

## THREE STOPS IN NEW YORK

by Elena Attala-Perazzini

### *Introduction*

New York City 2008

Had anyone told me, before moving there, that in New York I was to become the casual witness to a tragic escape attempt, of a bizarre conception, of a criminal act and of cunningly entwined destinies, I would have burst out laughing in incredulity. Had I imagined that the lives of my clients and acquaintances were to become as entangled with mine as an irresistible and underhand spider's web, I would have become curious and suspicious. If, on the other hand, I had known the context, I'd have fallen over backwards and my lips would have parted in a wide smile.

Three stories, three characters, three young New-Yorkers whose lives are crazy and slightly neurotic, if not completely on the rocks.

The background: the year leading up to the attack on the Twin Towers.

The events depicted in this book are fruit of that strange mechanism, that singular necessity that leads each of us, sooner or later, to tell our life-story to a complete stranger. It can happen on a train, in the subway, in a doctor's waiting room, in a taxi cue, at a bar. It's what I call *the extrovert face of metropolitan loneliness* because it's even more common in big cities like New York. It is the irrepressible desire, which germinates in a state of solitude, to share our lives with an *anybody-at-all*.

New-Yorkers have the gift of doing it in an outstanding and entertaining way, and I, after five years of running a restaurant in the heart of Manhattan, have developed the capacity of stealing from their needs, of plundering their lives, their emotions, which as if by magic, and despite myself, also become my own. I misappropriate their dreams.

Here are some of them and a large slice of me. Enjoy.

Elena

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Susana, the art of survival.*

*The present in New York is so powerful,  
that the past is lost.  
John Jay Chapman.*

I knew that I had taken a risk in employing someone like her, but I did it in a moment of confusion, and I liked her energy: artlessly impetuous.

The other evening Susana arrived late, her picturesque excuses tempted my curiosity. These have, by now, become truly entertaining and there is absolutely no possibility of them being true.

“Followed...” she said.

I lowered the light dimmer.

“Someone followed me, from an ex-client’s house...”

What a Maestro, I thought as prepared an espresso whilst waiting for the details.

She fell silent. It’s not like her. The moment in which she makes her excuses is that in which her loquaciousness is best expressed and is usually a flood of words,

But she stayed quiet for so long that I became suspicious.

“Where can I find the number of Lock-Smith? I should change the locks tomorrow,” she said.

At this point I became certain that she wasn’t lying and I turned, knocking against her clearly trembling hand.

The alarm clock on her favorite piece of funky furniture rings. The diagonal shaft of afternoon light breaks through the violet curtains in the studio flat in the heart of Alphabet City. Susana hesitates for a second before turning the thing off. It’s nearly two o’clock and, today too, she must stiffen herself to face up to the first of her four appointments. Having lingered to the last moment between the sheets, Susana shoots down the stairs and straight to the traffic meter embraced by her bike. She pedals to the entrance to line six and gets off at Spring Street, arriving in front of Mark’s building with short breath. Her finger presses 10B but, as usual, no one is home. The key turns jerkily in the sticking lock and the sound of her heels echo around the small hallway decorated in brilliant eighties colours. In a few paces she finds herself in the old iron lift. Someone is standing in a corner concentrating on a portable Play Station. He excuses himself

distractedly she says goodbye and gets quickly out. Susana slips the second little key in close to the number 10, a plait, as she lowers her head, swings in front of her eyes like a ragged liana while the sound of a chain indicates that the freight elevator is in movement.

That morning, before properly waking up, she stirred several times feeling remorse. She didn't really understand why, if it was over the last boy that she had taken to bed, with the beautiful Argentinean wrapping, and had denied herself, thereby losing her chance, or something more distant to do with her family in Germany. In her bold contingency universe, remorse is an unknown sentiment, a thing that she has occasionally felt surfacing, but that doesn't belong to her. Susana constantly feels regret for the things she has *not* done, she would like to experience so much more, but, from what she has meticulously told me about herself, for the things that she *has* done she feels little remorse, if any.

When she reaches the floor she pulls open the grille leading to the loft and notices that the familiar scent of jasmine is contaminated by something disgusting. It's been five days since she was last there. Even before turning the light on she rekindles the stub of a joint, takes off her jacket, throws her bag onto the couch and as she makes to stretch out, an instant before making contact with the inviting icy leather, realizes there is something wrong. The house is upside down. The few books and CDs are gone from the shelves, the Konjovic reproduction, so gushed over by Mark, has been removed from the now lop-sided frame, the open doors of the wardrobe reveal that a few empty coat-hangers have fallen to the floor. Further over a heap of sheets are piled on the dusty floor, the chest of drawers is open and emptied. From the bathroom everything has gone. The acrid smell of drains again assaults her nostrils.

A burglary, but by resentful thieves. Who would steal shaving foam? Only the tramps that resold things in Thompkins Square Park. But why had they left the flat-screen? And the Dolby stereo with twelve speakers? Whilst a cascade of thoughts on a thousand plausible hypotheses are sketched out and multiply in her mind, Pablo's rough tongue affectionately moistens her hand. She has been his dog sitter for nearly two years and he has run to her to be stroked. He wags his tail, dribbles, seems happy, or nervous, perhaps he's hungry. Looking for his bowl, Susana notices that there are four scattered around the room. All are empty. The French window is ajar giving onto the little terrace covered with the poor beast's droppings. He must have been alone for several days. She looks for Mark's number and calls it from the phone in the apartment. An automatic

message tells her that the mobile has been deactivated. She tries again. The same voice repeats the same message: deactivated. She is disorientated, she lowers herself onto a stool while the dog lifts himself onto his hind legs and, stretching, tries to lick her chin. Pablo is an eight year old male pitbull with a dense shiny black coat and a white mark around his eye which looks to her like a gigantic star from this distance. He starts nibbling her hands, he is pleased to see her, to see anyone, he wants to go out. Whilst she tries to avoid him exhaling his foul breathe straight into her own mouth, Susana notices a ripped edged envelope on the corner of the kitchen worktop. It is half open. White. An envelope for a bill. The electricity. It looks as if there are bank notes in it. The greenish corners of twenty-dollar bills poke out a couple of millimeters. She opens it. There are five hundred dollars and a note. "For Pablo".

There is no longer any doubt. An emergency escape. Marc has run away, or been made to run away. He has left in haste, without even hocking the electrical appliances. Maybe he'll be back after all. Perhaps he's gone on a long vacation and thought it better not to cancel Pablo's dog sitter. But why take everything with him? What if he's been murdered? But murdered by someone who didn't kill the dog and even left money for his upkeep? Improbable.

A beep echoes around the bare walls. It is the Argentinian. The one she mustn't make the mistake with.

She can't wait to get out of this desolate place that is making her ever more apprehensive. She says good-bye to Pablo with a restrained caress while someone below calls the lift just an instant before herself. The old elevator will take a good four or five minutes to go down and come up again. She waits anxiously. A gust of fright flurries down her back making her shiver. The lift doesn't come and she presses the button again, this time it lights up. Pablo sits next to her, like a sentry, he seems not to want her to go. But now the light comes to a stop in the glass at the centre of the elevator. Susana opens the gate then the double doors and Pablo springs forward with her slipping inside.

"Out! Out you go! Home! Go home!" she shouts as the wretched dog moves away. "Stay! I'll come back tomorrow." Pablo pauses, sits, then gets up ready for off again.

"No Pablo! Stay!" she repeats. "Good boy! Sit!"

The dog backs up towards the window. Almost resigned to his fate, he turns once more to look at the lift. He sits and stares her in the eye. Susana is frozen, her pointing finger still on her out-stretched arm, the stern expression fixed on her face. He straightens up, circles on himself looking

for his tail, which wags. Susanna maintains her harsh gaze as he puts his tongue out to pant and, it seems, to smile. Susana has the gate-handle in her hand ready to pull it across and closed. She holds it, cold in her uncertain grip, tightening and then loosening, she wants to shut it, slam it in the dog's face, after all, he's only a job. She'll be back in two days time, as agreed, that's what she was paid for and someone else can take care of him in the meantime, he'll survive.

But she can't do it. Her hand releases the metal and falls, limp to her side. She's scared of going out on the street alone. Her perplexity is turning into a dark premonition. She looks at Pablo. She could take him home with her, just for tonight. She could do it to protect herself, then she would search out that lunatic, Marc, and tear him off a strip.

She gestures to him with her head then with her hand. It is enough to entice him, he cocks his head, looks at her incredulously and pricks up his ears. "Come on" she says.

The dog hesitates for the briefest of moments, wagging not just his short tail but his whole rear end. Then he's off and slipping on his too long claws, he bounds into the elevator and starts, after his own fashion, to kiss her hand.

Susana and I.

It had been an emergency that had made Susana flash to mind. I knew her because she used to come to the restaurant with a group of musicians who, before their concerts, bolted down *lasagnette alla Bolognese*. The first time that I saw her she reminded me of a tsetse fly. She was small but slender, spirited, jumpy, with a tangible anxiety in her sunken gaze.

My boss, Mr. Vincenzi, had given me a new assignment.

"Good!" he said. "Now you are pronta to showa me who you are!"

I looked at him more carefully.

"Iya trusta you" his face was bloated and overbearing. "You willa be in charge to choose *gli dipendenti*, te imployees. Follov your *sesto senso*. Sixt sense!" he said in an English that seemed even more Italianized than usual. "Looka for soma one to assumere like a singer, I wanna to sacka te little smart girl, Mania," he continued, "I find she Croata!" he whispered in my ear.

"But she's good Mr. Vincenzi, what does it matter if she's Croatian?"

"It matter, it matter...you remember what I tella you about my partner? That one he steala me a load of money!"

"Yes, I remember, but he was Serbian."

“*Stessa razza*, same ting, same story. Croato, Serbo, zingari, gypsy, all te same, all one razza, I don’ wanna see her no more here!” he uttered unequivocally.

And so I thought of Susana. I had got hold of her number and asked her if she felt up to singing jazz. She replied that she could feel up to anything if it gave her a fixed income, she would even lower herself to cold bebop.

I should have understood then that arrogance was a prerogative of hers, but everyone sang her praises and her gaze did, somewhere deep down, have a touch of mildness to it. I let myself be convinced.

Zafirah, a dear long term friend, was in turn responsible for *me* working at the restaurant. She had introduced me to Mr. Vincenzi on a warm, New York Indian summer’s evening in November.

Obsessed by the need to resolve other people’s problems, Zafirah is an unequalled altruist, not only generous and disinterested, but also capable of identifying talent and ready to defend it vehemently.

We were at a party at the Versace boutique, a splendid three-storey town house on Fifth Avenue and Fiftieth. I had been out of work for a month, had promised myself to stick to a career in journalism and not let myself get sidetracked by insignificant little jobs, but New York was becoming evermore unbearably expensive. Good problem-solver that she is, Zafirah had already prepared the ground for my employment, painting a picture of me as an angel fallen from heaven. I had asked her not to do it this time, not to worry about me, to let me sink, with dignity, into this moment of instability. But her desire to always see everybody sorted out is irrepressible, especially when nobody has asked for her help in doing so. She usually manages it.

“No way am I working in a restaurant” I had told her.

Mr Vincenzi’s offer was, however, enticing; a fabulous salary, responsibility, *carte blanche* on the running of the place, and, in just a few months, I found myself on the corner of Second Avenue and Fifth as cashier, waitress, coffee-boy, hostess, glass and bottle washer, barman, *maitre d’* and manager.

Soho.

Exiting Marc’s deserted apartment, Susana walks at a swift pace along Greene Street’s uneven cobblestones. She doesn’t know why, but she has the feeling that she should get away fast. Another shiver, more intense than the one before, travels slowly up and down her spine. The only sounds in that part of the street are that of her own footsteps and the patter of the dog’s paws as he wags along panting. She takes long steps, moving as

quickly as possible. She keeps the lead short. The small puddles look like oily blood as she splashes them and when a heel gets stuck in a crevice, she has the distinct impression of being followed. The road is desolate. She doesn't remember ever seeing a Soho street so empty, at any time of day or night. At the cross street there are four taxis, once there, she'll be safe.

She's working herself up. Even if someone is following her, she's been living in New York for seven years now, she knows the ways and means of its inhabitant's. Just hold their gaze, there's nothing to worry about, miscreants are never as brazen as they appear to be.

She stops as she finally reaches the junction with Broome Street even though the WALK sign is illuminated on her side, and raises her arm to hail one of the taxis. The driver however shows signs of driving on by, of speeding up, giving her a decided no with a shake of his head. Susana swears. It's Pablo's fault, he doesn't want the dog in his car. She makes for the second taxi, heads straight for the rear door, but the driver locks it shouting that dogs are not allowed. Susana knocks on the window, but he maintains his position, apologizes, shakes his head, shrugs his shoulders, says he's sorry, but he'll not have dogs in his vehicle. She curses him and kicks the tyre. Whilst the cars disappear as the lights change to green, an irrational impulse makes her look back once again. There is a shape, blurred in movement. She sees it from the corner of her eye. She wants to run, a round of machine gun bullets seem to puncture her chest. She carries on walking, Pablo close beside her. Something slinks out of a mound of rubbish, the rustle of plastic makes her start, she grasps the lead that slips in her sweaty hand.

A few yards ahead a figure moves out of a doorway and heads towards her. He is chubby, olive-skinned, perhaps Indian. He is wearing a trench-coat over a grey office suit, he rummages in his pocket, looking for something, then lights a cigarette. He's advancing towards her, coming straight for her. Susana lengthens her stride to reach the next intersection as quickly as possible. They are the only two people in that stretch of road. They are getting closer, shortly their paths will cross. They lower and raise their gazes instinctively so that eye contact is made at the right moment. Pablo halts. He sniffs something at the bottom of a tree and pisses. The guy is going to pass her by, he stares at the legs stretching out of the miniscule miniskirt, at the bunch of grapes tattooed on her wrist.

"Evening, sweetheart!" he says while Susana, seizing up, resists telling him to stop.

Just a few paces and she'll be at the Oyster Bar on Spring Street. Her nostrils are frozen, her breathing short and strangled in her throat. Soho's

meandering streets are dark and gloomy, full of little doorways, recesses, columns, trapdoors. She had never noticed. She looks to the left. People are strolling up and down West Broadway but she's still a fair distance away. Something, that isn't really a sound, makes her look the other way and tighten her hold on Pablo's leash. She distinctly makes out the sound of stealthy footsteps behind her. She feels herself blush. Something brushes against her. She hears them distinct, light, and sees a black outline slip into one of the many doorways close behind her. She turns, clearly sees a man. He tilts his head backwards. She stays immobile, waiting for the green light and, her heart thrashing like a madwoman, summons a clear enough voice to breathe out "Pablo" when the dog turns and tries to move. Susana tugs at him, he twists his head back round but with all eighty kilos tries to get away. She manages to hold on, but she has to bend down and is almost on her knees before he gives in.

She breaks into a run, crosses the intersection and turns left towards West Broadway, Pablo is excited, he thinks they're doing it for fun and strides ahead, his little tail at full wag. People line the sides of the street. Susana's wedge lands on the sidewalk and she is finally able to loose herself amongst the crowd chattering, smoking, dancing, phoning and is generally enjoying itself outside of the bars and restaurants.

Reaching home panting after the long chase, her breath still laboured, Susana double locks the door, checks that the little button on the latch is in the upright position and slides the chain into place with great care. Pablo looks at her with an air of satisfaction and, probably, thirst. Soon she'll have to dash to work, and she'd have to do it without him. She's still trembling and once more a shiver runs up her nape as she recalls the hard-edged, sombre voice of the dark figure.

She breathes in deeply. The air is drawn in as far as her gut and she feels strangely light-headed. At times, fear has this effect on her, once she has made a lucky escape and is feeling safe. It is this exaltation mixed with physical pleasure, that pervades her even now. Despite the fact that this fright has been more chilling and horrible than any other she has ever felt, Susana is, nevertheless, experiencing that same exhilaration. The only thing she wants is physical contact. She wants to get close to, to cling to, to enflame another body. She needs to let her euphoria explode by throwing herself into the arms of some man, one into whom she channel all that terror and frenzy. She needs to take and be taken, to let herself be worn out, used until the adrenalin starts to wane and is finally replaced by calm. After all, it is that un-findable inner peace that she seeks every-time

she does it with a stranger. She must be mad having these thoughts with a potential homicidal maniac on the other side of the door.

She rummages amongst her books and seizes a can of anti-grease spray and slips it into her bag in case of ambush. She's late, but knows that her employer has a kind soul. Too kind in her case.

She grabs the phone and calls Rollerblade to tell them everything. She leaves a long message until a beep lets her know that the recording time is up.

Pablo sniffs around every inch of the apartment while waiting for his water and Susana realizes that she has added another oddball animal to her minagerie.

## Restaurant

Once again Susana is late for work but this time with a more plausible excuse than usual: the pursuit. I still don't know how I got into my head to sign her up as the singer of the jazz trio. My sixth sense should have told me that she would be the source of constant bother. The fact that she says hello to me again each time I walk by, tells me that she is decidedly more stressed out than usual. Her stare following me around the room and her leg twitching at fever pitch only confirm this impression.

The story of her pursuit must be true, not just another of her usual excuses. Luckily I see *her* arrive, the rescue worker. Zafirah has the full cheeks and fleshy lips of many arab women. She has a Libyan father, an Egyptian mother and a religion that forbids her to drink alcohol, have pre-nuptial relations, or to swallow any food before nightfall during the period of Ramadan. It is the last week in this long month of annual sacrifice dedicated to Allah and to personal discipline, but the sparkle in her eyes tells me that the sun set some time ago. Zafirah has always inhabited this world of contrast between devotion and her decision to live amongst the flames of the city of temptation that is the Island of Manhattan.

Susana runs to her and, as if she were the owner, orders two vodka tonics of the new barman, who serves her. I see that they are soon in animated discussion. They raise their glasses and make a toast. Observing them I think of the evening when I had introduced them to each other. I would never have thought that Zafirah's spots and rectitude would have mixed so well with Susana's dreadlocks and nymphomania.

"I sent her CD to Maniac Records" rejoiced Zafirah indicating herself, "she's got an audition next week!"

“Fantastic Susana! Now I’ll *have* to come and see you, no more excuses,” I say to her.

I see Johnny Rollerblade come in on his skates. He’s sturdy with the pumped up but flaccid triceps of an ex-weightlifter. About forty, he wears a low ponytail and shows off his soul’s allegiance to dark rock by sporting tailcoats and velvet cloaks. His slightly lazy eye and the uncertain gaze caused by contacted lenses, do however, give him a rather terrestrial and acquiescent look.

“Here we go,” I say to Susana, “five minutes.”

“Ok, just one second.” I leave her to it, even though I know that her “one second” is in no way to be trusted.

“I forgot my good luck charm” she clarifies as she heads towards the dressing room with Zafirah and Rollerblade at her heels.

She rummages through her bag. Rollerblade passes her a transparent plastic pouch of marijuana as she pulls out her cigarette papers.

“...nnoo thanks. I don’t smoke...” says Zafirah.

“Smoke? Come on, get off your high horse control freak, this ain’t no hydroponic shit. Hi sweetheart, I didn’t say hello to you properly did I?” says Susana, her arms encircling Rollerblades bull-like neck.

“Hydro-what?” goes on Zamirah, already fairly drunk.

“Roll, I got to tell you what happened today...someone followed me...I nearly shat myself!”

“Susana, there are people waiting for you in there, the concert’s supposed to start at half past nine...” Zafirah is on a high and feels a lightheadedness that she hasn’t experienced for some time. Susana offers her the joint and Zafirah takes the wavy cone between her index and middle fingers.

“Another round of vodka tonics for these guys” Susana says to the barman, indicating Zafirah and Rollerblade, as she rushes to join the musicians.

The small stage is on the east side of the premises. Mr Vincenzi, fearful of the Evil Eye, has asked me to hide a plait each of garlic and chilli peppers under the floor boards for fear that the Croatian ex-singer might have laid a curse on the performance. I can make out the triangular point of the Chrysler building reflecting the pale blue glow of the rising moon as Susana gets ready to go on. Finally she’s onstage, her face taught and her wide eyes fixed on the white light of the follow spot.

The new barman calls me, says that my friend is feeling unwell and is waiting for me in the bathroom. I hurry up the carpeted stairs losing my footing on a over-rounded step, a flicker of fear crosses the rubicund face

of the bathroom attendant and I enter to find Zafirah sitting on the floor with her head on the toilet.

“What are you doing? What’s wrong? Are you being sick?”

She doesn’t manage to answer, is extremely pale, her lips look bruised.

“Zafirah! You know that you can’t take spirits, you’re practically a teetotaler! You only had your first glass of wine when you were twenty-seven... why do you let her talk you into it?” I said looking at the train of her evening dress stretched out around the toilet.

“You introduced me to her! You told me she was fun...I feel sick, I feel like shit!

“Oh fu..! I’ve got to get back to work...”

In the meantime Mr. Vincenzi calls the cash desk extension where I should be at this very moment.

“Whata you mean you can’t see ’er?” he bawls into the barman’s ear.

“Yes, Mr. Vincenzi, she was here a moment ago, I’m not sure, perhaps she went to the bathroom...”

“Bat-room, bat-room, you joking, right? I call ten minute ago and dere no anser! Whata de fuck is going on?!” he yells as he hangs up.

Zafirah throws up until she feels a little better, we get up off the floor, I splash her face with cold water and fix her make-up. I hurry back into the restaurant, Susana is still singing, strutting her stuff contentedly around the stage on which a thousand other singers would gladly perform. I had allowed her to show off and she had allowed herself to deflower poor Zafirah with vodka tonic and marijuana.

A guy in a herringbone suit walks towards me, fixing my gaze intensely. He smiles, moves closer.

“I don’t mean to disturb you, you look a little up tight.”

“Up tight? Nonsense.”

“I’m in the music industry. That’s an interesting voice your singer’s got. I’d like to meet her” he says kindly.

Zafirah leaps from her stool and, bent double, rushes once more towards the bathroom. At that very moment the cash desk phone rings and the barman indicates that it is an emergency. At the third ring I manage to snatch up the receiver, and Mr. Vincenzi’s voice booms in my ear for several seemingly endless seconds.

The set is over. The man who asked me about her moves towards Susana to introduce himself, but is left with his hand in mid-air as she comes gracefully down the steps ignoring him.

“How was it?” she asks me.

“Good, very good!” I say holding myself back, knowing that if I tell her about Zafirah we will end up arguing.

She lifts her skirt and shows me a tattoo. It is made up of vine shoots in the form of a garter.

“It’s dedicated to the elixir of the gods,” she says, “My Grandma from Abruzzo said that wine was the best medicine against getting old. She was eighty-seven when she died, only sixteen days from her eighty-eighth birthday.”

I unknowingly smile thinking of her mania for numbers.

“Do you know the scientific name for bugs?” she chatters away, in that way she does when the tension is over, “...bleet...bb-ll-eeee-tl... hear how ugly it is bleetless, beetles, you know where it comes from? Its onomatopoeic, right? It’s the same sound that they make when you squash them with your foot, right? There are fossil remains of them from three million years ago.”

The kind man has moved towards us, offers her his hand and bows to me and introduces himself as David Steinenberg, marketing manager for Silky Records.

Sorry to butt in, I don’t mean to interrupt, but what were you...?”

“We were talking politics,” I said to knock her off balance, “did you see the headline in the New York Times? CLUELESS ON GLOBAL WARMING.”\*

I was surprised by her swift response.

“Bush has returned to Europe rejecting the Kyoto protocol, saying that he can’t let the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions damage the American economy. Can you imagine how pissed off they all must be?

“I guess” he smiled, “you’re not American, right?”

“Dead right!”

“That is to say?” he hesitates, “anti-American?”

“Not really, I’m actually trying to win the Green Card on the lottery, this is my third go.”

“So sooner or later you’ll be a monster too, just like the rest of us.”

Hold off Susana.

“When we inhale 1% of carbon dioxide” she continues undaunted, “We exhale 4% because a part of it is produced in our own bodies.”

\*The New York Times, July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

David Steinenberg is now disorientated, but Susana is unstoppable. “We are unable to eliminate it quickly. If someone tries to suffocate us, it is not

the lack of oxygen that kills us, but our incapacity to free ourselves of carbon dioxide.”

“You’re very well informed.”

“I have to get back to the phone,” I say, “in case Mr Vincenzi calls again... I’ll leave you with Mr. ...einberg, ...ainbarg.”

“David” he says nodding.

“David really liked your performance and he works for Silky Records,” I repeat, thinking that she may not have taken this on board.

“You know why it’s so difficult to get rid of bugs? Because they’re really tough, they can go a whole month without food, 45 minutes without air and up to a week without a head!”

I ‘m don’t know what I’m doing in this restaurant. I don’t know what my role is. I don’t know if what I don’t know, is what I want to do, but I do know that somehow feel responsible for what Susana does. After all it was I that wanted to change her from a Hard Rock singer into the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s answer to Billy Holiday.

I’m heading towards her when the telephone rings.

“Ah, so you’ra dere?”

“Yes, I’m here Mr Vincenzi.”

“You’ra dere, at de cash desk? You’ra sure?”

“Yes, of course, I’ve nearly finished up the checks.”

“But where de ‘ell were you? Dove minghia eri finita??? Eh?”

“I was in the bathroom, the bathroom...” helping Zafirah again I’d like to add.

“Tree times? What’sa wrong wit you? Eh? Che cazzo succede? You nota take drugs, my pretty?”

“What on earth... what are you talking about? I just didn’t feel too well, that’s all, I’m fine now, I’m finishing up the checks...”

“Ah... and everyting, it add up? Everyting is fine? Tutto torna?”

Without awaiting my reply, he starts talking to somebody at the other end of the receiver and, without saying good-bye, hangs up.

*I am at the threshold of my thirty-fourth year. I’ve been living in New York for the last five years. Notwithstanding the diversity of my former employment, the need that people have to talk about themselves has, for my sins, always captivated me. It’s neither through affection, nor respect, nor Zafirah’s heroic selflessness that I listen to them. I do it rather through a mixture of curiosity, the need to feed on those feelings of which I often feel so completely empty and that strange empathetic satisfaction which comes from second hand emotion.*

*Sometimes I hate myself for this, for living more through others than really living things for myself.*

*On reflection, this tendency of listening to confession freaks, that has perhaps been the most effective way for me to examine myself, started a long time ago.*

*My parents tell me that ever since my teens I filled the house and telephone wires with weak, shabby, desperate, suffering classmates. At best they were restless, tormented, loonies well on the way to a nervous break down, whilst I, at least, seemed to be the exact opposite.*

*Lithe and slender, with pale eyes and auburn hair, I excelled at school with very little effort, studied classical dance and piano. I had a deep-seated love of my home, the smell of salt-air, the setting up of the deck chairs on the beach in spring, the countryside around my village and my multifaceted and idyllic family. I couldn't have seemed anything other than satisfied and untroubled.*

*Even now I still give this impression, still attract those troubled souls. Now as then, in different ways and with greater selective capacity, I use the lives of others to better understand my own. Through the mirror of their eyes or, better still, of their mouths, I try to scrutinize myself. It is a deformed mirror, for what I see is not really myself but either my opposite or something somehow different from myself. I see an amorphous me that I would like to be, or a me that I can never become, but a me nevertheless.*

*Somewhere in their mutations, their emotions, their madness and contradictions, am I.*

But going back to Susana, I've realized that talking about disgusting animals, numbers and statistics, is one of the techniques that she uses most when struck by shyness.

Hearing herself being praised offstage, for some strange reason, embarrasses her, upsets her, almost as if she doesn't really deserve it.

### **Escape from the first dream**

Susana untangles herself from the snare of her sheets, and even before going to the bathroom, opens her underwear drawer where, hidden in a purple paint box, is her ticket to Brazil. Looking at the half closed tin, its silver clasp like sharks' teeth, she starts skipping, improvises a couple of uncertain samba steps and warbles *Chega de Saudade* while Lucifer, her adopted mouse squeaks the accompaniment from his cage. She opens the guidebook now chock-a-block with post-its marking suggestions made

by all of the Brazilians that she knows in New York. They've told her to go to beach 9 in Copacabana, where the best people go, the ones who are a little hippie and have no whiff of snobbery. She can't wait to see her cousins from San Paolo again, those with whom she had spent carefree summers while they were staying in Italy.

She looks at herself in the mirror, the super-short singlet, the culottes that have slipped down onto her hips, the not very Brazilian backside. Since she has decided to take a break from her beloved New York, from that first great dream, now worn out and sucked dry, she has been overwhelmed by a wave of good humour. It seems to her that the small cushions on her thighs are flattening out, the skin of her face is toning up and she has gone back to feeling like a thirty-one year old teenager. She strokes her purple tresses and winds them around her face pushing out her lips in an attempt to make them fleshier. A prolonged shudder seizes her, her life savings are in that box, fought and sweated for, a great deal of money for one who has never been able to save a penny.

She goes leisurely downstairs, gets on her bike and heads for the *Pick-me-up Café* to devour a chocolate muffin or a bagel with cream cheese. Muffin if she has satisfied her unbalanced hormones, bagel if she has had to resort to marijuana. Her second stop is the Bangladeshi deli, where having bought her ginger flavoured chewing gum, the guy gives her a copy of yesterday's newspaper.

Now to the bench in Union Square where she passes the intellectual moment of her day and she enjoys her favourite column in the *New York Times: Corrections*. The square is one of the few downtown from which you can properly see the sky, which, today, is of that flamboyant blue that she is so fond of. An odd mixture of buildings surround it, some, in white stone, are classy, the modern ones are banal, others, ill kept, are blackened by smog and falling into decay. This place more than any other reminds her of San Paolo, of the grey but developed city that she had glimpsed in photographs, that had accumulated like layers of sediment in her memory and had been deformed by her adolescent imagination.

She is waiting for Rollerblade, Johnny McFinkle, leader of her band. Rollerblade had met her at Great Jones three days after she arrived, and had shown her New York's underground. He took her everywhere, from the dives of Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side, to those lost in the hinterland of Fort Greene in Brooklyn, until he heard her voice. From that moment on, without audition or hesitation, she had been nominated singer of the group with a good salary and without applying for a work permit.

The two dogs play in the sand pit. Sissy, the harlequin great dane regularly lets herself be beaten by Tora, a golden cocker spaniel with a decidedly more authoritarian personality. The Argentinean with the champagne-coloured labrador is also there but seems not to have noticed her. Smoking, as usual, he scratches his head and, while pretending to flick through a magazine, scrutinizes every female backside that passes in front of him. He plays the part of the intellectual heartbreaker despite of himself.

The first time that he had deigned to speak to her he had said that he was born in Montevideo, “in Uruguay” (ay-ay-ay echoed his vibrating, sexy Spanish accent) but had always lived in Buenos Aires. Susana had moved closer.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he asked her. “La Boca is an evocative place, you should go there.”

If I could I’d X-ray you to see if your dick is as talented as your photographic eye, Susana had thought.

The sombre reactionary, with swarthy skin and hair as black as coal, had something seductive about him. Insolent at first sight, the sadness in his cynical glance was almost palpable. The raw skin around his bitten fingernails betrayed a stormy inner torment. Just the type she inevitably fell for.

Ignoring the Argentinean, she finally opens the corrections page. *The phrase “The 21st century will be the century in which we re-define ourselves as the first country in world history which is literally made up of every part of the world” published on December 31<sup>st</sup>, was mistakenly attributed to William Goldman instead of to Kenneth Prewitt, Census Bureau director.*

The United States’ supremacy mania had always disgusted Susana, and she had never expected to end up living here. *Corrections*, on the other hand, are her weak spot. For some perverse reason, that has something to do with lack of self esteem, the mistakes made by journalists allow Susana to forgive herself for never having graduated from university, like the rest of her family. One of several rules her mother had imposed on her children, which she had hated, was the obligatory reading of the daily newspaper. The children had to learn to be well informed, she said, it was an important moral duty for those who wanted to be properly educated and respectable. Those words had echoed in her mind every time she turned the page. But as often happens, that which we hate becomes part of us, and now this was one of her favorite past-times.

*Frau Ninette* Susana had nicknamed her German mother who, as a girl, had lived and modeled in Paris. Later, strong-willed and ambitious, she had first gone to university and then embarked on a career as a cosmetics representative. As she grew older, Susana began to realize that her attempts at running away from home weren't really a rebellion against her family. They were nothing other than a way of externalizing the adjustment that she had had to make to a mother who was unable of accepting her for what she was. The ex-model Ninette simply couldn't help but reject the podgy daughter who had inherited none of her Teutonic beauty. Only in the brief period in which Susana had worked for CBS TV in New York, had she shown any interest in the girl's life. She had even gone so far as to get on an airplane from Frankfurt to the Big Apple to check that the shameless, forever out of fashion little girl, that was her daughter, really did have some chance, be it ever so vague, of fulfilling at least one of her mother's ambitions.

With a butterfly pinned to the jacket of her yellow suit, she had arrived at JFK. Her unmistakable, undulating gait stood out from the yawning, stretching figures appearing at the arrivals gate. Susana had already been waiting for a couple of hours. She had bummed a Marlboro off a waiting husband, a nervous Dominican, worried that his wife wouldn't make it through immigration. He paced on the spot like a grape crusher in a vineyard, swore profusely and chattered to all those around him. Susana had gone outside to smoke and, constantly keeping an eye on the metal door, had drained the cigarette in less than a minute.

They had waved to each other from afar, continued to watch each other, moved towards each other. A barrier and a red cord still divided them. *Frau Ninette* was unable to embrace, as she should have, the tattooed and pierced body of the daughter that she hadn't seen for over a year. "The dollar's gone up again!" she managed to say.

After three years of well paid work in television and the prospective of a rapidly rising career as a stylist for sit-coms, Susana had chucked it all in.

*I too must have disappointed my parents, not with Susana's wanton shamelessness, but without exaggerating, as I had always done everything.*

*Like hers, my nature is curious and eclectic. Not to the same extent, hers allows her to have three or four jobs at the same time, but accentuated enough so as to worry whoever is close to me. I have always had jobs, passions and careers of a limited duration. This has been a worry.*

*I've never been very good at deciding what I wanted. To tell the truth I've been a disaster. A need to express myself, attracted me to the creative arts but, at the same time, something else repelled me, reminded me to hold on firmly to reality, told me to take a university degree in law.*

*The job that I didn't want, in the restaurant, had been the umpteenth proof that I am unable to let myself go, unable to let my passions triumph. Above all it had been the confirmation that I have a craving for security. I'm not just talking about money, but about a job that ties you to a world of clients, numbers, business hours, profit and responsibility, that my conscience tells me is right, safe.*

*This pragmatism has allowed me to live in various places around the world and to end up in New York. Here it's not possible to enjoy yourself without a salary that, in Italy would correspond to that of a managing director, here to that of a waiter, if you want to survive. My obsession with the "real world" has been a distraction that has only intensified in this hub of social climbing and competitiveness. Intensified like the desire to throw one's self headfirst into all the distractions that New York has to offer.*

*We need distractions. To a certain extent they are necessary. There are times when distractions are inseparable from life, which carries on as they alternate and flutter about. They are perhaps, the only occasions in which we truly live for the moment because they don't leave us time to think. They also serve to put things off and this is one of the best and most dangerous places to be truly distracted from everything and to put off, with very little effort, any form of self analysis.*

*Being as distracted as I have been in New York has been the most pleasurable feeling of weightlessness that I have ever experienced.*

### **geronimo**

Susana prefers the word "free-lance" to the word "fixed". Lucifer, the mus-dometicus, is probably hungry but she has no time for him. Pablo looks at her nervously. Yesterday it had been fun to see old friends again at the Izzy Bar but the cheap tequila had knocked her sideways and she couldn't remember the address that Stanley had given her. Stanley is a young banker with a square face and little eyes, too close together. He is of Russian origin, has a heavy accent and employs her as dog-sitter to Geronimo three times a week. Susana looks for the notebook that usually lives beside the telephone. She moves the pile of letters, bills, bank statements and watercolour sketches but can't find it. She remembers Guendaline calling her on the other line, for an urgent delivery, while she

was writing it down. Who knows where she had put the slip of paper. She's late already; she must hurry. Pulling on her army boots and throwing the last couple of things in her bag without knowing where she's headed but hoping for inspiration, she spots the magic note poking out from under the sofa.

"128 Jane Street, apt. 4e, Jerald the porter has the keys."

She tumbles down the steep stairs, catapults out onto the street and reaches the bus stop in record time. The cold, dry air hits her lungs violently; the vastness of the clear, almost transparent, ice blue sky dazzles her; the harsh wind stings her forehead, her nose, her ears. Her budget doesn't allow for the use of taxis, if not late at night, so seeing the bus leave in front of her very eyes, she runs to the next stop, pausing only briefly at the deli. In accordance with their daily ritual, the Bangladeshi gives her yesterday's paper free, in an *I LOVE NY* bag, but doesn't say hello.

Susana rushes into Stanley's building, the slimy, sarcastic porter watches as she shoots into the lift. She goes up to the seventh floor and entering the apartment sees what she had hoped never to have to witness in her career as dog-sitter.

"Fuck Susana! Where the hell have you been?" Zafirah shouts in the earpiece.

"What's up? I'm at Geronimo's house..."

"Geronimo who? Who's Geronimo? Are you crazy? You just didn't turn up? *Sfunker Records* called me, your audition was at nine."

"Fuck, *Sfunker*! What do you mean? That's tomorrow, not this morning! You told me Tuesday, you told me tomorrow...shit Zafirah!

"Shit Zafirah??? I never mix up dates, telephone numbers, addresses, you're the one who messes up all the time, not me! And you miss an audition to go to bed with some guy called Geronimo?!"

"No, I'm not in bed with anyone!"

"You're a landslide!"

"I made a mistake...I've got it down for tomorrow...look..."

"Susana, I'm on the phone!"

"I'll read it to you..."

"What difference does it make now?"

"I wrote Tuesday at nine."

"Listen, let it be, let me calm down, let me think... let me think up an excuse for you, you're in hospital, they took you into emergency last night, they're giving you a liver transplant, you're dying... I don't know, I'll call you back."

Today is her first meeting with Geronimo, a two and a half year old Italian greyhound. The wide open door shows him sitting in a corner of the bathroom with his head resting on the floor. Strangely, on seeing her, he lowers his eyes and fails to approach her. The apartment looks out onto the foliage of an imposing tree and the red brickwork of the townhouses that fill the West Village, reminding her of London. On an enormous white and pale blue Persian carpet that covers half of the lightwood parquet in the living room, right by the window, Susana notices a brown stain. Geronimo couldn't hold on and has relieved himself on the rug. Stanley's tennis racket in hand, Susana follows him around the coffee table, intending to give him two whacks on the back. He dodges artfully and two deep, clean grooves appear in the soft wood.

She unhooks the leash from the coat-stand, grabs Geronimo by the scruff of the neck and pulls him towards her. She clips the lead onto the ridiculous ostrich skin collar and drags him towards the lift.

### **bar fiftyfive**

After their various attempts at convincing me, I have promised Susana and Rollerblade to go and see them at Bar Fiftyfive in Greenwich Village. Every Friday they give me the address of a club to go to and a name to say at the entrance to be let in free, but I never go. This evening, however, I've decided to take the bull by the horns.

Yesterday someone saying he was a record producer, called the restaurant looking for her and I want to tell her as soon as possible.

It's gone one when I get out of the taxi at the address indicated on the flyer but there's nothing to be seen. Stumbling down a steep, narrow staircase in an opening in the pavement, I finally enter a basement with no sign and no door. The red lights are very dim, the electric cables hanging from the black ceiling nearly reach the heads of the people below, who smoke and drink from individual glasses or collectively, through immensely long straws, from washing-up-basins. Two girls brush the tips of their tongues together then try drinking from the same straw. I look around me in search of something familiar but find only Mohican hair cuts, chains, collars, master and slave leashes around throats, studded bands around wrists, army boots, black lipstick and nail varnish. One of the "kids" in the first row, if the mass of bodies in front of the stage can be so defined, starts shouting "Purple Suzy!" and it's not long before other voices join in the invocation.

Just a few moments later Susana appears on stage emerging from a dense cloud of purple smoke. The mane of dreadlocks piled high on her head frame the face, transformed by a sensual and facetious grimace. There she stands, confident, imposing, beautiful, a gentle witch ready to cast her spell on all of us. I finally see her in her own habitat, in the place where she belongs, the green slits that are her eyes no longer possessed, but finally appeased.

She has told me more than once, how much she feels at ease in front of an audience, how much she feels free.

The drummer gives the first four beats, the bass player joins in and Susana's voice, together with the guitar, bursts forth like a thunderclap. Thrashing about she sings of some one she hates, some one that she would like to make vanish by swallowing them up in her own vagina.

At this moment I just hope to god that Mr Vincenzi isn't, by some unimaginable coincidence, there in the place, and that fate keeps him well away from all *Kick in the Head* concerts for the rest of his life and mine. Susana puts a foot on one of the lights, bends forward with her leg lifted and, close above the heads of the audience, raises her skirt, indicating the said vagina that is, this evening, sporting a pair of black culottes with a white skull in the crucial position. Her finger singles out someone in the audience, her legs diagonally apart, the high heel of her boot pounding out the rhythm, she seems to glare penetratingly at each of us, one by one. Possessed, demonic, desirous, she slowly starts touching herself, rubbing herself, writhing about, her low round bottom moving with drive and determination. Her tentacle-like arms wrap around her, covering her, melting onto her body. She is everything that I hadn't yet imagined, a noxious, infernal goddess, who, as the chorus now repeats, gives herself to each and every one of us, "Like a prostitute from Hell".

It really is her, my standard jazz singer, Susana, who talks to me about bugs. She leaps about the stage, scaring me, but in two somersaults, comes to a stop, supine at the edge of the dusty wooden platform still singing uninterruptedly. She arches her back, once, twice, three times, then, from her kneeling position in front of the drums, raises herself into a one armed handstand. Ingenious, I think, magnificent; acrobat, singer, strip-tease artist.

The concert continues in this vein until, near the end, Susana gets down amongst the audience and starts beating the unfortunate wretches in the first row with her dreads. Having pirouetted to hit the musicians too, she dives, as if from a trampoline, into the public stretched out before her, microphone at her lips, giving voice to a series of interminable high notes.

I remember her telling me that she had broken her wrist three times during her concerts.

Pushing my way into the dressing room, my repulsed body being covered with a quantity of other people's body fluids, I manage to kiss the witch on the cheek and offer my compliments. Then over the deafening sound of voices, music, percussion and screeches I tell her to call the record producer as I slip her the number.

*I have a passion for the Performing Arts. What I like in art is the transient, the fleeting, the unrepeatable, the non reproducible.*

*I first went on stage at the age of five. I remember the woody smell of the dust, the lights blinding me and the thrill the murmur of the audience gave me in a full theatre. I have a boyfriend that I have loved for many years but have always had very unclear ideas about my future.*

*I have various talents but no real aspirations. I know I am admired for my spirit of adventure, but also that I have never fully laid myself open, as Susana does, and the courage I found to change my life came from the fact that I had no real life to change.*

*From an aesthetic point of view I can't complain. Dance has left me a ballerina's body, my eyes are very expressive and the overall effect is attractive. My male friends, exaggerating in their compliments, tell me that I am their ideal woman, the women calmly say that they would like to be more like me. Men try it on with me. From the most boorish to the most refined, with trivialities or with intellect, they try it on. I suppose I'm lucky but it hasn't always helped me. It has all too often been too easy to accept their approval, too easy to let myself be cradled by their praises. I have never really had to try to please anyone, to try to be accepted.*

*The fact remains that I am frightened to let go of the strings, frightened that the kite of my passions will take flight, so I keep it boxed up in the lean-to, in the store cupboard, in the guest bedroom.*

*Watching Purple Suzy on the stage I feel like a dog of the wrong breed that instead of barking at the intruder, feels the need to assemble the flock. All that ineptitude, Purple Suzy, with her singular and effective impertinence, manages to make me feel, constantly.*

I understand rather more about Susana by the time the concert is over. To her the stage and the audience are the elixir of life. Like all performers she lives for the applause and she needs it to live. She longs for it, follows it, provokes people until she is sure of getting it and feeds on that praise that excites and satiates her. The audience is a drug she cannot

do without. A hallucinogenic that takes her to a world in which only she exists and everyone else is in communion with her, a place where she is free to withhold or hand out her energy as she wishes.

This is why she performs. The public's approval exceeds any other gratification. Perhaps this is why she doesn't try to take that "final step to stardom", as Zafirah puts it, perhaps this is already enough for her.

I also understand how much more exhibitionism Susana's has compared to that of the average human being.

Exhibitionism is an inbred peculiarity, no one can teach it to you. One could almost divide the world into two summary categories, exhibitionists, or egocentrics, and spectators.

Children are all egocentric, for they are unable to differentiate their own points of view from those of others. This is clearly the case when it comes to Mr Vincenzi, and to Susana, when she forces her frenzied oratory down people's throats. The exhibitionist is, on the other hand, someone who "wants, at all costs, to promote his own image or any thing else that can, in any way, help to esteem or exalt him". This is Susana completely.

Exhibitionists are, however, the good guys, for they enjoy themselves through self-assertion and in so doing, demonstrate their altruistic nature as those who love giving pleasure to others. This is also their weak-spot for they are dependent on other people's approval. On the other hand spectators, it is said, observe others, not only to understand *them*, but also to understand themselves. That is rather how I see myself. Susana considers prying and passive those who put nothing at stake. They have one thing in their favour, they are dependent on no one and therefore self-sufficient. Perhaps, as a result, they are more egotistical.

### **madison avenue**

Susana yawns as she stretches between the slippery mixed silk/cotton sheets and the soft duvet. As she slides from the bed her feet alight on the aged mahogany flooring of the Madison Avenue apartment belonging to the owner of Tora, a Cocker Spaniel. He is on a business trip for a week and has authorized Susana the use of his flat while she looks after his dog. This is the norm with all her clients when they go away. They allow her to stay in their homes so that their pets don't feel alone, and for her it's like going on holiday.

She throws open the fridge and pours some cold milk into a cereal bowl, looking forward to the scent of eucalyptus in the sauna on the terrace over-hanging the street. An abandoned black overcoat sticks out from under the settee. Outside the door she finds the recycled paper

wrapper containing the three pastries she ordered from Payard Patisserie; one with honey, one with chocolate and one with double chocolate.

There are two messages on the phone. The first voice is male and has a hard and peremptory tone. It's Stanley. He says that he has a short circuit camera installed in his duplex on Jane Street and has seen the incident with Geronimo and the tennis racquet. Susana is fired. The other is Margaret, Sissy's owner, who insults and threatens to report her to the animal protection society. She too has decided to sack Susana, having heard the story from that drag-queen plunger, Stanley. Her last audition went badly and losing two dogs in one day will seriously affect her monthly bank balance.

She grabs the *Village Voice*, which reminds her of the smelly streets of Alphabet City, and looks for the *Part-time Jobs* section.

Security Guard for luxury apartment block.

Home Pizza Delivery.

Negotiator for Yacht Sales, formal dress required.

Teacher: energetic individual required to work with adolescents.

Beautician: precision, cleanliness, organizational skills and punctuality essential.

Become an instructor at the American Red Cross. A good wage for helping others.

Become an ovule donator. Are you between 24 and 34 years old? Need money quick? Donate your ovules from a starting piece of \$5000 per donation.

What does that mean, "from a starting price..."? Susana wonders. Does it mean that your ovules are worth more or less according to your age or physical aspect? Or is this too negotiable, like everything else in New York?

"Life is work, work is life" says the stranger with whom she spent the night, "I've got to run."

"I don't agree," she answers. "If that's the case, life is a purgatory that leads to money and life should be a purgatory leading to the elevation of the self," she continues, "but as slaves to money we will never escape from your purgatory."

"Oriental philosophy? Life is simply a continual torment of waiting and delusions my dear. The secret is to enjoy the trip."

He pulls her back to bed. She is naked. Her firm legs envelop his like a cobweb. He sighs, slips his fingers between her round buttocks, runs them up her spine to her shoulders and then down again to their soft starting point. The smell on their breaths is still sour from sex and sleep

the night before. Their bodies are satisfied but recharged. He tries to turn her over and get on top of her but she resists, blocking his arms and staying atop herself, legs together and head back. He starts to run his fingers over the crevice between her clenched muscles. Susana closes her eyes shivering with a still subtle pleasure. The hands continue on the same spot, then move to caress her breasts. She half-opens her legs slowly and he takes the opportunity to spread them apart, positioning them on either side of his pelvis. Their bodies unite for a few, too brief moments.

Susana is hot and sweaty and can't wait for the guy to go. All of a sudden and without warning she has a lump in her throat. Everything was going fine when her throat had tightened and the urge to cry, that she had been able to control for god knows how long, had welled up from the pit of her stomach. The guy leaves the bed and makes his way to the bathroom where he starts running a shower. She is holding herself back, although she would never admit it. She tries to understand but fails. She knows it's no longer Chuck. She hadn't even been thinking about him, it's been all over with him for three years, four months and eighteen days. She only misses him accidentally and sporadically when she remembers that it had been her, as always, who had given up.

Worn out and unfulfilled she is wrapped, as if in a tomb, in the wrinkled sheets. The crying has stopped, regressed, returned from whence it had come. A sense of emptiness had taken its place and the pleasures of the night, the excitement of the new, had been wiped away in seconds, the sublime aromas had already become almost stomach turning. Desolation. Pointlessness. It had all gone so well, all as she had wanted. Now she feels nothing, full of nothing. It is a feeling she hates, like she hates her desire to throw them out as soon as the act of lovemaking is over. She knows she can fight anything but against that desire she can never win, can never overcome that immeasurable emptiness that she now feels in her guts. She feels her soul flatten, she cannot find the Susana she knows. It's not the first time, it won't be the last, but she doesn't have the courage to fight it. She lies on the bed for she knows not how long, naked, the excited little thing between her thighs, notwithstanding her tears, awaits satisfaction, thus fulfilling its biological function.

*I was twenty-four when I met my boyfriend and have never been single in New York. A couple of tormented years together in Italy and we left for a study/experience holiday. He, almost immediately found a good job opportunity, I fell in love with the city's energy and, without planning it, we moved here.*

*When Susana tells me of her after-sex problem with the stranger it makes me happy. It comes naturally to me to think of it as a positive sign. I see her disorientation, her disarray, her pain but am happy to find her less alien than usual, less distant from me, more humanly fragile and, above all, in evolution. It's as if the enthusiasm with which she usually recounts things is automatic and I have unexpectedly managed to reveal this. These new emotions, on the other hand, that force her to burrow into the abandoned part of her ego and her female identity, albeit with effort, reveal the substance within. They could, it seems to me, even bring her slowly closer to her new true self.*

### **mobile message**

When Susana calls and tells her that she has lost her dog-sitter jobs, Zafirah is furious. As she listens to her rebuke she receives a strange telephone message: “ID UZMI PAKET ZA PABLO IZ SOBE ZA POSTUNA GREENE STREET I DONESI GA KUCI. GORE SU PARE ZA TEBE. IMAS KLJUC. MARK.”

No number appears.

The only word she half recognizes is “kljuc”, keys, because she had heard Maia use it when she used to sing in the trio and Susana was no more than a client at the restaurant. Maia is also the only person that she can think of who might decode this hieroglyph.

“Go and collect a package for Pablo in the post room on Greene Street and take it home. There is some money for you upstairs. You have the keys. Mark” Maia kindly tells her over the phone. Susana only has half an hour but, if there really are a couple of hundred dollars waiting for her, it's worth a try.

She runs down Astoria Boulevard and jumps onto an R line train. Getting off at Prince Street she crosses Broadway and two blocks later she's there. Greene Street, the street where she got scared. The full bag on the kitchen counter would solve a lot of her problems though.

As she walks along the pavement she remembers that evening vividly, the sounds, the puddles, the echo of her heels on the uneven cobblestones, the light, the darkness.

She turns the key in the rusty lock and enters the room where the post is left but sees no package. She looks around more carefully, there two shelves set aside for boxes, but they are empty.

She should go upstairs, that's where the money is. She gets into the lift. Number 10. Her nostrils still seem able to detect the smell of Pablo's faeces. An Asian woman in a pink silk dressing gown comes towards her.

“Mark sent me.”

“Who?” the woman asks politely.

“Mark.”

“How come you have the keys to my house?” She inhales cigarette smoke from an ivory holder.

“They’re the keys for the elevator, I’m his dog-sitter.”

“There’s no Mark here and no dogs, we’re the new tenants, we’ve been here two months. You’re cute”.