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The Discomposures of Solomon Shah

I. BUSHWICK

Dinner at Pablo's house was best thought of as a second dinner. Otherwise, one might collapse from the wait. On Monday, Solomon ate at his office, read for twenty minutes, then got on the subway. He'd rushed down the elevated train platform and quickly crossed Broadway to escape the cacophony of the intersection. Now, heading up the side street on which Pablo lived, he could take his time. He was only thirty minutes late, which meant Pablo would have at least another hour of cooking left.

Solomon disliked Bushwick. He found the treelessness, grime, and ambient industrialism to be grating. The noise most of all. He was fragile that way. He knew the neighborhood, like Ridgewood, was "cool" without Pablo having to remind him of it. Baggy layers of thrifted clothing, long, boxy coats, and mysteriously messy haircuts made the coolness obvious. So did the sprawling, crowded clubs, home to the enveloping raves Solomon was always hearing about. Anyway, as he'd remind Pablo in turn, he'd been visiting Bushwick long before Pablo moved to the city.

Solomon paused in front of a pale yellow apartment building. On one side, a graffitied mural reached nearly six stories high—two electric purple hands holding a bulldog above the Manhattan skyline. The bulldog glowed radioactive green. Solomon wasn't sure what it meant, but he was trying to get better at noticing things, at using his eyes. He'd long felt that metaphors and sensory descriptions were wearisome. In novels and essays alike, their labor was almost always transparent, even when they were well crafted. 'A highball sweating in the sun.' 'A thigh the color of cream cheese.' 'Whiffs of a fragrance like grains of sand in the wind.' Solomon preferred novelists who charted inner life, psychological terrain, the hazards and contradictions within ideas. But he knew people read novels precisely to chew on the invocations of imagery and aroma. He'd vowed to open his body up to the world, to sharpen his sensory perceptions, to hone his faculties of eidos.

A delivery man on a bike wheeled toward him on the sidewalk. A group of smokers standing outside a bar halfway up the block scattered, giving way. Solomon, still in thought, moved, as he always did in such moments, into the center of the sidewalk so that he was directly in the bike's path, forcing the rider onto the road. A small victory.

Bushwick's allure, he'd thought for some time, was stimulating, even

important, but it was perfectly acceptable to hold it at arm's length, to dunk into it selectively when needed. To marinate in what was "cool" at all times—in irony and exhibitionism and aesthetic omniscience—was a different story. That was the thing about trends. While more intriguing than wealth or careerism, they were nonetheless penned within aesthetics, preoccupied with cultural artifacts that were either au courant or impishly antiquated, and all with an appealingly enigmatic aura. That was how Solomon saw it, at any rate. The Bushwick crowd would probably cast their vogue as more of a piety toward aesthetics. Pablo, an epicure of coolness, certainly felt something like this, though he would have expressed it obliquely. And Solomon, who preferred trees and stately brownstones inhabited by quiet families and wealthy literary types, knew he wouldn't be able to persuade Pablo that aesthetes teetered dangerously close to hedonism as a way of life, and dangerously far from the inward solipsisms that fortified a truer sense of self. Solomon imagined Pablo would understand his position, but it would only compound his view that Solomon was curmudgeonly for a thirty-six-year-old, oddly ascetic even as he was funny and animated. If pressed, Pablo would probably say that it was perfectly possible to do both—to think *and* aestheticize.

Pablo opened the door wearing floral oven mitts and a floral apron over a white button-down shirt.

"Hello, darling," Pablo said, kissing Solomon once on each cheek.

"Ms. Child, you look lovely." Solomon twirled Pablo around.

"Oh, thank you," Pablo said, smiling. He posed, spreading out his hands by his waist and jutting out a hip. "I'm almost done, please, love, get settled."

They always talked to each other this way, with adoring vocatives, like a fictional mid-twentieth-century couple. Pablo whisked off to the kitchen, leaving Solomon to set down his backpack and unbutton his coat. The apartment smelled pungent and fishy and a little bit sour. The two of them enacted a ritual every time one cooked for the other, though it was more often Pablo who did the cooking. The guest would give the host three words—a cuisine and two adjectives—and then take to being surprised. For this occasion, Solomon had offered Pablo "Korean," "spicy," "soupy." He knew exactly what he wanted—seafood sundubu-jjigae—and he was quite sure Pablo would intuit this. Food was Pablo's medium of celestial communion.

Pablo was moving between the stove, sink, cabinets, and kitchen table when Solomon walked in from the living room. Solomon started toward the large, bubbling pot on the stovetop, but Pablo leapt between them.

"No! It's a surprise! I want you to see her when she's fully finished. She's still backstage."

Solomon laughed. "Okay, darling. How much time left?"

"Like, fifteen minutes. I'm giving her some final touches."

Pablo took a jar of sugar out of a cabinet and added a teaspoon to the pot. He stirred it delicately, with one hand on his hip, and then leaned forward to inhale.

Solomon looked at him, observing, consciously noticing. Pablo was slim, a few inches taller than him, and handsome in an unusual way. He had high cheekbones, a thin moustache, and thick, curly black hair. He looked more like his mother, a light-skinned hacienda girl whose grandparents immigrated to the Philippines from Spain, than like his father, who came from a line of Tagalog fishermen. Where his father's face was stern and square, Pablo's was gentle, almost serene.

Solomon had only ever seen pictures of Pablo's parents. They could never meet—Pablo would shudder at the thought—because they were maniacally religious and strict, compulsively suspicious that any acquaintance of their son might disclose something unbecoming or impious or, God forbid, dissolute. His father was the truly draconian one. Well into Pablo's twenties, he had inspected Pablo's every move—how he ate, how he spoke, how thin he looked in the shower—and critiqued him liberally. Pablo wasn't allowed to lock any doors. His father tracked his location every time he left the house. He even called over a priest to exorcize Pablo after he came out to his parents, forcing Pablo to profess a sham—it all had just been a phase, he told them, and for the next year he'd stand in front of his bathroom mirror rehearsing a deeper voice and tauter wrists, imploring the patrilineal phantom lodged somewhere inside him, if it were inside him at all, to make an appearance, to uphold the family honor.

Pablo was now chopping scallions. "Oh!" he exclaimed, dropping the knife onto the cutting board and pulling the rice cooker toward him. "And the rice! So maybe more like twenty minutes."

Solomon laughed again. Pablo, more than anyone Solomon had ever met, was prone to bouts of time warp, black holes within which he became so unqualifiedly absorbed in reading or cooking or cleaning that his hours melted away into nothingness. Solomon wanted to tell Pablo why he was so closely observing him, why he was trying to more adeptly infuse sensory observations into his thoughts, but he couldn't. Not yet. The idea that had come to him a week before was still too new, too unrealized. It had sprung up in a flash after a contentious phone call with Pablo. Solomon had been recounting a dinner he'd had the previous night with Sadie, the director of their master's program in cultural writing, with whom Solomon remained uncommonly close after graduating.

"Her top, Pablo, you would have died," Solomon had said, describing Sadie's riotously florid red-and-white pattern and boldly puffed sleeves. He enjoyed lightly vaunting his relationship with Sadie under the guise of relaying a bit of gossip or a literary opportunity that might have been mentioned during one of their dinners. Sadie had a cultlike draw among the program's small circle of students and alumni. She was, they all agreed, a life-altering teacher, and yet she remained formidable to most—few became her friends, and fewer still managed to get close to her.

"Wait, I need more, did the sleeves go all the way down?"

"Short sleeves," Solomon had said, "but puffed at the shoulders, something

you'd wear on *The View* but not to the Golden Globes, you know?"

"Oh, totally, okay, and the waist, I need to know about the waist." Pablo had such an interminable appetite for conversations about experiences and appearances that Solomon sometimes hesitated before sharing an anecdote, knowing Pablo might draw it out past a reasonable point of duration, perfectly content to suck the marrow out of minutiae even as urgent matters lay dormant and unheeded, and all before reciprocating with an ornately trivial story of his own.

"The waist? The top was on the flowy side, so it just about covered her waistline. White pants, by the way."

"Oh, of course, she pulls off white so beautifully. What about the cut of her pants?"

By then, Solomon's interest had waned. The sleeves really were the point of the story, the pièce de résistance of the whole ensemble. "What?" he'd asked distractedly. He'd wanted to move on to the subject of Aimee's nearing party.

"The cut!" Pablo had persisted, tutting the last consonant. The velvety deepness of his voice somehow tempered and augmented his femininity all at once. "Like, were they flared or tapered or just straight?"

"I don't know. I didn't really look at that. I don't think about pants in the same way."

"Oh, right, yeah," Pablo had replied. "That makes sense. You don't *really* care about fashion."

He'd said it in an innocent tone, without seeming to pay much attention to the insinuation, as if he'd been only half concentrating. But Solomon had ignited.

"Really?" Solomon had felt his voice grow quieter and more pointed. He'd been told his face changed when he assumed combat posture—that his eyes widened and hardened and his already protuberant nose seemed to grow even larger and sharper, like a sword.

"Don't care much about fashion?" Solomon had repeated. "That's interesting. And what about what we did three days ago?"

He was referring to the evening they'd spent moving from window to window on Madison Avenue, Pablo having taken one whole cannabis gummy bear, Solomon a quarter. Arm in arm, they'd surveyed Alexander McQueen dresses, Naeem Khan gowns, Stella McCartney blazers, Stuart Weitzman pumps, Balmain leggings, Bao Bao Issey Miyake tote bags, and on and on. Sometimes they'd lingered outside a single display for twenty minutes, keeping a running commentary about colors, fabrics, cuts, and evocations, taking turns choosing a friend and a celebrity who would perfectly befit one of the more spectacular outfits.

On the phone, Pablo had stayed quiet under Solomon's inquisition. Solomon knew his tone could perturb Pablo on the subterranean level of familial angst, that it occasionally could even summon the specter of Pablo's father. Solomon's directness, his conviction, and the strength of his emotions tended to give him the last word, but he liked to think his dialectical style was more philosophical than tyrannical. He'd learned that the force of an inner impression, when adroitly ren-

dered in language, would almost always emerge victorious, because the description was only the messenger. The impression itself had already arisen—it was real in the metaphysical interior and had only to be materialized by way of self-assured articulation.

Eventually, Pablo had apologized, claiming he'd been requiting Solomon's flippancy with his own. Solomon had overreacted, Pablo assured him—*obviously* he cared about fashion, *obviously* he was as capable a judge of concrete objects as he was of intangible concepts. But Solomon intuited in the exchange something sincere, the poison of something truly depreciatory, even if it had been semi-conscious, befogged by Pablo's blithely extemporaneous approach to the world.

II. SADIE'S MATCH

"Go sit, dear. Have some wine. I won't be long." Pablo was stirring the pot again.

Solomon took a bottle of Riesling out of the fridge and left Pablo to the rice and stew. Twisting the cap off the bottle, he sank into the paisley couch in the living room and felt something hard press against his waist. He pulled a slim volume from under a cushion. It was Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Probably Arthi's, Solomon thought. Arthi was always writing essays devoted to de Beauvoir's hortatory embrace of small revolutions—of the liberation to be found in even the trifling joys of existence. The living room, come to think of it, was decorated entirely by Arthi. The lease was hers. Though she lived with her husband in Ridgewood, she kept her room in the apartment for the occasions on which they fought, and she'd show up with neither warning nor explanation a few times a month. Apart from Arthi's murky cameos, Pablo had the two-bedroom apartment to himself. He'd leave her door open, though he'd never go inside her room, and he'd spend his evenings puttering around the kitchen and reading in the living room, both of which Arthi had painted variegated shades of pink and purple. She'd also painted Pablo's bedroom long before he'd moved in, when it served as her writing studio. There, every wall was a thick, dark blue. Solomon thought it left one feeling trapped in a subaqueous middle school diorama, and because Pablo had never bothered to offset this with well-placed lamps, he couldn't read or write in his bedroom. He didn't seem to mind—the living room, though startlingly bloomy, was cheery and comfortable.

At ten minutes to midnight, Pablo finally appeared in the doorway, carrying two steaming bowls of perfectly tawny sundubu-jjigae, his head excitedly waggling from side to side. It was lush with spice and fermentation, exactly how Solomon liked it. He filled a glass of wine for Pablo and raised his own to make a toast, but Pablo was already off on what was clearly to be a long-winded reconstruction of the cooking process. Most people, Pablo was saying, made fish stock using a few assorted parts of white fish, but he had added shrimp and crab shells in addition to two different types of anchovies.

"And do you taste the parsley? I used leaves and stem, but I read that hamburg parsley roots really balance out the regular leaves, so I got both. Do you taste it in the broth? That earthy counterpoise? Isn't it sublime? Is she spicy enough, though? And wait! Is yours hot enough?"

Solomon hastily assured him all was well, for Pablo was known to repossess a dish and return to his tinkering if he discerned even a flicker of discontentment in his guest. Pablo smiled at Solomon over the top of his bowl, reassured, and put one hand on Solomon's knee.

"I want to hear all about your day, dear, but first I have to tell you the story of these anchovies. It starts in Sunset Park, with me looking up words in Mandarin on my phone to interface with the most intimidating seafood saleswoman I've ever met."

If Pablo had once been imprisoned at home in Manila, he now was resettled, liberated, tongue out, tasting every drop New York City tendered. His parents had muffled but never fully quashed their son's passionate appetite for the sugar and spice, curios and quotidians of culture—all of it. He'd discovered the city's expansive freedoms well before graduating from the University. At first, it was in long walks down Flatbush's Farragut Road, visits to the Frick, restaurant-hopping in Chinatown, and 3 AM stops at propane-sputtering food trucks that served pork and squid skewers. Later, it widened to poetry readings in Greenpoint, cult films at the Metrograph, hours-long thrifts at Beacon's Closet, and all-night raves in Ridgewood.

Perhaps the most fascinating thing about Pablo, even when considering his many quirks and time warps, was the way he consumed experiences. Solomon thought he was rather like one of those oenophiles who insists that price points correspond more to scarcity than quality, that one must taste even cheap, industrial-scale productions, and that it's madness to spit rather than swallow in a life where one could, at any time, be thrust into parsimonious misery by dint of poverty or injury or the onset of some totalitarian regime. If Pablo was a glutton, though, his senses were neither dull nor clumsy—quite the contrary: He'd cull the good for his pleasure and remain perfectly cordial to the rest. He seemed to have read, watched, and listened to everything, especially if it was current, and even more so if it was both current *and* ironic or surreal or impassive or mildly discomforting. And if the artifact consumed by Pablo was none of these things, it was bound to be queer—not as a political stance, for Solomon knew that Pablo found politics predictable and distinctly unironic, but as part of his organic ensconcement in alt-cool and accordingly queer-brushed Brooklyn. In these ways, Pablo merged the steady buoyancy of the bon vivant with the all-knowingness of the compulsively online literary critic. He was not from New York, he had only moved to the country four years prior, and yet he had managed to settle into the city's artistic and literary ecosystems more easily and rapidly than Solomon could have ever dreamed of doing. Solomon had gone to college just a hundred miles

away, in the Hudson Valley, and yet the city hadn't served as a playground for his own exploits—his spontaneous cravings and decadent quests—for more than the first few months after graduation. After that, New York became a noisy, lonely atelier, a constant reminder of his unrealized goals, of other writers and thinkers who were successful, who had proven their inner lives, and who therefore denied him the grounds for any jollities except maybe sex.

After second and third helpings of stew, they finished the bottle of Riesling, with Pablo alternating between his wine and vanilla ice cream. They compared arrival times and guest list predictions for Aimee's party that coming Friday. They gossiped about Arthi's mysterious midnight appearances. They considered the biphasic splendor of a new Lana Del Rey song and the toe-curling distress of an old Dennis Cooper book. Finally, Solomon asked Pablo if he wanted to talk through their tiff on the phone.

"Um, if you want to," Pablo said, his voice suddenly reticent.

"I just wanted to make sure you understood why I flared up," Solomon started. "That I felt—"

"Actually," Pablo interrupted, summoning his courage, "can we maybe do it later? I feel like this has been happening kind of often."

Pablo clearly wanted to enjoy his ice cream, the music, the gossip, the commentary, without the bitter tonic of decipherment. Solomon found this amusing.

"They do happen often, don't they?" Solomon said. "We hit quagmires again and again." He once more found himself wanting to tell Pablo about his plan, to give him some clue that he was devising a novel about their friendship, about *him*. "We share this baffling confluence of love and . . ." Solomon trailed off.

"Rejection," Pablo offered.

"I was going to say verdicts, but it sounded strange."

"Judgment."

"Yes. Exactly. A titillating kind of psychodrama, no? Maybe someone will write about it one day."

Pablo giggled. "But who would get the story right? We're the only ones who know all the nuances."

Solomon stayed quiet. He felt a bit wretched just then, dangling in the void of the conspirator's exile. He knew he'd just dropped an underhanded hint to Pablo for his own wayward bemusement. He was growing more and more curious to know how Pablo would react to a revelatory portrait—and to Solomon trespassing upon their intimacy.

This tension between them was only a year old. The first months of their friendship had been marked by Pablo's reverence for Solomon, by shared elation. Sadie had called up Solomon one day, about two years after he'd graduated, to tell him about a new student who was young and shy but scintillating and right up Solomon's alley. He wrote beautiful, nimble essays about disco, modern art, prima

donnas, and the Philippines. They were destined to be close friends, Sadie told him. Solomon had been skeptical. Wasn't twenty-four too young to be either a good writer or a good conversationalist? Sadie had pushed back. Wasn't Solomon always complaining he needed more confidantes, better interlocutors? And wouldn't she know a gem when she taught one? Pablo was a perfect match, end of story. I'll give you his email address, she'd said.

Sadie, needless to say, had been right. The two decided to meet one spring evening at the Marlton Hotel, Solomon's choice. The hotel bar resembled a British aristocrat's living room—plush carpets, a fireplace, damask armchairs—and yet the crowd, as was so often the case in the West Village, was monied but detached, tourists in their own homes, unable to disappear into the tavern's dark corners. The patrons wore suit jackets and sharp perfumes, and they spoke noisily and looked uneasy. Once home to poor and wild artists, the hotel had become a refurbished monument, rented out hourly to the highest bidders. Solomon later realized that the bar, which he'd suggested because Pablo was working late at the nearby University library, wasn't a place Pablo would have ventured into of his own accord. If Solomon enjoyed dreaming up baroque, nineteenth-century cocoons amid a brashly fluorescent present, Pablo was scarcely nostalgic in this way. Nevertheless, leaning toward each other over candlelight, they immediately discovered that they loved the same divas, that they were both gripped by the metaphysics of glamor, that their conversational rapport was rhythmic, intricate, and mellifluous.

Solomon had never had a close gay friend before. He'd choose his friends by gauging conversational chemistry, appraising the ratio of padding to rapture, and his picks happened to mostly be women and straight men. Roving, pridefully vacant bands of gays in Speedos embarrassed him for obvious reasons, but neither did he gravitate toward incidental dynamics that Pablo would've described as "queer-coded." Perhaps these dynamics also lay too close to the fault lines of coolness, requiring a prescience of art, a decisive sort of insularity, and, in the case of this particular subculture, a relentless, gushing empathizing with everyone involved. But in Pablo, Solomon had found discursive flair and an idiosyncratically keen eye, neither of which was even slightly encumbered by schmaltz or histrionics or, for that matter, lechery. Solomon had also realized that Pablo was a sort of ingénue. He'd just graduated from the University, and he hadn't yet published anything in the United States, having put out only two essays under a pseudonym in the Philippines. At once, he'd soused Solomon in flattery. He would read Solomon's work, and he'd generously reference one essay and praise another, laud Solomon's latest benchmark and toast to the next. Thus the first chapter of their friendship had proceeded happily for Solomon, crystallizing resplendent layers of gaiety and acclaim atop deeper, darker differences.

III. WOMAN EATING ORANGE

The problems trickled into their idyll about nine months in. One summer evening, they'd stopped by the Salmagundi Club on their way to the L train. Pablo had been drawn in by the Lisa Yuskavage exhibit, which featured a series of topless women handling fruit, framed by abstractly gloomy tableaus. Fifteen minutes into their detour, Solomon had frozen up in front of *Woman Eating Orange*, in which a woman with wildly unkempt hair indeed ate an orange, the juice dribbling down her chin and onto her pointy breasts. Everything in the painting had been black and white except for the fruit and its juice, which had been vividly, almost mawkishly, orange. The painting had jarred within Solomon the caginess he'd sometimes feel at exhibitions and events, when his fervors and aspirations seemed to be roused by the art on display while simultaneously attacked by the expectations that he cede control, stay silent, suppress whatever creativity arose within himself, forcing him to receive without making, to helplessly genuflect as he was belittled and diminished and hammered into the throes of nihility. He'd feel this too sometimes when he was reading—when a page could scarcely be turned without ideas bursting out of him, without him having to pause to write them down, even if it meant never finishing the book.

Solomon had long been aware that this impulse to extrude rather than absorb was a masculine one. He certainly wasn't a manic babbler in the unilateral key that characterized so many men—men whose proclamations enveloped the poor listener like a locust swarm, and whose infrequent questions served only to justify brusquely keeping up the assault. Solomon thought that if he had a lot to say, it was simply because his head was a fount of impressions.

That day, Solomon had wanted to leave the gallery, to walk with Pablo to the L train discussing the few pieces they saw, for surely a *few* pieces were enough. He'd wanted also to talk about other things, to resurrect the inner voices that had been quieted by the looking. But if Solomon found frisson in the crises of meaning and individuality provoked in him by art, Pablo was vitalized by the joy of inviting surfaces, of middling surfaces, too, if it meant being in a room with other contented oglers. He found joy even in the outside sidewalk's redolent grit, the upbeat expectancy of the air-conditioned foyer, the very existence of the chance to collectively gape and grin and suspire. For Pablo, being moved from *without* was a way of life—and an irradiating one at that.

Pablo had appeared surprised but unruffled that Solomon wanted to leave—"Okay," he'd said brightly, "see you for dinner day after tomorrow!"—and Solomon had walked out alone and nettled. He'd gone straight to his office, where he'd tried until midnight to write something captivating before leaving for home, defeated.

For a decade, Solomon's eye had been on his literary ambitions. He'd written frantically in his early twenties but been published nowhere, read by no one. Then he'd entered the University, where Sadie had taught him the difference between writing for oneself and writing for others, between ideating in private and in

public. He'd started publishing as soon as he graduated, and he right away found himself rapacious for ascension. As soon as one piece was done, he'd chase the next byline, the next literary rung. After publishing with a respected but diminutive operation, say, *The Progressive*, he'd quickly develop a distaste for the magazine. Flush with embarrassment at the sluggishness of his craft, he'd seek something bigger and better—a better essay in a more prestigious publication. Before long, it was rarely the case that he would sink into a moment or idea for the thrill of the experience alone. No, it would have to be to write about it, to filter it through the prism of his solipsisms and then render it for the public.

Night after night, he'd sit at his desk at Pen & Sanctum, a handsomely droll writing space, the oldest in Brooklyn, where he worked as an administrator in exchange for a meager salary and his very own office. If he was ascetic, it was in this sense. He'd refuse nine out of ten invitations to go dancing or listen to jazz or mingle with ascendant literati at a book launch, preferring the elusive promise of his office's dark blue carpets and art deco paintings. Ringed by a half dozen lamps, he'd lock the door and try to read, invoke, and write. He'd work slowly, oscillating between doodling and edging himself, the latter of which he'd do, instead of finishing himself off in one go, because he believed one worked more fruitfully when unspent. He'd thus try his very best not to finish, to click out of a video when he got close, to return to work. Invariably, every time, he'd end up finishing, and the gradualism would result in an ejaculation whose velocity would overshoot the waste basket, disappearing into the carpet's coarse bristles like rain into grass. Deflated, he'd wipe himself off, zip up his pants, and have his writing notes back open so promptly that he'd sometimes not catch for several minutes a pearly string of semen lingering atop a knuckle. For a time, he'd taped to his desk a laminated notecard of endearingly despairing entries from Wittgenstein's diaries:

February 21, 1915: Did no work. Better mood. Feeling aroused. If only I could work again!!!!

February 23, 1915: Did no work. My difficulties have still not been resolved.

February 26, 1915: Did no work. Will I ever work again?!? Dark mood. Contemplating suicide.

February 27, 1915: Did no work. Dark mood. Strong sexual desire. Feeling lonely. I have lost all hope and confidence in my power to succeed.

Wittgenstein also worried about the enervation that came with spending oneself. He called it "squandering my inner strength." In another diary entry, he wrote, "I have strong sexual feelings again and masturbate almost every day: it cannot continue this way." Yet, just last week, Solomon had peeled the laminated notecard off his desk and thrown it away, feeling unworthy of the parallel.

Each night, Solomon would walk home from his office, spent in one sense and

throttled in another, the unfinished two-thirds of his agenda rattling around his conscience like a headache. He'd go straight to the kitchen and microwave some daal or spaghetti before putting on a bad movie that he'd usually already seen at least twice before. He'd drink one glass of wine, then another, and then another, and if the characters in the movie were drinking scotch, he'd pour himself a glass of bourbon, too, since he couldn't afford scotch.

He aspired to watch no television at all—not merely to switch over to more artistically honorable shows, but rather to effectuate *total* abstinence. He'd made the pact with himself when he turned thirty. "From now on," he whispered at the midnight that struck the end of his twenties, "my only form of pleasure will be reading, even while I'm eating." Sitting on a sofa in the main writing room of Pen & Sanctum, he'd watched the clock's hands evince the inexorability of time perhaps more vividly than anything ever had.

Of course, one's nominal passage into a new decade is not like getting on a plane, where one has only to sit on a cushioned seat to be whisked into a new world. For two days, he'd succeeded, and he'd eaten less and drank less alcohol, too. He'd found this was best accomplished by standing during mealtimes. But then, somewhat literally, he'd caved, sitting down again to watch sitcoms and chick flicks while knowing, hoping, in some crepuscular corner of his conscience, that they'd one day be replaced by the expectant prose of Henry James, Jorge Luis Borges, and Vasily Grossman.

Solomon half-atoned for this state of limbo by reading *about* writers in lieu of reading the laborious works themselves. He'd study their routines, their ticks, their daily walks: Nietzsche bathing himself in cold water at sunrise and then writing for six hours, drinking only milk; Kant meditating with his pipe in the morning and then, at the exact same time every afternoon, strolling through his village; Schopenhauer practicing the flute for thirty minutes before lunch and then, later, no matter the weather, taking a two-hour walk with his beloved poodle. Solomon read *Conversations with Goethe* instead of *Faust*, *Conversations with Kafka* instead of *The Trial*. More like guides than incursions, these books were not only easier to read but also attestations that the past centuries' greatest minds did ordinary things every day, repeatedly, compulsively. Maybe Solomon, too, might one day be described as having odd habits and fits of indolence that were no more than the quixotic adulterants of his ultimately glorious writerly life.

For his own essays, he'd manage to read through thick research packets about Iraq or Hannah Arendt or whatever else he was writing about. But when it came to recreationally studying the greats, to muffling his inner dialectic in order to accommodate imposing metaphysical diagrams or headily grandiloquent narration, he'd find himself freezing as he had before *Woman Eating Orange*—and not just because of ipseity's rebellions. It might have made for a more palatable apologia to chalk such failures wholly up to the vivacity of his inner life, but the truth

remained that even when he was left to his own devices, Solomon often produced nothing at all. He hadn't even read Wittgenstein beyond a chapter or two of *Philosophical Investigations*, which made the laminated notecard on his desk all the more superficial. He'd only stumbled upon the diary entries in a piece about old Ludwig's writing habits published in *The Threepenny Review*.

All this dabbling, especially his familiarity with philosophers' lives and routines, produced in nearly anyone who spoke to Solomon the impression of great knowledge and intellect. He was aware that his sheer will to be surpassingly intelligent gave him the air of possessing a sharp and certain mind, not unlike that uncanny correspondence between inner impressions and their clever outward articulations. But Solomon was sure that when held to the right standards, his air, his will, and his arsenal of references mostly constituted the armor of a dilettante—and he knew the armor would not last.

IV. ALIEN-LIKE FEELERS

Pablo, of course, was another story. Solomon imagined he must have stayed at the Salmagundi Club for another hour, before visiting one of his beloved food trucks for an oversalted treat and then riding happily home. Solomon had never once glimpsed competitiveness or envy in Pablo. It seemed Pablo had no enemies, felt no bloodlust. He'd wince, as if branded by an iron-hot stigmata, if he were made to say behind someone's back something he wouldn't have said directly to them. Solomon, who relished gossip, found this perplexing. But the truth was that Pablo rarely had anything negative to say. In people, as in art, he'd leave the undesirable behind, like rodent bones in owl pellets.

For a few years now, Pablo had worked as a bookseller at The Bedford Derby, which was Williamsburg's (if not all of Brooklyn's) premier bookshop. In this winsome little underworld of pouffed chairs and author readings, Pablo met more writers and artists than Solomon could keep track of, and he befriended all of them. The friendships didn't appear to be particularly profound—Solomon noticed that he preferred not to dwell on serious matters during those cocktail hours and wine gatherings—but Pablo nevertheless doted on his circle with protective zeal. He gifted them books, attended their parties, made them playlists, compared galleries visited. Above all, he consumed their art and then touted it to others, however unremarkable the works themselves seemed to be. Solomon quickly learned to keep his misgivings to himself. When it came to Pablo's cosmos of emerging writers, musicians, and painters somehow associated with The Bedford Derby, his peppy positivity extended past deference nearly to the point of jingoism. He had only to chat with someone once for them to become his friend, and he thereafter delighted in dressing them up in the rhetoric of kinship.

"My 'friend' Tyler," he'd say, "has an art show on Wednesday. Yes, they paint,

and they also lead that experimental punk band, remember I told you about it? *And* they write, I've read their work, it's really good! Oh, and of course, they work at TBD during the day. I don't know how they find the time."

For poor, gruelingly competitive Solomon, Pablo's openness was unrelatable. Was Tyler really good at writing, too? Solomon would think. And if so, how do I, who neither lead a band nor paint, compare? He'd wonder how to vanquish him, or *them*, as Pablo had no trouble remembering to call Tyler.

As Pablo collected more and more "friends," he had less free time for Solomon. He had to be booked days if not weeks in advance, or else he'd importantly inform Solomon about an afternoon electronica party or invitation-only play he'd already committed to. He began to smirk when Solomon hadn't heard of a novelist or a musician. When an electropop singer released a zeitgeist-consuming album and Pablo couldn't talk about anything else, Solomon gave it a listen. He'd found it unbearable. "Well, that's probably because it's beyond you," Pablo told him airily. When Solomon combusted, Pablo quickly added, evidently quite sincerely, "I just meant you know nothing about the Bushwick avant-garde she's paying homage to, so it makes sense you wouldn't like it."

Solomon's disinterest in coolness and his inability to deliver it seemed to spill into his writing, too. Unlike those first, flattery-filled months during which Pablo displayed an exuberant proficiency in Solomon's bibliography, he would now point nonchalantly to the weaknesses in Solomon's new essays or otherwise scarcely acknowledge something he'd just published. One day, Solomon wrote an article about the former secretary of defense having left his executive position at Raytheon to helm the Pentagon, where many of his policies handsomely profited Raytheon's shareholders. The man had then promptly returned to the weapons manufacturer upon the arrival of a new presidential administration. All of this was predictable praxis, and yet not a single outlet in the wider media landscape had done its muckraking duties. Pablo, when asked, said the investigation was "Good!", but even this required Solomon's prodding. And Pablo didn't elaborate. He didn't share it online as he once might have done. Just a month before the piece was published, they'd drunkenly disparaged journalists while at a bar in Clinton Hill, framing them as noble workers who nevertheless were neither writers nor artists. Perhaps it was Solomon who'd done the disparaging while Pablo daintily offered pacifistic embroideries. Either way, Solomon had tried to elevate his investigation from mere journalism to good cultural commentary, to ask broader questions, even to make it aesthetically pleasing, but what more could he really have said than some version of: "The press and the public are unconsciously forgiving of institutional corruption, especially when it's camouflaged within the industry of war, and this is a bad thing."

If Pablo knew everything about the sounds, colors, and raiment of the digital bazaar, he was clueless—albeit jovially so—about the political world. Naturally, he was anti-imperialism, anti-Republican, and anti–Democratic establishment, just

as most emerging writers were, especially those who came from former colonies. But he couldn't offer details beyond this. It was clear that he viewed reading the news every day as a bludgeon to the artistic spirit, in addition to just being boring. He gleaned really important developments in the course of his online roving, and the rest of the time he looked toward happier matters.

For Solomon, who regularly wrote about foreign policy, militarism, and the squalid business of war, Pablo's aloofness before the world's hourly-shifting macrostructures was less frustrating than abashing. Pablo, after all, was the empathetic one, more likely to placate some fragile soul in the flesh, whereas Solomon looked to politics less to process visceral compassion than to deliver abstractions of justice alongside victories of logic and clarity. There was no easier way for Solomon to replenish his phantasms of superiority than by flaunting his conversancy in global affairs. This was especially easy between the two of them.

"Another perfectly reasonable press release today from the Houthi movement's spokesman," Solomon might have said to Pablo at a colorful eatery on DeKalb as they took turns breaking pieces off a giant aloo masala dosa. Or, "*The Times*' headline story on Russia today called Putin, wait, let me pull up this quote, it's priceless, 'a brutal autocrat' and America 'a nation whose core idea is liberty and whose core calling has been the defense of democracy against tyranny.' Amazing, isn't it, that our pundits still talk as if Iran and North Korea are the only ones spouting nationalist propaganda?"

Pablo would nod and listen politely, his eyes wide with a willingness that nevertheless lacked the flush of true reverie, the electricity that would have crackled through a conversation about John Galliano or Wim Wenders. This would rankle Solomon, but quietly, subatomically. He'd feel clipped, as if he couldn't win either way. In politics, he was bland; in aesthetics, he was effete. Solomon would read Pablo's own essays, which were beginning to come out in increasingly prestigious literary journals, and he'd know that Pablo was right: politics—the mere digestion of facts—*was* indeed solemn, straightforward, full of ethical truisms and mundane logistics, easier to master than cultural criticism, which required attention to barely perceptible minutiae. The former asked for little more than a hankering for statistics, the kind that might be found in a man who memorizes basketball scores. The latter required not an engorged documentary organ so much as buzzingly sensitive alien-like feelers, culling the covert, the cryptic, the ineffable from the artist's projections of spirit and soul.

Even worse, Solomon was quite sure his own political knowledge was a sham. He'd spent most of his life reading halves and thirds of *New York Times* articles, as much a dabbler in politics as he was in philosophy—except that in politics, which prided itself in its incrementalism, its breezy ahistoricism, it was easier for dabblers to disguise their dilettantism. Solomon might have been able to talk circles around the average consultant, even the average poet, about the Iraq War or the vilification of Iran in the national press, but the moment a real journalist

or an international affairs graduate or even just a well-read nerd came along, Solomon would have had to deftly demote himself to spectator like a chipmunk running for the bush, lest he be found out and exposed, his standing among the University and Bedford Derby coteries permanently tarred. Rivalrous without a talent for stockpiling expertise, Solomon tended to shelter himself in contraries—he turned to politics when faced with a literary critic, to philosophy when faced with a political writer, and to cultural criticism when faced with a philosopher.

Fiona, the fifty-eight-year-old manager of Pen & Sanctum, loved it when Pablo came by to pick up Solomon for dinner or drinks. Pablo would knock at her office door, which was right next to Solomon's, then bound in to give her a hug. Solomon would emerge to find the two in conversation about actresses he'd never heard of, comparing Brigitte Bardot's beauty to Anita Ekberg's, and they'd laugh benignly together when Pablo would tell her that the only Brigitte Solomon knew was Bridget Jones.

Fiona, a minor Broadway actress by night, had given up trying to talk movies with Solomon long ago, ever since he asked if the painting of Jean Seberg on her wall was one of Michelle Williams. But Pablo could steep himself in vintage cinema, even Renaissance paintings, just as easily as he could curl up for hours watching looping videos on his phone. He had no qualms about giving himself over to the internet age. This was true even in a bodily sense, where the firmament of screens and virtual occurrences freely floated in and out of life and mind rather than being sequestered, as Solomon preferred it, in pinched and principled allocations of "computer time." Why, after all, should Pablo have worried about being online if he was scrolling through interesting content? The online part was just the ether, the air. Pablo believed resisting this was avuncular, permitting only sanctimonious notions of a clear-cut border between the simulated and the biotic.

When Pablo felt a bit inert or cross-eyed, having spent too much time on his phone, he had only to bound out of the bookshop to his favorite bakery, on N 4th Street, where a dark chocolate chip cookie and a sour cream coffee cake would rev his underused engines, bringing life's many dimensions back together in roaring symphony and turning the day into yet more evidence that life was good, even sumptuous.

V. DIVING FOR PEARLS

Solomon sat on the kitchen counter as Pablo washed their dishes wearing purple rubber gloves. He had offered to help, but Pablo enjoyed cleaning up as much cooking.

"I narrowed it down to five and then took a whole day to think it through," said Pablo, still standing over the sink. He'd taken the newly bought scarf out of his closet and wrapped it around his head in the style of Erykah Badu. "I knew it ultimately had to be about the way it felt against my skin. The stitching pattern's

important, of course, but when you wear a scarf, it has to feel like you're being nuzzled by a peach. See? Come feel the end."

Solomon reached over and pinched the fluffy material. It was mustard colored and gently embroidered.

"The second choice was a peacock blue Loro Piana. Seventy-five dollars. Can you believe it? Cashmere, of course, but it was tasseled, which encroached upon the peachiness."

"Like Aunty Spiker and Aunty Sponge, barring you from your giant fruit."

"Exactly! When all I wanted was to ride away and float above the city." Pablo had been caressing the same serving bowl with the dish sponge for several minutes.

"You're drowning her, darling," Solomon said.

Pablo laughed. "Almost done. I need to baptize her before I tuck her in." He rinsed off the bowl and then started soaping it up again, massaging the glass surface almost lovingly. Pablo washed dishes much like he washed himself: utterly and arrantly, and at least once a night. He loved baths as much as he loved chocolate milk and cookies, and he was neurotically clean, though not, Solomon had realized with time, for reasons of ego or sexual hygiene. Rather, it was due to the ablutionary phenomenology of bathing, of rinsing from his heart his abrasive evangelical upbringing, washing away sins, new and original, and the stigmata, too, of Solomon's gossip, turning it all into something lushly salubrious. As Pablo showered, his past of cloistered walls and unlockable doors melted into a perfumed, queenly present, one of large rooms and solid doors, face creams and scarf turbans, Erykah Badu and Donna Summer.

Contemplating Pablo's precious new scarf, Solomon thought of the brand he had named—"Loro Piana." He hadn't heard of it, and he thought once again of their argument over the phone the previous week. Solomon had turned defensive. He'd used his teeth, envenoming the conversation with ugly slights. Pablo may have known about brand names, Solomon had said, but he still appeared silly in his preposterously loose pants and thrifted shirts whose apparently "perfect stitching" Solomon had always found perfectly imperceptible. "I may not be a polymath of pants, but at least I *look* fashionable," he'd said, cruelly. "At least I look good in what I wear, instead of just signaling that I'm trendy."

He cringed at this now, and he slid off the counter to give Pablo a hug. He was holding back tears, though they hugged often enough that Pablo noticed nothing unusual. Solomon knew Pablo was insecure about his appearance, that his clothing was not just a fixation but also a line of defense, voiding his body and face, which Pablo had always considered too unusual to qualify as "hot." His clothes were intended to reorient the metric toward up-to-the-minute modishness. Solomon also knew their spat had been only a symptom, not the fulcrum, of their wavering drama. Fashion was a stand-in for aesthetics, for particular things in the world, for one side of the war between inner and outer life. But it was Solomon's war, not Pablo's, and he'd let himself go during their call because he'd sensed

that Pablo, however incognizantly, had spoken a dour truth about his looming defeat. Yes, they'd walked down Madison Avenue for hours, and yes, Solomon had partaken with élan in long analyses of boots and skirts and sunglasses. Still, he all the while had not a clue what distinguished Emilio Pucci from Miu Miu—he'd only heard of the designers from Pablo—and, if put to a blind test, he probably wouldn't have been able to distinguish them from Zara either, which was where he bought his own skinny jeans and fitted t-shirts. Thinking about it later, it had dawned on Solomon that it wasn't the names or even the styles of the brands that alone were meaningful. It was the gumption of looking past first impressions to the finesse of the buttons, the finery of the needlework, the historical precedents and insubordinations that had seen some fashion houses burn to the ground and others rise from the ashes. But for any of this, he'd have had to open his eyes, cede control, and give himself over to feelings of pleasure. He'd have had to resist the impulse to force sensuous objects out of their particular forms and into universalized concepts. It was all well and good to pose as a champion of the life of the mind—of Aristotle's maxim that contemplation is the sweetest of all delights—but what happened when warfare threatened both fronts? When an estrangement from worldly beauty desiccated the very impressions and ideas built out of metaphors? Were the furnishings of a rich inner life actually found on the outside, in Bushwick's unintelligible murals, women eating oranges, and luxury Italian scarves?

When Pablo had said, "You don't really care about fashion," he'd meant that one who doesn't care about pants couldn't be said to *seriously* partake in fashion, sort of like one who doesn't care about grammar couldn't be said to *seriously* care for literature. Underlying this truth was a broader implication that Pablo had exposed like a Tibetan throat singer who contrapuntally produces high and low tones. It was that Solomon couldn't have it both ways. For better or for worse, he had chosen cultural criticism as a middle ground between philosophy and aesthetics. And if it was nearly impossible to exist as a writer while hawking only conceptual wares, then maybe he had no choice but to look more closely at his professor's pants, at uptown window displays, at *some* things if not everything. Alas, Solomon remained viciously defensive of his shortcomings. As strong, even warrior-like, as he might have appeared in conversation, he still needed affirmation from the outside. Sometimes he was desperate for it. And thus even when he'd lay imperious claims before Pablo, he'd nevertheless long for Pablo's assurances, lest he feel destabilized, unseen, despite quietly clenching the coattails of an ostensibly feebler counterpart.

On the other side of this was Pablo, who for all his dreamy diffidence was in fact a sophisticate, a lover of art for its own sake, emancipated from self-regard, enlightened in his embrace of people and the world. If he was clueless about the earth as it was organized and operated, if he was unable to think just two days ahead, it was precisely because he lived at present, with no absolutist attachment

to the bigger picture, to career-serving ends, to rendering in public. He could fully immerse himself in a book because he could fully open himself up to it. He allowed literature, music, films, and paintings to inhabit him as he inhabited them. He was living proof that particulars were best approached for pleasure and not for ennoblement. And in his numinously graceful plunges into the present, Pablo found pearls. He plucked them up from the sands because he thought they were beautiful, and at the moment he wished to, he let them fall back upon the ocean floor. This was his secret, though he hardly seemed to know it was a secret: one had only to open up to something else, as abundantly as one could, to find the magic hidden within oneself.

As they hugged and kissed each other goodbye, Pablo pressed upon Solomon the remaining stew in a tightly sealed container, on top of which he'd lain two homemade cookies in a ziplock bag.

"Please, love," Pablo said, his face open and shining. "Enjoy them."

Solomon knew he meant it. ■