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THE ELEVENTH APARTMENT had only one closet, but it did have a sliding glass door that opened onto a small balcony, from which he could see a man sitting across the way, outdoors in only a T-shirt and shorts even though it was October, smoking. Willem held up a hand in greeting to him, but the man didn't wave back.

In the bedroom, Jude was accordioning the closet door, opening and shutting it, when Willem came in. "There's only one closet," he said.

"That's okay," Willem said. "I have nothing to put in it anyway."

"Neither do I." They smiled at each other. The agent from the building wandered in after them. "We'll take it," Jude told her.

But back at the agent's office, they were told they couldn't rent the apartment after all. "Why not?" Jude asked her.

"You don't make enough to cover six months' rent, and you don't have anything in savings," said the agent, suddenly terse. She had checked their credit and their bank accounts and had at last realized that there was something amiss about two men in their twenties who were not a couple and yet were trying to rent a one-bedroom apartment on a dull (but still expensive) stretch of Twenty-fifth Street. "Do you have anyone who can sign on as your guarantor? A boss? Parents?"

"Our parents are dead," said Willem, swiftly.

The agent sighed. "Then I suggest you lower your expectations. No one who manages a well-run building is going to rent to candidates with your financial profile." And then she stood, with an air of finality, and looked pointedly at the door.

When they told JB and Malcolm this, however, they made it into a comedy: the apartment floor became tattooed with mouse droppings, the man across the way had almost exposed himself, the agent was upset because she had been flirting with Willem and he hadn't reciprocated.

"Who wants to live on Twenty-fifth and Second anyway," asked JB. They were at Pho Viet Huong in Chinatown, where they met twice a month for dinner. Pho Viet Huong wasn't very good — the pho was curiously sugary, the lime juice was soapy, and at least one of them got sick after every meal — but they kept coming, both out of habit and necessity. You could get a bowl of soup or a sandwich at Pho Viet Huong for five dollars,

or you could get an entrée, which were eight to ten dollars but much larger, so you could save half of it for the next day or for a snack later that night. Only Malcolm never ate the whole of his entrée and never saved the other half either, and when he was finished eating, he put his plate in the center of the table so Willem and JB — who were always hungry — could eat the rest.

"Of course we don't *want* to live at Twenty-fifth and Second, JB," said Willem, patiently, "but we don't really have a choice. We don't have any money, remember?"

"I don't understand why you don't stay where you are," said Malcolm, who was now pushing his mushrooms and tofu — he always ordered the same dish: oyster mushrooms and braised tofu in a treacly brown sauce — around his plate, as Willem and JB eyed it.

"Well, I can't," Willem said. "Remember?" He had to have explained this to Malcolm a dozen times in the last three months. "Merritt's boyfriend's moving in, so I have to move out."

"But why do *you* have to move out?"

"Because it's Merritt's name on the lease, Malcolm!" said JB.

"Oh," Malcolm said. He was quiet. He often forgot what he considered inconsequential details, but he also never seemed to mind when people grew impatient with him for forgetting. "Right." He moved the mushrooms to the center of the table. "But you, Jude—"

"I can't stay at your place forever, Malcolm. Your parents are going to kill me at some point."

"My parents love you."

"That's nice of you to say. But they won't if I don't move out, and soon."

Malcolm was the only one of the four of them who lived at home, and as JB liked to say, if he had Malcolm's home, he would live at home too. It wasn't as if Malcolm's house was particularly grand — it was, in fact, creaky and ill-kept, and Willem had once gotten a splinter simply by running his hand up its banister — but it was large: a real Upper East Side town house. Malcolm's sister, Flora, who was three years older than him, had moved out of the basement apartment recently, and Jude had taken her place as a short-term solution: Eventually, Malcolm's parents would want to reclaim the unit to convert it into offices for his mother's literary agency,

which meant Jude (who was finding the flight of stairs that led down to it too difficult to navigate anyway) had to look for his own apartment.

And it was natural that he would live with Willem; they had been roommates throughout college. In their first year, the four of them had shared a space that consisted of a cinder-blocked common room, where sat their desks and chairs and a couch that JB's aunts had driven up in a U-Haul, and a second, far tinier room, in which two sets of bunk beds had been placed. This room had been so narrow that Malcolm and Jude, lying in the bottom bunks, could reach out and grab each other's hands. Malcolm and JB had shared one of the units; Jude and Willem had shared the other.

"It's blacks versus whites," JB would say.

"Jude's not white," Willem would respond.

"And I'm not black," Malcolm would add, more to annoy JB than because he believed it.

"Well," JB said now, pulling the plate of mushrooms toward him with the tines of his fork, "I'd say you could both stay with me, but I think you'd fucking hate it." JB lived in a massive, filthy loft in Little Italy, full of strange hallways that led to unused, oddly shaped cul-de-sacs and unfinished half rooms, the Sheetrock abandoned mid-construction, which belonged to another person they knew from college. Ezra was an artist, a bad one, but he didn't need to be good because, as JB liked to remind them, he would never have to work in his entire life. And not only would *he* never have to work, but his children's children's children would never have to work: They could make bad, unsalable, worthless art for generations and they would still be able to buy at whim the best oils they wanted, and impractically large lofts in downtown Manhattan that they could trash with their bad architectural decisions, and when they got sick of the artist's life — as JB was convinced Ezra someday would — all they would need to do is call their trust officers and be awarded an enormous lump sum of cash of an amount that the four of them (well, maybe not Malcolm) could never dream of seeing in their lifetimes. In the meantime, though, Ezra was a useful person to know, not only because he let JB and a few of his other friends from school stay in his apartment — at any time, there were four or five people burrowing in various corners of the loft — but because he was a good-natured and basically generous person, and liked to throw excessive parties in which copious amounts of food and drugs and alcohol were available for free.

“Hold up,” JB said, putting his chopsticks down. “I just realized — there’s someone at the magazine renting some place for her aunt. Like, just on the verge of Chinatown.”

“How much is it?” asked Willem.

“Probably nothing — she didn’t even know what to ask for it. And she wants someone in there that she knows.”

“Do you think you could put in a good word?”

“Better — I’ll introduce you. Can you come by the office tomorrow?”

Jude sighed. “I won’t be able to get away.” He looked at Willem.

“Don’t worry — I can. What time?”

“Lunchtime, I guess. One?”

“I’ll be there.”

Willem was still hungry, but he let JB eat the rest of the mushrooms. Then they all waited around for a bit; sometimes Malcolm ordered jackfruit ice cream, the one consistently good thing on the menu, ate two bites, and then stopped, and he and JB would finish the rest. But this time he didn’t order the ice cream, and so they asked for the bill so they could study it and divide it to the dollar.

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The next day, Willem met JB at his office. JB worked as a receptionist at a small but influential magazine based in SoHo that covered the downtown art scene. This was a strategic job for him; his plan, as he’d explained to Willem one night, was that he’d try to befriend one of the editors there and then convince him to feature him in the magazine. He estimated this taking about six months, which meant he had three more to go.

JB wore a perpetual expression of mild disbelief while at his job, both that he should be working at all and that no one had yet thought to recognize his special genius. He was not a good receptionist. Although the phones rang more or less constantly, he rarely picked them up; when any of them wanted to get through to him (the cell phone reception in the building was inconsistent), they had to follow a special code of ringing twice, hanging up, and then ringing again. And even then he sometimes failed to answer — his hands were busy beneath his desk, combing and plaiting snarls of hair from a black plastic trash bag he kept at his feet.

JB was going through, as he put it, his hair phase. Recently he had decided to take a break from painting in favor of making sculptures from

black hair. Each of them had spent an exhausting weekend following JB from barbershop to beauty shop in Queens, Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Manhattan, waiting outside as JB went in to ask the owners for any sweepings or cuttings they might have, and then lugging an increasingly awkward bag of hair down the street after him. His early pieces had included *The Mace*, a tennis ball that he had de-fuzzed, sliced in half, and filled with sand before coating it in glue and rolling it around and around in a carpet of hair so that the bristles moved like seaweed underwater, and "The Kwotidien," in which he covered various household items — a stapler; a spatula; a teacup — in pelts of hair. Now he was working on a large-scale project that he refused to discuss with them except in snatches, but it involved the combing out and braiding together of many pieces in order to make one apparently endless rope of frizzing black hair. The previous Friday he had lured them over with the promise of pizza and beer to help him braid, but after many hours of tedious work, it became clear that there was no pizza and beer forthcoming, and they had left, a little irritated but not terribly surprised.

They were all bored with the hair project, although Jude — alone among them — thought that the pieces were lovely and would someday be considered significant. In thanks, JB had given Jude a hair-covered hairbrush, but then had reclaimed the gift when it looked like Ezra's father's friend might be interested in buying it (he didn't, but JB never returned the hairbrush to Jude). The hair project had proved difficult in other ways as well; another evening, when the three of them had somehow been once again conned into going to Little Italy and combing out more hair, Malcolm had commented that the hair stank. Which it did: not of anything distasteful but simply the tangy metallic scent of unwashed scalp. But JB had thrown one of his mounting tantrums, and had called Malcolm a self-hating Negro and an Uncle Tom and a traitor to the race, and Malcolm, who very rarely angered but who angered over accusations like this, had dumped his wine into the nearest bag of hair and gotten up and stamped out. Jude had hurried, the best he could, after Malcolm, and Willem had stayed to handle JB. And although the two of them reconciled the next day, in the end Willem and Jude felt (unfairly, they knew) slightly angrier at Malcolm, since the next weekend they were back in Queens, walking from barbershop to barbershop, trying to replace the bag of hair that he had ruined.

"How's life on the black planet?" Willem asked JB now.

“Black,” said JB, stuffing the plait he was untangling back into the bag. “Let’s go; I told Annika we’d be there at one thirty.” The phone on his desk began to ring.

“Don’t you want to get that?”

“They’ll call back.”

As they walked downtown, JB complained. So far, he had concentrated most of his seductive energies on a senior editor named Dean, whom they all called DeeAnn. They had been at a party, the three of them, held at one of the junior editor’s parents’ apartment in the Dakota, in which art-hung room bled into art-hung room. As JB talked with his coworkers in the kitchen, Malcolm and Willem had walked through the apartment together (Where had Jude been that night? Working, probably), looking at a series of Edward Burtynskys hanging in the guest bedroom, a suite of water towers by the Bechers mounted in four rows of five over the desk in the den, an enormous Gursky floating above the half bookcases in the library, and, in the master bedroom, an entire wall of Diane Arbuses, covering the space so thoroughly that only a few centimeters of blank wall remained at the top and bottom. They had been admiring a picture of two sweet-faced girls with Down syndrome playing for the camera in their too-tight, too-childish bathing suits, when Dean had approached them. He was a tall man, but he had a small, gophery, pockmarked face that made him appear feral and untrustworthy.

They introduced themselves, explained that they were here because they were JB’s friends. Dean told them that he was one of the senior editors at the magazine, and that he handled all the arts coverage.

“Ah,” Willem said, careful not to look at Malcolm, whom he did not trust not to react. JB had told them that he had targeted the arts editor as his potential mark; this must be him.

“Have you ever seen anything like this?” Dean asked them, waving a hand at the Arbuses.

“Never,” Willem said. “I love Diane Arbus.”

Dean stiffened, and his little features seemed to gather themselves into a knot in the center of his little face. “It’s DeeAnn.”

“What?”

“DeeAnn. You pronounce her name ‘DeeAnn.’ ”

They had barely been able to get out of the room without laughing. “DeeAnn!” JB had said later, when they told him the story. “Christ! What a

pretentious little shit."

"But he's *your* pretentious little shit," Jude had said. And ever since, they had referred to Dean as "DeeAnn."

Unfortunately, however, it appeared that despite JB's tireless cultivation of DeeAnn, he was no closer to being included in the magazine than he had been three months ago. JB had even let DeeAnn suck him off in the steam room at the gym, and still nothing. Every day, JB found a reason to wander back into the editorial offices and over to the bulletin board on which the next three months' story ideas were written on white note cards, and every day he looked at the section dedicated to up-and-coming artists for his name, and every day he was disappointed. Instead he saw the names of various no-talents and overhypes, people owed favors or people who knew people to whom favors were owed.

"If I ever see Ezra up there, I'm going to kill myself," JB always said, to which the others said: You won't, JB, and Don't worry, JB — you'll be up there someday, and What do you need them for, JB? You'll find somewhere else, to which JB would reply, respectively, "Are you sure?" and "I fucking doubt it," and "I've fucking invested this time — three whole months of my fucking life — I better be fucking up there, or this whole thing has been a fucking waste, just like everything else," everything else meaning, variously, grad school, moving back to New York, the hair series, or life in general, depending on how nihilistic he felt that day.

He was still complaining when they reached Lispenard Street. Willem was new enough to the city — he had only lived there a year — to have never heard of the street, which was barely more than an alley, two blocks long and one block south of Canal, and yet JB, who had grown up in Brooklyn, hadn't heard of it either.

They found the building and punched buzzer 5C. A girl answered, her voice made scratchy and hollow by the intercom, and rang them in. Inside, the lobby was narrow and high-ceilinged and painted a curdled, gleaming shit-brown, which made them feel like they were at the bottom of a well.

The girl was waiting for them at the door of the apartment. "Hey, JB," she said, and then looked at Willem and blushed.

"Annika, this is my friend Willem," JB said. "Willem, Annika works in the art department. She's cool."

Annika looked down and stuck out her hand in one movement. "It's nice to meet you," she said to the floor. JB kicked Willem in the foot and grinned

at him. Willem ignored him.

"It's nice to meet you, too," he said.

"Well, this is the apartment? It's my aunt's? She lived here for fifty years but she just moved into a retirement home?" Annika was speaking very fast and had apparently decided that the best strategy was to treat Willem like an eclipse and simply not look at him at all. She was talking faster and faster, about her aunt, and how she always said the neighborhood had changed, and how she'd never heard of Lispenard Street until she'd moved downtown, and how she was sorry it hadn't been painted yet, but her aunt had just, literally just moved out and they'd only had a chance to have it cleaned the previous weekend. She looked everywhere but at Willem — at the ceiling (stamped tin), at the floors (cracked, but parquet), at the walls (on which long-ago-hung picture frames had left ghostly shadows) — until finally Willem had to interrupt, gently, and ask if he could take a look through the rest of the apartment.

"Oh, be my guest," said Annika, "I'll leave you alone," although she then began to follow them, talking rapidly to JB about someone named Jasper and how he'd been using Archer for *everything*, and didn't JB think it looked a little too round and weird for body text? Now that Willem had his back turned to her, she stared at him openly, her rambling becoming more inane the longer she spoke.

JB watched Annika watch Willem. He had never seen her like this, so nervous and girlish (normally she was surly and silent and was actually a bit feared in the office for creating on the wall above her desk an elaborate sculpture of a heart made entirely of X-ACTO blades), but he had seen lots of women behave this way around Willem. They all had. Their friend Lionel used to say that Willem must have been a fisherman in a past life, because he couldn't help but attract pussy. And yet most of the time (though not always), Willem seemed unaware of the attention. JB had once asked Malcolm why he thought that was, and Malcolm said he thought it was because Willem hadn't noticed. JB had only grunted in reply, but his thinking was: Malcolm was the most obtuse person he knew, and if even *Malcolm* had noticed how women reacted around Willem, it was impossible that Willem himself hadn't. Later, however, Jude had offered a different interpretation: he had suggested that Willem was deliberately *not* reacting to all the women so the other men around him wouldn't feel threatened by him. This made more sense; Willem was liked by everyone and never

wanted to make people feel intentionally uncomfortable, and so it was possible that, subconsciously at least, he was feigning a sort of ignorance. But still — it was fascinating to watch, and the three of them never tired of it, nor of making fun of Willem for it afterward, though he would normally just smile and say nothing.

"Does the elevator work well here?" Willem asked abruptly, turning around.

"What?" Annika replied, startled. "Yes, it's pretty reliable." She pulled her faint lips into a narrow smile that JB realized, with a stomach-twist of embarrassment for her, was meant to be flirtatious. Oh, Annika, he thought. "What exactly are you planning on bringing into my aunt's apartment?"

"Our friend," he answered, before Willem could. "He has trouble climbing stairs and needs the elevator to work."

"Oh," she said, flushing again. She was back to staring at the floor. "Sorry. Yes, it works."

The apartment was not impressive. There was a small foyer, little larger than the size of a doormat, from which pronged the kitchen (a hot, greasy little cube) to the right and a dining area to the left that would accommodate perhaps a card table. A half wall separated this space from the living room, with its four windows, each striped with bars, looking south onto the litter-scattered street, and down a short hall to the right was the bathroom with its milk-glass sconces and worn-enamel tub, and across from it the bedroom, which had another window and was deep but narrow; here, two wooden twin-bed frames had been placed parallel to each other, each pressed against a wall. One of the frames was already topped with a futon, a bulky, graceless thing, as heavy as a dead horse.

"The futon's never been used," Annika said. She told a long story about how she was going to move in, and had even bought the futon in preparation, but had never gotten to use it because she moved in instead with her friend Clement, who wasn't her boyfriend, just her friend, and god, what a retard she was for saying that. Anyway, if Willem wanted the apartment, she'd throw in the futon for free.

Willem thanked her. "What do you think, JB?" he asked.

What did he think? He thought it was a shithole. Of course, he too lived in a shithole, but he was in his shithole by choice, and because it was free, and the money he would have had to spend on rent he was instead able to spend on paints, and supplies, and drugs, and the occasional taxi. But if

Ezra were to ever decide to start charging him rent, no way would he be there. His family may not have Ezra's money, or Malcolm's, but under no circumstances would they allow him to throw away money living in a shithole. They would find him something better, or give him a little monthly gift to help him along. But Willem and Jude didn't have that choice: They had to pay their own way, and they had no money, and thus they were condemned to live in a shithole. And if they were, then this was probably the shithole to live in — it was cheap, it was downtown, and their prospective landlord already had a crush on fifty percent of them.

So "I think it's perfect," he told Willem, who agreed. Annika let out a yelp. And a hurried conversation later, it was over: Annika had a tenant, and Willem and Jude had a place to live — all before JB had to remind Willem that he wouldn't mind Willem paying for a bowl of noodles for lunch, before he had to get back to the office.

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JB wasn't given to introspection, but as he rode the train to his mother's house that Sunday, he was unable to keep himself from experiencing a vague sort of self-congratulation, combined with something approaching gratitude, that he had the life and family he did.

His father, who had emigrated to New York from Haiti, had died when JB was three, and although JB always liked to think that he remembered his face — kind and gentle, with a narrow strip of mustache and cheeks that rounded into plums when he smiled — he was never to know whether he only thought he remembered it, having grown up studying the photograph of his father that sat on his mother's bedside table, or whether he actually did. Still, that had been his only sadness as a child, and even that was more of an obligatory sadness: He was fatherless, and he knew that fatherless children mourned the absence in their lives. He, however, had never experienced that yearning himself. After his father had died, his mother, who was a second-generation Haitian American, had earned her doctorate in education, teaching all the while at the public school near their house that she had deemed JB better than. By the time he was in high school, an expensive private day school nearly an hour's commute from their place in Brooklyn, which he attended on scholarship, she was the principal of a different school, a magnet program in Manhattan, and an adjunct professor at Brooklyn College. She had been the subject of an article in *The New York*

Times for her innovative teaching methods, and although he had pretended otherwise to his friends, he had been proud of her.

She had always been busy when he was growing up, but he had never felt neglected, had never felt that his mother loved her students more than she loved him. At home, there was his grandmother, who cooked whatever he wanted, and sang to him in French, and told him literally daily what a treasure he was, what a genius, and how he was the man in her life. And there were his aunts, his mother's sister, a detective in Manhattan, and her girlfriend, a pharmacist and second-generation American herself (although she was from Puerto Rico, not Haiti), who had no children and so treated him as their own. His mother's sister was sporty and taught him how to catch and throw a ball (something that, even then, he had only the slightest of interest in, but which proved to be a useful social skill later on), and her girlfriend was interested in art; one of his earliest memories had been a trip with her to the Museum of Modern Art, where he clearly remembered staring at *One: Number 31, 1950*, dumb with awe, barely listening to his aunt as she explained how Pollock had made the painting.

In high school, where a bit of revisionism seemed necessary in order to distinguish himself and, especially, make his rich white classmates uncomfortable, he blurred the truth of his circumstances somewhat: He became another fatherless black boy, with a mother who had completed school only after he was born (he neglected to mention that it was graduate school she had been completing, and so people assumed that he meant high school), and an aunt who walked the streets (again, they assumed as a prostitute, not realizing he meant as a detective). His favorite family photograph had been taken by his best friend in high school, a boy named Daniel, to whom he had revealed the truth just before he let him in to shoot their family portrait. Daniel had been working on a series of, as he called it, families "up from the edge," and JB had had to hurriedly correct the perception that his aunt was a borderline streetwalker and his mother barely literate before he allowed his friend inside. Daniel's mouth had opened and no sound had emerged, but then JB's mother had come to the door and told them both to get in out of the cold, and Daniel had to obey.

Daniel, still stunned, positioned them in the living room: JB's grandmother, Yvette, sat in her favorite high-backed chair, and around her stood his aunt Christine and her girlfriend, Silvia, to one side, and JB and his mother to the other. But then, just before Daniel could take the picture,

Yvette demanded that JB take her place. “He is the king of the house,” she told Daniel, as her daughters protested. “Jean-Baptiste! Sit down!” He did. In the picture, he is gripping both of the armrests with his plump hands (even then he had been plump), while on either side, women beamed down at him. He himself is looking directly at the camera, smiling widely, sitting in the chair that should have been occupied by his grandmother.

Their faith in him, in his ultimate triumph, remained unwavering, almost disconcertingly so. They were convinced — even as his own conviction was tested so many times that it was becoming difficult to self-generate it — that he would someday be an important artist, that his work would hang in major museums, that the people who hadn’t yet given him his chances didn’t properly appreciate his gift. Sometimes he believed them and allowed himself to be buoyed by their confidence. At other times he was suspicious — their opinions seemed so the complete opposite of the rest of the world’s that he wondered whether they might be condescending to him, or just crazy. Or maybe they had bad taste. How could four women’s judgment differ so profoundly from everyone else’s? Surely the odds of theirs being the correct opinion were not good.

And yet he was relieved to return every Sunday on these secret visits back home, where the food was plentiful and free, and where his grandmother would do his laundry, and where every word he spoke and every sketch he showed would be savored and murmured about approvingly. His mother’s house was a familiar land, a place where he would always be revered, where every custom and tradition felt tailored to him and his particular needs. At some point in the evening — after dinner but before dessert, while they all rested in the living room, watching television, his mother’s cat lying hotly in his lap — he would look at his women and feel something swell within him. He would think then of Malcolm, with his unsparingly intelligent father and affectionate but absentminded mother, and then of Willem, with his dead parents (JB had met them only once, over their freshman year move-out weekend, and had been surprised by how taciturn, how formal, how *un-Willem* they had been), and finally, of course, Jude, with his completely nonexistent parents (a mystery, there — they had known Jude for almost a decade now and still weren’t certain when or if there had ever been parents at all, only that the situation was miserable and not to be spoken of), and feel a warm, watery rush of happiness and thankfulness, as if an ocean were rising up in his

chest. I'm lucky, he'd think, and then, because he was competitive and kept track of where he stood against his peers in every aspect of life, I'm the luckiest one of all. But he never thought that he didn't deserve it, or that he should work harder to express his appreciation; his family was happy when he was happy, and so his only obligation to them was to be happy, to live exactly the life he wanted, on the terms he wanted.

"We don't get the families we deserve," Willem had said once when they had been very stoned. He was, of course, speaking of Jude.

"I agree," JB had replied. And he did. None of them — not Willem, not Jude, not even Malcolm — had the families they deserved. But secretly, he made an exception for himself: He *did* have the family he deserved. They were wonderful, truly wonderful, and he knew it. And what's more, he *did* deserve them.

"There's my brilliant boy," Yvette would call out whenever he walked into the house.

It had never had to occur to him that she was anything but completely correct.

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The day of the move, the elevator broke.

"Goddammit," Willem said. "I *asked* Annika about this. JB, do you have her number?"

But JB didn't. "Oh well," said Willem. What good would texting Annika do, anyway? "I'm sorry, guys," he said to everyone, "we're going to have to take the stairs."

No one seemed to mind. It was a beautiful late-fall day, just-cold and dry and blustery, and there were eight of them to move not very many boxes and only a few pieces of furniture — Willem and JB and Jude and Malcolm and JB's friend Richard and Willem's friend Carolina and two friends of the four of theirs in common who were both named Henry Young, but whom everyone called Asian Henry Young and Black Henry Young in order to distinguish them.

Malcolm, who when you least expected it would prove himself an efficient manager, made the assignments. Jude would go up to the apartment and direct traffic and the placement of boxes. In between directing traffic, he would start unpacking the large items and breaking down the boxes. Carolina and Black Henry Young, who were both strong but short, would carry the boxes of books, since those were of a manageable

size. Willem and JB and Richard would carry the furniture. And he and Asian Henry Young would take everything else. On every trip back downstairs, everyone should take down any boxes that Jude had flattened and stack them on the curb near the trash cans.

"Do you need help?" Willem asked Jude quietly as everyone began dividing up for their assignments.

"No," he said, shortly, and Willem watched him make his halting, slow-stepping way up the stairs, which were very steep and high, until he could no longer see him.

It was an easy move-in, brisk and undramatic, and after they'd all hung around for a bit, unpacking books and eating pizza, the others took off, to parties and bars, and Willem and Jude were finally left alone in their new apartment. The space was a mess, but the thought of putting things in their place was simply too tiring. And so they lingered, surprised by how dark the afternoon had grown so quickly, and that they had someplace to live, someplace in Manhattan, someplace they could afford. They had both noticed the looks of politely maintained blankness on their friends' faces as they saw their apartment for the first time (the room with its two narrow twin beds—"Like something out of a Victorian asylum" was how Willem had described it to Jude — had gotten the most comments), but neither of them minded: it was theirs, and they had a two-year lease, and no one could take it away from them. Here, they would even be able to save a little money, and what did they need more space for, anyway? Of course, they both craved beauty, but that would have to wait. Or rather, they would have to wait for it.

They were talking, but Jude's eyes were closed, and Willem knew — from the constant, hummingbird-flutter of his eyelids and the way his hand was curled into a fist so tight that Willem could see the ocean-green threads of his veins jumping under the back of his hand — that he was in pain. He knew from how rigid Jude was holding his legs, which were resting atop a box of books, that the pain was severe, and knew too that there was nothing he could do for him. If he said, "Jude, let me get you some aspirin," Jude would say, "I'm fine, Willem, I don't need anything," and if he said, "Jude, why don't you lie down," Jude would say, "Willem. I'm *fine*. Stop worrying." So finally, he did what they had all learned over the years to do when Jude's legs were hurting him, which was to make some excuse, get up, and leave the room, so Jude could lie perfectly still and wait for the pain

to pass without having to make conversation or expend energy pretending that everything was fine and that he was just tired, or had a cramp, or whatever feeble explanation he was able to invent.

In the bedroom, Willem found the garbage bag with their sheets and made up first his futon and then Jude's (which they had bought for very little from Carolina's soon-to-be ex-girlfriend the week before). He sorted his clothes into shirts, pants, and underwear and socks, assigning each its own cardboard box (newly emptied of books), which he shoved beneath the bed. He left Jude's clothes alone, but then moved into the bathroom, which he cleaned and disinfected before sorting and putting away their toothpaste and soaps and razors and shampoos. Once or twice he paused in his work to creep out to the living room, where Jude remained in the same position, his eyes still closed, his hand still balled, his head turned to the side so that Willem was unable to see his expression.

His feelings for Jude were complicated. He loved him — that part was simple — and feared for him, and sometimes felt as much his older brother and protector as his friend. He knew that Jude would be and had been fine without him, but he sometimes saw things in Jude that disturbed him and made him feel both helpless and, paradoxically, more determined to help him (although Jude rarely asked for help of any kind). They all loved Jude, and admired him, but he often felt that Jude had let him see a little more of him — just a little — than he had shown the others, and was unsure what he was supposed to do with that knowledge.

The pain in his legs, for example: as long as they had known him, they had known he had problems with his legs. It was hard not to know this, of course; he had used a cane through college, and when he had been younger — he was so young when they met him, a full two years younger than they, that he had still been growing — he had walked only with the aid of an orthopedic crutch, and had worn heavily strapped splint-like braces on his legs whose external pins, which were drilled into his bones, impaired his ability to bend his knees. But he had never complained, not once, although he had never begrudged anyone else's complaining, either; their sophomore year, JB had slipped on some ice and fallen and broken his wrist, and they all remembered the hubbub that had followed, and JB's theatrical moans and cries of misery, and how for a whole week after his cast was set he refused to leave the university infirmary, and had received so many visitors that the school newspaper had written a story about him. There was another

guy in their dorm, a soccer player who had torn his meniscus and who kept saying that JB didn't know what pain was, but Jude had gone to visit JB every day, just as Willem and Malcolm had, and had given him all the sympathy he had craved.

One night shortly after JB had deigned to be discharged from the clinic and had returned to the dorm to enjoy another round of attention, Willem had woken to find the room empty. This wasn't so unusual, really: JB was at his boyfriend's, and Malcolm, who was taking an astronomy class at Harvard that semester, was in the lab where he now slept every Tuesday and Thursday nights. Willem himself was often elsewhere, usually in his girlfriend's room, but she had the flu and he had stayed home that night. But Jude was always there. He had never had a girlfriend or a boyfriend, and he had always spent the night in their room, his presence beneath Willem's bunk as familiar and constant as the sea.

He wasn't sure what compelled him to climb down from his bed and stand for a minute, dopily, in the center of the quiet room, looking about him as if Jude might be hanging from the ceiling like a spider. But then he noticed his crutch was gone, and he began to look for him, calling his name softly in the common room, and then, when he got no answer, leaving their suite and walking down the hall toward the communal bathroom. After the dark of their room, the bathroom was nauseously bright, its fluorescent lights emitting their faint continual sizzle, and he was so disoriented that it came as less of a surprise than it should have when he saw, in the last stall, Jude's foot sticking out from beneath the door, the tip of his crutch beside it.

"Jude?" he whispered, knocking on the stall door, and when there was no answer, "I'm coming in." He pulled open the door and found Jude on the floor, one leg tucked up against his chest. He had vomited, and some of it had pooled on the ground before him, and some of it was scabbed on his lips and chin, a stippled apricot smear. His eyes were shut and he was sweaty, and with one hand he was holding the curved end of his crutch with an intensity that, as Willem would later come to recognize, comes only with extreme discomfort.

At the time, though, he was scared, and confused, and began asking Jude question after question, none of which he was in any state to answer, and it wasn't until he tried to hoist Jude to his feet that Jude gave a shout and Willem understood how bad his pain was.

He somehow managed to half drag, half carry Jude to their room, and fold him into his bed and inexpertly clean him up. By this time the worst of the pain seemed to have passed, and when Willem asked him if he should call a doctor, Jude shook his head.

“But Jude,” he said, quietly, “you’re in pain. We have to get you help.”

“Nothing will help,” he said, and was silent for a few moments. “I just have to wait.” His voice was whispery and faint, unfamiliar.

“What can I do?” Willem asked.

“Nothing,” Jude said. They were quiet. “But Willem — will you stay with me for a little while?”

“Of course,” he said. Beside him, Jude trembled and shook as if chilled, and Willem took the comforter off his own bed and wrapped it around him. At one point he reached under the blanket and found Jude’s hand and prised open his fist so he could hold his damp, callused palm. It had been a long time since he had held another guy’s hand — not since his own brother’s surgery many years ago — and he was surprised by how strong Jude’s grip was, how muscular his fingers. Jude shuddered and chattered his teeth for hours, and eventually Willem lay down beside him and fell asleep.

The next morning, he woke in Jude’s bed with his hand throbbing, and when he examined the back of it he saw bruised smudges where Jude’s fingers had clenched him. He got up, a bit unsteadily, and walked into the common area, where he saw Jude reading at his desk, his features indistinguishable in the bright late-morning light.

He looked up when Willem came in and then stood, and for a while they merely looked at each other in silence.

“Willem, I’m so sorry,” Jude said at last.

“Jude,” he said, “there’s nothing to be sorry for.” And he meant it; there wasn’t.

But “I’m sorry, Willem, I’m so sorry,” Jude repeated, and no matter how many times Willem tried to reassure him, he wouldn’t be comforted.

“Just don’t tell Malcolm and JB, okay?” he asked him.

“I won’t,” he promised. And he never did, although in the end, it didn’t make a difference, for eventually, Malcolm and JB too would see him in pain, although only a few times in episodes as sustained as the one Willem witnessed that night.

He had never discussed it with Jude, but in the years to come, he would see him in all sorts of pain, big pains and little ones, would see him wince at

small hurts and occasionally, when the discomfort was too profound, would see him vomit, or pleat to the ground, or simply blank out and become insensate, the way he was doing in their living room now. But although he was a man who kept his promises, there was a part of him that always wondered why he had never raised the issue with Jude, why he had never made him discuss what it felt like, why he had never dared to do what instinct told him to do a hundred times: to sit down beside him and rub his legs, to try to knead back into submission those misfiring nerve endings. Instead here he was hiding in the bathroom, making busywork for himself as, a few yards away, one of his dearest friends sat alone on a disgusting sofa, making the slow, sad, lonely journey back to consciousness, back to the land of the living, without anyone at all by his side.

"You're a coward," he said to his reflection in the bathroom mirror. His face looked back at him, tired with disgust. From the living room, there was only silence, but Willem moved to stand unseen at its border, waiting for Jude to return to him.

"The place is a shithole," JB had told Malcolm, and although he wasn't wrong — the lobby alone made Malcolm's skin prickle — he nevertheless returned home feeling melancholy, and wondering yet again whether continuing to live in his parents' house was really preferable to living in a shithole of his own.

Logically, of course, he should absolutely stay where he was. He made very little money, and worked very long hours, and his parents' house was large enough so that he could, in theory, never see them if he chose. Aside from occupying the entire fourth floor (which, to be honest, wasn't much better than a shithole itself, it was so messy — his mother had stopped sending the housekeeper up to clean after Malcolm had yelled at her that Inez had broken one of his model houses), he had access to the kitchen, and the washing machine, and the full spectrum of papers and magazines that his parents subscribed to, and once a week he added his clothes to the drooping cloth bag that his mother dropped off at the dry cleaners on the way to her office and Inez picked up the following day. He was not proud of this arrangement, of course, nor of the fact that he was twenty-seven and his mother still called him at the office when she was ordering the week's groceries to ask him if he would eat extra strawberries if she bought them, or to wonder whether he wanted char or bream for dinner that night.

Things would be easier, however, if his parents actually respected the same divisions of space and time that Malcolm did. Aside from expecting him to eat breakfast with them in the morning and brunch every Sunday, they also frequently dropped by his floor for a visit, preceding their social calls with a simultaneous knock and doorknob-turn that Malcolm had told them time and again defeated the purpose of knocking at all. He knew this was a terribly bratty and ungrateful thing to think, but at times he dreaded even coming home for the inevitable small talk that he would have to endure before he was allowed to scruff upstairs like a teenager. He especially dreaded life in the house without Jude there; although the basement apartment had been more private than his floor, his parents had also taken to blithely dropping by when Jude was in residence, so that sometimes when Malcolm went downstairs to see Jude, there would be his father sitting in the basement apartment already, lecturing Jude about something dull. His father in particular liked Jude — he often told Malcolm that Jude had real intellectual heft and depth, unlike his other friends, who were essentially flibbertigibbets — and in his absence, it would be Malcolm whom his father would regale with his complicated stories about the market, and the shifting global financial realities, and various other topics about which Malcolm didn't much care. He in fact sometimes suspected that his father would have preferred Jude for a son: He and Jude had gone to the same law school. The judge for whom Jude had clerked had been his father's mentor at his first firm. And Jude was an assistant prosecutor in the criminal division of the U.S. Attorney's Office, the exact same place his father had worked at when he was young.

"Mark my words: that kid is going places," or "It's so rare to meet someone who's going to be a truly self-made star at the start of their career," his father would often announce to Malcolm and his mother after talking to Jude, looking pleased with himself, as if he was somehow responsible for Jude's genius, and in those moments Malcolm would have to avoid looking at his mother's face and the consoling expression he knew it wore.

Things would also be easier if Flora were still around. When she was preparing to leave, Malcolm had tried to suggest that he should be her roommate in her new two-bedroom apartment on Bethune Street, but she either genuinely didn't understand his numerous hints or simply chose not to understand them. Flora had not seemed to mind the excessive amount of

time their parents demanded from them, which had meant that he could spend more time in his room working on his model houses and less time downstairs in the den, fidgeting through one of his father's interminable Ozu film festivals. When he was younger, Malcolm had been hurt by and resentful of his father's preference for Flora, which was so obvious that family friends had commented on it. "Fabulous Flora," his father called her (or, at various points of her adolescence, "Feisty Flora," "Ferocious Flora," or "Fierce Flora," though always with approval), and even today — even though Flora was practically thirty — he still took a special pleasure in her. "Fabulous said the wittiest thing today," he'd say at dinner, as if Malcolm and his mother did not themselves talk to Flora on a regular basis, or, after a brunch downtown near Flora's apartment, "Why did Fabulous have to move so far from us?" even though she was only a fifteen-minute car ride away. (Malcolm found this particularly galling, as his father was always telling him brocaded stories about how he had moved from the Grenadines to Queens as a child and how he had forever after felt like a man trapped between two countries, and someday Malcolm too should go be an expat somewhere because it would really enrich him as a person and give him some much-needed perspective, etc., etc. And yet if Flora ever dared move off the island, much less to another country, Malcolm had no doubt that his father would fall apart.)

Malcolm himself had no nickname. Occasionally his father called him by other famous Malcolms' last names—"X," or "McLaren," or "McDowell," or "Muggeridge," the last for whom Malcolm was supposedly named — but it always felt less like an affectionate gesture and more like a rebuke, a reminder of what Malcolm should be but clearly was not.

Sometimes — often — it seemed to Malcolm that it was silly for him to still worry, much less mope, about the fact that his father didn't seem to like him very much. Even his mother said so. "You know Daddy doesn't mean anything by it," she'd say once in a while, after his father had delivered one of his soliloquies on Flora's general superiority, and Malcolm — wanting to believe her, though also noting with irritation that his mother still referred to his father as "Daddy"—would grunt or mumble something to show her that he didn't care one way or another. And sometimes — again, increasingly often — he would grow irritated that he spent so much time thinking about his parents at all. Was this normal? Wasn't there something just a bit pathetic about it? He was twenty-seven, after all! Was this what

happened when you lived at home? Or was it just him? Surely this was the best possible argument for moving out: so he'd somehow cease to be such a child. At night, as beneath him his parents completed their routines, the banging of the old pipes as they washed their faces and the sudden thunk into silence as they turned down the living-room radiators better than any clock at indicating that it was eleven, eleven thirty, midnight, he made lists of what he needed to resolve, and fast, in the following year: his work (at a standstill), his love life (nonexistent), his sexuality (unresolved), his future (uncertain). The four items were always the same, although sometimes their order of priority changed. Also consistent was his ability to precisely diagnose their status, coupled with his utter inability to provide any solutions.

The next morning he'd wake determined: today he was going to move out and tell his parents to leave him alone. But when he'd get downstairs, there would be his mother, making him breakfast (his father long gone for work) and telling him that she was buying the tickets for their annual trip to St. Barts today, and could he let her know how many days he wanted to join them for? (His parents still paid for his vacations. He knew better than to ever mention this to his friends.)

"Yes, Ma," he'd say. And then he'd eat his breakfast and leave for the day, stepping out into the world in which no one knew him, and in which he could be anyone.