

The guy in 13, and other fictions

S G Collins

The guy in 13
and other fictions

Postwar Media, Amsterdam

Copyright © 2017 S G Collins / Postwar Media.
All rights reserved.

ISBN: 9789402159370

Postwar Media
Witte de Withstraat 113 - 3
1057 XP Amsterdam NL

Here are thirteen stories I wrote between 1988 and 2011. They take place in Amsterdam, Atlantic City, Boston, Buffalo, Los Angeles, Montreux, Niagara Falls, Paris, Peenemünde, Providence, Toscana, and various surburbias of the heart. Two of them are set in the past, and one a few decades in the future, but most of them happen roughly now-ish, depending on your size of now. — sgc

Could have been a tyrannosaurus	1
A kitten at the feet of Olympia	6
The man about whom the world revolves	49
After the Alcazar	53
Does meaning merely seem	128
Miscellaneous Providence	132
And a little spit	185
Bones of the citizen	193
The headbanger's daughter's great grandfather the Nazi	207
The last time I saw Molya Sustradanye	213
The third widow	232
Holiday in Peenemünde	267
The guy in 13	311

Could have been a tyrannosaurus

The kitchen phone rudely interrupts the *Andante* from Mozart's 25th. Matty always puts on classical when he's working in neighborhoods like this.

"Wamme to get that?" he yells, but Mrs Sanovetti doesn't answer.

Matty exhales, puts down his spackle knife, and climbs down off the ladder.

"Hello."

"Who is this?" a serious man wants to know.

"This is Matty Polaszek, whozis?"

"Can I speak to Ms Sanovetti?"

He hears the toilet flush. "Just a moment please."

When she takes the black phone from his hand, her face is wet, and her eyes are savagely scouring him for a clue. She's in some state, like she's doped up or hung over or something.

"It's for you," he says, and feels how ridiculous that sounds. He turns down the volume on his old spattered boombox, and gets back to prepping the living room wall.

Behind him, Sandy Sanovetti's voice is low and quiet. "Hello?"

Jesus, talk about mood swings. When they were first specing this job three weeks ago, she was all

lightness and liberty, laughing and giving them more coffee and asking their opinions on which teal to choose for the trim. Hector was shivering with delight once he realized that yes, it was *the* Sandy Sanovetti whose living room they'd be painting. Mrs Sanovetti seemed pleasantly surprised that anybody still remembered her. She gave Matty his own key to the place, and left to go pick up her kid.

"Sandy Sanovetti, TV Four News," Hector said in the van, then said it three more times trying to get the tone right. As usual his right knee was jumping all crazy nervous. "She's still pretty hot, man, you think she got a husband?"

"I think she got a divorce," Matty said, "and that's where the coin for this job is coming from. So you mind your frick-inn manners, alright?"

But then this morning Matty asked her for a cash advance to send Hector out to buy primer — and she looked up at him like he was a burglar. Something's changed.

Most of the living room furniture is jammed into the dining room, and what didn't fit there is stacked out back on the screen porch. It'll take a couple days to get the walls ready, then two coats of primer before they even get to the meat of the matter. If you're gonna do something, do it right, he tells Hector at every job, just loud enough to be overheard. In fact Matty is boundlessly grateful for Hector's roleplay as the good-natured Salvadoran learning to better himself. But he's only ever told him so once, when they were both drunk.

“Why do you need to know that?” he hears Mrs Sanovetti say softly into the phone.

He’s sanding the top of the window trim.

“Could you hold the line please? Just give me a minute.”

He hears her set the receiver down on the kitchen table. Footsteps on the stairs. The *Andante* draws to a close, and after a few seconds the third movement begins. *Menuetto*.

“Uhm,” she says, “are you still there?”

Matty glances over his shoulder. Mrs Sanovetti is busy spreading pairs of what look to be kids’ underpants out on the old maple wood. She moves her empty coffee cup to make more room for them, and stands there looking down.

“Well there are two kinds. I have three white jockey shorts with red, purple and blue piping, and a Spiderman on the front. Then there are two red-orange boxers with dinosaur shapes on them. One brontosaurus, and one stegosaurus. Yes? No. I mean he’s old enough to dress himself, so I don’t know which one he — I’m sorry. What?”

Matty’s ladder creaks a bit too loud as he steps down to change his sandpaper.

“Yes, I suppose it *could* have been a tyrannosaurus. Please tell me what this is *about*?”

Her voice sails so sharp into singsong that it stops Matty cold. He freezes, and doesn’t move a muscle, hardly even breathes, until Mrs Sanovetti speaks one more time.

“Thank you detective.”

She puts the phone down. She pulls out one of the chairs, and sits there, watching the boxer shorts as if they're gonna do something any second now.

He's closer, almost right behind her. But doesn't remember crossing the room. Then he hears himself utter a syllable.

"Uh."

"Blood? What blood, how much blood, how *much*?" she spills. Then recognizes him, almost. "Oh."

His right hand is, without his consent, reaching for her shoulder. But he sees her watching his hand in terror, regains control of it and pulls it back. The sun comes out. Through the open blinds he sees the van pull up in the driveway. POLASZEK PAINTING.

"I'm sorry," she tells him, which confuses him, and maybe his confusion looks like anger, and she says she's sorry three more times.

"I'm sorry," Matty answers.

The screen door burps open and it's Hector, Hector's white teeth.

"Who wants donuts?"

Matty's hand reaches out to stop him. Hector frowns, scans the room silently, is there somebody here with a switchblade? Matty steps back one step away from the woman in the chair, and Hector does the same.

"I'd like a, I'd like, I think I'd like. A donut. Please thank you."

Mrs Sanovetti is nodding, watching the orange and white box in Hector's hands. He opens it and sets

it down before her. She looks, reaches, takes out a sugar-crusted jelly donut with a red navel. She holds it as a newborn kitten, studies it for a long time, then screams.

A kitten at the feet of Olympia

There's the chance that this is really happening to you. That it's no dream, that by way of several painless impacts, each one sapping some of your starting momentum, you have just come to rest in an unlikely spot. In an unfamiliar position. Looking entirely like someone else. But is this the real you now, this you cool blue nude and compromised, this you staring out through shopglass on a day when the stores don't open? Or are you somehow still who you were at midnight last night?

Her phone is ringing again.

"I found something, maybe I found her, I dunno. I'm going somewhere, not sure where, here I go. Call you tomorrow, bye."

A breathless voicemail blinking in the sky over Malibu.

What time is it in California anyway? The arithmetic eludes her just now. Now, just before midnight as she walks out of the Martyrs club in St Germain and crosses a wide sidewalk toward a waiting black Renault, the echo of that promise stirs her intestines. *I'll call you tomorrow*. And will she survive tonight? The back door of the sedan swings

open and she lifts a foot diagonally to step in. Her new red shoe. Her stiletto. The point of her toe.

Her companion inside, whose real name she doesn't know — *for now, just call me Sabine* — has just hiked up her slippery blue skirt and loosed one black stocking from the clips. Her thumbs peel it down to expose the whitest moonglow thigh. The car is moving now, moving fast.

“May I borrow your phone?”

Nica reaches in her fuzzy black handbag and passes the mobile. “Who are you calling?”

“No one. You'll get it back later.” Sabine leans on the power key and the phone goes dark, sayonara. Then she's reaching for Nica's shoulders, slips the stocking behind Nica's neck, under her hair. “I hope you don't mind,” she says. *Mind what.*

“Mind what?”

Sabine wraps the black nylon over Nica's eyes. It grows snug.

“Forgive me. You mustn't see where we're going.”

She's tying a knot just above Nica's left cheekbone.

“There. How many fingers am I holding up?”

“I didn't know you were holding up any.”

“The answer is two.”

“Who's the guy?”

“He's the driver.”

“What are you doing now?”

“Putting my shoe back on.”

“Oh.”

The silence presses her eardrums. Away from the pounding trance of the Martyrs where they just met half an hour ago — *take your time, finish your drink, I'll wait for you downstairs* — this woman's voice sounds Brit. Maybe she's not, but her English teacher was.

"May I kiss you?" the voice asks.

"I'm a little drunk, though," Nica says, and wonders why she said that. Could she have said *normally I wouldn't, but?* She has been trying not to lie to herself lately.

"I'll take that," not just a voice but hot breath beside her right ear, "as a yes."

Departed Blvd St Germain just before midnight, Nica scrawling sudden diary entries in the black sand of her mind here, accelerated, she touched her lips to my lower lip, not quite a nibble. Liquid waxiness of her lipstick. Slowed and turned right again. What time is it in California? What is Becky doing? Lips opened and I felt the tip of a tongue. Her body temp runs a bit cooler than my own. Faint taste of vodka and orange. The car bearing right now, or maybe left, and we turned again, and turned.

Sudden slowdown, she hears him downshifting. Sabine, now astride her, falls back against the front seat with a shriek. "*Chat,*" says the driver by way of apology, and speeds up again. Nica never caught a glimpse of his face, but feels just a smidge safer knowing the driver of this car wouldn't even hurt a black cat crossing his path. The woman calling herself Sabine has fallen sideways off her, giggling in

microtremors. Nica waits for her to come kiss her again. Her sweat is turning clammy from the air conditioning. She feels around on the cool leather. Sabine's hand finds hers and encloses it.

"What's really going on, is something bad gonna happen to me?"

"What's happening is you're giving up control, and a tiny piece of your dignity. When you surrender something, you receive something."

"Follow your bliss, that's my advice," Becky says, and her fingers stab into the sky like points on the Statue of Liberty's crown. "Follow your fucking bliss already."

Sitting outside Gladstone's, Becky with her back to the Pacific. In her sunglasses Nica sees a fisheye view of her own confused self slumping there in post-sunset glow holding a glass of beer. What the fuck. It's already decided she's staying right here in LA for her Masters in Applied Proteomics. What's the big deal if she takes a little time alone? Two weeks.

Quietly she repeats. "I am coming back."

"What for? You're already gone. This little obsession of yours is getting a little —"

"Obsession? Is that what you —"

"Oh. *Oh.*" Turning away as if to puke.

"Becky."

"Go to Paris."

"Becky?"

"Go to Paris."

Their waiter asks if there will be anything else. There won't be.

"You wanna sleep with her. Don't you."

Blink. "I *what*?"

"Just admit it, it's okay."

"How can I sleep with a girl who died in 1927?"

"That's what you've been trying to figure out."

Becky pins her with a glare. "You want to. You *wish* you could."

In the sunglasses Nica sees herself shaking her head in slowmo.

"Just admit it," Becky says.

Nica doesn't admit anything just then. She puts down her glass, rises from the table and walks down the steps and tips the valet and drives home alone and starts packing.

"Your father doesn't understand," says Mom.

Mom doesn't like one bit the idea of a twenty-three-year-old woman travelling alone in Europe, and as usual deals with the conflict by bashing Nica with a blowup doll of her father.

"You've already *been* to Paris. We took you to Musée d'Orsay when you were fifteen."

"Put him on. I can tell by your voice he's sitting right there."

"No."

"It's something I gotta do, Mom. Please don't worry." *Please just shut up and pay for my ticket.*

“Flying over to Paris just to look at a couple of paintings. Can’t speak a word of French. Can that phone of yours call transatlantic?”

“Yes Mom.”

“Cuz not all of them —”

“I’ve seen to it, Mom.”

“Well your father doesn’t like it. And I can’t say I blame him, Nicole.”

“Just tell him ...” Nica smiles, phone tucked between her jaw and shoulder as she folds her prettiest top. “Tell him I’m in love.”

“You are?”

“People do crazy things for love.”

Silence.

“Mom. Chill. I promise I won’t get in any trouble.”

That was ten days ago. Since then she’s spoken to her mother seven times. Becky meanwhile has said five more words to her. *Great, thank you for calling.*

Thinking: no Mom, I won’t get into any trouble, I’ll just get into a big black car with two total strangers and let them blindfold me and kidnap me. What else is there to do in Paris on a Saturday night? The car has paused with a turn signal ticking. A police siren comes and goes before them, pitching down a minor third in the passing.

“Here she is. Nica, slide over would you?”

“Sorry? Oh!” Her elbow slips. The car door beside her pops open and another woman hops in, nearly on top of her.

“Bon soir!”

“Hi.”

The new girl smells fancy. Her name is Booboo. Yes really, but Nica has to ask twice before she believes it. In French the new girl exchanges what may be quick updates with Sabine. There’s a melodious lightness to her voice that strikes Nica as very French-girl French, rendering Sabine as Jeanne Moreau by comparison. It sounds nice. If only Nica hadn’t let her Dad railroad her into taking German in high school (*it’s a science language*, he promised), she might have a clue what these girls are on about.

“Ah beautiful, I love her,” says Booboo, helping herself to a strap of Nica’s top. “Where do you find this one?”

Blind, Nica recalls what she wore tonight, oh, the coppery swirly thing with glinties around the décolleté. “Somewhere in California,” she shrugs.

“California. Is where you come from?”

“Theoretically I’m from New Jersey. My folks are in Florida now, I live in LA.”

“*O la la, Boulevard ‘ollywood.*” Booboo is now squirming around beside her like she’s trying to get out of her skin. It’s not a small car, she just has no concept of personal space, this one. Maybe she was raised by a family of housecats. Finally she settles with one elbow resting comfortably on Nica’s right shoulder. *Stay cool.*

“What perfume is that?” Nica smiles. “You smell amazing.”

“Errm.” Booboo answers in a sunshower of French.

“She has no idea,” Sabine says. “She just came from a party, and believes she smells like a lady she danced with.”

Then Booboo touches Nica’s hair, asks her a question in English.

“And why are you looking for Victorine?”

Nica is silent for a moment. She touches her tongue to her upper lip.

Christmas vacation six months ago. Nica first comes out to her mother in the Winn Dixie parking lot in Port Orange, Florida. The big event is not unlike a spring-driven toy you wind up for a long time, only to have its action play out in three rattling seconds. It’s just beginning to rain. Mom insists on pushing the cart herself, she likes to have something to lean on. They are now approaching the minivan. Nica knows that if she waits till they’re inside, she won’t say what she has to say — what she’s been stoking the courage to say since two days before she got on the plane to Daytona.

“Uh.”

“Yes dear?”

Mom glances back at her, squeezes her keyring, the minivan goes *bloop*. Mom’s not exactly Susie Homemaker here, but she has always appeared in the role of the good girl, the registered Republican, the loyal wife, the community spirit, the shoulder to cry

on, the blah blah blah *omygod how am I gonna do this*.

“Can we talk about sex for a minute?”

“Sure!”

“I dunno how else to put this. Um, sometimes I go with girls.”

She watches carefully as Mom eases the cart to a halt and opens the hatchback.

“So you’re gay.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Maybe I haven’t quite made up my mind?”

Mom smiles and bites her lip. “Well that’s par for the course.”

She sounds more teasing than critical, but Nica’s so pre-cranked she still takes it the wrong way. Steps back a bit with her hands on her hips.

“What, so I have to decide about that too? I need a plan? Jesus I hate this. Stickpinning the possibilities before you even know what they are. Like those experiments where some *man* forces a photon to go through one slit or the other, and all the wave patterns disappear. I hate that. The universe hates that. The universe abhors particularity. It wants to be a big swirly gooey mess.”

“Like your room.” Mom nods. “You wanna help me with the groceries dear?”

Nica steps up to the shopping cart and grabs the thirty-pound turkey, and hefts it like a boulder — like she’s gonna use it to crush Jerry Falwell’s head or something.

“I don’t know much about cosmology, hon,” says Mom. “But at some point, yes, you *will* have to make up your mind about *something*. It’s just inevitable.”

“So what if I said I was gay?”

“I’d say so am I.”

“Mom, fuck off, I’m serious.”

“I’m serious too.”

They look at each other. The rain is starting to come down, tiptapping on the open hatchback window above.

Maybe she didn’t hear right. “Mom, I’m telling you I’m a lesbian.”

Mom shrugs but doesn’t flinch. “I’m a lesbian too.”

“Mom.”

“Honey, would I lie about a thing like that? Now think hard.”

There are three bags left in the shopping cart.

“Don’t tell your father.”

The windshield wipers are on medium as Mom takes a right onto Big Tree Road.

“I’m confused.”

“I know.”

“If you’re really gay then why did you marry Daddy?”

“Maybe I just didn’t want to make up my mind yet.”

Quick glance, a wry smile from the girl twisted up in the passenger seat with her back to the foggy window.

“Anyway,” Mom says, “It’s not such a bad deal. The sex kinda makes your skin crawl, you feel like a two-dollar whore sometimes, but that doesn’t last. And besides.” Mom peers at the sign in front of a Sunoco station, apparently checking gas prices. “Women go through all kinds of unpleasant and meaningless things to get what they want. I’ve thought about this. We’re strong that way. Or at least we’ve had a lot of practice. How long have we been mammals now?”

“I’m not sure I follow you.”

“It’s like anything else, Nicole. You make certain disgusting compromises, and then you get something you want. Hopefully something good.”

She stops at the traffic light by Route 5, and stares at her left turn blinker.

“I, for example, got you.”

Nica looks at Mom’s no longer soft and supple hand on the steering wheel.

“And Timmy,” she says.

“Yes,” Mom says, distending the curve of her voice with chicken wire. “Him too.”

Left turn on arrow only.

This egg was supposed to be over easy, not scrambled. She was planning to shock her mother max gently with her so-called alternative lifestyle, not to discover that Mom’s a lifelong dyke and both she and Dad have had a series of illicit lovers since before Nica was born — all in the time it takes to drive home from Winn Dixie.

“What’s she crying about now?” Timmy asks Mom as they walk in with the groceries.

Something is calling her. Standing in the middle of her big swirly mess, feeling too tall in here, not wanting to remember the day she helped pick out this ruffly pink polka-dot bedspread, ignoring the track and field awards and the Cabbage Patch doll on the shelf behind her, Nica just looks out the window at Mr Hannigan dragging a Christmas tree out the back of his gold Taurus wagon — and senses change in the air. She can’t shake the feeling that something is *coming* for her, that all this is somehow leading up to something.

“Thinking about that Masters?” Dad says halfway through Christmas dinner.

“Arthur. You promised.”

“What? I’m just asking my genius daughter a simple question.”

Nica smirks from behind a forkful of mashed. “Uh-huh.”

“What’s the answer?”

“The answer is uh-huh. I’m thinking about it. I haven’t quite made up my mind yet.”

Dad rears back with a smile and regards his knife and fork, and takes a breath.

“This is just my view, but I think Proteomics is now where Astrophysics was in the time of Galileo.”

“Oh Christ,” says Timmy.

“There’s still room for a bright mind to become a legendary mind, that’s all I mean to say. Think about the impact on drug discovery.”

“Okay,” Nica says, and makes like she’s thinking.

“Right now drug discovery is kinda like duck hunting in the dark with a machine gun. But once we start to really understand how proteins interact, we can literally —”

“Daddy, you’re absolutely right, but listen. You’re not on MSNBC right now, you don’t have to talk in sound-bites. Relax. It’s fucking Christmas.”

Dad looks at her, and looks at Mom, then nods, and stabs a hunk of white meat.

“Anyway if I do it, I’m going with UCLA. The internships pay better.”

“Fair enough,” he decides. “Good school. Not quite the *level* of the Johns Hopkins program, but that’s just my opinion. I’ll support whatever you wanna do.”

Really?

She looks across and quickly hates him for that lie, and for pretending she’s dumb enough not to hear it. The passing sunbeam of her hate briefly illumines the spiderweb of blackmail stretching between her parents. But she ignores it, her clouds return, and she just smiles at Dad as if she’s been offered free Ben & Jerry’s for life. He’ll support whatever she wants to do.

“Cool.”

I wanna be spanked in public by Juliette Lewis in a rhinestone mask.

“Timmy can you pass the stuffing?”

“Don’t worry Nic,” Timmy tells her in the pool. “You’ll cap this Proto-metric thingy just like you capped Molecular Bio-thingy.”

Morning of the day she’ll fly up to Boston to see her ex-girlfriend. The sky is pearl gray with dark shreds blowing through it. It’s chilly, but the pool is heated. Her eighteen-year-old brother’s sitting on the edge, dangling his legs in the water, but wearing his sweater from Ireland. He looks ridiculous, especially with that Heineken in his hand.

“Proteomics,” she says, and turns over to float on her back.

“I read that paper you wrote. Survey of Bionic something.”

A survey of Bioinformatic workflows in Systems Biology. “Whadya think?”

“Kinda boring.”

“Mmm. You see my dilemma.”

“But dude you got published in like *Bio-IT World*. How many undergrads can say that? Dad thought you did awesome.”

Reaching the shallow end, she stands up in the pool. The cold from the hips up is momentarily refreshing.

“I can *learn* anything, Timmy. Molecular Biology is just there, like washing the dishes or folding laundry. A lot of things are just there. But not everything is on fire, not for me. Like I really wanna spend two years logging mass spectrometry numbers just so I can get a great job prostituting myself for Big Pharma?”

“What big farmer?”

“And stop looking at my tits.”

Timmy shrugs. “Stop having tits.”

A big blond dog is trotting across their lawn. Someone whistles and it runs back out to the street.

“Trouble with you, Nic? Everything’s too easy. That’s why you have trouble deciding anything. Me I have to fight for every little scrap of appreciation. But you, nothing’s ever hard for you.”

“That’s not true Timmy.”

“Name one thing.”

She starts to lower herself into the water again.

“True love. Finding true love is hard.”

Timmy shrugs. “Only cuz you’re a girlhomo.”

Splash, she stands back up to glare at him.

“Who told you that?”

“I may be dumb but I’m not blind. I’ve seen you in love.”

She wants to slap those blank beady eyes right out of his acne disaster of a face. But there is just the tiniest squiggle of compassion in his voice, something only a close relative could even detect.

“What, you just like *knew* I was gay the whole time?”

Timmy shrugs. “Did you know I’m adopted?”

“What?” She feels one side of her face get longer.

“I’m adopted.”

“No you’re not.”

“Yep. Hannigan told me.”

“Timmy, I was in the room, I saw you come out of her. You’re not adopted.”

“Oh.”

He stops looking at her tits.

She wades forward through the pool until her feet run out of slope, then freestyles a few strokes before floating on her back again. Timmy gets to his feet and kicks a bit of gravel into the pool, and stares into the water like he’s waiting for a TV show to come on there. He shakes his head over some private puzzle.

“Weird. I hate you sometimes, but I still miss you.”

“Yeah I miss you too.”

“Even if we are related.”

He glances at her for a click, then turns and saunters dripping along the concrete toward the screen porch of the house. Nica watches his wet footprints for a minute, then dives under the water. A fluttering gurgling, the chlorine stings her eyes. Featureless aqua. Silence.

And why *are* you looking for Victorine?

Like so many great loves it begins inside a blind spot, something she can no longer clearly see. She’s in Boston to meet her old lover’s new lover. Drinks out in some ersatz Irish pub. Sleeping on the sofa while they make love in the bedroom without even closing the door. Brunch. January. Filthy snowbanks, slush, car horns, a cruel and fickle wind, subway tokens, a streetcar rising out of the earth into

a most hostile light. A bronze Indian on a horse in front of a white stone building. They are a civilized threesome quietly roaming the Museum of Fine Arts. A big rotunda with sculptures and a grand staircase. An exhibit of nineteenth century European painting. A surplus of Frenchmen. Degas Cezanne Monet Manet Millet. Renoir. Gauguin. These French guys seem to have had a lot of time on their hands. Nica is getting bored way too soon.

At one doorway she turns, and all the paintings disappear. All but one, this square little rusty thing hanging there dwarfed by the magnificent unseen.

A young woman is staring back at her from 1862.

The colors are almost exclusively siennas and umbers. Even the featureless backdrop could have been done in dried blood. Whatever is not actually brown is scarcely permitted to be anything else: the seemingly blue ribbon bowed across the girl's head is in truth battleship gray. Her blouse, presumably yellow, is struggling just to achieve a greenish ivory. The light comes crashing down on her from above, then bounces back up to illumine the shadow side of her cheek in a perfect, straight-from-the-tube flatness. Her hair seems a blondish flavor of red, tucked back into a dark bonnet, except for the one loose tuft beside her left temple. There's an appealing tiny cleft in her rather pointed chin. Her lower lip is recessive, not voluptuous. Her eyebrows, if she has any, are very faint. And her eyes —

Her eyes.

The mind stops at her eyes. Thoughts can no longer form.

“Yoo hoo,” at her shoulder, the ex-girlfriend’s new girlfriend. Kind of a mousy little thing with pointy eyeglasses and a slightly bulbous nose, but there is probably something cute about her. She smiles at Nica. “We’re going down to see the Egyptians.”

The details blur. Does Nica actually say anything then, or does she just nod, and turn away to stare again at the *Portrait of Victorine Meurent*?

She lands at LAX convinced Edouard Manet is a genius, but that impression fades like a smile. In the public library, poring over one slick art volume after another, Nica soon realizes that Manet’s only truly notorious paintings — those either emphatically rejected by the Salon, or hung high enough that some enraged mob couldn’t quite take a coal-chisel to them — are those of Victorine Meurent. It’s not Manet she’s after. He’s just a window onto Victorine.

“Victorine Meurent, a popular artist’s model of not especially high birth...”

“Victorine Meurent, who also appeared in early French pornography...”

“Victorine Meurent, who died an alcoholic in abject poverty...”

“The prostitute Victorine Meurent...”

“So what’s with the art fetish all of a sudden?” Becky will ask, nibbling on a granola bar. And Nica will try her best to explain.

What's scandalous about Victorine is not that she is sometimes naked, but that she is naked and looking right at you and she doesn't care. There's nothing either seductive or abashed here. She's just looking at you. And that is unforgivable. How many critical essays have spurted over her arresting gaze, her cold, wanton, bemused, alluring and/or confrontational stare? No one, not man not woman, can endure the possibility that she really doesn't mean anything by it. They are compelled to shower her with interpretation.

Here she is sitting naked on the grass with two fully clothed men, they ignoring her, she ignoring them. The basket of plums, red grapes, peaches and kaiser rolls spills across her discarded dress, a fine still life in its own right. Lip moist, hand to her chin, eyes wide open, Victorine turns to us across what's left of the picnic as if to say *help yourself to a grape if you're hungry*. Surely she must be a prostitute. And here she is again, nude on high satin pillows, looking a tad jaundiced from head to high-heels (*I paint what I see*, says Manet, *not what you wish to see*), with maybe a magnolia in her hair, maybe a diamond pending from the tiny black ribbon snug at her throat. If someone has possessed this woman and displayed her for us here, then why is she so disturbingly self-possessed? The inappropriately black servant woman is just now presenting the flowers that you, the viewer, are supposed to have brought. For she lying here is Olympia, common alias of Parisian courtesans of the time, while you approaching the canvas are her John. One writer

postulates the artless lay of her hand across her crotch as some kind of proto-feminist statement; the next tells us it's Manet himself in Victorine's body, warning that he alone will set the terms of this cultural transaction. The cat, we're told, was Baudelaire's idea. At the foot of the bed, a black kitten stands with its tail crooked in the arc of a backward question mark. Perhaps in this frozen-forever moment Victorine is about to decide whether you may or may not have her.

Or maybe she's just looking at the guy with the paintbrush.

She does look a little bored, doesn't she? Is it possible, just faintly, that all this neurotic mythmaking we've splattered onto young Victorine has nothing to do with her? Does she really gaze out from some inner repose, radiating profound sexual confidence? Or is she thinking Manet should trim his beard soon? Is she saying *go on, think what you will — and by the way which of you is not also a prostitute?* Or is it *hmm, how about fish tonight?*

In Nica's eye, Victorine Meurent pays no attention to the cat, the servant, the bouquet or all your precious theories. She's just looking at you.

And what does she see?

Or rather — where are her paintings?

“Where are her paintings?”

“I dunno hon. Can I borrow something to sleep in?” Becky opens Nica's fridge and drinks from the carton.

“Help yourself,” Nica says, buried in a hardcover of Duchting’s *Manet: Images of Parisian Life*. “I mean she was a really productive artist in the 1870s, and no dilettante either, she was showing in the Salon even when Manet was *refusé*. But every scholar I’ve read tells me the paintings of Victorine Meurent have been lost. And they just leave it at that.”

She sits back at the dinette table and looks at Becky.

“Lost. What the fuck does that mean?”

“I don’t know, sweetie.”

“I mean the fucking Dead Sea Scrolls were lost for a while, right?”

“Right. So you’re uh, staying up all night again with this?”

“No, I uh ...” She looks at her watch, turns a page, her finger searching for a thought that was here a minute ago.

“Nica. You coming to bed or not?”

“Jesus Becky do I have to decide right now?”

She looks up at her, and in that instant she knows she is going to Paris.

“Art is pain,” she tells the needy young man sitting beside her at Café Depart St Michel.

She’s due to go home in two days, and still feels no closer to whatever she came here looking for. She’s got no shame now, she’ll talk to any English-speaking warm body about her little craving. Random curators in little galleries. Cute museum docents with stylish black-rimmed eyeglasses. A

librarian. A policeman. Even some Ethiopian-looking sweet boy in a pretty brocade shirt, who sits down next to her at a street café and hopes to take her dancing.

“Art is fucking pain,” she tells him.

“Yes.”

“What does *lost* really mean? If I burn all my old love letters, that’s one kind of lost. If I just can’t remember where I put them — in an envelope under the old magazines, or tucked in the back of my college yearbook? — that’s a whole different lost. Doesn’t mean I’ll never find them, they’re only lost until I do.”

“I see,” says the sweet boy, lighting an American cigarette.

“So maybe she had to sell her paintings off piecemeal during the lean years. Maybe she traded *Une Bourgeois du Nourembourg* for two bottles of absinthe. So her canvases are scattered to the winds, okay. One’s in a seaside hotel lobby, another’s in some attic in Avignon. That doesn’t make them lost. There’s no record of a spectacular bonfire. See what I mean?”

He nods and takes another drag. “Another cappuccino?”

“Sure.”

She laughs at herself then, exchanges another glance with the honey-haired woman at the next table, and leans back in her chair, trying to call herself to the world. *Be here now*. She looks out at the traffic on the boulevard and the fountain across the way.

Peruvian pan-flutes echo from somewhere down in the Metro station. The curved iron fronds flanking the *Metropolitain* gateway sprout into red glass lamps in vaguely sinister seedpods, like those Martian robotentacles in a 1960s *War of the Worlds* she fell asleep to on the couch once, and they gave her bad dreams. Now a lady with long shiny black curls is trying to stop bus 96 for Gare du Montparnasse by placing herself bodily in its path. But the bus won't wait. Paris is urgent. It feels crowded even when nobody's around. It's the smell of all the people who ever were here, mingling with the psychic fury of all those who ever will be. A maelstrom of sloshing volition in grimy white barrelvaulted escalators. You wade through and try your best to be here now. But you've stumbled into the deep mine of time, of everything it means to flatter yourself that you are more than an animal. *O, the Humanity*, cried the man with the microphone as the zeppelin Hindenburg collapsed in fire.

"Oh, the humanity," Nica exhales.

The mint green bus pulls away now, revealing the huge figure of archangel Michael in the fountain, sword held high, standing triumphant over an annoyed demon with bat wings. From this angle he almost seems to be dancing on the head of the honey-haired woman at the next table, who looks at Nica once more across her sunglasses. A tiny smile quivers on her lips.

That was yesterday.

Time is running out.