

KING AND BALLOON

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The day that ensured I could never go back to God began with a hat.

My people wore head coverings, but not like this one. It was a sunhat made of white denim, and painted all over it, as if by a child, were dripping red hearts and cartoony green saguaros. When I emerged from my bedroom, it was sitting on the wood floor. The apartment smelled of the brownies my roommate, Tamara, was baking for the Fourth of July.

“I can’t believe you didn’t hear anything!” said Tamara, turning down the TV and rising from the couch. “Six in the morning, and someone’s ringing our doorbell like it’s a fucking emergency. I jumped out of bed in a panic, thinking maybe somebody’d died, but it was just him with that stupid hat.” Tamara never used Devon’s name. She leaned in my doorway, crossing her arms. “Kayla, are you sure he’s clean?”

Until seven months ago, clean to me meant kosher. This meat was clean and fit for consumption. That woman was menstruating and therefore unclean, and whoever touched her or anything she touched would also be unclean. The last time I heard the word used that way was the day I finally told Papa that I didn’t believe in God. He drove me under the Williamsburg Bridge to the unclean side of the neighborhood where delis had beer posters featuring half-dressed women and Latino music boomed out of top floor windows. Ordering me out of the car, he explained there was no place in his heart or his home for a *treyfnyak*, an unclean daughter.

“He doesn’t use drugs anymore,” I assured her, observing myself in the full-length mirror wearing the new hat and my long white nightdress. Laughing aloud, I pulled the front brim down to one side. All Satmar Hasidic girls wore the same clothes: dark ankle-length skirts, long-sleeved blouses, opaque stockings, and flat leather shoes.

Never had I looked as original as I did in this hat. Yesterday when we were sitting on the fire escape I'd told Devon that when I feel like I'm not going to make it out here, I picture a cactus standing alone and defiantly green in an inhospitable desert.

A half-hour later I could still hear Tamara saying, "Oh, my god, please tell me you're not going to go out in public like that!" as I skipped down the stairs to Devon's first-floor apartment wearing my new hat with a Yankees T-shirt and pair of jeans from Goodwill. Grinning, I rang his doorbell.

Devon answered the door wearing rubber yellow gloves.

"Sweet pea!" he exclaimed. "You're wearing it!"

My smile faded when I saw two people sitting on the couch. Since Devon and I started spending time together a few weeks ago we'd always been alone. I liked that. Devon was the only person in this new world I wasn't frightened to be around. Tamara said that was because he wasn't normal and he didn't expect me to be, that we were both outsiders.

"Matt and Tina," Devon said in his southern lilt as he pulled me into the apartment. "This is Kayla!"

Matt looked up from his Backstage and said, "Hey there, Kayla. Are you ready to go to Kenny's Beach?"

"Surprise, sweet pea!" Devon turned to me, his blue eyes wide like he'd just scratched a winning lottery ticket. "Fourth of July adventure! Long Island, Kenny's Beach!"

"An adventure?" Tina stood up, rolling her eyes. She had straight blonde hair, long legs emerging from white short-shorts, and an Eastern European accent. "Long Island is hardly an adventure."

Matt laughed. "It can be if you're with Devon."

Devon did a goofy little dance, which Matt jumped up and imitated.

I had heard of Matt. Devon called Matt his best friend, but really he was Devon's only friend; and even he called so little that once, when the phone was ringing and I asked Devon why he wasn't answering

it, he replied that he'd already spoken to his mom today so it had to be a solicitor. I wondered how someone as generous and outgoing as Devon could go through life without accumulating friends.

"Okay," Devon said, skipping over to the stereo. Rock music assaulted the room. "Y'all just give me two seconds to finish these dishes and we're off!"

"The dishes? Now?" Tina shouted above the music. She'd already put on her black sunglasses. "Do them later."

"Let him wash 'em," Matt said, sitting back down. "It'll only take a moment."

Devon was particular about a select number of things. At dinner he had to have equal portions of the different foods on his plate. He refused to write with anything but a felt-tip pen, even to sign at the grocery store. And he loved to wash dishes and carefully put them away like his particleboard cabinets were going to be featured in *Better Homes and Gardens*. They seemed to soothe him, these small oases of order. Whenever he finished the dishes, he had the peaceful look of a man returning from the mikveh bath on Sabbath eve.

Suddenly, I panicked. "But I don't have a swimsuit!"

"Don't worry," Tina said. "None of us do."

What a relief! Aside from not knowing how to swim, I could never have worn a regular bathing suit where half your tuchus hangs out.

On the way to the car, Devon and Matt strode ahead and I was left walking down the street with Tina, who between pulls on her cigarette explained she'd come from the Czech Republic to be a model, but now that she was getting older was turning her attention to acting. I watched Devon wave hello to the man with the purple birthmark over half his face who sat all day on his stoop blankly watching the street.

As I was climbing into the back of Matt's tiny blue compact, I said, "Your Jeep is bigger, Devon. Why aren't we taking your Jeep?"

Matt held the front seat forward so Devon could get inside. "It's gone," Devon said.

Matt handed Devon back his cooler, which he placed on the floor between his feet. I guessed it was packed like Devon's fridge with a variety of diet sodas.

"Gone?" I asked.

Matt climbed in front and started up the car.

"Yup," Devon said. "Towed. I wasn't paying attention last night, and I parked in front of a loading garage. Since it'll cost at least four hundred dollars to get it back, I'm not going to bother."

We turned onto the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. To our left the city's gray buildings looked like the packed headstones in the cemetery where my mother was buried. From this distance, you could see how much taller the twin towers were than the other skyscrapers. I took off my cactus-heart hat and carefully laid it on my lap.

I asked, "Just like that? No more Jeep?"

"No more Jeep," Devon said, popping open a can of Diet Mountain Dew. "Truth is, last winter when I was using, I'd park wherever I wanted. I didn't care. I'd pick the ticket off the window shield and just toss it. Soon I owed more than a thousand dollars in parking tickets. And that was on top of the \$800 I already owed from a previous binge. I'm hoping, cause parking tickets are registered under a license plate, that if I never claim that Jeep, I'll never have to pay up." Devon took a sip of his soda and asked Matt to turn up the tunes.

"No problem, daddy-o," Matt said. "Vintage Aerosmith coming your way."

Devon sang along, "*I'm BACK in the saddle again. I'm BACK—*"

Since it was forbidden for women from my community to drive, it being conducive to immoral behavior among the weaker sex, I wasn't sure how parking tickets worked, but I knew I envied something in the way Devon so easily handled losing his Jeep. I watched him from the corner of my eye, singing, tapping his foot, bobbing his head to the song. Devon seemed to always get away with things, get out of things—debts, arrests, injuries. And if he didn't get away with something, it hardly mattered because he seemed to have taught

himself how not to care. Things that would plague anyone else, he flung aside like those parking tickets. In short, Devon never seemed to pay for not playing by the rules and that looked a lot like freedom.

Holiday traffic was slow until the city outskirts, but then the highway opened up, and furniture outlets and car dealerships gave way to stretches of trees. I eagerly stared out the window. The only America I'd ever seen was the Five Boroughs, and, to be accurate, I'd never been to Staten Island.

Devon closed his eyes. I held my breath as he gently ran his fingers tips back and forth along the length of my fingers. Lately, he had been touching me like this, gently, like the tender touches from the Song of Solomon, and I, of course, had never been touched anything like the beautiful Shulamite and was genuinely afraid the others in the car could hear my heart battering.

"Hey, Kayla," Matt said, turning down the music. "Did Dev ever tell you about our Fourth of July at the juvenile rehab?"

"No."

Devon opened his eyes. "I don't know, Matty."

"Come on, bro. It's funny."

Devon pulled on the neck of his T-shirt and sat up. Reaching into the cooler for a Dr Pepper, he sighed, "Alright. But only cause I don't believe in false advertising."

"Ridgeview of Georgia," Matt said, shaking his head. I could see him smiling in the rear-view mirror. "Best juvenile rehabilitation center in the south. No kidding, compared to that shit-hole you were in last year in Queens, Dev, it was friggin' resort, huh? Still, a rehab's a rehab, and nobody likes being locked up anywhere 24/7. So when Dev and I made it to Level 2, which meant we could go on day trips, like to the planetarium or the zoo, we were stoked. We both made Level 2 at the same time even though I'd only been there a month and Dev for over a year."

"How old were you?" Tina asked.

"I was fourteen and Dev sixteen." Matt glanced back at Devon. "Man, was that all fifteen years ago already?"

Devon squinted out the window. “Probably seems a lot longer to you than me.”

Staring ahead at the highway, Matt continued, “Fourth of July and we’re going to a goddamn mall, but we didn’t care. After all, there’s a lot of girls at a mall. I put mousse in my hair and Dev pulled on his signature rainbow-striped pants, what he called his Picasso Pants. He’d say it real effeminate, too: *my Picasso pants*. Anyway, as soon as we hit the mall, we headed straight for the arcade. You know the kind, think mid-80s, Galaga, Q*bert, Double Dragon.”

Devon interrupted, “King and Balloon was my favorite. It gave you like a million chances. You could keep fucking up, and the game would still be going.”

“As luck would have it,” Matt said, “there’s a gaggle of girls at the joint, not playing games, but just chewing on candy, batting their eyelashes. One girl in a pink visor was ridiculously hot, and Dev starts hamming it up in an effort to get her attention. Right off the bat, I’m a little wary because I was starting to get a vague idea of what could happen if this guy got going.”

Devon tugged on the chest of his T-shirt, and it occurred to me to put on my seat belt. The steel clasp was hot from the sun.

“First Dev says real loud, *‘That girl’s so delicious I could sop her up with a biscuit!’* And the girl kind of giggles and points at herself, as if to say, *Who, moi?* Then Dev turns to me and starts talking in this big voice about all this crazy shit we did together, shit like blowing up cars and running away to Mexico, when I’d only just met Dev in rehab. So I’m mumbling under my breath, hey, let’s just play some Blasteroids or something, trying to get him to bring it down a notch, when all of a sudden, Dev jumps up on the pool table and starts singing. Loudly, legs apart, pretending like he’s Jon Bon Jovi with a microphone, you know, running his fingers through his hair... Thing is—and hell, it was exactly those daring antics that drew me to the guy—it was working! The girl in the pink visor was eating it up. Eyes all shiny, clapping and laughing with her stupid girlfriends.”

Devon shook his head. We drove by a billboard: *Giuliani Didn't Give Up on You. Don't Give Up Giuliani! Give the Mayor a Third Term.*

Matt laughed. “And then all of a sudden Dev comes to a halt and eyeballs this kid, this kid in an Iron Maiden T-shirt. I still don't know why. It wasn't like the kid did anything. But boom, all at once, without a word, Dev's jumping off the pool table and charging at him. Even though the kid was older and bigger, he didn't stand a chance because Devon was out of control! Grabbing the kid by his hair, he swung him around and smashed his face into a pinball machine.”

Was this supposed to be the funny part of the story? I wondered. I looked to Devon. He was staring blankly at the back of the gray car seat.

Keeping one hand on the steering wheel, Matt made a fist with the other one and acted it out.

“Clutching the back of the guy's head, you know, by the hair, Dev keeps smashing him face first into the pinball machine, again and again, the backboard flashing and ringing like somebody'd made a new top score. He doesn't stop until he breaks the glass with the kid's face.”

We happened to pass a roadkill deer, and its red innards made me think the worst of what the boy might have looked like when Devon was done with him.

Matt shook his head. “Dev, man, do you remember the expression on that pretty girl's face then?”

Devon took a deep breath and nodded. “Yeah, I remember.”

There was a honk. Matt checked his rear-view mirror and sped up. Realizing we'd lost the radio station, he announced, “Bessie Smith,” and pushed in a CD. *I'm gonna drink good moonshine and rub these browns down/See that long lonesome road, Lawd, you know it's gonna end—*. Devon's eyes locked on a roadside shack topped by a large sign: *Live Girls and Videos-XXX*. He craned his neck to look back once we'd passed it.

We turned into a rest stop so Tina could use the washroom and buy

a pack of cigarettes. A dozen giant semi-trucks napped in the parking lot, their chrome trailers glinting in the midday sun. I imagined them filled with supplies for the city, canned pineapple wedges, laundry detergent, umbrellas. As soon as were out of the car, I put on my new hat.

The three of us waited for Tina around a wooden picnic table under the shade of a tree. Matt lay across the tabletop, I sat on the bench, and Devon stood with his arms folded and his legs crossed at the ankles.

Devon said, "You know what that was, Matty? That Fourth of July?"

Hands under his head, Matt stared into the tree whose rustling leaves muffled the drone of the highway. "What?"

"A bender without the drinking."

"What's a bender?" I whispered. Sometimes I felt like a sage in this new world where people rarely seemed to think about anything profound, and at other times I knew I came across as a naïve girl or even an idiot. I could argue about free will, but I didn't know how to use an ATM machine.

Matt turned his head toward me. "I was never like Devon. I was in Ridgeview because I partied too hard one night and threw up in my parents' bathtub. So what did they do? They send me to this nut-job institution where I could meet the likes of this character. For me, I could get enough. Enough alcohol or chaos, or sex or whatever. I could be satisfied. But Dev? Aw, man, it was painful. Nothing ever hit the spot with him."

I looked at Devon. The dancing green leaves behind him made his eyes look awfully still and blue. He smiled at me, closed-lipped. He always smiled closed-lipped as if he were ashamed of his teeth. "A bender is when you keep going until you're dead or out of money, whichever comes first." Knocking on the wooden picnic table, he added, "As luck would have it, I've never had too much money."

Tina came sauntering back from the convenience store, smoking

the first cigarette from her new pack. College-age boys in a Land Rover whistled at her, and she flashed them a smile. Though once in a while I'd catch a *bochur* stealing a glance at me as we passed in the street or were filing into the separate entrances of the synagogue, the only man who'd ever actually told me I was pretty was Devon.

As we were making our way back to the car, a sudden gust of warm wind blew off my cactus-heart hat, and Devon and I both went after it. Every time one of us was about to snatch it, the wind blew it a few more feet, and the hat rolled across the parking lot on its brim. At last it came to a stop in a dirty puddle, and Devon walked back with the sullied hat in his hands. Looking ashamed, he said, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, pea. We can wash it, right? Oh, pea, I'm so so so sorry." It occurred to me that Devon apologized a lot.

It was well into the afternoon by the time we arrived at the small beach town. Matt led us along little paths between modest summerhouses with dry wood porches and tinkling wind chimes. We climbed through long wild grass to the top of a dune, and there was the Atlantic.

Matt said, "It's not the prettiest beach, but that's why we have it to ourselves."

Devon yodeled for the gray ocean, opening his mouth like he wanted to swallow the universe. I noticed that his teeth were in fact packed with dark fillings. "Man, look at that! Look at that ocean!" he said, kicking off his flip-flops. "Hallelujah!"

We all took off our shoes and scampered down the dune. I'd never been barefoot outside, and the scalding sand and pricks of twigs felt strange beneath my feet.

Still walking, Matt started taking off his T-shirt. Throwing it down, he said, "Last one in's a rotten egg."

"I can't remember the last time I went swimming," Tina said, laying out a towel. She proceeded to shimmy out of her white short-shorts.

I realized what they meant by nobody had swimsuits.

Tina pulled off her tank top. Matt was already down to his plaid boxer shorts. Devon pushed down his boxers and I quickly looked away. Raising my hand to my eyes, pretending it was to block out the sun, I sat cross-legged down on the sand.

Devon went into another one of his dances. Putting his hands behind his head, opening his legs wide, he threw his pelvis forward and back, making his penis flop to and fro. Tina snorted, “You clown.”

I shook my head at Devon, careful to keep my eyes on his face, but I could still see it—a grown man’s penis! Devon’s penis!—in the lower periphery flapping around in a mass of hair. It was disturbing. It seemed tacked on to him, like it didn’t go with the body’s streamline. I thought, How could anyone believe God made Adam in His image, that God would have something so inelegantly affixed to him like that, like a tail pinned on a donkey?

“Aren’t you coming in, Kayla?” Tina asked. Her lacy bra off, wearing only a black thong, she looked like a gangly child with breasts the shape of small yarmulkes.

“I don’t know how to swim,” I said.

Matt was incredulous. “What? I’ve never met anyone who didn’t know how to swim!”

Devon stopped dancing. “Really, pea? You can still come in. Just don’t go in too deep.”

“Maybe later,” I lied.

Matt called, “One, two, three, go!”

They dashed for the water. Matt and Tina looked free, running in their underwear, her long blond hair whipping in the wind. But Devon, who quickly abandoned the race, looked more than free. Hasidim danced ecstatically as a means to joy and hence to God, because they believed God can best be reached through joy—indeed God *is* Joy. Now Devon, completely naked, was dancing his way to the water, spinning around, kicking up sand, whooping. At the water’s edge, facing the great expanse of gray, he swayed his hips from side

to side, before crouching into a small ball and springing up, arms reaching toward the heavens. It was a euphoric dance for the ocean, and I wondered how someone so susceptible to beauty and life and vastness could smash a person's face into a pinball machine.

Devon ran into the waves to help Matt splash Tina, who'd only gone in knee-deep and was hunched over, crying, "It's cold, it's cold." I enviously watched them flail around like children, and then laid back and let the sun beat down on my face.

I remembered the night, not long after Mama died, when I reached for the Nutella on the top shelf of the pantry, and Papa saw that I'd rolled up the waist of my skirt. Despite my protests that I wasn't trying to make it shorter, that it had been Mama's skirt and was too big for me, he still pounded on the table and told me to change immediately and bring the skirt back to him. Muttering under his breath that I was an immodest girl with no respect for law, he cut the skirt up with a pair of scissors, Mama's favorite skirt. And yet I missed Papa, even his anger, his anger that was a part of home.

I was roused from my thoughts by a sprinkle of cool water on my arms.

"What are you thinking about?" Devon stood, drip-drying.

I sat up, still trying to keep my eyes away from his nakedness. Matt and Tina were walking along the shore. "Nothing."

Devon tried to shake the water out of his ears and sat down on the towel next to me. "I don't believe you," he insisted, closing his eyes and offering his face to the sun. "Sweet pea's always thinking about one thing or another."

"Was the water nice?" I asked.

"Nice? No. It was sublime."

I nodded. Devon looked sideways at me. "Kayla, you sure you don't want to go in?"

I shook my head.

His blue eyes searched mine. "No, as in no, or no, as in you're not sure?"

I nodded.

Devon gave a slow nod back. Then he didn't encourage me anymore. He didn't try to help me out of my clothes or offer words of encouragement. He waited quietly as if nothing special were going on as I dug my teeth into my bottom lip and pulled my baggy T-shirt over my head.

My undergarments weren't anything like Tina's. I wore a practical full-coverage bra the color of cheap drugstore pantyhose and large brown nylon underwear from the dollar store. Devon kept his eyes away from me, but I knew I had to be loitering in the corner of his vision a little tempting to look at. I realized then that I wanted to be more than a little tempting. I wanted him to want me. Badly. I shook. Was I really doing this?

Devon smiled at me. Not at all lewdly. Actually his smile reminded me of the one Papa would have whenever one of his children achieved something—a smile that was both proud and sad. The first time I reached the faucet by myself, Papa had to go lie down. Years later he said that something in the sight of me on my tiptoes, gleefully reaching over the sink, brought home the fact that one day, maybe not for a long while and hopefully he wouldn't be around for it, but there was going to be a day in which his little girl would die.

“Ready?” Devon asked.

“Ready.”

Devon took my hand and together we ran for the water. The salty air rushed at my stomach and thighs. Sunlight fell for the first time on my shoulders, chest, knees. I screamed. It came out as a long “AAAAH,” but it meant: ‘Hello, World, here I am!’ In the distance, Matt and Tina cheered and clapped.

The cold water shocked, but Devon didn't let me dawdle. He pulled me in, smiling open-mouthed for once. The waves crashed into us. The salt stung my lips. Suddenly, I remembered sharks, immediately saw a shadow between the waves, screamed and jumped onto Devon. My whole life I had been forbidden to even shake hands with a member of the opposite sex and now I was holding onto a naked man. His wet skin was slippery. My heart pounded in my ears.

“What if there are sharks?” I screamed.

Devon laughed, “Don’t worry! I’ve got you, sweet pea! I’ve got you!”

The drive home was quiet. The setting sun was a crimson globe in a blood orange sky, and it occurred to me that things are at their most exquisite just before their decline. The day most stunning on the verge of night. A fruit tastiest in the instant before its ripeness gives way to rot. A woman most physically appealing in the final moments of her youth. I was in the final moments of my youth. Almost twenty, I was supposed to be at my zenith as the young beautiful wife with small children. I glanced over at Devon, who had his hand up against the glass as if he were trying to touch the dusk. He seemed surprised when I leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

Matt and his girlfriend dropped us off at our building. They were going to a party in the Meatpacking District. Inside his apartment, Devon put the cooler down on his kitchen counter and started packing it with more diet sodas and snacks for watching fireworks on the roof. I lingered by the wall of DVDs and videos, where interspersed among *Metropolis*, *Dr. Strangelove*, and *Amadeus* were *Nasty Girls*, *Amateur America*, and *Cum and Play*.

“I want to see one,” I said.

Devon looked up. “One what?”

“One of *those* videos.”

Devon laughed. “I don’t know. Maybe we should try something else first. Like, first base.”

We climbed through Devon’s bedroom window and up the fire escape. The last part to the roof was a straight-up ladder, rusty and wobbly.

Devon said, “It’s beautiful up here, huh?”

A rooftop in Williamsburg provided the most sweeping view of Manhattan. The glittering buildings of the financial district soared to the left, and to the right, midtown’s famous mass of skyscrapers. The Empire State building was lit a holiday red, white, and blue. It

seemed the whole neighborhood had taken to their roofs. All around were the silhouettes of parties, pop music, shouts, laughter, the heavy clink of beer bottle toasts.

“That’s my building,” I said, pointing at a dark project high-rise just to the south. “My family’s right there. On the nineteenth floor. We can practically see our window.”

We’d arrived just in time. Sparks whistle-screached into the sky. Devon and I sat down. Through the worn-out blanket we could feel the roof’s rubber still hot from baking in the sun all day. We watched in silence. Devon appeared preoccupied. He kept on looking down at the can in his hand and back up at the fireworks.

Right now they’re all crowded into that little apartment, I thought, unable to ignore the old building. Since my family lived on one of the highest floors, it was a tradition for the Hasidim in the building to gather at our place to watch the show. No beer or barbeques or bared midribs like the blacks in the courtyard below, just a short recess to watch the colors exploding in the dark above the city. Then one year Mama was too weakened from the chemotherapy to stand at the window anymore, so she sat at the kitchen table surrounded by the other wives, who all assured her, *Beila, the Lord is looking out for you*. The next Fourth of July, however, Mama was beyond chemotherapy; Papa had to carry her out of the bedroom in his arms, and she spent the evening laid out on the couch, expressionless, while everyone ooohed and aaaahed more than usual. *Children*, Mama said, her voice croaky with disuse and death, *I ooohed and aaaahed my whole life, but you know what?* My sisters and brothers and I shook our heads and leaned in to try and hear her better. *I was faking. I never thought fireworks were that interesting.*

Devon gently turned my face toward his. Meeting his gaze, I smiled. He leaned in.

“Devon!” I held him back. “Everyone can see us.”

“What’s the worst that can happen? We’ll get arrested.”

“Arrested? For kissing?”

“We’re not just kissing.”

Devon took hold of my thigh, and it sent a jolt through my body.

As the whistling, booming and crackling intensified, so did the cheering on the roofs and the hollers from the kids down on the street. It was the grand finale. As we kissed, a frightening need swelled inside me, and I grabbed hold of his shoulders. Devon’s hand peeked under the hem of my t-shirt. It lingered warm and cool on my waist, threatening to move upward. A rat-a-tat-tat like the banging on a cosmic drum, one final crack, and the fireworks were over, the sky abruptly black and silent.

Devon pulled away and started to gather the Doritos and cans. Realizing he’d been joking about doing more than kissing, I found myself disappointed. I asked, “Don’t you want to sleep with me?”

“Oh, sweet pea, don’t look so sad!” Devon said, head tilted to the side, looking at me with both compassion and amusement. “Well, of course I want to. But I don’t know. Do you?”

We decided to wait until people left their roofs. Not only for the privacy, but because Devon said that would give me a chance to change my mind. I nibbled awkwardly on a Dorito.

“Want to hear something funny?” Devon asked, popping open another can of Mountain Dew. “This morning, I was walking by the dry cleaners and the hangers—it was crazy—they all looked like upside-down martini glasses.”

When the only party that remained was on a roof two blocks away, Devon pulled the blanket over us.

According to Hasidic tradition, the husband and wife should be alone in the bedroom. The couple should remove all their clothes except for the man’s *kippa* and the woman’s headscarf.

Devon left our t-shirts on and barely pulled our jeans down.

Relations must be had on a bed, not against the wall or on the floor. No Holy Books should be exposed to the act. The woman on top is strongly discouraged, as is the man coming in from behind.

His kisses were gentle, at first. They moved down my neck. He

pulled at the collar of my t-shirt to plant a few on my shoulder. As he kissed between my shoulder blades and down my back, he tugged harder on the collar and it dug into my throat. He rolled me onto my stomach. My face pressed against the smell of tar.

It is of utmost importance that the couple concentrate on virtuous thoughts in order to conceive a virtuous child.

Devon reached down and held his hand firmly between my legs as he thrust in and out of me. My mind stilled and my senses took over. There was an unfamiliar pulsing below, within, all over. Confused, I gasped. His panting grew harder. It didn't feel like Devon knew he had grabbed a fistful of my hair and was pulling my head back.

Afterward the husband should comfort his wife and then they should both go to sleep.

I lay on my back with Devon on his side, holding me. Staring up at the sky, I was thankful that one couldn't see the stars in New York City. A myriad of stars would have had me crying. Why? I wasn't sure. Devon kissed my cheek. His body odor was at once foreign and soothing. I wriggled closer into him.

Climbing down the shaking iron ladder was far more unnerving than going up. Below, the small courtyard wavered. Finally, I clambered from the fire escape through my bedroom window.

"You okay, sweet pea?" Devon asked. "You sure you don't want to spend the night downstairs?"

I kneeled on my bed, which was really just a mattress on the floor, and stuck my head out the window. Devon stood on the fire escape with his hands clenched into two tight fists. Behind him, the sky was indigo and the silver tops of the twin towers peeked over the shadowy five-story walkups.

Instead of saying goodnight, I heard myself asking, "Why, Devon? Why did you smash that boy's face into a pinball machine?"

Devon shrugged. "I don't know."

I stared at him unsatisfied.

He gave me a quick kiss. "Goodnight, sweet pea. I'm going to

wash your hat tonight.”

I watched him go down the stairs, head bowed. He glanced up one last time, and, before I could see him turn away again, I fell back on my mattress. The sheets were cool compared to the summer night, and I lay listening to the day’s straggling ends: the wailing of a tired baby, a siren, the TV, whose blue light glowed under the bedroom door. Tamara was watching the eleven o’clock news: *In a day of expanding violence, an Israeli helicopter gunship killed three Muslim militants crossing the border in a car packed with explosives...* Papa always said the State of Israel was living on borrowed time. Upstairs somebody dropped something heavy, and my ceiling lamp rattled. Poor Mama knew what it was like to live on borrowed time. Tonight the whole city, the whole world around me, seemed to be living with the meter running out. Or maybe, I acknowledged, it was just that I was feeling that way for the first time.

And then I heard an odd word to be said so softly—

Sabotage.

I sat up and looked out the window. Devon was still where I last saw him, stooped forward on the escape with one hand on the railing.

“A day out, people trusting me, a new friend looking up to me, a pretty girl: it’s that need, you know, if everything is going too well, if the pond is too still, too quiet, to throw a rock at it and make waves.”

I came forward, leaned on the windowsill.

“When things are going too good,” he said. “I get anxious. Anxious I’m going to fuck everything up again. Eventually the anxiety gets so bad that I’ll do anything for relief. I’ll purposely fuck things up just so I don’t have to sit around anymore waiting for me to fuck things up.”

The TV turned off, and I heard Tamara patter over to her room and shut the door. Her bedroom light switched on, casting Devon in a dull yellow, like a faded photograph.

“Are things going too good between us?” I asked, voice shaking.

“Sweet pea, I’m falling in love with you. And that’s why, I swear, things are going to be different this time.”