

## IV DARKROOM

Insisting he just can't quite seem to get the hang of it himself, Ruineux is fond of telling me that, despite his endless hunting and pecking on that dilapidated old Royal of his, I am the true storyteller between us. It might be true, but his is the only story in my repertoire. Amateurish and teetering on the blind causeway of speculation by which I negotiate the blanks, the bombasts, the camouflage, the him to which he refuses access, it sometimes allows me a Ruineux, sometimes threatens to deny me the very idea of a Ruineux. What I manage to ferret out of him, that Ruineux history I allow myself, in a kind of lackadaisical, creamy naiveté put down as the gods' honest truth. It's ripped from me in a cruel snatch-and-grab when, to test him, I bring up an event in his life I've slashed from whole cloth: unblinkingly he accepts, digests, elaborates. At times he even corrects: no, as a matter of fact it was his sister who fled the Ruineux nest when life with father became too much. Sometimes I just don't know what to make of Ruineux. Trying, I become a spinner of tales, but I'm afraid I do my best work with a Praktiflex FX.

One night, because I'd asked, he allowed me into the projection booth so I could photograph him at work. That was a sweet night. All kinds of questions he asked me, wanting, all of a sudden, and engagingly sincere, to know everything about what I do. I started in on my best explanation for beginners, but he wanted to bypass layman's terms

and enroll directly in the advanced class. For the most part he picked up, but depth of field caused him some mental cramping. The logic of it eluded him: that I could bring a greater area into focus by stopping-down the diaphragm and slowing the shutter speed. Were the shutter speed slow enough, I explained, the diaphragm wide open, I could bring almost everything in the booth into sharp focus. Everything except the projector's rotating reels: two spinning discs in a booth still life. He only half understood, but liked the idea of the two circular blurs and the sense of motion their image would convey. Getting into the spirit of things, he reciprocated by guiding my hand to the payout reel off which we spun several feet of the print. Handing me a length of it, he directed my fingers to the first sprocket wheel, helped me fit the print into place and secure it with the pressure rollers. He told me to test with my fingertips to make sure there was a proper fit between the sprockets and the sprocket holes edging the print. Beautiful, he said, inspecting my work and, together, we wound the print through the projector's complex of mechanical guts, Ruineux's educated fingers guiding, teaching, playfully twining with my inexperienced own. Later, when the tripod was in place and I was ready to shoot, the goof started looking, with an exaggerated air of concentration, from projector to camera, camera to projector. "What?" I asked. Some days his clowning amuses, but more often than not it mildly encourages me right up the wall. As if it were necessary for him to have concocted a ridiculous line simply to validate his affection, he took me in his arms and, with the husky cornball whisper of a soap-opera variety Charles Boyer, or of P  p   le Pew, said, "Cherie, you and I are zee complementary opposeetz: I, zee projectioneest,

shoot imageez that dance on zee screen; you, zee 'postceptioneest,' receive imageez that feex themselves on zee chemical streep." And then the idiot kissed me. Oh la la.

Long past midnight now, such sugary memories are little consolation: the wait is beginning to take its toll. The occasional incandescent yellow glow, or blue television strobe gesturing the life behind the windows up and down the rowhouse grid outside my window are chilly signals in the humid night, the lazy Morse of boredom, the tense luminaries of anticipated domestic upheaval. Only an hour ago they winked with resolute charm, even in the face of a shrieking, drunken challenge spat from the window of a burly low-rider; the crash of bottle against brick; the garbage can torched for sport by squealing, delighted children practicing for summer, and snuffed by more-or-less equally delighted mothers and fathers trying out the season's new catalogue of curses, feigning, as they did, to chase the brats down. Too quiet now; too dark: the halogen streetlamps in this neck of the woods have all been slingshotted or twenty-twoed into oblivion, so when the front doors lining Howard street close, everything, everyone closes. Smart-ass women photographers being no exception, it's time to switch over to candlelight, draw the shade, move away from the window. Ruineux, I should have known you wouldn't show. When I look in the mirror and see my face flushed, it occurs to me it's not from too many bourbons and Coke, but from turning the other cheek so damn often. Arms weary and shaking from the bucket after bucket I've drawn from the well of forgiveness, I half wonder if you're not out to drive me to Christianity: St. Jasmine the Clement. Not your style, I know, but something like it. If that's your game, you ought to know my virtue is fickle: if I discover your cashbox, I just might make a bonfire out of the

currency with which you buy my clemency, toss it in the dumpster for the neighbor kids' match play.

Naked, I see my legs unstroked, my hip bones unmolded by the cup of your palm, my snatch unlicked, my breasts unsuckled. My lips taste only the chalky filters of cigarettes, and my tongue glides only over the brittle rim of a highball glass. Alone and untouched, lonely beyond my years, horny but hopelessly dry, hungover without having slept, I suck listless smoke and conjure a Ruineux out of the flickering candlelight. Bent to his apparatus, he's making incomprehensible adjustments, fiddling with numbered knobs and color-coded switches. If he's thinking of me, the thought is not betrayed by his face. Concentrated and workmanlike, he gauges the effect of his adjustments by gazing through the porthole, through his reflection in its glass, at the image lighting the screen. On it, Ruineux lies shivering, gathered in a fetal ball, his subconscious gurgling in Black Horse Alley as the camera pans from the closeup of his broken face to the liquid incandescence of a fixture bolted onto the wall of the Hotel Milner. Sordid light quickly gives way to swales of lace curtains animated by the wind of a gathering storm (another miracle of photography), and through the window drifts a premonitory mist. Shadows cast by candlelight flutter over the bedroom wall: two silhouettes, one seated, one standing, in a luminous orange plane. From the apartment above seep 1940s ballads, the syrupy taint of which does nothing to lighten the heart of this scene.

Jasmine (oh yes, I'm there too) weaves her fingers into her hair as she writhes to the music, snakes with an eroticism made bona fide by the private nature of this performance. No check suit or balloon-wielding half-wit knew anything like this. Nor

would they have wanted it, their boisterous timidity allowing them only a taste for the corny, familiar, sham assortment of things erotic. Not a one would trade places with Ruineux, Jasmine's audience of one; naked, strapped to the chair of submission, his wrists bound behind its back with the silk cord of Jasmine's kimono. A gift from him, a memento of a Chinatown night, the kimono hangs open as she contorts grace, candlelight glistening in the hair of her sex. Tiring of the game, certainly not the performance, Ruineux tries, but Jasmine's tied one hell of a knot. He thinks: This must be a serious dance: another pirouette, an alluring step, for me. This dance is for me.

Stepping behind him now, she plays her long nails over the nape of his neck, trails them along the ridge of his spine. Ruineux's back arches, shoulder blades grinding against the dry wood, and a shiver runs through him as the slats of a broken melon crate rip through his cotton shirt. On the Black Horse Alley cobblestones, he rolls as if wrapped in a carpet of regret. Voices, shouts echoing along 10th Street, shake him by the collar of consciousness, but all he can manage, lifting his head an inch, maybe two, is an open mouth from which hangs a viscous thread of ruddy saliva, a loose fist shoved numbly into a shard of glass, and a sharp gasp that sucks back into him the cry he's desperate to make. Heavy heels click along the sidewalk, as does the intermittent tapping of a steel-tipped cane, but he's slipping back into it again, fading, even as the laughter and shouting assemble themselves into song: "So here's a toast to Pennsylvania!"

Bending to Ruineux, Jasmine feathers her lips along his neck, lingers just below the left ear. When, with her tongue, she traces the line of his jaw, her hair falls over his shoulder and he rolls his head to feel it against his cheek, to breathe its fruity, olive

perfume. “Jasmine,” he whispers, the scene melting, giving way to a deserted strand on which the waves break in an unusually delicate Atlantic rhythm. Purple clouds are sailing over Nantucket. The raking wind, the gulls, the distant and irregular carillon of a bell buoy; the sour but comforting aroma of death sprinkled over the beach, like rancid butter spooned into a jar of pickle brine, rising from the hundreds of thousands of empty shells and the stranded crabs scattered among them, the stalk-eyes of which, never so touching in life, appear to plead now in death for one more pick at the sea-floor litter. Jasmine stoops and plucks a hollow crab from the sand, frowning either at its stink, or at its lost fearsomeness. Perhaps responding to the buoy, she turns away from the late crab and gazes out into the sea. A gust stirs the sleeves of her white cotton blouse, and lifts the hair hanging about her shoulders, hair gone fetchingly salt-and-pepper gray and which she still refuses to tame. “You’re a goner, old man,” she says, maybe to the crab. Turning away from the Atlantic, back over the grassy ridge of dunes protecting their small cottage, a shack completely covered in a lacy network of hardy white roses, Jasmine feels lucky again, lucky for their having gotten the place for the entire summer. An arm and a leg, she thinks, would be fair rent on that place. Behind the dunes, protected from the Atlantic’s frequent spells of distemper, the cottage has known a succession of summer tenants, but Jasmine thinks only of two. Ruineux, of course, in there the better part of the morning, typing away confidently on the Royal Quiet de Luxe; another story, another article, and a growing pile of pages he refers to only as “der meisterwerk.” Still goofy, she thinks. He’ll never change. She also thinks, remarkably, of James Cagney. He too knew this place, coming here alone, summer after summer, to

turn his face to the Atlantic, spit in the wind and dare it to blow the clam back in his mug. She feels him sometimes, giving her a fatherly nudge as she walks along the sand, and so tries to recall with her bare feet steps learned so early in the thrall of her girlhood, long before, even, her vision of a Jasmine of the hills, stomping happily through the gorse in those big, floppy, rubber boots. Angels with dirty faces, she thinks, the memories of our evolving childhood, the dreams we hatched behind our eyes. They're still with us. I like to think of myself as an angel, but only an angel with a dirty face: a real angel. Cagney knew. She turns a pirouette and leaves a crater in the moist sand. Giddy, she considers a cartwheel, then thinks better of it: it scares her, the thought of lying there in the wet sand, immobilized, back thrown painfully out, calling to Ruineux as the tide creeps in, Ruineux half-deaf as it is, lost to whatever it is that motivates that so-called "meisterwerk." Like one of those plastic saucers she and Ruineux have watched kids amuse themselves with, tossing it around on calmer, sunny days, she flips the lifeless shell into the surf and watches for a moment as the power of the undertow sucks it from the beach. Twenty, thirty, forty feet it bumps its way back over the rippled surface until submerged in a breaker that sizzles its froth over the wet, compacted sand and swirls around her ankles. Cool and effervescent, the water invigorates her, invites her to roll up the cuffs of her chinos and wade. As if plying her with a modest gift, the receding wave decorates her with a sea grass anklet from which she kicks free with a miniature, impish jeté. She thinks: were I to have wanted it, I really could have danced on a stage, a proscenium compared to which that platform at Danny Boy's would appear little more than a four-by-eight sheet of plywood slapped on a foundation of disused beer crates. All the Jasmine

Belladonnas I could have been—they're all me: the could-have-beens alongside the have-beens alongside the is. Our children, had Ruineux and I ever thought to pitch good sense to the wind in the matter of nests and offspring, would probably have laughed, first in astonishment, then in disbelief, when eavesdropping on our reminiscences. Sticky would be their reconciliation of the image of a "Mom" who slung them off to school with brown-bagged ham sandwiches and playful kicks out the door, with a "Mom" (the very same woman) grinding topless on the Danny Boy's stage. Had I fished in my box of mementos for an old glossy, produced for them photographic evidence, their new idea of "Mom" would only have become more idealized, mythified, excitedly embarrassed, or nostalgic. Spicy nostalgia. But none of it would be true. None of it could ever have been true for them, not even the solidity of a mother indulging in a sentimental journey, illustrating the trip with blush-making publicity shots. No, the angel I would have been for them would be the angel Ruineux makes of me, and that kind of angel has nothing to do with a dirty face. Sad. It's the way it is. Maybe not so sad. It could be that's what saves us. Every morning I make an angel, the scrubbed kind, of Ruineux: me still in bed, one foot poised on the edge of dream, beatifying the short-order cook he becomes for himself in the kitchenette, frying up two, sometimes three eggs, potatoes (awful, dripping oil and with ketchup), some leftover piece of fish or meat, always two pieces of rye toast, dry, on the side. Though he knows I find the idea of breakfast disgusting, he never remembers not to ask if I might like something myself. I tell him, No, just coffee; later. And then he slips back out, edging the door closed behind him. Love, Jasmine: you can't say you never had it. Two wrongs certainly don't make a right but, maybe, it just

could be, the image of the image of love really does make love. I've always been willing to believe it.

Above her, beyond the stratus veil, burns a yellow disc sun and, as she hands-in-pockets strolls along the strand and out of frame, the camera's gaze rises to it, draws the sun closer and closer until its yellow light engulfs the frame. For what seems to Ruineux an inordinate length of time, the screen is involved only with this abstract sunlight, and the subdued, rhythmic crush of surf. Poised between the Simplex 35s, he watches through the porthole glass, waiting, eyes straining at the white void, ears drowned with the intensified Atlantic lappings grown to explosions that reverberate through the Olympia and dissipate with the hiss of gravel cascading, as if through some titanic hourglass, before again being swallowed by another pulsing blast. Gradually, the four corners of the frame begin to darken, the explosions mellow to a comforting, maternal shush and pish, before falling silent. What had been an unbearable sun, disguising its power to blind behind a film of gray vapor, is now nothing more glorious than a dusty, 40-watt bulb glowing wan in its ceramic fixture. In a ceiling it must be set, a pull-cord string of metal beads hanging from a slit cut into the ceramic. On these the director has chosen to obsess, focusing on each bead in intense closeup. Descending from the slit out of which the string emerges, each bead merits a pause before the camera's gaze passes on to the next. As it does, a monologue impresses itself on the otherwise silent screen. The voice, Ruineux recognizes, is his own; an echo of his thoughts, his riffing; the voice with which he speaks so well, to himself.

Artifacts of the night within City Hall Tower, the bells ring in my chest so hard that the baffles of narrow streets, bereft of neon, advertise no solace. Father came thumping down in the pine-scented night, the concrete spinet strapped to his Morlock back spitting a punch-hole tongue, a sterile Begin the Beguine of need, frustration, and belated regret. Splintering chunks of spinet suck into popcorn thunderheads as I edge my way into a room decorated in the colors of the forebears' patinated magnanimity. Father want to be alone, arm lying to his side, the other raised to where the bullet went in. Loose flaps. Dust shimmering in the light of reclamation. An ambulance left its red light over the birthplace of a nation in halcyon days mechanically rigged to maintain a puzzle of powder burns for the general enhancement, an event about which I'm loathe to speak. Quite a "Shame on you" shoots out over the bruised metropolis. Gone are the words failing to occur to him. Unfold the map on which has been roughly sketched the route of the firewalk, and shake hands with the suicide the name of whom no one will recall, a stoker shoveling the hardest coals. A memory scribbled onto a cocktail napkin, it has a way of creeping into the piano-playing architecture. Every second off the screen is a gaze into lozenges of ice. On the way out, bring me some peace, would you? And insist the shooting script be a sharp-edged tendril of hesitation. "Your dead father reminds me of the hush that's fallen over the now-dark warehouse ghost town of reassurance," she said. "Make a mental note," I said, "a piped-in whisper: a word-blossom vibrant and naive. Then close the door with pleasant invectives." Scent of an impending afternoon clusters in the light of his wit. His flop is an open invitation to everyone mucking around

on the pavement. His project: name the alleyways of delusion. But I chose to trace rose patterns, let loose the innuendo about a streak of father's blood.

From the last bead on the chain, as if a tear of condensation had collected there by virtue of the room's tropical atmosphere, a droplet stars reflected light, hangs a moment, draws itself out oblong to the extent surface tension will allow, then falls. Miracle of photography: the droplet's release has been rendered by the clever insertion of scientific, slow-motion footage set to the silence-breaking baroque of J. S. Bach's lilting and ponderous \_\_\_\_\_; every nuance of the bead's amorphic modulation traced and accented, in ever-shifting perspective, through its eloquent descent. Ruineux watches and thinks: Kernel, football, bubble gum, Murine, zeppelin, sebum, jellyfish, bullet. The droplet splashes on what appears to be the bridge of a nose, judging by the pink vestige of a jagged scar edging along uneven, porous skin. It erupts in a liquid crown of many points, each tipped with the atomized offspring of the original droplet: the droplet's droplets. They hardly plash on the oily skin before sucking back into a larger mass, reforming themselves into a second-generation bead of moisture that runs slow to the bulb of flesh (clearly, the nose's tip: nostrils) where it catches on a spiky hair curling from the dark orifice, bisects, and falls out of frame. Bach fades as the gastro-intestinal rumble of Philadelphia rises to an intensity made ridiculous by the Dolby surrounds. Only the occasional car horn organizes the din into what might euphemistically be dubbed a minimalist composition. Zooming in reverse, the camera reveals the preoccupied gaze of a silver-screen Ruineux. That's entertainment.

Seated on a frugal wooden chair, hands to knees, Ruineux appears lost either to thought or back-line recollection in a room appointed to accommodate sleeping, eating, and the hundreds of incidental and forgettable activities that pull folks from one moment, one hour, one day to the next. Orbiting around him, the camera collects in its sweep what passes for a bed, the thickness of the mattress more like those fold-out cots pitched in drafty high school gymnasiums for the relief of disaster victims. The olive drab, wool blanket covering the bed-cot is crisp and neatly tucked under the mattress. At the foot of the bed lies a carefully draped herringbone overcoat, a folded red scarf and a gray fedora piled neatly on top. Also caught in the camera's sweep is a two-burner Pullman stove, the kind of thing suitable for heating cans of soup. On the back burner rests an aluminum percolator, the hollow glass knob missing from its lid. Next to the electric coils, the shallow half-sink betrays the only sign of disorder in the room: out of it sticks the handle of a frying pan, its cooking surface decorated with black badges of burnt protein, a diner platter stained yellow with congealed egg yolk and identified in purple script as having once belonged to the "Savoy Restaurant," and an opened can, lid hinging off the barrel portion, label just visible enough to distinguish the words "Fruit Cocktail." There is a window, too, before which rests an austere table, its naked surface lending it an impression of having never been used. In the window, the diaphanous reflection of Ruineux's face overlays, as though in photographic multiple-exposure, the shadowy night architecture of Philadelphia. Ruineux raises a hand to wipe the itchy residue of moisture from the tip of his nose, and sighs as the ceiling lightbulb blinks out.

The screen is plunged into jet, a cinematic representation of the irises' struggle to dilate with the same suddenness as the vanishing light. Then, from the window, just enough begins to illuminate the left side of Ruineux's face. Outside, the storm is gathering momentum, pulsing with lightning's irregular strobe and thumping its chest with the hollow thunder that echoes and rebounds so well in a city's concrete matrix. Giving way now to melancholia, the big band shuffle filtering from the apartment upstairs yields to a sad, spectral voice that rises and falls over the bluest notes; a woman's voice rich with pain and reaching across the years on a scratchy recording. Gloomy Sunday .... With a swift, graceful movement, Jasmine swings a bare, slender leg around and over, straddling Ruineux. Her feet arch sharply, toes straining to two points on either side. Hot breath. Quick breath caresses. Ruineux bites hard on the inside of his cheek.

But it's no bullet, and the lancing pain radiating from the center of his face forces him to a silent cry. Heels of his palms pressed to the cobblestones, he props himself in Black Horse Alley, the soot-smearred brick wall of the Milner Hotel alive in the refreshed darkness; alive before his eyes. "1-sheets," have been pasted there, posters from old movies like *An Orderly*, *Seamless Life*; *Ladybird of November*; *The Not-so-Clever Bartender*; and *Bank Daddy*. One by one the posters curl off the wall, chalky dust spilling from the mortar grid. Lousy masking tape; posters scroll off the walls like the shavings of an enormous plane. Plaster dust: a menace that can render the motion picture unwatchable: it scratches the print and gums the lubricant in the projectors' guts. Tape the 1-sheets back into place, sweep up the concrete floor. Don't dare kick up any dust. But the dust keeps coming. It piles up against the foot of the brick wall in a soft

dune, phosphorescent with what little light penetrates the alley from 10th Street. Spilling from the wall, it raises a chalky cloud that powders Ruineux's clothing and hair and catches in his throat. First it forces a dry heave, then a long stream of watery vomit which, redolent of yeast and onions, splashes off the alley, solids adhering to the gibbous surface of the cobbles, liquids draining to the interstices. Only now does Ruineux begin to feel; begin to feel better. Gone is the chalky cloud, which was moth powder in his lungs. Gone, too, the phosphorescent dune; sucked back into a wall from which the posters have disappeared, leaving only, in hasty whitewash, an anarchist's frustrated dictum: "There's no government like no government." At least that's what he thinks it says, so hard it is for him to be sure in the dark, one eye swollen shut, mind still dim and clouded by pain, or the overpowering sensation of having forgotten how to contort himself into the recognizable gestures of pain. Though something resembling composure is beginning to return to him, he's reduced to working out the simple logic of every move: By sliding my palms away from my sides, I can lower my upper body to the ground. He does. Then he rolls prone over his various secretions and emissions, the vomitus, and stretches full length, reading the ground with his right hand. Equilibrium failing him, nausea again wells up, forces him to grip the cobblestones until his wobbly, vertiginous, end-over-end flop about Black Horse Alley plays out to a horizontal cartwheel and, finally, to an almost pleasant sensation of dizziness. Again he gropes over the stones, this time making contact with his leather billfold. Drawing it toward him, he clutches the wallet in his fist, pulls it down under his chest and, gasping for a decent breath, rolls onto his back. Exhausted, he fumbles through the wallet and makes a quick

but confused inventory: nothing is missing. It's not possible, but the twenty some-odd bucks are there, the Trans Pass is there, the motion picture operator's license is there, the emergency-phone-call quarter is still tucked behind an interior flap of leather, the "Poverty Jet Set" gag business card Zane handed him after being canned from Pergolisi, Giovanni, and Battista ("Call me ... we'll do lunch")—all that crap is still there. The photograph of Jasmine is still there.

Green eyes shining erotic, candlelight a glistening corona in the fly-away strands of auburn hair, corners of her mouth drawn up in an ironic smile, she sighs and relaxes against him. For a moment, Ruineux thinks she has fallen asleep; breasts rising and falling with her quiet, slow breath; head bowed and resting heavily on his shoulder. Around them on the floor, the candles they've arranged knot arthritic fingers of wax over the dusty hardwood. And there's no doubt about it: Billie's is the sotto voce Syrette from which is squeezed a fix for the upstairs tenant who makes his presence felt, every now and then, by groaning out of his creaky bed and pacing with heavy steps about his room.

*Sad October  
Blows a bitter autumn wind  
It chills you to the bone  
Knives so deadly through the skin . . .*

Lost to the wind blowing off the Atlantic, Jasmine's voice is bending blue and charged with the tremolo of her best Holiday.

*. . . October came and took you  
To the angels up above  
I wonder, what would they do  
If I came to join my love?  
It's bad, this oh so sad October.*

Now that the clouds have thickened, not even the disc of a sun remains. There's a fresh bite to the wind, a whiff of the thin, salty fog forming over the dunes. In her solitude, and despite the turn in weather, Jasmine is warmed, not haunted, by thoughts of days gone by. Smiling to herself, feet sinking deeper into the sand as she moves away from the surf, she walks toward the cleft in the dune, her favorite, where her towel, sweater, and espadrilles lie nestled in a tuft of beach grass. A few more steps bring her to the tidy pile before which she pauses, wrapped in her own arms, gazing back to the cottage at the wisps of smoke puffing out the little chimney: he's built a fire. Not much, she thinks. Not much it takes these days to chill him. No doubt he's in there poking at the logs and cursing a circulation ever more sluggish. And the wood don't come cheap on Nantucket. Go ahead, Ruineux, throw another on the fire and warm yourself. Your smoke signal is almost as good to see as the touch of your fingers is good; the closing around my own on those evenings you reach across the kitchen table, bleary-eyed and nostalgic over all the old songs misting from the dear tinny speaker in that boxy Philco you dragged home from the flea market (tubes, yet). Didn't you tell me it was a miracle the thing still worked and that you'd only bought it as a conversation piece (as if we get any visitors these days—who needs them?). You really are a sappy one, but what would I do without that hushed squeeze, and the moist silent eyes that mock the very idea of the words; the “I love you” that would add absolutely nothing. Sometimes I almost think you've learned the secret lies in what not to say, when not to say it. The carpet of so many words has been ripped out from under us. Maybe the carpet never was. No matter: we've learned to weave a Persian silence, the pattern of which is Reg. Us. Pat. Off.

Another log, Ruineux: splurge. Wrap yourself in that moth-eaten Army blanket of yours, pull it over your shoulders and let “der meisterwerk” draw you into its womb. On my way back through the fog, I’ll be sure to scrounge some driftwood. But I’ll take my time, leave you your peace. I know it’s all you ever really wanted and, lo and behold, I think you’re finally beginning to enjoy it. Why don’t you stick a fresh sheet in the typer? At the top, center the title of a new chapter: “The Nantucket of My November.” Were you to then pull the page out of the Quiet De Luxe, without one word of elaboration, maybe tucking fifteen or twenty blank sheets behind it, you just might find it to be the best chapter. Clean white perfection, whiter than the fog closing in: it’s a thought.

Impossible, I know. There always has to be something, if only a something as inadequate as one word following another following another. Yes, fill all the pages. When I get back I’ll lay the driftwood outside the door, brush the sand off my feet, and push through with that old line about our hoped-for Cagney poltergeist: “Has the grapefruit been shoved in your face?” Now that would be something. I’ll grab the poker, that nine-iron (you do enjoy the flea market) bent and scorched from prodding, and stir up a regular bonfire.

Then, fixing the blanket around your shoulders, I’ll ask: “Well?” You’ll read to me the last sentence: The young woman, still wrapped in the arms of her lover, jumps in place to keep warm and I can feel my eyelids grow heavy as she says to her man: “Tell me the one about the harelip, the beer nuts, and the bartender with the gigantic proboscis.”

“Keep trying,” I’ll tell you. Then I’ll put a pot of water on the stove and dig around for the box of Earl Grey.

Jasmine sits down on the sand and, making a shawl of her sweater, throws it over her shoulders, knots the sleeves loosely around her neck. Absently fingering the seam where the sleeve's cable stitch meets the tightly ribbed cuff, she looks out over the whitecaps to a horizon made flat by the low clouds and fog. Then, remembering the lines that pulled Billie out of her musical tailspin, she serenades a young gull swooping crazy and unsure in the gusts:

*But now morning has come  
And soft autumn sun  
Burns the dream from my head.  
It was nothing, I see  
But a dark fantasy,  
A thing better left unsaid*

*So sweet baby  
Don't let October get you down ....*

Bending the notes of “haunted” a bit too eccentrically, her voice slips to a wincing, sour “you.” No matter, she thinks. Nobody hears it.

Tucked in her downy plaid blanket is a notebook, its spiral binding visible among the folds, a ballpoint pen slotted into the binding's wire helix. Yawning, Jasmine reaches for the notebook, the brown paperboard cover of which bears the equally bland inscription, in black marker, “Photographer's Log.” With both hands, holding it in front of her, she shakes the notebook to conjure the ballpoint pen from its wire scabbard, but the pen won't fall loose. Rather, a postcard slips from among notebook leaves thick and wrinkled with her tight, angular script. Kiting in a sudden puff of wind, the card flips around on the sand and climbs several feet up the dune where it lodges against the frame

of an abandoned beach chair. Lazily setting the notebook aside, Jasmine rolls and stretches herself over the sand and long grass, reaching. Where her blouse rises untucked, the sharp blades tickle her tummy and make her twitch as she snatches the card before another gust has a chance to blow it over the dune. Then, once again sitting up, she examines the postcard's black-and-white photo: in it, there is a piece of cardstock, pinched in kempt male fingertips, on which has been printed the dictum "*Kunst is Modder.*" Both card and hand cast a murky shadow over what Jasmine imagines to be a sheet of corrugated aluminum. She smiles. Turning the card over, she begins to read the crowded message, penned by Zane in fanatically tiny block letters.

Dear Friends,

Walloon is an impossible language, and my French is even rustier than I thought, but Brussels is pretty and dotted with the occasional anglophone. Even met an American woman living here in a little place called Leuven who reminded me an awful lot of "the young Jasmine Belladonna." Uncanny. Married to a Belgian who, get this, spent a couple years working for NASA. Pleasant couple. The weather . . .

. . . like a tepid two-day-old soup: sour and chunky. I think it must make these Belgians a little loopy because not only have there been kind reviews for the show (or so say the

friendly, newspaper-translating couple—could be they’re sparing my feelings), but I’ve managed more than just a few sales. What do you know about that? “The Suicide’s Crude Noose,” “Pedantic Copula,” “Parking Garage Decision,” “Meat in the Icebox”—they all went in the first five days. I tell you, there’s no accounting for taste. Anyway, it goes on. You walk down a street you’ve never set foot in before and drive yourself nuts making familiar masks out of strange faces. There goes Ruineux, you think, and then you do a double-take, half-expecting the impossible, but it’s never you, Jack, or you, Jas. Then you remember: Oh yes, this is Belgium. Might as well be anywhere. At least they like my art. I can’t explain it. I’m folding money I can’t even count. Talk about strange faces: who are the great historical icons of Belgium? If you ask me, there should be a denomination for every one of them beer-brewing monks. St. Sixtus? Nectar of the gods, my dears. Those monks should be immortalized in currency. They’ve already immortalized themselves in brew. History—you were right Jack: you go out in an antiseptic tour bus, the sexy guide giving you the World War I spiel in three different languages, but you’re too busy watching her mumbo gabbangons or the moist verdure roll by outside your window to pay much attention. At some point they let you off and you go walking into the “Flanders Gain.” You actually stroll along the shallow, meandering depressions, the blood gutters, and you try to make contact with an experience as absurd as turning your back to bullets as if to a gust of wind-driven rain. You even got your trench coat on. You try for a feeling, but it’s not there. Everything’s so damn green, lush; a pastoral and quietly rolling landscape sculpted by the vestiges of entrenchment and shell craters. You think: There aren’t many trees, they oughta build a

golf course. And then you realize you've wandered away from your cluster of fellow tourists and so take extra large steps across the battlescape to catch up, just in time to be hustled back onto the bus for a ride back to Brussels made mellow by some piped-in Saint-Saens, a handful of foil-wrapped cheese squares ("la vache qui rit"), and a plastic, hundred-milliliter bottle of Louis Jadot. Later, in the hotel room, you pick up your copy of *In Flanders Fields* and find what you've been looking for all day; you start bawling over the passage, "Afraid to move in any direction at all, the men huddled in craters and waited for at least one side to leave them alone." Satisfied with yourself for having been, finally, moved, you close the book and decide to wash out a pair of socks in the sink of the communal bathroom at the end of the hall, hanging them to dry by fitting them over the two posts at the foot of your bed. Then you're grunted at later by the maid for having done so. When she leaves, mumbling something either to you or to herself, you think: Damned if I ever paint you. Then you think of the things you could be painting: maybe another one like "A Room in the Hotel Vendig." Jack, you were crazy about that one. Man, you talked for weeks about a whole book you could make out of the lonely and forlorn face of that old wreck of a geezer. Drawn, but eyes tight with red concentration, he peered down through the pigeon-stained windowglass, page of typescript clutched in long fingers gnarled and knobbed like ginger roots. Flecks of the first gray snow of November streaked the middle distance. Remember? The familiar sweep, you noticed, of his thinning gray hair; the pleated trousers that swam around his waist; the checked cardigan, misbuttoned and hanging uneven. For you, Jack, it was his neglectful attempt to be casually mannered. Yeah. Jack, you called him a likely incarnation of a figure

moving through your dreams—not the recurring kind, but serial. Had me convinced, let me tell you. “Fiery Jack” you were then, stomping around a territory all your own with a red-eyed neo-Romantic gusto so gassed up you just couldn’t make a shape out of your *idée fixe*. Now that’s French. In a way, I’m glad you never could get that book off the ground. There were plenty of others coming to term. I sit and wonder: What ever happened to that painting? Long gone now, most likely to a Jersey landfill. Too bad. Would’ve given it to you, Jack, but I sort of knew you already had it. Remember when you, me, and Jas went down to 11th and Market to watch the Vendig make its grand exit? Bought us some cheap lawn chairs at Woolworth’s and folded them out right there on the sidewalk. You with notebook and pen, Jas with the—what was it? *Praktikon*? Me making sketches of the wrecking ball’s Godzilla progress. I remember, before things really got started, some crazy junk dealer pulled up in a jerry-rigged flatbed truck, some kind of wing-arm grabber bolted into the bed, and took down the Vendig’s old neon nametag. When he drove off down market with the sign strapped onto the truck it looked like one of those rolling billboards, but you, Jack, said it was more like a religious icon being paraded around a village out of which the faithful had been driven. Jas, you just laughed at the both of us and called us ab-surd. The things you remember. Didn’t take long to bring that old brick box down, but what a spectacle. And even the bums watching as the walls caved in, the demolition guys running around and hollering things like, Where’s the jimmy-john? Yo, homes. Over there by the chompie. Jesus. When it was over, it was over. We sold the lawn chairs to those two Italian guys for a couple bucks apiece and marched straight down to the Locust, Vendig dust in our hair and all over our

clothes. Good and hooched we got, that night. Every toast was to the Vendig and to the Philadelphia vanishing right before our eyes. Ah, them Philly days of yore. Gone. You go from one day to the next, the weight of the days piling up on your back. It's a precious weight, and you do what you can to keep yourself from letting it go, but one day you realize you just can't do like you used to could, and you start casting off refugee days by the roadside, laying down a little of the weight here and there saying, "I'll be back for this later, after I get a little rest." But that rest never really comes and, even if it did, there's no way in hell you'll remember all the secret places you stashed the holy weight of the days. You have to be satisfied with what you got, and promise yourself you'll bear up, only half-believing it. Yes sir, we're getting old, Jack. You, Jas, I'm sure are as beautiful as I remember you. Belgium. I never woulda thunk it. The drizzle outside . . .

. . . streaking down my window makes my eyes well up when I look at it.

I hear the maid rutting around in the hall, so I'd better get my socks . . .

There the postcard ends, Zane's improvisation having run out of room, if not out of brio.

Tucked in the lower left-hand corner, so tiny Jasmine can barely make it out, the sign off:

Always, Zane.

For Zane to have come into his own in Belgium is a punchline just about right, thinks Jasmine, for the shaggy dog story his life has been. Them Philly days of yore: she can see him in the eternal Yesterday, lounging around Ruineux's West Philly dump in his National Organization for Women t-shirt and his National Rifle Association ball cap.

(“You mean you never fired a gun? Man, you just get yourself up to the pistol range on Spring Garden, lay down your money, strap on a pair of ear shields, and start blasting away.”) His last winter in Philly, a few months before he took off for Cleveland (“I’ve come to the realization, Jas, that Ohio is the center of the universe—Cleveland, or leave land!”), he became bored with the ball cap and took to wearing a black-and-white striped cone off which branched three more longish, zebra-stripe flaps, tassels bobbing at the end of each one. His “Italian fool’s hat,” he called it, and wore it wherever he went. My god, the looks shot his way. No, Zane didn’t come into his own in Belgium. He’s always been-coming-into his own. All of us have; ever could have.

Wanting to make an immediate reply, but not knowing if Zane’s remained in Brussels or made off for parts unknown, Jasmine examines the card again and realizes there’s nothing to do: no return address. So, stuck with the urge, she takes up the “Photographer’s Log,” fishes the pen out of the wire binding and, right there in her sandy cleft, picks up where she left off.

Gray dawn leaks into Black Horse Alley, dragging with it a sooty drizzle equipped with the long index finger of awakening, its nail caked with black grease. Prying, it lifts the one moveable eyelid Ruineux possesses at the moment, which he immediately forces shut with a grimace that tugs at the thick scab running down the side of his nose. Drawing a deep breath, Ruineux slowly opens the eye again, works it, tries to make it focus, and stares straight up at the slit of dingy sky visible between the Milner Hotel and

the Whateverthehell Building. Soaked from the rain, the leather billfold and its contents lay in a peculiar arrangement over his chest. His head throbs, sure, but not much worse, thinks Ruineux, than a full-blown attack of sinusitis. When he folds his hands over his chest, he folds them also over the wallet items, the blood stains, the vomit residue. One leg, the right, he swings over the other, crossing them reassuringly at the ankles. Then he moves his head this way and that, like a suburbanite adjusting for a Saturday afternoon hammock nap. Go ahead, Ruineux. Relax while you piece it together: train . . . coatrack . . . Are you right with God? . . . Liberty Bell shades . . . Vendig . . . harmonica Hannet . . . Uspensky Ben . . . Savoy . . . Locust . . . Tigers win . . . Van Cleef et Arpels . . . Jasmine! . . . piss-in-the-alley . . . chain. Oh Christ, he thinks. And then: The old-fashioned shape of many masks—Love. Oh Jesus, I'm screwed bad.

He lifts his head a bit off the cobblestones and takes a look around him, blowing the butterflies out of his stomach with a phlegmy sigh. First things first. With what deliberateness he has at hand, Ruineux props himself on an elbow and begins to reassemble his soggy wallet, reserving the Trans Pass and sticking it in his breast pocket. Still there is the pack of Camels, which he fishes out and peels open. Two butts sag against the inside of the pack, damp beyond the point of ever doing him any good, so he flips the useless box vaguely in the direction of dumpsters, pushes himself to a reclining position, feels the rainwater stream down his face, and thinks: Today the umbrellas will be up. Shifting his weight to his left elbow, he raises his right hand to smooth the dripping hair out of his forehead, but he's still clutching the wallet—a hopeless comb. Lifting his right cheek a bit, he shoves the wallet in his hip pocket and tries again, this

time with a bit of primitive success: his hair's short enough for the tangled, natty wave cresting over his brow to pass as a "look." Besides, who's going to notice his hair? Thomas Jefferson Hospital, he remembers, riding the momentum of a short burst of lucidity, is just a few blocks away, but he's abandoning the continuous loop of logic now, switching back to manual override, making changeovers only he need understand. This print he's made up without regard to the identification numbers stenciled on the reel-hubs.

Tugging at his shirt, he lifts the moist tail to his face and daubs away as much of the blood as he's able, wincing every now and then when he grazes the tender knot of mutilated bone and cartilage. He's been here before, and shivers at the thought of lying in some croaker's office, gripping white-knuckled the edges of the examination table, gritting his teeth as Marcus Welby undoes the bandages and begins to draw yard after yard of bloody, viscous packing out of the impossibly deep nasal cavity. Rhinoplasty.

With no small effort, he takes first one ankle, then the other, and pulls himself up Indian style. O.K., he thinks. O.K. I can work this. Balance is his again, as is a comforting sense of intention: first get out of the alley, then play it by ear. Placing his left palm to the cobblestones, a piercing sensation shoots up his arm and, for the first time, he notices the gash in his palm, a jagged sliver of broken beer bottle still dangling in the wound. Carefully, with the thumb and forefinger of his other hand, he plucks the glass and tosses it against the Milner brick. What else? he thinks. What else? Blood begins to run from the laceration, so he undoes the button of his left cuff and pulls it down over the palm, presses the cotton with his thumb to stem the flow and,

remembering his first aid, raises both arms above his head. At a loss, he sits there, coughs up a heavy clam, and spits it at one of the rusty dumpsters. What else can a poor boy do?

Soon enough, Ruineux's arms grow tired, but the blood's only beading now near the center of the wound where the scab's slow to congeal. On top of everything, as if the lacerations and fractures and contusions and bad Karma weren't enough, the dry-mouthed ball-peen agony of a Betz-and-Wild Turkey hangover places the bony knuckles of its fists at the bases of Ruineux's temples and begins to press. So suddenly oppressive is the glue of saliva in his mouth, he resorts to sucking the rainwater out of a somewhat unsoiled patch of shirt. Thank the Lord for small mercies. It seems to do the trick. Resolute, he thinks of a line of dialogue from a movie the name of which he cannot recall, a pithy maxim received and filed away as though only to be tapped on this dreary, wretched morning, this black dawn from which even the rats and pigeons shy in Black Horse Alley: "What are we here for?" he says aloud, to himself. Then, answering: "We're here to go." And with that, Ruineux edges crabwise toward the Milner, rests a moment against the rough brick then, using the wall to brace himself, scales it, rises unsteady to his feet. Keeping his left hand cautiously in touch with the Milner, Ruineux creeps toward the alley's mouth, toward 10th Street. Each step brings him closer to the swish of tires on wet asphalt, closer to the broad gray light of a rain-spattered Philadelphia morning. Rather than squint (the wet dawn being that bright to his eye), he forces the good eye wide to take everything in. "They're up," he thinks, standing at the mouth of the alley. Though there aren't many yet, a few hustling bodies do pass along the sidewalk, heads

obscured beneath benevolent domes of colorful fabric stretched over alloy ribs—  
bumbershoot people bounding headlong toward their days.

Five, ten minutes he stands at the mouth of the alley, right hand resting on his hip, left supporting him, holding his balance against the Milner. The rain's coming down harder now, and the new chill raising the gooseflesh on his forearms sinks into him just as the first tom-toms of thunder roll, as if over the Ben Franklin Bridge from Camden, across the Delaware to echo in Philadelphia. Though only a few blocks north, a block west, the nearest El station, he knows, is a Burma Death March away. So he waits. It doesn't take long before a green and white Quaker City cab appears, making its red-eyed a.m. run down 10th Street. Ruineux, lurching out into the walk, stumbles to one knee, then pulls himself up by the bent standard of a No Parking sign and, holding on, hails the cab.

Perhaps startled by the exhibition Ruineux makes, and maybe in spite of a cab driver's better instincts, the cabbie slams on his brakes, throws the cab into park, and runs around to the fiasco, helping him by the shoulders, propping him against the cab. "Man, what happened to you?" he says, ready to assume the role of good Samaritan even as he frowns in disgust at fiasco's swollen, bloody, purple face. And the smell: like sour milk and relit cigarette. "You want me to take you to Jefferson?" Ignoring the question, fiasco raises a hand to smear the hair out of his forehead and looks at the cabbie with his bloodshot eye. "1804 North Howard Street," he says, remembering Jasmine's address. Though he speaks directly, deliberately to cabbie, fiasco's words have the character of surprise that comes from having recalled a fact thought lost to memory. It gladdens him

so much he tries it again, “1804 North Howard.” Then he nods with emphasis: one firm downward shake of the head, chin thrust out with pride.

“North Howard?” Dubious, cabbie gives fiasco’s shoulders a wary shove, as though to wake him. “All the way up there? You don’t look too good, why don’t I take you to Jefferson?” Becoming a bit the suspicious Samaritan, cabbie adds, “You got enough cash to get you up there?”

Face swollen beyond the point of passing definitive non-verbal clues, fiasco tries his best to screw into it a version of disgust. Then, with what looks like a smirk, he nods a peevisish “yeah, yeah, yeah,” reaches for his wallet, pulls out a ten, a five, another five; holds the bills up for the cabbie to examine, fans them, shakes them ironically, and slurs, “Hey, I know where I’m going.”

Just to be on the safe side, and despite the fact he too is getting soaked by the steady rain, cabbie puts fiasco to a little test. He asks him his name, holds up various combinations of fingers, quizzes fiasco as to the day and date. Then he asks him: Who won last year’s Super Bowl? What’s the maiden name of the Vice President’s wife? Which came first, chicken or egg? And why did the chick cross the road? Who’s on first? (I dunno—third base.) Red sky at night, sailor’s . . . what? (Fill in the blank.) John is to Paul as George is to . . . ? How many licks does it take to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop? Number of feet in a mile? Has eighteen legs and catches flies? Hath no fury like a woman scorned? Billy the Kid’s last words? Arthur (a.k.a. “Dutch Schultz”) Flegenheimer’s? Bob Crane’s? Oh Fab, I’m glad they put . . . what in you? Number of passing yards, in aggregate, and not counting his early years with the New York Giants,

quarterback Fran Tarkenton threw for in his career? Captain of the Hindenburg? Played The Incredible Mister Limpet? Height from street level to the crest of Billy Penn's Quaker hat on top of City Hall Tower? Name any three of the eight city councilmen. Zip code of Big Cove Tannery, Pennsylvania? Male lead in *That Means 'No' in German, Don't it?* Zip code of Eighty Four, Pennsylvania? Composer of "Ode on the Death of Mr. Henry Purcell; Ah, heaven! what is't I hear?" and Song for Soprano and Continuo, "No, Lesbia, no, you ask in vain"? What *will* she be driving when she comes? First we'll take Manhattan, then we'll take . . . ? Author of *Wives of the Saints* ? Capacity of Connie Mack Stadium? Ein Führer, Ein . . . ? Bela Lugosi's last film? Displacement of the *Titanic* ? Bridge off which Billy Joe McCallister jumped? Number buried in Arlington National Cemetery? Inventor of submarine warfare? Who do you love? Then he elicits some rudimentary answers to questions about how fiasco came to be just that: a walkin' talkin' fie-asco. "Jesus, that sucks," he says, hearing fiasco's *Reader's Digest* condensation. "Just like that? Out of the blue? While you was pissing?" Moved, but still a bit leery, cabbie opens the back door of his cab, helps fiasco to the back seat, radios in the fare, and pulls away. Shoving an unlit cigar into the corner of his mouth, he eyeballs fiasco in the rearview mirror and launches into a homily: "Let me tell you something, kid. All gin-mill men's rooms oughta have a mirror in the pisser to balance out the one they got behind the bar. You know, a kind of realty-check to keep you in line after sucking down a few in front of that hero, tough guy, street-fighting man, bitch-magnet, moneybucks, Einstein you make out of yourself in that looking glass. Now you, I can tell, ain't been to no bars with a mirror in the pisser. You know how I know all this?"

I'm a friggin' cab driver, man. Just last week I had this fare, owns a bunch of movie joints in town like the Rialto and the Viking and the Olympia? Swell guy. Well, I got to telling him about an incident that . . . ."

From where he sits, fiasco can see the meter's digital display: 2:15. Though for him these are some of the darkest moments, the numerals cut warmly red into his night and reaffirm the slackening of an anxiety which had, until just a few moments ago, kept him feeling stranded and uneasily on the defensive. Sure, it's dark, but there's something about the absence of movement that carries with it an enveloping comfort. Maybe she really has fallen asleep. He whispers, "Jasmine?" but she makes no reply other than that which can be read into the hushed, rhythmic, sibilant breath passing through her lips and teeth. On the milkcrate next to her mattress, he watches as the clock's display silently rearranges itself from 2:15 to 2:16 and, as though that were the cause, Ruineux begins to feel a numbing tingle in his thighs. It's there, too, where the crooks of his elbows press into the chair's back, and in his wrists, where the kimono's silk cord chokes sensation right down to the tips of his fingers. He thinks: this is a game she's grown tired of. I've played along and actually enjoyed myself, threw myself into this play, was ready to ride as far as Jas wanted to take it. Now she's dropped off, snoozing, nearly naked and sitting on a naked me, dead weight pressing down on my thighs and me tied down with nothing to do but sit. I suppose I can think of worse circumstances than this. Were this not a game, for instance. But who's to say it is? Figuring out where the play leaves off and the brass tacks begin is a pastime I've never been too keen on, because even the brass tacks reduce to nothing more than a glorified play, silliness made sane by semantics. Or is it

semiotics? Could be it comes down to a matter of belief: that thing you end up with when the self's impoverished bureaucracy of cabalistic schemes, delusion, pretty logic, goal-inventing, priority-setting, dream, jealousy, flights of infancy, what have you grinds to a halt in the absence of a steady, automatic stream of red tape. All the make-work that gets you from incubator to slab just might be nothing more than psychic decoration so elaborately overblown as to help you forget that the architecture of self rests on a suspect foundation of two shifty words: I believe. Resorting to them now, I say this: I believe I love this Jasmine Belladonna, and where that belief gets me is a thing nobody can know, but it just might get me to a place called Jack Ruineux.

He whispers again, "Jasmine?"

This time, she raises her head from his shoulder, takes his face in both her hands, and fixes him with that green, ironic, one-sided smile. "O.K.," she says. Bending and reaching around him, she uses her nails to loosen the knot, undo the silk cord. Then, stepping off Ruineux's lap, she leads him by the hand to her bed. Pulling him on top of her, Jasmine places a finger to his lips, shushes, and says, "Quiet now. I'm afraid you're going to say something. No words. Tonight, no words." Lightning flashes from time to time, lighting up the room without thunder.

Jasmine and Ruineux uproot the bed, entangle themselves in various tableaux so energetically ornate Ruineux has to stifle an occasional laugh inspired by an imaginative leap outside himself, a leap in which he presides from the director's folding chair, a skin-flick maestro, shouting instructions through a megaphone decorated with a rub-on decal depicting Niagara Falls and the inscription "Bra-Vo!" In small print: Niagara

Megaphone, Inc. Jasmine, truly in charge, again straddles him, grasps his cock, directs it, sinks down onto him, forces him deep, twists over him. When she lowers her lips to his, her hair falls forward in a veil that envelops their kiss. Outside, the steady rain spatters the window sill and, from time to time, mists into the room on a gust that first lifts the curtains, then sucks their sooty hems back through to hang in the window's mouth like lace tongues. There are "Ahs" and "Ohs" as they thrust and roll, reposition themselves according to a choreography designed to unlock latent pleasures. Not bad work if you can get it. Complicated silhouettes oscillate in the light of flickering candles; quick breath caresses flutter in the ozone; 40s ballads seep muffled from above; her tongue along his neck lingers. Jasmine: her slender, incisive fingers expose every nerve. The steady rain; thunder sans lightning. Ruineux bites hard on the inside of his cheek, makes a minor adjustment. Fingers weave hair. Smiling tongues caress and part, search out new flesh. Her thighs stretch as she rises over him, blue silk of kimono a frame for luminescent white flesh. "Go ahead," she says. He thrusts and convulses not from cock and balls, but from some loose nut rattling at the base of his left temple. Blinding white, a kind of lightning stuns him a moment, and then it's over. "Jasmine. Oh yes, Jasmine."

"What's that you saying?" Cabbie's anxious eyes search the flat-line nothing etched in the face of this pasted what's-his-name, the fiasco, Jack Ruineux.

In the booth, he's long since stopped watching, perhaps tired or disgusted, maybe both, with the exhibition he's been so determined to project. Seated at the projection booth desk, one hand to either side of the Quiet De Luxe, unlit Camel poking from the fingers of his right, matchbook lying in the loose fist of his left, Ruineux appears lost in

the contemplation of god-knows-what. But, as the last several feet of print flow through the guts of the Simplex 35, he seems to get back his eyes and watches intently as it spools off the payout reel, sucks into the projector's belly, rattles through the gate, and pops out what might be described as the projector's anus with a release of tension so zippingly torqued it sets the take-up reel spinning. Yards of print coil off the crazy reel in a tangled ribbon that spreads out along the concrete floor before wrapping itself in a horrible knot that jams ragged in the take-up reel's hub. Ruineux watches and does nothing: he couldn't care less, it seems. And if he hears the furious knocking on the booth's bolted, metal firedoor, there's no way of telling by the starry-eyed attitude of serenity winking from his crow's feet.

Were he to have made the changeover, Ruineux could have watched as the mature Jasmine Belladonna, reclining in her favorite Nantucket dune-cleft, closes the notebook she's labeled "Photographer's Log," slips into her espadrilles, pulls on her sweater, and walks down along the foggy shore until she reaches a jetty composed of boulders long polished by the Atlantic and thick on the undersides with a clinging beard of mussels. When the tide permits, she sometimes comes here to harvest them for a lunch made sweet by these *fruits de mer*. With garlic she sautés them, and chopped green onion, before pouring in a healthy cup of cabernet. In a minute or two, and with some shaking of the pan, voilà—mussels à l' Jasmine B. She finds it endearing to watch him dig in, dip a crust of bread the size of his fist into the bowl so he can sop up a nectar of cabernet and muscle juice.

But there's no harvest today; no steaming lunch. Careful, stepping lightly from stone to stone, Jasmine works her way to the end of the jetty where surf punches rock and explodes in a fountain of froth and delight. It's enough to make her forget the bell buoy's now-mournful carillon, which in the murk and chill of thick fog sounds to her wounded, swathed in gauze and cotton packing.

Crossing her feet at the ankles, Jasmine lowers herself Indian style on the most extreme rock and spends several tough minutes paging through her log, searching the leaves for this or that particular passage, running her finger along lines where she finds it difficult to make out her own handwriting, wondering at sentences scratched over so thoroughly it's clear her intent had been not merely to correct, but to *expurgate*. Did I get it right? she thinks. Perhaps a reasonable version, a convincing imitation of a Ruineux I once knew—maybe—all those years ago in a Philadelphia that no longer exists. The book he always talked about, but could never bring himself to write: the one about an obsession with the image that tainted his dreams, Zane's old coot living out his days in a room in the Hotel Vendig: it's been, for me, and despite my amateur status, an exorcism in its writing. A way, finally, to pin down all those wicked ghosts of his, for once and for all (and it did get easier as I groped along: *they're* getting old, too, and in more ways than one). The ghosts he couldn't bring himself to write he dumped onto me in those fits of his, the raving bombasts, and they stuck. Sure, he could vomit them out like that and shove along on his merry way. But what about Miss Jasmine B.? How strange to think in a voice that has nothing to do with your own. And for so long. Mind-voice infected by that fleeting incarnation of a long-ago Jack Ruineux? Nonsense, Jasmine. You're

talking mumbo-jumbo now. Still, I'll be damned if that voice didn't rattle around in my head. Sometimes louder than others, and sometimes gone altogether for months, years at a time, only to pop up again and at the most unexpected moments; so many times when bending over the viewfinder of the Pratiflex. Long fading, that particular Ruineux inflection, which on the more oblong of my days subverts the voice with which I self-speak, might just be gone for good: written into exhaustion on the leaves of this notebook. Maybe I ought to give him a look, a glimpse of the could-have-been lurking there behind those eyes of his; those idiosyncratic eyes flashing sometimes blue, sometimes gray. It might give him a laugh—a nervous one, maybe, but still a laugh (laughter comes so easily to him these days). Then again, I could just be inviting disaster: a vestige of the projectionist remains with him, I'm convinced of it, lying dormant as any virus: a fifth-column Complex 35 just waiting for its opportunity to absorb the big-screen vision, incubate it, effect mutations that render it the flamboyant kin of the Ostensible, and project. No, prior exposure does not carry with it the serendipitous benefit of future immunity, especially for a host as creakily sympathetic as old Jackie Ruineux. Got to keep my eye on that nutty Canuck. Besides, his present incarnation's been with me too long now to put at risk. Long since removed from that caved-in soul careening around the sneaky ruin I'll call Philadelphia, he's a crusty-at-the-edges St. Ruineux these days, broken-in enough to wrap himself around his world while at the same time ever in touch with the degrees and minutes of his latitude and longitude. NOW: Nearest Ostensible World: always on the look out for the virtual palmed-off, he's got this concept to get himself from one day to the next. A matter of belief, to be sure,

but the Ostensible's about as good as it gets nowadays, the "Real" having long ago been bulled into the ditch by the insidious juggernaut of the Virtual. Oh god, Jasmine! Where do you get this crap? But it's the way it is. Self-preserving as opposed to self-doubting, in touch with the phenomena at hand, healthfully skeptical in the face of the Virtual<sup>13</sup> unthinkingly tossed off by the marketeers and black marketeers of image, yet resigned to an acceptance that image is reducible to no absolute, looking inward for the fuel of his imagination and logic—he's getting along as best he can, which is a far sight better than "them Philly days of yore." What passes for news these days he calls "Nightly Network Propaganda" and, while smirking at the talking head on those nights he resorts to television, he's prone to walking disgusted from the room saying, "*Merde à la treizime puissance.*" A wonderful old refrain that makes so much sense to him now. So yes, maybe he has, after all, come far enough to peruse my exorcistic log, but why take chances?

Without closing the notebook, Jasmine throws it into the Atlantic breakers, watches until she sees it disappear with the undertow, then rises and works her way back along the jetty.

For some time she picks along the strand for what driftwood there is to be scavenged, adding to it a bit of dry, brittle brush for kindling from the grove of scrub pines that squats on the lee side of the dunes. Arms cradling the bundle of sticks and wood, she returns to the cottage to find a chilly but diligent Ruineux, animated in his concentration, whispering over the several pages he's marked up with his typer and then with the red fine-point pen, hunched over his desk and huddled in a that worn-out army

blanket. “Has the grapefruit been shoved in your face?” says Jasmine, picking up the bent nine-iron, now a poker, to stir the tired fire. Ruineux looks up and smiles at her, says nothing. Unable to revive the flame, Jasmine fetches the driftwood and kindling she’d laid outside the door, arranges it in the fireplace, takes one of the long matches from the box on the mantel, and lights the kindling at several strategic points. The dead sticks of pine catch quickly, fragrantly, and soon, Jasmine fanning the fire with several pages of manuscript swiped from the corner of Ruineux’s desk, there comes a healthy crackle. Satisfied, Jasmine replaces the nine-iron poker to the antique milk pail they use just for this purpose, and the sheets of manuscript to the pile on the edge of Ruineux’s desk. Then she steps behind him and fixes the blanket around his shoulders. “Well?” she says, looking over his shoulder at the page in his hands. The type is uneven, faint on one letter heavy on the next, riddled with false starts and dead ends, parts of sentences and even entire passages typed over with Xs or ampersands, margins filled with Ruineux scratch in red ink. Understanding that this “Well?” of hers is intended as a request for a fresh sample, Ruineux turns the page sideways, clears his throat, and begins to read from a longish paragraph of marginalia. *Moved, blubbery with sentiment, the thought of her always-loaded Praktiflex FX drew me to her photographer’s duffel. Unskilled as I was, I remembered to fully open the aperture, the light being so dim in the room, and, confident the thing was loaded with 400 speed, focused and snapped the shutter release. She stirred at the whirring of the auto-wind, but did not awaken and, quietly, I replaced the Praktika in the duffel, folded it closed, and poured the last shot of Banker’s Club. Bending over her, I stroked her hair, inhaled the fragrance of olive oil and patchouli that*

*came from it so fruity, eternal, alive. This is what I love, I thought: the quiet moment when amazement slaps me out of my waking dream. Then I floated on easy steps to the breakfast nook to do there what its name suggests. She awakened to the snap of frying eggs, but none of it was true. "Not bad," says Jasmine. "Not bad." Then, walking over to the kitchenette, she sets a pot of water to boil and starts fishing around for the box of Earl Grey.*

No Ruineux, none of it is true. Ever on your way, never quite making it to my door, your flesh and bone and the bits of you I've come to trust actually are a you, I can hardly distinguish from the you I invent to fill in the gaps. How many gaps does the mind fill in? Your refrain, I know. So many times I've heard you make an incantation of that refrain, or a sing-song that gets you bopping along with that fingersnap cakewalk gait of yours: endearing, antic, sad. I always feel I've got to *do* something with you, Ruineux: take photographs of you to pin you down (your image, at least), photographs I can later gaze at and wonder, Is this a man to whom I can attach a name like John Alexandre Ruineux? Or I arrange dots and numbers, link up the dots with the soft, fat graphite of speculation, try to make sense of your mystifyingly incomplete Connectogram. Do I need to remind you I invented a diagnosis for your "condition," a Complex 35 the sole purpose of which was to drag a sham Ruineux biography out of our play therapy. What crap. You, at least in one sense, know how to wear a woman out, which wouldn't be such a bad thing if I could get you to introduce a little variety, try

some other way of exasperating me, astonishing me, than these random dropouts of yours. Where are you hiding, Jack Ruineux? Stick that creepy Quiet De Luxe of yours back in its case for a while, hang your little schemes and obsessions on a nail, ease up a little, and it just might occur to you I'm lying here alone, again, waiting. Waiting for *you*. And that's not such a good thing because the waiting only gives me time to think you into places like a Black Horse Alley. Yours, I'm coming to believe, is a night that knows no end, and for all I know you are licking your wounds in some rats' nest, but just as easily I can think you into a Nantucket sunset burning the horizon. I play these games nowadays. The Nantucket sunsets are mine, but I inherit the alleyways from you: that's the legacy you leave me. And the photographs: those too are an inheritance; not so much the ones I took of you as the ones you gave me: those childhood snaps culled from the box your mother kept, the ones you snatched up before the Ruineux nest, feathered in that white frame house, fell once and for all from the Ruineux family tree. I keep special the snap of a little blond boy on the Cape Cod of his youth, face silent, stark and distant in the murky rotogravure of childhood. Chubby and smooth with puppy fat, there is, in such a young kid, especially in the eyes, something that suggests the haggard biding his time, waiting for the moment to burst into full bloom. Of course it isn't you, most likely isn't even a youthful incarnation of you, but you gave it to me with the line that it was and I've been willing to believe it. These are the kinds of artifacts I have, the consequentially suspect research on which I base my thesis of John Alexandre Ruineux. I works with the evidence I gots, and I even scratch it out in a notebook that's college ruled. Can you blame me? Of all the nights we've had, there might have been one that could be called

truly good, maybe two, and I'll grant three. But no more than that. Not much to cling to, is it? Yet, here I lie, naked and waiting, knowing sure as Shinola the sight of your face at my door is something only as solid as a wish based on the hope of the photograph of that wish. See what you have me doing? I had to kill you off in that Black Horse Alley, and I'll admit I enjoyed it. But I also cast you into an image of a future we might call our own, a future that has nothing to do with some failure pre-ordained, with frustration, loneliness, or even a room in the Hotel Vendig. Call it love, Ruineux. Something forces me to believe you deserve it. Were you to show up at my door right now, I'd probably be the perfect stupid bitch, throwing my arms around you and kissing you and where-were-you asking. In spite of myself, I'd give you the benefit of the only thing you leave me—doubt—and run my mouth, as if on some autophonic pilot, speaking in ecstatic tongues of worry, fury, doubt, jealousy, disbelief, love—all of it flowing from one breath. I'd lead you to the window, lit up now with some new, disturbing light, peel back the curtain, and we'd watch the sorry arson: only an abandoned jalopy set on fire by the neighbor hoods. It'll have drawn the curious to their Howard Street windows, the brave to the sidewalk. Soon enough a tanker from the fire company would show, a few police cruisers in escort, to douse the thing and make a quick getaway. Playfully, I'd insinuate you'd been the torch, then lead you to bed with a lullaby and a kiss. I'd sit up long after you'd fallen asleep, happy to finally have a you in my bed to watch over, and when I grew sleepy enough to join you I'd whisper in your drowsing ear, "Sweet dreams, Jack Ruineux."