



PETER SELGIN

My Search for Red and Grey Wide-Striped Pajamas

Since coming to New York two years ago I've suffered from fainting spells. I'll be standing somewhere, doing nothing, *minding my own business*—at a street crossing or an intersection, somewhere where a decision must be made. The first time it happened I froze at the corner of Fifth and 42nd, near the public library. I must have been blocking the crosswalk, for people kept jostling me, some cursing under their breaths. My back broke into a clammy sweat. The moisture crept down my spine to gather at the elastic waistband of my under shorts. My white shirt, the only dress shirt in my wardrobe, clung to my skin in ruddy patches as I stood in demented sunlight, paralyzed. Everything seemed to rush out of me then until nothing remained but a cold, clammy sense of my own uniqueness and a sound like a projector reeling. Then my knees went out from under me, and I toppled.

Strange, goggle-eyed faces lowered cell phones and peered down.

You okay, mister?

Mister, you okay?

Someone handed me a copy of the *News of the World*. "I believe you dropped this," the good Samaritan said.

At first I thought the fainting spells had something to do with my father, who'd died a few years before, since his face

would always appear fleetingly among those looking down at me. My aunt and uncle took me to three doctors, one a specialist in inner ear disorders, each of whom drew blood and reached no conclusions. Uncle Nick thinks I'm neurotic, that I should drink more ouzo and otherwise fortify myself. "You don't eat enough lamb shank; you don't eat enough spanikopita (spinach pie)," he tells me, tugging down the lower lids of my eyes to see how anemic I am. "Either that or you need a goddamn kick in the ass," he says.

The evening after my first fainting incident, riding the subway train home with the *News of the World* spread open before me, I read, "*A passenger from the Titanic wreck has been discovered frozen solid inside an iceberg. Scientists and archeologists are debating whether or not to thaw him.*"

I thought of my dead father: to thaw or not to thaw?

I turned a page, read on.

"A Haitian voodoo priestess claims that Hitler has been resurrected as a zombie and is raising an army of the undead to invade the United States. One eyewitness has reportedly spotted Der Fuhrer, a known vegetarian, sitting on a campstool in a graveyard, chewing on raw chicken livers."

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"A *purpose!*" says my uncle, slamming his fist down hard on the dining room table—hard enough to rattle the plates in the china cabinet behind him. He knocks back a glass of ouzo. "That's what all humanity is after. To struggle for something well within your grasp—that's *wisdom!*"

Uncle Nick sits at the head of the long dining room table, holding forth, as he himself would describe it. "To quote the great man Epictetus, *whosoever longs for or dreads things outside of his control can neither be faithful nor free.*" Aunt Ourania, Nick's dark little ball of a Greek wife, watches in jittery silence as he chews, swallows, sips, considers. Nick fancies himself likewise Greek, though like my father he's only third generation. Ourania, my aunt, he met at a motivational forum that he

presided over, this one for the Greek Restaurant Association of New York—one of dozens of such forums conducted by him each year in grey and mauve conference rooms across America.

Meanwhile my cousin, Marcia, his twenty-two-year-old daughter, eyes me with sullen contempt from the far side of a sage-encrusted lamb shank. Is she contemplating her lost virginity? She is; I smile. From the depths of one of Dante's lower regions she repackages my smile into a sneer and delivers it back to me.

“Am I right, nephew?”

I'm getting that floating feeling again, like I'm in one of those sensory-deprivation chambers. The diningroom table, the floral wallpaper, the empty ouzo bottles lined up like infantry before the fireplace, Uncle Nick's lamb-and-ouzo scented words—they all close in on me. Sundays are cruel.

“Am I *right*?”

Uncle Nick swats the back of my head, taps my untouched ouzo glass. “I don't drink,” I explain to him for the hundredth time—as if it matters, as if anything matters to Uncle Nick but what *he* thinks.

He carves lamb, forks meat into my plate. “I don't care if you're fat or thin, rich or poor, dumb or smart,” he says. “It makes no earthly difference.” The combined smells of lamb and anisette increase my Sunday nausea. “No difference whatsoever.”

I await the aphorism, the one that invariably ties the knot on my uncle's dinner speeches. Uncle Nick has made a modest living, not to mention a name for himself, churning out aphorisms. He's written over two dozen—I hesitate to call them books—pamphlets? monographs? all with chrome-yellow dust jackets and titles like *How to Lick This Old World and Everyone in It*. The pamphlets are packed with tidy Ben Franklinesque sayings. “*A penny saved is a penny scorned.*” “*If you can't stand the heat, buy an air-conditioner.*” “*A fish out of water*

can't do much with a bicycle." A person could spend many hours trying to decipher some of Uncle Nick's more elaborate aphorisms. Still, they've earned him a decent living, not to mention all those plaques and photographs lining the walls of his wood-paneled Astoria den: him shaking hands with the President and C.E.O. of Marcal Toilet Tissue Corporation, for example.

"*A man without a purpose,*" Nick proclaims, "*is a chameleon on a scotch plaid.*"

By George, he's done it! Satisfied with this conclusion, Nick rewards himself with another glass of ouzo, places the empty in line with four others lined up before the fire grate next to his snakeskin cowboy boots. "*Stinyassas!*" He drains his glass, then eyes my full one with a brave man's disdain for cowards. "Got that, Loverboy?"

Does my uncle know I've slept with his daughter? A prickle runs up my spine. Ever since I arrived in New York Uncle Nick has been pimping his daughter to me as if I'm the last man on earth: and maybe I am. Or maybe he just wants to get rid of her, marry her off. Or maybe he sincerely thinks we'd be good for each other—incest and other small matters aside. Or maybe, just maybe, he just wants us to be *friends*.

Uncle Nick has my father's eyes, but none of my father's warmheartedness. His daughter has the same eyes. When she and I make love I close the blinds.

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My search for red and grey wide-striped pajamas began this past Christmas and has since taken me from the disheveled multicolored plastic bins of K-Mart, at Astor Place, to the vinegar and soap scented oak cabinets of Brooks Brothers, at Madison and 44th. Uptown by subway, downtown by bus, crosstown on swollen, blistered, sweaty feet. Three months into my search I'm bruised but not beaten, tired yet hopeful, drawn but not defeated. Even, for brief shining moments, faintly optimistic.

Saturday—a day of dull, drizzly rain. I ride the 7 train from Sunnyside where, in the graveyard-encrusted, working class muddle of Queens (zone of bars and cemeteries: a turf war between drunks and the dead) I rent a nine-by-ten room from a retired church organist named Filbert, who keeps a pipe organ in his vestibule and plays Mozart requiems to raise the Dead.

But about Filbert I'll say as little as possible, having far more important things on my mind, like the men's clothing store on Greenwich Avenue, in the Village. It came to me in a dream this morning, while dozing between snooze alarms.

"May I help you?" the clerk in the dream—whose face was its own caricature, poorly drawn—asked me.

"Yes," I answered. "I'm looking for a pair of red and grey wide-striped pajamas."

"Red and grey *wide* stripes?" said the clerk, raising his thin eyebrows, squeezing into the word "wide" an entire Eastern city full of snideness.

"That's right," I said, slowly. "Red and grey wide stripes."

"Wait here," said the clerk. And that's when I woke up.

I've seen paisleys, plaids, checkers, swirls; I've seen abstracts, geometrics, diagonals; I've seen winged horses, flying fish, golf clubs, chili peppers, hummingbirds, sunflowers and tennis balls; I've seen bacon and eggs, doughnuts and coffee cups, stars and stripes, exotic fish and birds of paradise, trains, cars, ships and planes. I've seen smoking pipes, playing cards, woodwind and brass instruments, violas and violins, waterfowl, rainbows, puffy clouds. I've seen mandalas, spirals, stars and polka-dots. I've seen pajamas of every color, every style, every pattern. I've even seen stripes: pink stripes, green stripes, red, white and blue stripes, wide stripes and pin stripes—I've even seen red and grey stripes. But never, *ever* red and grey wide stripes.

Still, I don't give up easily. The search goes on.

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Why red and grey wide striped pajamas? Because they're what he wore. My father. He wore them ragged, as a matter of fact, so ragged you could see the skin of his knees. Were they rayon? Silk? Plain cotton? I don't remember. But I do remember the faint smell of bourbon and unwashed vegetable bins burrowed deep into their fibers, musty and ripe. Though he died just over five years ago, it seems like so much longer, long before Astoria and Uncle Nick; long before Sunnyside and Filbert and his Organ. Long before my obsession with red and grey wide-striped pajamas took hold of me and made me its crusader-slave. Something about the combination of those two colors both grounds and disorients me, throws my world off balance while simultaneously anchoring me to it.

They say that boredom arises from one's sense of detachment from all things human and material, in which case a pair of red and grey wide-striped pajamas has become the least boring thing in the world, for me. For me those colors conjure a privileged, happy childhood. After all, how many boys grow up with their very own private trolley car? My father built it from scratch in his spare time in our garage. It was yellow with red pinstripes and varnished cane seats that flipped back and forth depending on which way it was going. The trolley ran on twin lawnmower engines, and had a brass bell I'd ring as we clacked along. We rode it up and down the wooded hill overlooking the brass fastener and hat factories that dotted the landscape. My father wore his red and grey wide-striped pajamas. They were the closest thing he had to a conductor's uniform.

My father and I would watch the hat factories burn down. Some people wondered how he always knew when there'd be a fire; one man, a fellow employee at the Christmas bulb socket factory where he worked, even went as far as to accuse dad of being an arsonist. But the fact is that when it came to predicting hat factory infernos my father was pos-

sessed of a Promethean foresight. And insurance fraud was rampant.

We'd find the best vantage point up on our hill, then sit next to each other on trolley seats with dampened rags covering our mouths—since the hat factory smoke carried noxious fumes from the mercury salts used as a block lubricant. More than once, the evening before the factories went up, he'd build a campfire, a tiny blaze to mirror the larger one at the bottom of the hill. Then, armed with marshmallows *en brochette*, as quiet as monks, we'd wait.

The factories burned gloriously, with marmalade flames augmenting the dusk, spitting sparks where they licked utility wires. Sometimes, if the wind blew the right way, burning hats would fly through the air to land on our heads—almost. “Now *that's* something!” my father would say.

One marshmallow night, just a few weeks before he died, for the very first time my father gave me some advice. “Son,” he said while bobbing two marshmallows on a twig. “I’ve got two pieces of advice for you.” He kept his bourbon bottle handy always, and drank from it now. “Fifty-eight years alive on this earth, and I’ve only got two bits of advice to give to you, my son. The first bit is: *want everything, need nothing*. That may not sound like anything useful but believe me, it’s *very* important. The second piece of advice is...” He chewed his lip, looked around. “The second bit of advice...” His eyes went blurry and lost their focus; he scratched the short rough hairs behind his neck. “Son,” he said, “I’m sorry, but I forget what the second bit of advice was.”

By way of consolation he handed me the bourbon bottle. For the first time I tasted, along with his tobacco-flavored saliva, the burning amber fluid that was as much a part of my father as his skin, and which tasted to me like the hat factory fire. The whisky carved its own path through my lungs, into my stomach. With metal-stained fingers he pried a braised marshmallow—its formerly white flesh caramelized to a per-

factly even ocher—from the end of his twig and fed it to my open mouth—like a bird feeding a worm to its chick. We went on watching flames—those of the camp fire and of the factory blazing—letting them do our talking for us. When two firemen arrived to ask us what the hell we thought we were doing, my father smiled, slapped them on their sooty backs and offered them marshmallows and bourbon.

I was sixteen when he died in the bathroom, straining and coughing on the bowl. He'd smoked like a burning hat factory all his life, until his pulmonary cells mutinied. I found him slumped against the cool tiles, blood drops flecking the front of the red and grey wide-striped pajamas, which hung from his shoulders as if from a wire hanger, he'd grown so thin. I sat on the floor near him, listening to the last chains rattle through his sacked lungs, then he was gone. I held him, the fingers of his hand in mine stained with powdered metal and nicotine. I smelled his earth-soaked mustiness, the tobacco of his hugs and kisses, the unwashed vegetable-bin/bourbon odor of his flesh. His cancer soaked into my skin.

The trolley went up on cinderblocks in our swampy backyard. For a while I sanded and varnished the cane seats, polished the bell with Brasso, smeared moving parts with white grease, freshened yellow paint and red pinstripes. But the bell tarnished. Rust froze the driveshafts in their bearings; vines crept over the seats, strangling and finally splitting them apart. Two years ago, the day of my nineteenth birthday, carrying my father's ashes in a grey plastic box with a number on it, I arrived here, in New York, at the front door of my uncle's Astoria home.

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Now it's mid-afternoon, and I'm in Greenwich Village. Moribund November. The air heavy under grey-bellied snowclouds. A sweet smell of honey-glazed peanuts tugs at my heart like leafsmoke. For a moment I'm at a loss: one of those moments when all existence slips out from under your

shoes, when you forget to breathe and heartbeats turn voluntary.

Then I remember my mission.

From outside the store looks pretty much as it did in my dream, but smaller, warmer and infinitely sadder. The blue and white sign says “Minsky’s Men’s World.” I peer through plate glass. Slowly a precognition grows, swells and settles in the spongy mass of my lungs. I feel outlandishly small: a barnacle on the back of a sperm whale. Suddenly the plate glass freezes into an iceberg, my body frozen inside it like a fly in amber. My heart decelerates. I can’t breathe; I need to lie down. My father’s whisky-moistened eyes shine through the frozen glass. I faint.

I know what Uncle Nick means when he says I need a kick in the ass. But it’s not a kick in the ass that I need. It’s what some people call ambition, and others call motivation, and others call God. Whatever—they’re lucky to have a built-in “kicking machine” they can rely on, whereas people like me, we have to kick ourselves, or be kicked. When I hear the word “potential,” my first impulse is to lie down somewhere soft and go to sleep. And though potential may *seem* like a fine thing, stored up for too long it eats away at the soul. You go through life thinking there are other choices, and so all days are rented and not wholly owned. Like buying subway tokens one at a time, or hiring a hotel room by the hour, hour after hour, day by day, year after year.

And as for commitment, to me commitment is a burning hat factory you can never escape alive. Nor does my uncle understand that during my worst periods of floating fainting is all that tethers me to this world. It has *nothing* to do with ouzo or spinach pie. It’s just me and this whole red and grey wide-striped dream that some people call life.

I look up, see faces looking down, their eyeballs swollen with looks of concern.

You okay, Mister?

(A fainting perk: they call you mister.)

Fine, fine, thank you.

But I'm still floating, swimming in inner space. The lifeline has been cut and I'm drifting free of the space capsule, which grows smaller. Now they've got me sitting up on the sidewalk against the window display to "Minsky's Men's World." I turn, look inside, my eyes dead level with a silk plaid bathrobe. I think: *I'm the chameleon.*

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"May I help you?"

The real sales clerk at Minsky's wasn't at all like the one in my dream. He had a soft, diffident, neatly feminine face, a *kind* face—nothing pointed or severe—almost listless in its lack of distinct features.

"Pajamas," I said, still a bit woozy from my faint.

"We don't carry many," he said with a sorry look. "I'll show you what we've got."

He showed me the so-called pajama section, and right away my heart sank. There were no more than a dozen pair. All solids, no stripes. Not even piping.

"That's *all*?"

The sales clerk shrugged. He looked sincerely sorry.

But this is no time for hopelessness. Ahab had his whale, Shackleton his South Pole, Jason his Golden Fleece, the Crusaders their Holy Grail. Off I march to Barney's, to Loehmann's, to Macy's, to Bloomingdales, Saks, Lord & Taylor, Paul Stuart... like a pig rooting truffles I snort quickly through the discounted bins at Filene's, then head uptown, to jaunt along Madison Avenue in the sixties, among fur-coated, imperially slim housewives with tucked chins and powdered noses, to admire the thrilling bad taste of the rich...

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Sunday, that most tyrannical of days, a day dedicated to dates with my cousin Marcia, my beloved, Uncle Nick's sullen little lamb. For almost a year Uncle Nick has been brib-

ing me to take her out with me, slipping me crisp twenties in the shadowy recesses of his plaque-lined den, whispering to me, "Show her a good time, eh, Loverboy?" And I try, honest, I really try. But Marcia has no manners. She's constantly sulking, telling me off with that soggy face of hers. She knows what her father's up to: she's no Einstein, but she's not stupid, either.

Alas, I have no folding money. Three evenings a week I wash dishes at one of several Greek restaurants owned by *her* uncle, my uncle's brother-in-law. I make barely enough to pay my bills. And so every Sunday, after lunch, Uncle Nick presses a fresh twenty into my reluctant palm.

But I refuse to spend his money on her. I keep all Uncle Nick's twenties neatly stacked on my dressertop, weighted down by the plastic urn holding my father's ashes, and treat my cousin as I see fit, with pocket change. At first I tried taking her with me on my pajama search, but Marcia would have none of it. "What the hell do you need pajamas for? Sleep in the raw!" She thinks the whole "quest thing" is loony. And maybe she's right. But I'll be damned if I'm going to stop searching.

It's raining. We ride the Number 1 local downtown. I love riding the subway; I love the element of surprise each passenger brings into the car, like guests on a variety show, or show and tell. You can *smell* the damaged souls as they enter—a sharp, electronic odor of massed negative ions, a smell of anxiety and defeat. The lady seated across from us says over and over to herself, desperately, "*He was all I had!*" I hear my father's whiskey-logged voice, "*Want everything; need nothing*" and want to correct her. I've no business giving people advice—I'm not sure anyone does. Still, I can't resist. And as I lean forward Marcia's head, which she's been resting on my shoulder, stirs in protest. She opens her mouth to try to stop me, aware of my habit of confronting troubled strangers in public places. But this time Marcia is too late.

“No, ma’am, he *wasn’t*,” I say, reaching forward to grasp the subway soliloquist’s hand.

The lady, whose cheeks are like powdered dough, looks surprised, but doesn’t pull away. “How do you know?” she asks.

“Because—I *know*.” Marcia elbows me; I elbow her back. My cousin has deep brows and silky black hair and is exotic looking, for an Astoria girl.

“Who the fuck are *you*?” the lady wants to know.

“Steven—mind your own *business*!”

“My name is Steven Papadapoulis. This is my cousin, Marcia.” She elbows me again. “I’m taking her sightseeing.” I elbow *her* again.

The woman stares at me. I raise her hand to my lips and kiss it, then fold it gently back into her lap, where I pat it like a small creature.

“What is *wrong* with you?” says Marcia as we climb out of the subway at South Ferry. Then, realizing where we’re headed, she cries, “*Not the Staten Island Ferry again!*”

“What’s the matter, don’t you like the ferry?”

“*Fuck you!*”

“Tsk! Language.”

“Can’t we at least go to the Statue of Liberty?” she whines.

“What, and get trapped with all those tourists?”

She stops dead, gives me a devilish look, hand on out-thrust hip. “Or else take me to your place,” she says. Her lips part hormonally; spermatozoa swim in her eyes.

Patience, I tell her with my flattened palm. Soon I’m marching three steps ahead of her into the crowded waiting room, an echoing cavern of spent faces. On the wall a lighted sign tells when the next ferry departs. The place smells of crowds and sticky orangeade. It’s our third date here. Marcia grabs the tail of my windbreaker.

“Come on,” I say. “Be a sport.”

“You really, really hate me, don’t you?” she sniffs. Our fam-

ily runs to long, narrow heads, and she's got one.

"Hate you? What makes you think I hate you?"

The truth is, I like Marcia—more than I should. She's quite wonderful in bed, and can be funny. I just don't want her getting wrong *ideas* about me, such as that I'm the type of guy who takes a girl out to dinner and the movies.

"It may surprise you to learn," I say, seating her on a long, chewing-gum barnacled wooden bench beside me, "that there are in this world women who would all but die for a chance to ride the Staten Island Ferry in the rain with the likes of yours truly."

"You're right—it *would* surprise me," she says.

"You're sullen."

"And you're a creep."

"I'm also your cousin, and I have deep feelings for you."

"What the fuck is *that* supposed to mean?"

"It means—"

A bell rings. Grappled to each other by DNA, we shuffle up the gangplank.

"You were saying, creep?"

"Blood is thicker than water. Didn't your dad ever teach you that?"

"My father still thinks I'm a virgin."

"That makes two of us."

At seventy-five cents a round trip the Staten Island Ferry is still one of the best deals in town. And for one fare you can ride forever. Having grown up landlocked, with the hot breath of hat factory smokestacks breathing down on me, I love everything to do with the ocean, including scavenger birds and iron corroded by salt. My father found his ocean in bottles and *drank* it. I won't make that mistake. Far better to be corroded from without, more natural. I watch the dirty waves slosh up against the pier coming and going. The *galumphs* of water against black pylons waterlog me with joy. Salt air inflates my lungs.

“Isn’t it great?”

“You make me puke.”

I plan our dates for late in the afternoon, in time to watch the sun spatter downtown with gold dust. Smoke-colored gulls follow orange and black tugs. The towers of downtown Manhattan pockmarked with twenty-four karat gold. It’s strange seeing the city looming so giant and silent, the towers like stalagmites and the sky a Hollywood rear-screen projector fake. So much removed beauty, silent and majestic, while at our feet banana peels and floating scum float in brown, murky waves and in the waiting room behind us people swallow their daily dose of shouting headlines. (I swear, some people live for grey suits and newsprint.) Only the tourists pretend to see the skyline.

As for my cousin, she doesn’t give a fig about this display. She huddles inside with the rest of the drained newspaper faces, her hands folded in her pugnacious lap, hating my guts while dreaming of the warmth between my sheets. I lean on the rail, feel the salted breeze in my hair, toss bits of pretzel to raucous gulls, glance at my cousin through rain-beaded glass, knock on it, point out the Statue of Liberty. Her sulk is grey and fixed as the skyline. I go to the concession stand, buy two oranges for fifty cents, toss her one.

“Eat up!”

“Up yours.”

I sit beside her, peel my orange. “You know,” I say, “it bothers me that you think I hate you. I think you have lots of good qualities.” She gives me a fish-eye. “Really. You’re honest, fair... a bit on the flip side, but fair. You have a sense of humor, and integrity—a rare quality these days, or so I’m told. Plus you’ve got a very nice figure.”

“I’m fat.”

She’s not: she’s pudgy. But I like a little flesh. “The point, Marcia, is I think we have lots in common. I just wish you could understand just what these ferry rides mean to me,

then you'd realize I'm trying to share something very important with you."

"Why does everything you say sound like a rehearsed piece of shit?"

I clutch myself, wounded. "What I'm trying to say, Marcia, is that...well...it's very possible that *I'm in love with you*." Do I mean this? Could I mean it? Honestly I don't know. As if to plug up the hole from which that statement leaked I plop an orange section into my mouth. Marcia looks at me. Her orange has fallen with a thud to the steel deck; I hand it to her. She beats her skull with it. I go back outside and finish peeling my orange in the drizzle. The peel floats out to sea. Then she's next to me.

"What did you say?"

She bends way over the rail to catch my eye. I face the water, take in flotsam and jetsam, finish segmenting my orange. The faint oily smell of the bay corrupts its taste.

"If you love me so fucking much why don't you take me someplace decent—like the Rainbow Room?"

"This is fun," I say quietly.

"It was fun the *first* time."

"The first two times it was the *Samuel I Newhouse*. This is the *American Legion*. It's a whole new ballgame." I'm still not looking at her.

"It's boring! And *my ass is frozen!*" Boredom: when people refer to it, do most of them really have any idea what they're talking about, one of the most complicated emotions—a heady mixture of fear, loathing, and dread—a silent, poker-faced form of sheer terror?

She leans her plump breast into my arm. I feed her the last piece of orange, put an arm around her. She bites her lip. She has her father's eyes, my uncle's eyes, my father's eyes. The sunset turns bloody red against ash-grey towers. My pulse stumbles, dies.

"Oh, God, Steven, no—*please don't faint!*"

★ ★ ★

From where I live, in Sunnyside, you can see the spire of the Empire State Building, but it may as well be on Jupiter. When not otherwise engaged I'm here, in my rented room, with its foam mattress and metal trash pail stinking of yesterday's banana peel. Every so often, on weekdays when I'm not getting fed at Uncle Nick's or at the restaurant I go out for dinner and to escape the funereal vibrations of my landlord's organ. There's a Chinese place a few blocks from here, where the boyish waiter always seats me facing the Boulevard, where, underneath the Elevated's girders clawing up into darkness, a red neon sign flashes

STEVEN'S

—with the T and V in “STEVEN” turning blue every other flash. For the price of an order of chow mein I can sit there all night watching my namesake flash in neon.

There's something very cosmic about eating alone in a Chinese restaurant in Sunnyside on a cold night. But mostly I stay holed up in my room in Filbert's apartment, at the mercy of a boredom so intense it turns the fruits in a bowl on his dining room table grey as if seen through colorblind eyes, and thus I avoid the even less mouthwatering banality of having to go anywhere. It seems to me, has seemed to me for a while now, that many if not all of the ills of this world would be solved if only men could learn to sit quietly in their rooms. Where's there to go, anyway? What's to be done? Why all this hunger for activity? The earth spins: isn't that activity enough? Not that I mean to hold myself up as an example. It's just something that's occurred to me, as it occurs to me that my Christian name, punctured by a period, turns me into a Saint of uniform disposition, an angel in equilibrium.

Lives are so disposable, moments like after-dinner mints melting in our mouths. It isn't so much a feeling that things don't matter, but rather a feeling that what we choose to

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make matter is arbitrary: a bright, vertiginous feeling, like sunstroke shining through gloom. This remarkable yet perturbing sense of arbitrariness goes everywhere with me, carrying with it the seeds of both possibility and impossibility, the need to do so many things, and likewise the urge to do nothing.

I bungle along Queens streets, dark with newspapers blowing. The lights of Manhattan shine upwards, painting a fake aurora borealis in the night sky. A drunken sailor—or someone wearing what looks like a sailor suit—stumbles along ahead of me, clanging a section of metal pipe against the cast iron fence that separates us both, at least for the time being, from the dead. My breath fogs the air. Within a block of my building it starts to rain; I hold my collar close. The wind makes a sound rushing through alleys, a drawn-out moan, a dreary sound. It seems to be telling me something, to want to grab me by the shoulders and shake me, as if I'm dreaming and it wants me to wake up, to snatch me from oblivion and call me a fool as the subway rattles off into darkness overhead.

Then I realize it's not the wind at all. It's Filbert's organ wafting down into the street.

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Sunday morning, before lunch, Marcia and I make love on my foam mattress. We do it to the vibrations of Bach's Toccata & Fugue D-moll; we do it to the Tune of Conspiracy, to the Beat of Betrayal, to the Melody of Mutiny. From above the urn containing my father's ashes Uncle Nick peers down at us, sipping ouzo from a glass as he watches the slow dance of his daughter's unvagination unfold under goosepimpled flesh. Like the explosion that, ten billion years ago, sent all the stars and planets hurtling into space, our lovemaking is cataclysmic and chaotic, as if a critical mass had been reached, a density beyond that of all existing stars. In my fervor I forget about such things as guilt and where my skin ends and how

long it takes Marcia's inverted nipples to pop. One of us is the chameleon, the other the scotch plaid. We disappear each in each.

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"More ouzo, Loverboy?"

We're woefully late for dinner. Uncle Nick keeps shedding his eye on me, a different look this time, like this time he knows for certain that I've deflowered his daughter, but whether this means victory to him or defeat I can't say for sure. Ourania seems to know it, too, but she merely looks thoughtful and sad. But then she looks that way always.

"You kids had a nice time last Sunday?" Uncle Nick asks.

"Oh, yes, very nice," I say.

"We rode the ferry," says Marcia through a lamb-stuffed smile.

"Again the ferry?"

"The *American Legion*," says Marcia.

Uncle Nick leans close and whispers, ouzo-breathed. "I give you good money and you take her on the *ferry*?"

"Next week we go to the Transit Museum," Marcia blurts. "Right, Steven?"

I smile.

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Passing by Rockefeller Center. The heaven-topping tree is up. A crowd watches the colored lights as golden Prometheus burns, his torch shooting colored sparks that scurry up the dark facade of the RCA tower. I think of my father, who stole fire not from heaven but from burning hat factories. How I long to curl up in red and grey stripes, to sleep tucked into their ripe smell.

Snow falls as I cross 57th. A cold gust blows. I fold up the collar of my windbreaker, wait for the ache to pass. The sky thickens to darkness.

"I'm looking for pajamas," I tell the sales clerk at Bergdorf's, a man with a nervous twitch to his upper lip and thick lines

running up the middle of his forehead.

“What size?” He seems completely uninterested.

“My size. But it’s the pattern and colors that concern me.”

I follow the salesclerk’s dispassionate back to a display case bursting with pajamas—diamonds, shields, polka dots—and, yes, stripes.

“Any wide ones?”

“Wide?”

“I’m looking for wide stripes. Red and grey, preferably.”

With a desultory air the salesman opens drawers. From one he withdraws a stack of striped pajamas. Second from the bottom, I see them: a pair with red and grey wide stripes.

“It’s a medium,” says the clerk, unfolding them. “They run a bit large. These should fit you just fine.”

I nod thoughtfully into my index finger, which I’ve pressed against my lips as if to suppress a painful outburst—something between a groan and the mewl of a cornered, pocket-sized creature, then take a step back—and then another—as the clerk, a toreador dangling a red and grey striped cape, fixes me with questioning eyes and the department store walls (decorated in wide vertical red and grey stripes) close in on me like the bars of a colorful jail cell. Question: how did they kill him? Answer: they gave him everything he wanted. (*He was all I had. No—not exactly.*) I think I’m going to die; I *know* I’m going to faint. A few minutes later I’m sitting with a Dixie cup of cool water to my lips, surrounded by concerned faces, including that of the desultory clerk, who asks me do I still want the pajamas? if he should ring them up for me? My mouth goes dry. I stammer.

“Well...actually...I really wanted...pink and blue,” I say, merely in order to extricate myself. “You haven’t got pink and blue, have you, by any chance?”

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I survived. Together with my cousin I watched the magnolias in Central Park blow out again, flinging their snowy

branches to snare the sky. The daffodils the gardeners had planted bloomed in sudden affray. By May's end I'd never felt better, only lighter, as if my bones had hallowed, like the bones of birds. I no longer floated; my lightness attached itself to earth. When the magnolia blossoms shivered, I shivered with them; when fat raindrops dimpled the glassy surface of the rowboat pond, my skin took their imprint, too. There was no obvious joy in any of this, mind you, only a great substantive indifference, as if the long, nearly total vacuity of the past year—my year of searching for red and grey wide striped pajamas—had served up its purpose, had scooped my longing for old comforts out like so much melon-meat, had emptied me of something I didn't need *or* really want, and by emptying me had freed me—or at least delivered me from department stores.

I no longer suffer from fainting spells.

Standing on the stern of the *American Legion*, sifting my father's ashes into its wake, the wind whips them into grey smears. I toss the plastic urn in afterwards; it bobs, floats. *O sweet grey banality of life! O bloody shank of day's end! O bourbon and ouzo scented breath of night!* Under a red bay of sky Marcia wraps her plump dainty arms around me.

Uncle Nick has asked me to go to work for him, setting up his symposiums, peddling his chrome-yellow manifestos. I've agreed. A man needs a purpose, after all. *A man without a purpose is a chameleon on a scotch plaid.* In celebration we locked arms across his diningroom table, drained each other's ouzo glasses, then hurled them synchronously into the fire grate, where they shattered like snowballs. *Stinyassas!*

And so I shall live on, lightening and lightening, until at last I quaver in frequencies of every wavelength, and spectrums of every color.

Speaking of spectrums: next Sunday I've promised to take my cousin to the Rainbow Room.

Uncle Nick is pleased. 