

3.

THE ATTACHMENT

She's gone to Harvey Nichols and gotten sick.

Should have known better.

How she responds to labels.

Down into menswear, unrealistically hoping that if anyone might have Buzz Rickson's it would be Harvey Nichols, their ornate Victorian pile rising like a coral reef opposite Knightsbridge station. Somewhere on the ground floor, in cosmetics, they even have Helena Stonestreeets's cucumber mask, Bernard having explained to her how he'd demonstrated his considerable powers of suasion on the HN buyers.

But down here, next to a display of Tommy Hilfiger, it's all started to go sideways on her, the trademark thing. Less warning aura than usual. Some people ingest a single peanut and their head swells like a basketball. When it happens to Cayce, it's her psyche.

Tommy Hilfiger does it every time, though she'd thought she was safe now. They'd said he'd peaked, in New York. Like Benetton, the name would be around, but the real poison, for her, would have been drawn. It's something to do with context, here, with not expecting it in London. When it starts, it's pure reaction, like biting down on a piece of foil.

A glance to the right and the avalanche let go. A mountainside of Tommy coming down in her head.

My God, don't they know? This stuff is simulacra of simulacra of simulacra. A diluted tincture of Ralph Lauren, who had himself diluted the glory days of Brooks Brothers, who themselves had stepped on the product of Jermyn Street and Saville Row, flavoring their ready-to-wear

with liberal lashings of polo kit and regimental stripes. But Tommy surely is the null point, the black hole. There must be some Tommy Hilfiger event horizon, beyond which it is impossible to be more derivative, more removed from the source, more devoid of soul. Or so she hopes, and doesn't know, but suspects in her heart that this in fact is what accounts for his long ubiquity.

She needs out of this logo-maze, desperately. But the escalator to the street exit will dump her back into Knightsbridge, seeming somehow now more of the same, and she remembers that the streets runs down, and always her energy with it, to Sloane Square, another nexus of whatever she suffers these reactions to. Laura Ashley, down there, and that can get ugly.

Remembering the fifth floor, here: a sort of Californian market, Dean & DeLuca lite, with a restaurant, a separate and weirdly modular robotic sushi operation humming oddly in its midst, and a bar where they served excellent coffee.

Caffeine she's held in reserve today, a silver bullet against serotonin-lack and big weird feelings. She can go there. There is a lift. Yes, a lift: a closet-sized elevator, small but perfectly formed. She will find it, and use it. Now.

She does. It arrives, miraculously empty, and she steps in, pressing 5. "I'm feeling rather excited," a woman says, breathily, as the door closes, though Cayce knows she's alone in this upright coffin of mirror and brushed steel. Fortunately she's been this way before, and knows that these disembodied voices are there for the amusement of the shopper. "Mmmmm," purrs the male of the species. The only equivalent audio environment she can recall was in the restroom of an upscale hamburger joint on Rodeo Drive, years ago: an inexplicable soundtrack of buzzing insects. Flies, it had sounded like, though surely that couldn't have been the intent.

Whatever else these designer ghosts say, she blocks it out, the lift ascending miraculously, without intermediate stops, to the fifth floor.

Cayce pops out into a pale light slanting in through much glass. Fewer lunching shoppers than she remembers. But no clothing on this floor, save on people's backs and in their glossy carrier-bags. The swelling can subside, here.

She pauses by a meat counter, eyeing roasts illuminated like newly minted media faces, and probably of a biologic purity she herself could never hope to attain: animals raised on a diet more stringent than the one propounded in interviews by Stonestreet's wife.

At the bar, a few Euromales of the dark-suited sort stand smoking their eternal cigarettes.

She bellies up, catching the barman's eye.

"*Time out?*" he inquires, frowning slightly. Brutally cropped, he regards her from the depths of massive, mask-like Italian spectacles. The black-framed glasses remind her of emoticons, those snippets of play-school emotional code cobbled up from keyboard symbols to produce sideways cartoon faces. You could do his glasses with an eight, hyphen for his nose, the mouth a left slash.

"I'm sorry?"

"*Time Out*. The weekly. You were on a panel. ICA."

Institute for Contemporary Arts, last time she'd been here. With a woman from a provincial university, lecturer in the taxonomy of trademarking. Rain falling thinly on the Mall. The audience smelling of damp wool and cigarettes. She'd accepted because she could stay a few days with Damien. He'd bought the house where he'd rented for several years, fruit of a series of Scandinavian car commercials. She'd forgotten the blurb in *Time Out*, one of those coolhunter things.

"You follow the footage." His eyes narrowing within their brackets of black Italian plastic.

Damien maintains, half-seriously, that followers of the footage comprise the first true freemasonry of the new century.

"Were you there?" Cayce asks, jostled out of herself by this abrupt violation of context. She is not by any means a celebrity; being recognized by strangers isn't part of her ordinary experience. But the footage has a way of cutting across boundaries, transgressing the accustomed order of things.

"My friend was there." He looks down and runs a spotless white cloth across the bar top. Gnawed cuticle and too large a ring. "He told me that he'd run into you later, on a site. You were arguing with someone about The Chinese Envoy." He looks back up. "You can't seriously believe it's him."

Him being Kim Hee Park, the young Korean auteur responsible for the film in question, an interminable art-house favorite some people compare with the footage, others going so far as to suggest that Kim Park is in fact the maker of the footage. Suggesting this to Cayce is akin to asking the Pope if he's soft on that Cathar heresy.

"No," she says, firmly. "Of course not."

"New segment." Quick, under his breath.

"When."

"This morning. Forty-eight seconds. It's them."

It's as though they are in a bubble now, Cayce and the barman. No sound penetrates. "Do they speak?" she asks.

"No."

"You've seen it?"

"No. Someone messaged me, on my mobile."

"No spoilers," Cayce warns, getting a grip.

He refolds the white cloth. A waft of blue Gitane drifts past, from the Euromales. "A drink?" The bubble bursts, admitting sound.

"Espresso, double." She opens her East German envelope, reaching for heavy mirror-world change.

He's drawing her espresso from a black machine down the bar. Sound of steam escaping under pressure. The forum will be going crazy, the first posts depending on time zones, history of proliferation, where the segment surfaced. It will prove impossible to trace, either uploaded via a temporary e-mail address, often from a borrowed IP, sometimes via a temporary cell phone number, or through some anonymizer. It will have been discovered by footageheads tirelessly scouring the Net, found somewhere where it's possible to upload a video file and simply leave it there.

He returns with her coffee in a white cup, on a white saucer, and places it before her on the glossy black counter. Positions a steel basket nearby, its sections containing a variety of colorful British sugars, at least three kinds. Another aspect of the mirror-world: sugar. There is more of it, and not only in things you expect to be sweet.

She's stacked six of the thick pound coins.

"On the house."

"Thank you."

The Euromales are indicating a need for fresh drink. He goes to tend to them. He looks like Michael Stipe on steroids. She takes back four of the coins and nudges the rest into the shadow of the sugar caddy. Smartly downs her double sans sugar and turns to go. Looks back as she's leaving and he is there, regarding her severely from the depths of black parentheses.

BLACK cab to Camden tube.

Her attack of Tommy-phobia has backed off nicely, but the trough of soul-delay has opened out into horizonless horse latitudes.

She fears she'll be becalmed before she can lay in supplies. On automatic pilot in a supermarket in the High Street, filling a basket. Mirror-world fruit. Colombian coffee, ground for a press. Two percent milk.

In a nearby stationer's, heavy on art supplies, she buys a roll of matte black gaffer's tape. Heading up Parkway toward Damien's she notices a flyer adhering to a lamppost. In rain-faded monochrome a frame-grab from the footage.

He looks out, as from depths.

Works at Cantor Fitzgerald. Gold wedding band.

Not that: this is from the footage.

PARKABOY'S e-mail is text-free. There is only the attachment.

Seated before Damien's Cube, with the two-cup French press she bought on Parkway. Fragrant waft of powerful Colombian. She shouldn't drink this; it will not so much defer sleep as guarantee nightmares, and she knows she'll wake again in that dread hour, vibrating. But she must be present for the new segment. Sharp.

Always, now, the opening of an attachment containing unseen footage is profoundly liminal. A threshold state.

Parkaboy has labeled his attachment #135. One hundred and thirty four previously known fragments--of what? A work in progress? Something completed years ago, and meted out now, for some reason, in these snippets?

She hasn't gone to the forum. Spoilers. She wants each new fragment to impact as cleanly as possible.

Parkaboy says you should go to new footage as though you've seen no previous footage at all, thereby momentarily escaping the film or films that you've been assembling, consciously or unconsciously, since first exposure.

Homo sapiens is about pattern recognition, he says. Both a gift and a trap.

She slowly depresses the plunger.

Pours coffee into a mug.

She's draped her jacket cape-style round the smooth shoulders of one robotic nymph. Balanced on its stainless pubis, the white torso reclines against the gray wall. Neutral regard. Eyeless serenity.

Five in the evening and she can barely keep her eyes open.

Lifts her cup of black unsweetened coffee. Mouse-clicks.

How many times has she done this?

How long since she gave herself to the dream? Maurice's expression for the essence of being a footagehead: to give oneself to the dream.

Damien's Studio Display fills with darkness absolute. It is as if she participates in the very birth of cinema, that Lumiere moment, the steam locomotive about to emerge from the screen, sending the audience fleeing, out into the Parisian night.

Light and shadow. Lovers' cheekbones in the prelude to embrace.

Cayce shivers.

So long now, and they have not been seen to touch.

Around them the absolute blackness is alleviated by texture. Concrete?

They are dressed as they have always been dressed, in clothing Dayce has posted on extensively, fascinated by its timelessness, something she knows and understands. The difficulty of that. Hairstyles too.

He might be a sailor, stepping onto a submarine in 1914, or a jazz musician entering a club in 1957. There is a lack of evidence, and absence of stylistic cues, that Cayce understands to be utterly masterful. His black coat is usually read as leather, though it might be dull vinyl, or rubber. He has a way of wearing its collar up.

The girl wears a longer coat, equally dark but seemingly of fabric, its shoulder-padding the subject of hundreds of posts. The architecture of padding in a woman's coat should yield possible periods, particular decades, but there has been no agreement, only controversy.

She is hatless, which has been taken either as the clearest of signs that this is not a period piece, or simply as an indication that she is a

free spirit, untrammled by even the most basic conventions of her day. Her hair has been the subject of similar scrutiny, but nothing has ever been definitely agreed upon.

The one hundred and thirty four previously discovered fragments, having been endlessly collated, broken down, reassembled, by whole armies of the most fanatical investigators, have yielded no period and no particular narrative direction.

Zaprudered into surreal dimensions of purest speculation, ghost-narratives have emerged and taken on shadowy but determined lives of their own, but Cayce is familiar with them all, and steers clear.

And here in Damien's flat, watching their lips meet, she knows that she knows nothing, but wants nothing more than to see the film of which this must be a part. Must be.

Above them, somewhere, something flares, white casting a claw of Caligarian shadow, and then the screen is black.

She clicks on Replay. Watches it again.

She opens the site and scrolls a full page of posts. Several pages have accumulated in the course of the day, in the wake of the surfacing of #135, but she has no appetite for them now.

It seems beside the point.

A wave comes crashing, sheer exhaustion, against which the Colombian is no defense.

She takes off her clothes, brushes her teeth, limbs wooden with exhaustion and vibrating with caffeine, turns off the lights, and crawls, literally, beneath the stiff silver spread on Damien's bed.

To curl fetal there, and briefly marvel, as a final wave crashes over her, at the perfect and now perfectly revealed extent of her present loneliness.