

Being Obscured

“Let’s go to Ostia tonight,” Rick had said, “Jim told me about it. He said the food and the atmosphere are both great.” As the taxi turned onto Eighth Avenue, Jen watched Rick’s face pass in and out of the shadows: the strong elegant jawline, the angular chin, the thick black hair.

The hostess seated them under a glittering chandelier—cascading tear-drop shaped crystals shimmering and reflecting soft light. Jen was grateful for the muted lighting; she hadn’t slept well all week, and when she had looked in the mirror that morning, she had seen the inevitable half-moons of darkness under her eyes.

The waiter brought over the bottle of wine that Rick had ordered, (“do you have Chateau Montrose? Oh good, a

wonderful vintage, we'll take that"); Rick poured the wine, the deep garnet liquid refracted through the leaves and petals etched into the crystal wine glasses. He handed a glass to Jen and smiled; there were two rows of even, gleaming white teeth, slight crinkles that had only just appeared that year around his eyes—two bright blue glacial points, set beneath the solid ridge of his brow.

“Cheers. Here’s to us,” he said.

“To us.”

The wine was dry and oaky, it slid down Jen’s throat, the penetrating warmth passing down through to her stomach. Rick smiled again, that smile that had become a part of her consciousness, that she had first seen the night they met at the bar down the street from work. Jen had sat, eyes glued to the football game she had no interest in, waiting for Sharon, who

stood out on the sidewalk, clutching her cell phone, arguing with her on again, off again boyfriend. Rick came over, sat next to Jen and smiled; the smile defined a new moment, time transmuted into something amorphous, as though she and Rick existed in a realm where time had begun to fall away, and as they continued talking, it plunged into irrelevance.

Rick picked up his knife and fork and began slicing into the brown mass of his steak, sawing the knife back and forth in sharp movements. He told her that the merger had gone through, but only after plying the clients with thousands of dollars' worth of Cuban cigars.

“Why would it take all that when they’re in such dire financial straits?” asked Jen.

“Because they had three other firms courting them. So it was like a race to see who could get there first.”

Jen nodded and looked down at her steak and concentrated on cutting. A moment of silence hung between them; Rick topped up her wine glass. “Everything OK?” he asked, “you seem far away.” He sipped his wine. “You’re not having second thoughts about our decision, are you?”

She paused. The woman at the table next to them let out a high-pitched laugh, a waiter breezed by, the low hum of talking filled the restaurant; Rick was watching her, wondering.

“I’m just tired. You know what a stressful week I had at work. I’m drained.”

“Of course babe.” He reached across the table and took her hand. “I know how hard this week was for you. Don’t worry, it’ll get better.”

He squeezed her hand; yes, of course, it would get better.

Rick's lamp cast a swath of light onto his legs, cutting across the bed and resting on the floor. The laptop's glowing screen reflected in his reading glasses, the clicking of the keys punctuated the silence as his fingers glided over them. As Jen reached for her book on the nightstand, her gaze rested on the cedar chest of drawers that she had bought when she moved in. Rick had said it matched with his furniture perfectly; she had been happy that he was pleased, that he seemed to be answering the question he had posed when he brought up moving in together—would it work out between them—in the affirmative.

She leaned back on her pillow and opened her book, but as she looked down at what at that moment seemed to be an inky sea of indecipherable symbols, she thought again of the week

before, when she had gone into the newly decorated living room (she had replaced all the dark browns and blacks with greens and whites), where Rick sat, typing on his laptop, and she had held up the pregnancy test. “It’s positive.”

Rick stopped typing, took off his glasses, sat back and folded his arms. “I guess it must have happened on vacation, that time at the beach when we got caught up in the moment and didn’t use anything.”

Jen nodded.

“What do you want to do? You know I’ll respect your decision.” He paused. “But do you think now is the right time for a baby?”

Jen focused on that thick black hair that looked darker than usual under the mellow tract lighting. “Why did you say you’ll

respect my decision, but then say you don't think it's the right time for a baby?"

"I'm only letting you know how I feel. Things are going so well, we're getting used to living together, I just think it would be a really big disruption to all of that right now."

Rick's face was grim as he listed the pros and cons of keeping the baby; tension filled the air between them, Jen wasn't sure how she felt, she had been ambivalent about having kids for as long as she could remember.

The conversation went on late into the night; Rick looked exhausted and worn out. "Look, I just think this is the time to cement *our* relationship," he said. "Once we get that down, then we can think about a baby. You're still young, we have plenty of time."

Jen realized that he was right; it would interfere with this new start of living together. She told him she would take care of it.

He had smiled and hugged her. “That’s great babe, I think it’s really the best thing for our relationship.”

Jen stared down at her book and sighed. Rick was probably right, it was probably the best thing for them. So many of her friends who had kids said it was a big strain on the relationship; a few of them had even broken up after they had a baby. “All the magic disappeared,” her friend Jessica had said, “whatever we had before went out with the disposable diapers.”

Rick yawned and closed his laptop. “That’s about as much as I can do today. Goodnight babe.” He pecked her on the cheek.

“Goodnight.”

He switched off the lamp. The swath of light disappeared; the floor was shrouded in shadow. Jen closed her book, put it on the nightstand and sunk back into the soft down pillow. As she looked into the darkness, an echo of a memory from long ago reverberated—she had been a child, standing in the hallway, watching her mother in the foyer, in her sparkling silver dress, putting a wrap around her shoulders and walking out the front door. When the door closed, and Jen was left in the hallway, peering into the foyer, desolation had descended onto her at the fact that her mother was gone.

As she listened to Rick's steady breathing and felt the satin sheets touching her skin with smooth softness, once again she saw her mother going out the door, her silver dress glinting and shimmering against the nighttime darkness as she pulled the door closed behind her. The door clicked shut and Jen had felt as

though the closing of the door was a final act, as though the darkness outside was eternal.

But her mother had always come back; the next morning she was at the breakfast table in her floral robe, sipping coffee, smiling at Jen. And when Jen saw that smile, the night before had faded away, engulfed in the cheerful morning sunlight that poured in through the bay window and bathed the breakfast table.

The memory began to recede; she listened to Rick's even breathing, contemplating the darkness.

The alarm pulsed; Jen opened her eyes. Rick reached over and pulled her towards him, he pressed his lips to hers, but she stiffened. He relaxed his grip, stroked her hair, kissed her on the forehead and pushed himself out of bed. A moment later he was singing over the the hum of the shower.

Jen got out of bed and opened the drapes. It was a dull, murky day, gray sky, wind whizzed past the window, shaking the pane. The grayness of the sky lurking outside seemed to seep into Jen, filling her with a gray blank. She turned from the window, pulled on her robe and went down to the kitchen. She made the coffee; she watched it drip drip drip into the pot, drip drip drip; she wondered for how long it would drip until it stopped, until the last drop would fall.

She poured the coffee into two white porcelain mugs. She brought one in to Rick, who was standing at the bathroom sink

shaving. “Thanks babe.” He took the mug and placed it on the sink. Jen sat on the edge of the bed and watched him pull the razor over his cheek in long strokes.

She sipped her coffee. “Do you remember when your mother died and I was talking to your father after the funeral?” She had stood with Rick’s father on the patio, it was night, they each held a glass of vodka neat, looking out at the backyard. He had teared up; he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. “She was so scared,” he had said, “right at the end, she said it’s over, it’s over, there’s nothing left. And she died.”

Rick splashed his face with aftershave. “Yes I remember, but why are you bringing that up now?”

Jen didn’t answer. She remembered the sound of crickets chirping, the hot, muggy summer night, the bitter taste of the vodka, Rick’s father’s voice breaking as he spoke about his dead

wife. And the finality. She had felt the finality of Rick's mother's death, as though her own soul had entered the tomb, and the cold darkness had enveloped her into nothingness.

But she smiled and said that she had been thinking about his father lately and they needed to invite him over for dinner.

He turned around. "You're always so thoughtful, it's one of the things I love about you."

Rick took her out to dinner. He was in a good mood; he kept smiling and reaching across the table to squeeze her hand. "Things are so great. I think we made the right decision moving in together."

That was all Jen had wanted to hear, all she had hoped for as she had put her books in Rick's bookshelf, her mugs in his kitchen cabinet, and her sweaters in the closet space he had cleared for her. But instead of feeling happy she only felt a void in her chest, as though her being had gone blank and there was nothing there, only an endless empty void. But she smiled and squeezed his hand.

He took a long sip of his cocktail; as he sipped he looked over the rim at her, and he asked her if she had made the appointment.

"Not yet, but I'll call tomorrow."

"Don't wait too long, it's better to take care of it earlier than later."

"Yes, you're right. I know."

The food came, Rick dug into his pasta; Jen looked at her salad but she didn't want it. It must have been the pregnancy affecting her appetite. But she speared a piece of lettuce and began to chew, it crunched between her back teeth, she washed it down with white wine. She took another bite, the cucumber crunched, Rick said they should see a movie after.

She nodded as she felt a part of herself leave the restaurant, it went out into the night; alone, she was alone, facing something irrevocable. When she went to her appointment, whatever it was that was growing inside of her would no longer exist; she herself would be the one to do it; she was the person who had to decide whether or not to allow it to grow, or to cause it to slip deep into the void of nonexistence.

Rick was watching her. "You look awfully serious."

She looked into her wine, she swirled it around. “I don’t know, I’ve been thinking of things that are irrevocable.”

“Come again?”

“I don’t know, I just feel, well, I feel that I’m making an irrevocable decision.”

“Did you quit your job?”

“No, I mean,” she looked down at her abdomen, “I mean with what we decided.”

“Oh?” Rick’s eyebrows shot up as he picked up his glass of wine.

“It would have existed, now it won’t exist.”

“Sure, but there’s nothing there now, so you’re not really doing anything. Just getting rid of a few cells.”

“Yes I know. But I keep remembering how I felt when my mother went out at night. I always felt so alone as I watched her go. I would stand in the hallway, watching her as—”

“My mother went out to parties at night too.” Rick put down his wine glass, sat back and crossed his arms.

“I know. I just feel...I feel that I’m the one who has to face this decision alone.”

“Babe, you know I’m always here. You know you’re not alone.”

“Not alone that way. I mean, it will be me who does it. Me alone, within myself.”

“Yes, of course. It’s your decision, you know I totally respect that—”

“But I don’t mean it like that.”

“How do you mean it?”

She looked into the limitless blue of his eyes, at the bright, icy blue. “It’s just that, when my mother went out, into the dark, I felt...I felt as though the darkness was eternal.”

“Eternal darkness. OK, and what does that have to do with anything? What does that even mean?”

“It’s irrevocable.”

“OK, so eternal darkness is irrevocable. Now what?”

“Once I decide to do it, it will be gone.”

“I see. So you *are* having second thoughts.”

“I’m having thoughts about it, that I’m trying to share with you.”

“I think this is just your veiled way of saying you’re having second thoughts. You don’t want to be honest, so you go through

all this convoluted stuff. You can be honest and just tell me outright.”

“You said you’re there for me. I’m trying to talk to you about it.”

“Yes but you’re doing it with an agenda.”

She shook her head and looked past Rick outside the restaurant window. She saw the glistening silver of her mother’s dress set against the darkness outside the door; the door closed, her mother gone. Rick sighed, behind him was the window, his head was set in front of the darkness, the darkness was behind him.

Rick began to work later and later; he had dinners with clients, he had to take them out and entertain them afterwards. Jen was left alone in the loft, staring out at the nighttime skyline, at the buildings rising up to touch the night sky; and she knew that unless she made the choice of non-existence, things with Rick would be over.

A door closing, out into the night forever. Or lose Rick. It was her choice.

She sat in the waiting room, leafing through a magazine. What would it have been, the thing she was choosing to plunge into nonexistence? She would never know.

But it wasn't a child, so she wasn't leaving anyone in the outer darkness; it was a few microscopic cells. That was all it was. But the cells were something, they were a mingling of herself and Rick; if left to their own devices they would become a child. But the key word was become. They were nothing yet, they had no mind, no consciousness, no self-knowledge, they were just cells.

The nurse called her name, Jen put down the magazine and followed her into the room.

“How are you dear? Let me take your vitals.”

The nurse's makeup caked over her skin, settling into the lines around her mouth and giving the brown mole on her chin a faint covering of skin color. She put the cuff around Jen's arm, “your blood pressure looks good.” She handed her a paper gown. “Put this on, the doctor will come in soon.”

Jen took off her clothes; she looked down at her abdomen, at the small area between her hips; under that small bit of flesh was a gateway to existence or a vortex opening up into non-existence.

That morning, Rick had left for work without even looking at her. As he went out the door he called over his shoulder that he had a dinner thing that night, he would be home around ten. And he closed the door behind him. A dinner thing. He had a dinner thing.

Jen sat there alone, under the fluorescent lights, looking at a poster that showed the phases of recovery after the procedure.

The door opened. “Hello Jen, I’m Doctor Marsh, I’ll be taking care of you today. The procedure will only take about a half hour.” She discussed the recovery period, it would be an

easy recovery, Jen could go back to her normal routine in a few days.

Jen put her hand to her belly. Her normal routine, she would plunge it into nonexistence and then go back to her normal routine. As she looked at Doctor Marsh smiling pleasantly, she began to sweat. A wet glob rolled down her face; she lifted her hand to wipe it away. Doctor Marsh looked at her, was she OK?

“I’m fine, the room is just a little hot, I’m having a little trouble breathing but I’m OK.”

“Lie down dear, just relax. Take some deep breaths. The procedure is simple, I’ve done it so many times. Don’t worry, it will go by without any complications.”

Jen closed her eyes. She put her hand on her abdomen, she tried to impart a small moment of connection with the pulsing

cells, to acknowledge them before they were plunged into nonexistence. She let herself imagine what they might have become....

“Are you ready now dear?” Doctor Marsh touched her shoulder. The nurse was waiting, Jen stood up, crossed the room, lay down and put her feet into the stirrups. She closed her eyes.

The waiter brought over a bottle of Champagne. Rick popped the cork and poured it. He held up his glass, “here’s to us babe, to the great future we have together.”

“Here’s to us.” She tipped her head back and drank. Doctor Marsh had told her that it went well, that it was all taken care of.

Rick had come straight from work to surprise her. He smiled; what she had loved for so long, that smile, had now become the first link in a chain that had brought her to that moment, that moment she had known the cells were gone, no longer pulsing, no longer filled with potentiality; when Doctor Marsh had looked up at her and said, “it’s all over, you did great”; when, for the first time, she had plunged something into non-existence.

It was all over, it was done. Rick told an amusing story, the Champagne was amazing, Rick had gone all out that night, she knew they would have great times together again in the future, she knew she would go back to what she had felt that first night she met Rick, when they had stood outside the bar, he had taken her hand....

