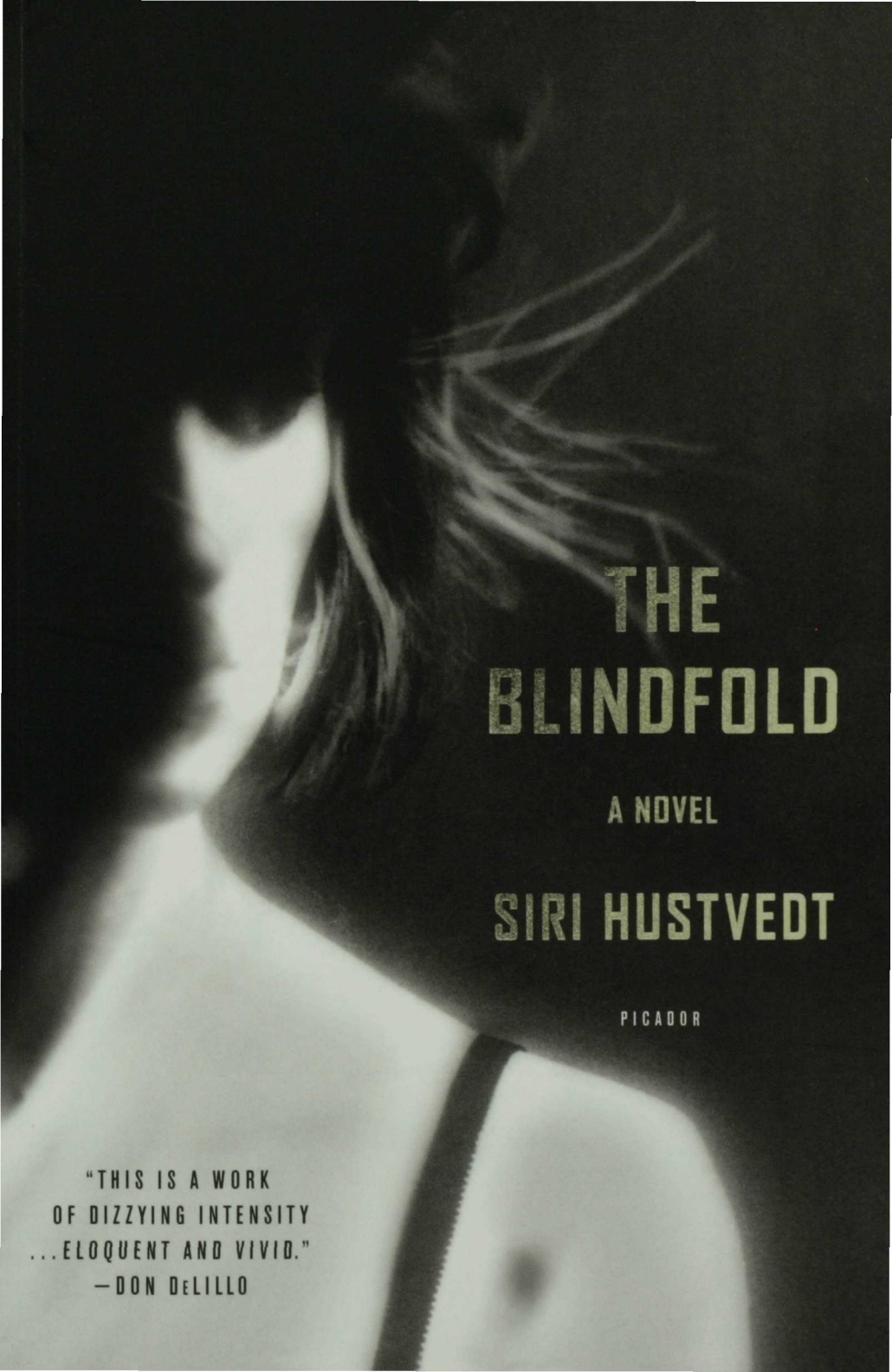
THE
BLINDFOLD
A NOVEL
SIRI HUSTVEDT
PICADOR
"THIS IS A WORK
OF DIZZYING INTENSITY
...ELOQUENT AND VIVID."
—DON DELILLO

ONE

Sometimes even now I think I see him in the street or standing in a window or bent over a book in a coffee shop. And in that instant, before I understand that it's someone else, my lungs tighten and I lose my breath.

I met him eight years ago. I was a graduate student then at Columbia University. It was hot that summer and my nights were often sleepless. I lay awake in my two-room apartment on West 109th Street listening to the city's noises. I would read, write, and smoke into the morning, but on some nights when the heat made me too listless to work, I watched the neighbors from my bed. Through my barred window, across the narrow airshaft, I looked into the apartment opposite mine and saw the two men who lived there wander from one room to another, half dressed in the sultry weather. On a day in July, not long before I met Mr. Morning, one of the men came naked to the window. It was dusk and he stood there for a long time, his body lit from behind by a yellow lamp. I hid in the darkness of my bedroom and he never knew I was there. That was two months after Stephen left me, and I thought of him incessantly, stirring in the humid sheets, never comfortable, never relieved.

During the day, I looked for work. In June I had done research for a medical historian. Five days a week I sat in the reading room at the Academy of Medicine on East 103rd Street, filling up index cards with information about great diseases—bubonic plague, leprosy, influenza, sy-

philis, tuberculosis—as well as more obscure afflictions that I remember now only because of their names—yaws, milk leg, greensickness, ragsorter's disease, housemaid's knee, and dandy fever. Dr. Rosenberg, an octogenarian who spoke and moved very slowly, paid me six dollars an hour to fill up those index cards, and although I never understood what he did with them, I never asked him, fearing that an explanation might take hours. The job ended when my employer went to Italy. I had always been poor as a student, but Dr. Rosenberg's vacation made me desperate. I hadn't paid the July rent, and I had no money for August. Every day, I went to the bulletin board in Philosophy Hall where jobs were posted, but by the time I called, they had always been taken. Nevertheless, that was how I found Mr. Morning. A small handwritten notice announced the position: "Wanted. Research assistant for project already under way. Student of literature preferred. Herbert B. Morning." A phone number appeared under the name, and I called immediately. Before I could properly introduce myself, a man with a beautiful voice gave me an address on Amsterdam Avenue and told me to come over as soon as possible.

It was hazy that day, but the sun glared and I blinked in the light as I walked through the door of Mr. Morning's tenement building. The elevator was broken, and I remember sweating while I climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. I can still see his intent face in the doorway. He was a very pale man with a large, handsome nose. He breathed loudly as he opened the door and let me into a tiny, stifling room that smelled of cat. The walls were lined with stuffed bookshelves, and more books were piled in leaning towers all over the room. There were tall stacks of newspapers

and magazines as well, and beneath a window whose blinds had been tightly shut was a heap of old clothes or rags. A massive wooden desk stood in the center of the room, and on it were perhaps a dozen boxes of various sizes. Close to the desk was a narrow bed, its rumpled sheets strewn with more books. Mr. Morning seated himself behind the desk, and I sat down in an old folding chair across from him. A narrow ray of light that had escaped through a broken blind fell to the floor between us, and when I looked at it, I saw a haze of dust.

I smoked, contributing to the room's blur, and looked at the skin of his neck; it was moon white. He told me he was happy I had come and then fell silent. Without any apparent reserve, he looked at me, taking in my whole body with his gaze. I don't know if his scrutiny was lecherous or merely curious, but I felt assaulted and turned away from him, and then when he asked me my name, I lied. I did it quickly, without hesitation, inventing a new patronym: Davidsen. I became Iris Davidsen. It was a defensive act, a way of protecting myself from some amorphous danger, but later that false name haunted me; it seemed to move me elsewhere, shifting me off course and strangely altering my whole world for a time. When I think back on it now, I imagine that lie as the beginning of the story, as a kind of door to my uneasiness. Everything else I told him was true—about my parents and sisters in Minnesota, about my studies in nineteenth-century English literature, my past research jobs, even my telephone number. As I talked, he smiled at me, and I thought to myself, It's an intimate smile, as if he has known me for years.

He told me that he was a writer, that he wrote for magazines to earn money. "I write about everything for

every taste," he said. "I've written for *Field and Stream, House and Garden, True Confessions, True Detective, Reader's Digest.* I've written stories, one spy novel, poems, essays, reviews—I even did an art catalog once." He grinned and waved an arm. " 'Stanley Rubin's rhythmical canvases reveal a debt to Mannerism—Pontormo in particular. The long, undulating shapes hint at . . .' " He laughed. "And I rarely publish under the same name."

"Don't you stand behind what you write?"

"I am behind everything I write, Miss Davidsen, usually sitting, sometimes standing. In the eighteenth century, it was common to stand and write—at an escritoire. Thomas Wolfe wrote standing."

"That's not exactly what I meant."

"No, of course it isn't. But you see, Herbert B. Morning couldn't possibly write for *True Confessions*, but Fern Luce can. It's as simple as that."

"You enjoy hiding behind masks?"

"I revel in it. It gives my life a certain color and danger."

"Isn't danger overstating it a bit?"

"I don't think so. Nothing is beyond me as long as I adopt the correct name for each project. It isn't arbitrary. It requires a gift, a genius, if I may say so myself, for hitting on the alias that will unleash the right man or woman for the job. Dewitt L. Parker wrote that art catalog, for example, and Martin Blane did the spy novel. But there are risks, too. Even the most careful planning can go awry. It's impossible to know for sure who's concealed under the pseudonym I choose."

"I see," I said. "In that case, I should probably ask you who you are now."

"You have the privilege, dear lady, of addressing Herbert

B. Morning himself, unencumbered by any other personalities."

"And what does Mr. Morning need a research assistant for?"

"For a kind of biography," he said. "For a project about life's paraphernalia, is bits and pieces, treasures and refuse. I need someone like you to respond freely to the objects in question. I need an ear and an eye, a scribe and a voice, a Friday for every day of the week, someone who is sharp, sensitive. You see, I'm in the process of prying open the very essence of the inanimate world. You might say that it's an anthropology of the present."

I asked him to be more specific about the job.

"It began three years ago when she died." He paused as if thinking. "A girl—a young woman. I knew her, but not very well. Anyway, after she died, I found myself in possession of a number of her things, just common everyday things. I had them in the apartment, this and that, out and about, objects that were lost, abandoned, speechless, but not dead. That was the crux of it. They weren't dead, not in the usual way we think of objects as lifeless. They seemed charged with a kind of power. At times I almost felt them move with it, and then after several weeks, I noticed that they seemed to lose that vivacity, seemed to retreat into their thingness. So I boxed them."

"You boxed them?" I said.

"I boxed them to keep them untouched by the here and now. I feel sure that those things carry her imprint—the mark of a warm, living body on the world. And even though I've tried to keep them safe, they're turning cold. I can tell. It's been too long, so my work is urgent. I have to act quickly. I'll pay you sixty dollars per object."

"Per object?" I was sweating in the chair and adjusted my position, pulling my skirt down under my legs, which felt strangely cool to the touch.

"I'll explain everything," he said. He took a small tape recorder from a drawer in his desk and pushed it toward me. "Listen to this first. It will tell you most of what you want to know. While you listen, I'll leave the room." He stood up from his chair and walked to a door. A large yellow cat appeared from behind a box and followed him. "Press play," he commanded, and vanished.

When I reached for the machine, I noticed two words scrawled on a legal pad near it: "woman's hand." The words seemed important, and I remember them as if they were the passwords to an underground life. When I turned on the tape, a woman's voice whispered, "This belonged to the deceased. It is a white sheet for a single bed . . ." What followed was a painstaking description of the sheet. It included every tiny discoloration and stain, the texture of the aged cotton, and even the tag from which the words had disappeared in repeated washings. It lasted for perhaps ten minutes; the entire speech was delivered in that peculiar half-voice. The description itself was tedious and yet I listened with anticipation, imagining that the words would soon reveal something other than the sheet. They didn't. When the tape ended, I looked over to the door behind which Mr. Morning had hidden and saw that it was now ajar and half of his face was pressed through the opening. He was lit from behind, and I couldn't see his features clearly, but the pale hair on his head was shining, and again I heard him breathe with difficulty as he walked toward me. He reached out for my hand. Without thinking, I withdrew it.

"You want descriptions of that girl's things, is that it?" I could hear the tightness and formality in my voice. "I don't understand what a recorded description has to do with your project as a whole or why the woman on the tape was whispering."

"The whisper is essential, because the full human voice is too idiosyncratic, too marked with its own history. I'm looking for anonymity so the purity of the object won't be blocked from coming through, from displaying itself in its nakedness. A whisper has no character."

The project seemed odd to the point of madness, but I was drawn to it. Chance had given me this small adventure and I was pleased. I also felt that beneath their eccentricity, Mr. Morning's ideas had a weird kind of logic. His comments about whispering, for example, made sense.

"Why don't you write out the descriptions?" I said. "Then there will be no voice at all to interfere with the anonymity you want." I watched his face closely.

He leaned over the desk and looked directly at me. "Because," he said, "then there's no living presence, no force to prompt an awakening."

I shifted in my chair again, gazing at the pile of rags under the window. "What do you mean by awakening?"

"I mean that the objects in question begin to stir under scrutiny, that they, mute as they are, can nevertheless bear witness to human mysteries."

"You mean they're clues to this girl's life? You want to know about her, is that it? Aren't there more direct routes for finding out biographical information?"

"Not the kind of biography I'm interested in." He smiled at me, this time opening his mouth, and I admired his large white teeth. He isn't old, I thought, not even fifty.

He leaned over and picked up a blue box from the floor—a medium-sized department store box—and handed it to me.

I pulled at its lid.

"Not now!" He almost cried out. "Not here."

I pushed the lid back down.

"Do it at home alone. The object must be kept wrapped and in the box unless you are working. Study it. Describe it. Let it speak to you. I have a recorder and a new tape for you as well. Oh yes, and you should begin your description with the words, 'This belonged to the deceased.' Could you have it for me by the day after tomorrow?"

I told him I could and then left the apartment with my box and tape recorder, rushing out into the daylight. I walked quickly away from the building and didn't look into the box until I had turned the corner and was sure that he couldn't see me from his window. Inside was a rather dirty white glove lying on a bed of tissue paper.

I didn't go home until later. I fled the heat by going into an air-conditioned coffee shop, sitting for hours as I scribbled notes to myself about the glove and made calculations as to the number of objects I needed to describe before I could pay my rent. I imagined my descriptions as pithy, elegant compositions, small literary exercises based on a kind of belated nineteenth-century positivism. Just for the moment, I decided to pretend that the thing really can be captured by the word. I drank coffee, ate a glazed doughnut, and was happy.

But that night when I put the glove beside my typewriter

to begin work, it seemed to have changed. I felt it, felt the lumpy wool, and then very slowly pulled it over my left hand. It was too small for my long fingers and didn't cover my wrist. As I looked at it, I had the uncanny feeling that I had seen the same glove on another hand. I began to tug abruptly at its fingers, until it sailed to the floor. I let it lie there for several minutes, unwilling to touch it. The small woolen hand covered with smudges and snags seemed terrible to me, a stranded and empty thing, both nonsensical and cruel. Finally I snatched it up and threw it back into the box. There would be no writing until the next day. It was too hot; I was too tired, too nervous. I lay in bed near the open window, but the air stood still. I touched my clammy skin and looked over at the opposite apartment, but the two men had gone to sleep and their windows were black. Before I slept I moved the box into the other room.

That night the screaming began. I woke to the noise but couldn't identify it and thought at first that it was the demented howling of cats I had heard earlier in the summer. But it was a woman's voice—a long, guttural wail that ended in a growl. "Stop it! I hate you! I hate you!" she screamed over and over. I stiffened to the noise and wondered if I should call the police, but for a long time I just waited and listened. Someone yelled "Shut up!" from a window and it stopped. I expected it to begin again, but it was over. I wet a washcloth with cold water and rubbed my neck, arms, and face with it. I thought of Stephen then, as I had often seen him, at his desk, his head turned slightly away from me, his large eyes looking down at a paper. That was when his body was still enchanted; it had a power

that I battled and raged against for months. Later that enchantment fell away, and he passed into a banality I never would have thought possible.

The next morning I began again. By daylight the box on the kitchen table had returned to its former innocence. Using my notes from the coffee shop, I worked steadily, but it was difficult. I looked at the glove closely, trying to remember the words for its various parts, for its texture and the color of its stains. I noticed that the tip of the index finger was blackened, as if the owner had trailed her finger along a filthy surface. She was probably left-handed, I thought; that's a gesture for the favored hand. A girl running her finger along a subway railing. The image prompted a shudder of memory: "woman's hand." The words may have referred to her hand, her gloved hand, or to the glove itself. The connection seemed rife with meaning, and yet it spawned nothing inside me but a feeling akin to guilt. I pressed on with the description, but the more I wrote, the more specific I was about the glove's characteristics, the more remote it became. Rather than fixing it in the light of scientific exactitude, the abundance of detail made the glove disappear. In fact, my minute description of its discolorations, snags, and pills, its loosened threads and stretched palm seemed alien to the sad little thing before me.

In the evening I edited my work and then read it into the machine. Whispering bothered me; it made the words clandestine, foreign, and when I listened to the tape, I didn't recognize my own voice. It sounded like a precocious child lisping absurdities from some invisible part of the room, and when I heard it, I blushed with a shame I still don't understand.

Late that night I woke to the screaming again, but it stopped after several minutes, just as before. This time I couldn't get back to sleep and lay awake for hours in a vague torment as the shattered images of exhaustion and heat crowded my brain.

Mr. Morning didn't answer the bell right away. I pressed it three times and was about to leave when I heard him shuffling to the door. He paused in the doorway, looked me directly in the eyes, and smiled. The beautiful smile startled me, and I turned away from him. He apologized for the delay but gave no explanation. That day the apartment seemed more chaotic than on my first visit; the desk in particular was a mass of disturbed papers and boxes. He asked me for the tape; I gave it to him, and then he ushered me from the room, gently pushing me behind the door where he had concealed himself the last time.

I found myself in the kitchen, a tiny room, even hotter and smellier than the other. There were a few unwashed dishes in the sink, several books piled on the counter, and one large, white box. From the next room I could just manage to hear the sound of the tape and my soft voice droning on about the glove. I paged through a couple of books—a world atlas and a little copy of *The Cloud of Unknowing*—but I was really interested in the box. I stood over it. The corners of the lid were worn, as if it had been opened many times; two of the sides were taped shut. I ran my finger over the tape to see if I could loosen it. I picked at the tape's yellow skin with my nail, but my efforts made it pucker and tear, so I stopped, trying again on the other side. My head was bent over the box when I heard

him coming toward the door, and I leapt backward, accidentally pushing the box off the counter. It fell to the floor but didn't open. I was able to return it to its place before Mr. Morning appeared in the doorway. Whether or not he saw my hands dart away from the box, I still don't know, but when the box fell, whatever was inside it made a loud, hollow, rattling noise, and he must have heard that. Yet he said nothing.

We walked into the other room and sat down. He looked at me and I remember thinking that his gaze had a peculiar strength and that he seemed to blink less often than most people.

"Was the tape okay?" I asked.

"Fine," he said, "but there was one aspect of the thing you neglected to describe and I think it's rather important."

"What's that?"

"The odor."

"I didn't think of it," I said.

"No," he said, "many people don't, but without its smell, a thing loses its identity; the absence of odor cripples your description, makes it two-dimensional. Every object has its own scent and carries the odor of its place as well. This can be invaluable to an investigation."

"How?" I said it loudly.

He paused and looked at the window. "By evoking something crucial, something unnoticed before, a place or time or word. Just think of the things we forget in closets and attics, the mildew, the dust, the crushed dry bodies of insects—these odors leave their traces. My mother's trunks smelled of wet wool and lavender. It took me a long time to realize what that odor was, but then I identified it, and I remembered events I had forgotten."

"Is there something you want to remember about this girl who died?" I asked.

"Why do you say that?" He jerked his head toward me.

"Because you obviously want something out of all this. You want these descriptions for a reason. When you mentioned those trunks, I thought you might want to trigger a memory."

He looked away again. "A memory of a whole world," he said.

"But I thought you hardly knew her, Mr. Morning."

He picked up a pencil and began to doodle on a notebook page. "Did I tell you that?"

"Yes, you did."

"It's true. I didn't know her well."

"What is it you're after, then? Who was this person you're investigating?"

"I would like to know that too."

"You're evading my questions. She had a name, didn't she, this girl?"

"Her name won't help you, Miss Davidsen." His voice was nearly a whisper.

"Well, it won't hurt me either," I said.

He continued to move the pencil idly on the page in front of him. I craned to see it, trying to disguise the gesture by adjusting my skirt. There were several letters written on the paper—what looked like an *I*, a *Y*, a *B*, an *O*, an *M*, and a *D*. He had circled the *M*. If those markings were intended to form some kind of order, it was impossible to make it out, but even then, before I suspected anything, those letters had a strange effect on me. They stayed with me like the small but persistent aches of a mild illness.

Putting the pencil down, he looked up at me and nod-

ded. He patted his chest. "The heat has given you a rash—here."

"No, it's my birthmark." I touched the skin just below my collarbone.

"A port-wine stain," he said. "It has character—a mark for life. If you'll forgive me for saying so, I've always found flaws like that poignant, little outward signs of our mortality. I used a birthmark in something I wrote once—"

I interrupted him. "You aren't going to tell me anything, are you?"

"You're referring to our subject, I take it?"

"Of course."

"I think you've failed to understand the nature of your task. I hired you precisely because you know nothing. I hired you to see what I cannot see, because you are who you are. I don't pretend that you're a blank slate. You bring your life with you, your nineteenth-century novels, your Minnesota, the fullness of your existence in every respect, but you didn't know her. When you look at the things I give you, when you write and then speak about them, your words and voice may be the catalysts of some undiscovered being. Knowledge of her will only distract you from your work. Let us say, for the sake of an example, that her name was Allison Hart and that she died of leukemia. Something appears before you, an image. A row of hospital beds perhaps, in a large room lit by those fluorescent tubes, and you see her, I'm sure you do. Allison—it's a romantic name—pale and emaciated, once beautiful, she lies under white sheets . . . And what you see will not only be shaped by my words but by my inflections, my expression, and then you will lose your freedom."

I began to speak, but he stopped me.

"No, let me say my piece. Let us say I tell you that her name was"—he paused—"Maxine Robinson and that she was murdered." He looked out past me toward the door and squinted as if he were trying to see something far away. He took several deep breaths. "That she was killed right here in this building. What would you compose then, Miss Davidsen, when you look inside my boxes? You'd be suffocated by what you know, just as I am. It wouldn't do; it just wouldn't do."

"You're playing with me and I resent it," I said. "If you admit that I bring my own associations to the descriptions, why shouldn't I bring my own baggage to the facts of her life? And death."

"Because!" he almost shouted. "Because we are about the business of discovery, of resurrection, not burial." He grabbed the edge of the desk and shook it. "Atonement, Miss Davidsen. Atonement!"

"Good God," I said, "atonement for what?"

He was suddenly calm. He pushed his chair back, crossed his legs, folded his arms, and cocked his head to one side. These movements seemed self-conscious, almost theatrical. "For the sins of the world."

"What does that mean?"

"It means exactly what the words denote."

"Those words, Mr. Morning," I said, "are liturgical. You've gone into a religious mode all of a sudden. What am I to think? You seem to have a talent for saying nothing with style."

"Be patient, and I think you'll begin to understand me." He was smiling.

I had no reply for him. The hot room, the darkness, his outburst and incomprehensible speech, had robbed me of

the will to answer. Exhaustion had come over me in a matter of seconds. My bones hurt. Finally I said, "I should leave now."

"If you stay, I'll make tea for you. I'll feed you crumpets and tell you stories. I'll dazzle you with my impeccable manners, my wit and imagination."

I shook my head. "I really have to go."

He paid me with three twenty-dollar bills and gave me another box—this time a small white jeweler's box. He told me he didn't need the description until Monday of the following week. I had four days. We shook hands and then just before I walked through the door, he patted my arm. It was a gesture of sympathy and I accepted it as if it were owed to me.

Inside the second box was a stained and misshapen cotton ball. I found myself hesitant to touch it, as though it were contaminated. The wad of fiber was colored with makeup or powder that looked orange in the light and was also marked with an unidentifiable clot of something dense and brown. I drew away from the little box. Had he salvaged this thing after her death? I imagined him in a bathroom bending over a wastebasket to retrieve the used cotton ball. How had he found these things? Had he hoarded more of her refuse in boxes? I saw him alone, his fingers tracing the outlines of an object as he sat in his chair in front of the window with the closed blinds. But in the daydream I couldn't see what he held. I saw only his body hunched over it.

In those four days between visits to Mr. Morning, I was never free of him. Bits and pieces of his conversation in-

vaded my thoughts, appearing unsummoned at all hours, especially at night. The idea that the girl had been murdered in his building took hold of me, and I began to imagine it. He had taunted me with it; he had intended to entice me with it as just another possible death, but once it was said, I felt that I had known it from the beginning. Resurrection. Atonement. He had seemed genuinely passionate. I remembered his troubled breathing as he spoke, the letters on the page, the white box falling, his hand on my arm. At the same time, I told myself that the man was a charlatan, someone who loved games, riddles, innuendo. Nothing he said could be believed. But in the end it was his posing that made me suspect that he had hidden the truth among his lies and that he was earnest about his project and the girl.

That night I worked for hours on the description. I held the cotton ball with a pair of tweezers up to the light, trying to find words that would express it, but the thing was lost to language; it resisted it even more than the glove. And when I tried metaphors, the object sank so completely into the other thing that I abandoned making comparisons. What was this piece of waste? As I sat sniffing the fibers and poking at the brown stain with a needle, I was overwhelmed by a feeling of disgust. The cotton ball told me nothing. It was a blank, a cipher; it probably had no connection to anything terrible, and yet I felt as if I had intruded on a shameful secret, that I had seen what I should not have seen. I composed slowly and my mind wandered. It was a night of many sounds: a man and a woman were fighting in Spanish next door; fire sirens howled and I heard a miserable dog crying somewhere close. At around two o'clock, in the baking confines of my bedroom, I whis-

pered the description into the machine. After it was recorded, I put the cotton ball back into its box and hid it and the tape inside a cupboard in the other room. As I shut the door I realized I was behaving like a person with a guilty conscience.

For the third time I stood outside Mr. Morning's door in the dim hallway. A noise was coming from the apartment; it was as if a wind were gusting through it, a rush of sound. I put my ear to the door and then I understood what it was—the tapes, one breathy voice on top of another. He was playing the descriptions. No one voice could be distinguished from another, but I felt sure that mine was among them; I backed away from the door. At that moment I considered running, leaving the box and tape recorder outside the door. Instead I knocked. It may have been that by then I had to know about Mr. Morning, I had to know what he was hiding. I listened to the sound of the machines being turned off and rewound one by one and then to the sound of drawers being opened and shut.

When he came to the door, he was disheveled. His hair, moist with sweat, stuck up from his head and two buttons on his shirt were unbuttoned. I avoided looking into his flushed face and turned instead to the now familiar room. The blinds were still tightly shut. How can he stand the darkness? I thought. He leaned toward me and smiled.

"Excuse my appearance, Miss Davidsen. I was sleeping and forgot the time altogether. You see me in my Oblomovian persona—only half awake. You'll have to imagine the brocade dressing gown, I'm afraid. And there's no Zakhar, to my infinite regret."

When he said the word "sleeping," I felt a slight contraction in my chest. He's lying, I thought. He wasn't sleeping. He was listening to the tapes.

He went on: "Let me have the description and I'll shoo you into the other room right away and then we can talk. I've looked forward to your coming. You brighten the day."

In the kitchen I looked for the box, but it wasn't there. He's moved it, I thought, so I can't see what's in it. The low sound of my voice came from the other room as I waited. How many people had he hired to read those descriptions onto tapes? What were they really for? For an instant I imagined him lying in the unmade bed listening to that chaos of whispers, but I pushed the image away. Then he was at the door, motioning for me to follow him into the other room.

"You did a good job with a difficult object," he said.

"Where did you get it?' I said. "It doesn't seem like a very revealing thing to me, a bit of discarded fluff."

"That is precisely the kind of thing that is the most telling and pathetic. It was there in your description—the pathos."

"Where did you get it?" I repeated.

"She left it here," he said.

"Who was she? What was she to you?"

"You can't resist, can you? You're dying of curiosity. I suppose it's to be expected from a smart girl like you. I honestly don't know who or what she was to me. If I did, I wouldn't be working on this problem. But that won't satisfy you, will it?"

I heard myself sigh and turned away from him. "I feel that there's something wrong with what you've told me,

that there's something hidden behind what you say. It makes me uneasy."

"I will tell you what you want to hear, what you already think you know—that she was murdered. She was killed in the basement laundry room of this building. She lived here."

"And her name was Maxine Robinson."

"No," he said. "I made that up."

"Why?" I said. "Why do that?"

"Because, my friend, I wasn't giving you the facts at the time. I was just giving you a story—one story among a host of possible stories—a little yarn to amuse you and keep you coming back." He looked at his hands. "And keep me alive. A thousand and one tales."

"It would relieve me enormously if you could keep books out of this for once."

"I can try, but they keep popping up like a tic, one after another, rumbling about in my brain, all those people, all that talk. It's a madhouse in there." He pointed to his head and grinned.

"What was her real name?"

"It doesn't matter. I mean that. It doesn't matter for what you're doing. A name can evoke everything and nothing, but it's always a boulder that won't let you pass. I know. I'm a specialist. I want to keep you pure and her nameless." He stared at me. "I'm not fooling you. I need you. I need your help and if you know too much, I'll lose you. You won't be able to do the descriptions anymore."

The emotion in his voice affected me. It was as if he had revealed something intimate, unseemly. I could feel the heat in my face. When I spoke there was a tremor in my voice. "I don't understand you."

"I'm trying to understand a life and an act," he said. "I'm

trying to piece together the fragments of an incomprehensible being and to remember. Do you know that I can't even remember her face? Try as I may, it will not be conjured. I can tell you what she looked like; I can recite a description of her features, part by part, but I cannot evoke the whole face."

"Don't you have a photograph?"

"Photographs!" He spat out the word. "I'm talking about true recollection—seeing the face."

The cat rubbed against Mr. Morning's legs and I looked at it. The room was cooler. "Could you open the window?" I said.

He stood up and pulled at the blind, raising it halfway. It was darker outside; a gray cloud cover had replaced the stifling yellow haze. I looked at his profile in front of the window. He stood there in his loose shirt and pants, his hand in one pocket, and I found him elegant. It's in his shoulders, I thought, and the narrowness of his hips. He must have loved her or hated her.

"I should get going," I said.

"You will do another description for me, won't you?"

I nodded. He gave me another small box, three twenty-dollar bills, and asked me to return in two days. I pushed the money into my pocket without looking at it and stood up. A breeze came from the window. The weather was changing. At the door he extended his hand and I took it. He held it for a few seconds longer than he should have, and as I pulled it away, he pressed his thumb into my palm. It startled me, but I felt a familiar shudder of excitement.

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It had grown cool with remarkable speed. The sky was darkly overcast, and I turned my face upward to feel the first drops of rain as I strode home. I ran into my apartment and opened the box, pulling up its lid and pushing aside tissue paper. The third object lay before me on the table. It was a mirror, unadorned, a simple rectangle, without even a frame. Without thinking, I picked it up and examined my face, removing a bit of sleep from the inside corner of my eye, studied my mouth, the line of my chin, and then moved the mirror away to see more. I still can't understand it, but as I looked I was overcome with nausea and faintness. I sat down, put my head between my knees, and took deep breaths. It's possible that the dizziness had nothing to do with the mirror. I had had very little to eat that day and the day before. I scrimped on food for cigarettes, trying to keep my expenses down, and it may have been simple hunger, and yet when I think of that mirror now, it disturbs me, as if there were something wrong with it, something sickening.

Still unstable on my feet, I went to my desk and began to make notes. I was writing to myself, typing out questions about Mr. Morning and the project, but I couldn't put anything together. His remarks about memory, whispering, resurrection, returned to me as scraps of some inscrutable idea, some bizarre plan. And then I thought of the noise of the tapes behind the door, his touch and his slender figure in front of the window. Those letters, I thought, those letters on the page. What did they mean? A name. Her name. I moved the letters around, trying to arrange them into a coherent order. I found *mob, boy, dim,* and then *body*. The word coursed through me—a tiny seizure in my nerves. But it was absurd, a man doodles on a paper

and I decode his meaningless scribbles. Besides, there were letters that could not be incorporated. *I. M.* He had circled the *M.* The suspicion did not leave me, and I began to imagine that rather than hiding, Mr. Morning really wanted to talk, wanted to tell me something, that the letters, the hints were revelations, part of a circuitous confession. "If you know too much, I'll lose you." I took my umbrella and went out into the rain.

Within five minutes, I was standing in the entryway of Mr. Morning's building. I buzzed the super. After a considerable wait, a small, fat man came to the door. He yawned and then raised his eyebrows, an expression apparently intended to replace the question: What do you want?

"I'm looking for an apartment," I said. "Do you have anything vacant?" This was my first ploy, and to my surprise, the building had one empty apartment.

"Three seventy-five a month." He raised his brows again.

"I'd like to see it."

He took me to the third floor and opened the door of a small apartment identical to Mr. Morning's. I walked through the rooms as if I were inspecting them. The man leaned against the open door with a look of belligerent boredom.

"I was told there was a murder in this building," I said.

"That was three long years ago, honey. There hasn't been nothing in that way since."

I walked toward him. "What was her name?"

"Your umbrella's dripping on me, sweetheart."

I moved it away and repeated the question. "Was it Maxine, Maxine Robinson?"

"Hey, hey, hey." He lifted up his hands and backed away

from me. "What's going on here? The name was Zalewski, Sherri Zalewski. It's no secret. It was in all the papers."

Tears were in my eyes.

"What's the matter, kid?" he said.

"Please, tell me," I said. "Did they find the person who did it?"

"You got some kind of special interest here?"

"There can't be any harm in telling me the story," I said.

He did tell me then. I think he was sorry for me or embarrassed by my emotion. Sherri Zalewski was a nurse who had lived in the building. She was knifed to death on a February night while doing her laundry. No one had seen or heard anything. A woman who moved out shortly afterward had found her the next morning. "Real ugly," he said. "Real bad." The woman had vomited in the hallway. The police never found the killer. "They snooped around here for months," he said. "Nothing came of it. They were after the guy in 4F for a while, a real weirdo, Morning. Even took him down to the station. All the tenants were calling and bitching about him. They let him go. Didn't have a thing on him."

"Do you think he killed her?"

"Nah," he said, "he's not the type."

From there I went to Butler Library to check the papers, but there was little new in them. Sherri Zalewski had grown up in Greenpoint. Her mother was dead; her father was a mailman; she had one sister. A friend, quoted in the *Times*, called her "an angel of mercy." Mr. Morning was not mentioned. According to the articles, the police had no suspects. Sherri Zalewski vanished from print for months; her name appeared only once again in a story run by the *Times* on unsolved murders in New York City. I found a single

photograph of her—a grainy block of newsprint that was probably taken from a high school graduation portrait. I stared at the picture, looking for a way in, but it was unusually blank: a girl, neither pretty nor homely, with small eyes and a full mouth.

I carefully attached the chain lock on my door and turned on every light in my apartment before I sat down at the typewriter. I decided to write and record a letter to Mr. Morning. I did describe the mirror briefly, but there was little to say. Its surface was unscratched; it had no discernible odor; it was at the same time a full and empty thing, dense with images in one place, vacant in another. Except for the steady sound of the rain outside, my building and street were uncommonly quiet that night, but the noises I did hear made me jump, and I understood that I was listening for someone, waiting, expecting the sound of an intruder. He was in my head. Fragments of our conversation came back to me: Fern Luce, what he had said about not remembering the girl's face, the smell of wool and lavender in his mother's trunk. I wrote, and as I wrote, I saw her body on the floor in the vacant apartment I had visited. I always see it there for some reason—bloodied and torn apart. I see the corpse as in a photograph, black and white, illuminated by a dim light bulb. Even now when it comes to me, I can't examine it closely. I push it away.

Evening became night. The room turned dusky and a chill made the blond hair on my arms stand up. I wrapped myself in a blanket and wrote one page after another and threw them away. When I finished I had just one page. The mirror lay beside me shining in the lamplight. At around one o'clock in the morning, I spoke the words I

had written into the tape recorder but didn't listen to them. The wind blew over my bed, and I fell into a deep, empty sleep.

Mr. Morning's rooms were cool and wet that day. His windows were open for the first time and the wind blew in, ruffling a newspaper that lay on top of a pile. His unusually pale cheeks were rosy and he seemed to be breathing more easily. I am quite sure that he sensed my apprehension immediately, because he said so little to me and in his face there was sorrow and maybe regret. Before I secluded myself in the kitchen, I noticed that there was a tall stack of papers on his desk that looked like a manuscript.

I didn't close the door to the kitchen; I let it stand open slightly and put my eye to the crack. I watched him as he placed the tape recorder in front of him on the desk and turned it on. He leaned back in his chair, let his arms hang limply at his sides, and closed his eyes. After a brief interval of static from the machine, I heard my voice come from the other room. I listened to the short description of the mirror that I had dutifully whispered onto the tape. Then I heard my full voice and saw Mr. Morning look sharply in my direction. I quickly shut the door. As I listened to the high, childlike voice that must have been mine, I clenched my teeth so tightly that later my jaw was sore.

"I know who she was. Her name was Sherri Zalewski. I wondered for a while if you hadn't invented her, but now I know that she existed and that she lived and died in your building. A glove, a stained cotton ball, a mirror. Why

these things? Where did you find them? You must have known that I would ask these questions. I suspect that you have invited them, that you knew I would find out about her and about you. You should have told me the story, Mr. Morning. You should have told me directly rather than hinting at it. I do believe that, for you, this project is somehow an attempt to undo what happened that night, that these things are part of some elaborate idea I can't make out." There was a pause on the tape, and I listened for a noise from him, but there was nothing. "The things, the tapes, all your talk. I don't know what to do with them, how to understand them, how to understand you. I do know that the dead do not come back to life." I heard a loud scraping noise. He must have moved his chair. But the tape was still on. I pressed myself against the door, as if the weight of my body could shut him out. "I know the police questioned you, that they suspected you. I am not saying that you killed her; I'm asking you to tell me the truth. That is all." It was over. He was walking to the door and I heard him turn the knob on the other side. I stepped back. He was breathing loudly and a wheezing sound seemed to come from deep in his chest. He stood in the open doorway and stared at me, his face flushed. He looked as if he were about to speak, but then he closed his mouth and gained control of his breathing.

He said, "What is there to say? You expect me to confess, don't you, to fall down before you and tell you that I murdered her. But that isn't going to happen. It can't happen."

"What are you saying?" My voice was choked.

"I have already explained everything to you." He looked

past me and pressed his lips together in a spasm of emotion. "There is nothing more to say. The story is yours, not mine."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you've invented the story yourself. It belongs to you, not to me. You've already chosen an ending, a way out. I suppose it's inevitable that you want satisfaction." He looked at me. " 'The evil wizard turned to stone.' 'The king and queen lived happily ever after.' 'He died in prison, a broken man.' Whatever. What you've forgotten is that some things are unspeakable. That's what you've left out. Words may cover it up for a while, but then it comes howling back. A storm. A plague. Only half remembered. The difference between you and me is that I know I've forgotten. You don't." He turned around and faced the other room.

I spoke to his back. "That's what you have to say to me? I ask you to tell me the truth and you tell me that?"

"Yes," he said.

"I don't understand you. I don't understand you at all. Tell me that you didn't kill her." My voice was shrill.

"No," he said.

Mr. Morning walked toward his desk, and I heard the blinds rattle. There was a gust of wind from outside, and the papers on the desk were whipped into the air—hundreds of white pages flapped noisily against the bookshelves and walls, blew over the chairs and stacks of newspapers, sliding across the wood floor. Mr. Morning scrambled to retrieve them.

"Listen, Iris," he said. "I know things have changed, but I don't want to lose you. I want you to stay with me and

do some more work. I want you to talk with me the way you've done these last two weeks. You will stay, won't you?"

I said yes to him. I thought to myself that if I did one more description, I could press him again, that he would tell me the truth, but now I wonder if that was really the reason.

He opened the desk drawer and took out another small white box. He held it out to me with both hands. "For tomorrow. Tomorrow at two." He gave me the tape recorder, and then after explaining he was short of cash, he wrote out a check to Iris Davidsen.

"I can't accept it," I said.

"Please, I insist."

I took it, knowing I could never cash it. I walked to the door, picking my way among the fallen pages. He walked beside me.

At the door he took my hand in both of his. "There's one last thing. Before you go, I want you to leave me something of yours." His eyes were shining.

"No."

"Why not?"

I released my hand from his grip. "No."

"One small thing." He leaned closer to me, and in the opening of his shirt I saw the cleft of his collarbone. There was a vague scent of cologne.

I opened my bag and began to search it, roughly pushing aside books, envelopes, and keys until I found an old green eraser, blackened with lead smudges, and thrust it into his hand, saying that I had to leave for an appointment.

I imagine that he stood in the doorway and watched me

rush to the stairs and that he continued to stand there as I ran down one flight after another, because I never heard the door close.

I ran into the street and began to walk toward Broadway. When I reached the corner, I paused. It had stopped raining and the sky was breaking into vast, blank holes of blue. I watched the clouds move and then looked into the street. The sidewalk, buildings, and people had been given a fierce clarity in the new light; each thing was radically distinct, as though my eyesight had suddenly been sharpened. It was then I decided to get rid of the things. I opened my bag, took out the check, ripped it to pieces and threw it into a large trash bin. Then I threw away the tape recorder and the unopened box. I can still see the small black machine lying askew on the garbage heap and the smaller box as it tumbled farther into the bin. It upset a Styrofoam cup as it fell, and I turned away just as a stream of pale brown coffee dregs ran over its lid. My memory of those discarded objects, lying among the other waste, is vivid but silent, as if I had been standing in the noiseless city of a movie or a dream. I saw them for only an instant, and then I ran from those things as if they were about to rise up and pursue me.

I didn't think that would be the end of it. Mr. Morning had my telephone number, after all, and there was nothing to prevent him from finding me. I waited for months, but I never heard from him. When the telephone rang, it was always someone else.