was that she'd claimed to be gay but she'd had a major boyfriend for a couple years now, they were always in the papers and she couldn't deny it. Some bought her gayness still and believed her locked deep in the closet, others were convinced she'd been mistaken because she was that big an idiot: either way, she'd been a big disappointment to lesbians in the Being One of Them department. Bitterness prevailed—bitter laughter, actually, prevailed. In person, Emma Jasohn compared very unfavorably to the stripper who went around impersonating her in public sex acts with another stripper playing Grand Slam and Olympic champion Vivienne Helm. That girl, those girls both had all the good qualities: hot, mocking, brave, confrontational, highly into one another. Every now and then, snapped at a landmark, a shocking blur of Sapphic lust consumed half a page owned by Rupert Murdoch, in all markets—STRIPPERS BEAT SANTA TO MACY'S, for instance, just that morning. Whereas the real ones were screwed up and tiresome, she and Helm, they weren't even friends anymore, everyone knew. They were bores that way, aggressively boring in the manner of young straight women who pursued careers so public and all-consuming, their hearts could only be afterthoughts. Meanwhile, compared to the older players, the ones from when tennis was better, they weren't even worthy of such a comparison—when compared to the great Freya, or to Man McKinley in her prime or remember poor Johnny Bone, certainly compared to Cookie Toms the greatest champion of all, she and Helm were emotional pipsqueaks. She'd overheard enough:

“Tennis is much better now than it ever was, c'mon!” Emma scolded the Cubbyhole. “A lotta those women are still playing, plus you got Theodosia now—and Lala's still around.”

“Are we?” Scooter Lee started and stopped herself; Emma turned to see her blushing hard along both cheekbones. “I mean, like, will we be meeting Lala, do you think? This, um, trip? I mean, if she has time.”

“Oh, I dunno.” A little at a loss, Emma had to admit: “I can’t really control things like that with her. Helm maybe could, but—I mean, I dunno.” She ran long fingers through her curls. Was nothing enough for these two, she had to deliver Lala on top?

“What don’t you know?” asked Shanaya. “Besides most stuff.”

“I don’t know if Lala will be up to meeting new people this week, okay?”

“Don’t shout,” Shanaya complained. “You always shout.”

“I’m not shouting.”

“Is she okay?” Scooter Lee’s massive Lala fan fixation was no secret. “Is anything wrong with her? Does she have an injury? I know the basic diagnostic protocols for like five different forms of traditional Asian medicine.”

“You do not,” said Emma. “You don’t—here is something, Scooter Lee, that you think you know five of like you think you know everything when in fact—”

“Just because,” was Scooter Lee’s response, beginning already, “just because I chose in fact to get an education and just because I’ve had the opportunity in fact and Shanaya your yes friend has had the opportunity to enrich our minds at a great university, in fact, you can’t get over your resentment of us.”

Emma restrained a gigantic scoff. “Are you kidding me? I been all over the world—I don’t resent people who sit around writing term papers. And I’m paying her way so I really don’t see the resentment, Scooter Lee, I think you’re wrong again. Just like you were wrong an hour ago when you said you and Shanaya both coulda played professional tennis right from high school.”

Scooter objected. “We could. Have.” Shanaya didn’t say anything.

“I don’t think so,” said Emma. “I think that’s wrong, and so is it wrong to act like Shanaya can’t get into any Top Med School she fucking desires, cause for one thing I’m paying, which means she’s paying full price and this is America, Scooter Lee, in America if you can pay full price you can get anything. The problems only start when they’re trying to figure out which poor people to let in for free—which she’dah been anyway cause she’s black.”

“That,” said Scooter, “isn’t necessarily true. I mean, quota-based admissions are far less prevalent than most people assume.”

“Whatevuh.”

Emma’s dull and grudging tone caused Shanaya Greene to raise both eyebrows. “Really? You think your money’s going to waste? Is that what’s going on with you tonight?”

“What—Shanaya, I was defending you! What’re you turning on me for?”

“Don’t defend me. I don’t need that kind of defense.”

“That kind? What kind—huh? Tell!”

But now Shanaya wouldn’t engage, she only flared her nostrils and released through them a sigh: she was avoiding two particular subjects, this—Emma’s character—being one. Shanaya didn’t like unpleasantness, it wasn’t restful. “No one gets in for free,” she chose to explain. “Not anywhere.”

“Yeah well some people are pretty highly subdecided.” Emma saw Scooter’s jaw drop and kind of hang suspended. “What?”

Again Shanaya explained, to her girlfriend now: “She gets a deal of information from my little brother.”

“So?” Emma retorted. “Gene knows stuff, he reads the Wall Street Journal.”

“He carries it around.” The fourteen year-old in question posed no mysteries for his long-suffering kin. “And Scooter’s right—I see resentment in you, too.”

Emma stared. She couldn't believe it. When Shanaya had all the resentment on her side—and she had none! “You,” she began, “see resentment in—*bnn-ub*.” Her breath was gone as if dismay had kicked her in the breadbasket; her mouth seemed frozen open. Beyond Shanaya's shoulder was a scene she gazed at: a familiar but startling figure broke free from a commotion by the entrance, crossed the tiny floor with a bouncer sputtering in pursuit and stopped about a racquet length away.

“What does this person want, Wolfie?”

“Money, Helm.” She was keeping calm. “There's a cover, you gotta pay to come in.”

The blonde glanced around. “Why?”

“Cause—it's custom.”

“But there is nothing in this place to pay for seeing.”

“Excuse me,” said the bouncer.

“I know, baby, but that's just how things work here—um, did you follow me?”

She shrugged. “Pay, then. I won't.”

Emma looked up at the bouncer. “You don't hafta let her in.”

“She's already in,” said the bouncer. “Pay.” Emma handed up some cash and the bouncer asked for more. “For her condition. It's fifty.”

“What! We paid ten each—she's on her feet, lookit her.”

“She's drunk.”

“So what?” said Helm.

“It's still extortion and I'm not paying fifty.” Helm said she was worth it but Emma told her that wasn't the point. “I'm serious—what the fuck are you doing here? I didn't tell you where I was going.” The bouncer shoved in a palm, upturned, empty. “Throw her out, then,” said Emma. “Her way I'm not paying, not fifty—I didn't invite you either,” she told Helm. Who'd begun to reach, most unwillingly, for her own cash when another voice came from the bar-rail, somebody wondering:

“Are you the tennis player or the stripper?”

Helm wheeled on the voice and flung clarity: “Performance artist!” They all watched her maintain her balance in a half-miraculous manner, toss back her shoulders and unbutton a black suit jacket somewhat the worse for wear, lined but too thin for the weather considering the nothing underneath but pale gleaming well-muscled skin and a dark brassiere of erotic character. The general once-over she gave the entire Cubbyhole now brought her abdominals into relief; both sets. “I don't strip. Raise your minds—and put some fucking music on, merde.” she added.

“Oh brother,” said Emma, as the bar erupted in applause and rapturous excitement. *Of course it was the strippers! Doing one of their free underground shows!* What clinched it was the sexy French accent, she knew. Helm had decided that the woman performing her these days came from the bad part of Nice or one of its harder-up suburbs. She'd had an unlucky life, this artist, she was the product of a hard luck string of many bad happenings; Emma knew the hours Helm had spent telling her the story were ten times less than those she'd poured of it into her notebooks at night when they were apart, as always, and Helm alone in her hotel room. Helm was inclined to drink herself into frenzies and she was also smoking Emma's weed, quite a lot, they argued about this lately, debating the limits of permission in loud voices. They argued as ever about Helm's drinking, this hadn't changed. Their most recent screaming fight had occurred at Helm's hotel that same afternoon, after Emma's match and right up until she'd slammed out the door; indeed, they argued more or less constantly when they were alone together.

Out in public, they had sex.

“Yeah,” said the bouncer. “I knew the two a'you were definitely in town.”

