

Chapter 2

PRETTY FACES GOING PLACES

With long dancing strides she makes her way flamboyantly down the street. Her down-cast eyes are a playfully modest reflex borne from her confidence that with her she drags the gazes of the transfixed pedestrian mass.

My ass. I remember walking in Pittsburgh. What a deep, white world those winters were. Coming home from school on darkening afternoons, we took short cuts through alleys that belonged to the Insane Unknowns, a gang we feared but never once saw. Blindness was a part of the urban plan then, as integral to its design as bricks and plate glass, and the few glimpses of evil we actually caught only extended the territories of what stayed invisible. The men who pulled up in cars, a hairy finger on the automatic window button. The guitar solos that oozed out of scary, hippie basements where the bongos were always loaded. Finally back home, my blind mother would be hammering away at Debussy's *The Sunken Cathedral*, with the thermostat always set to a miserly 62 degrees. I remember pyromania, Pennsylvania, geraniums, gymnasiums, head shops, hay rides, hand jobs under the stairs, under the dim, distant stars.

On a small tree-lined street of mild-mannered, bourgeois-brownstone taste, I remember what the two watery globes in the front of my head are for. I am often surprised, not to say a little embarrassed, at how blown-away I can be by the street's beauty after a day in the museum. I see no trace of the grid and am

reassured that no such ordering device lies beneath what is. Even the elongated rectangular shapes of the elegant townhouses present themselves as disorderly patchworks of tangents barely touching one another, to say nothing of the mesmerizing rustle of leaves which are like sound shapes increasing and decreasing in volume. Beneath them, the miraculous mechanics of a walking ass.

Buy a Dyptique candle for the bathroom. Moisturizer, bananas, toilet paper. Walking in this city today is more like work on the way home from work. Is there a walking that would be more like giving it all away? My ass, my ass.

79th Street: Where has the day gone? Why does this street never open up? Will I ever kick in a window? And: am I a bisexual? A street of questions. 72nd Street, already: Bodies, outfits, bricks, traffic, traffic reflected in polished granite, glass, cops, bags, voices and horns, a fifty foot-tall athlete wrapping the side of a building, another building shaped like a giant perfume bottle, sliding doors, revolving doors, a sunset about to happen, Reena Spaulings. The smog-loving ginkgo trees outlasting us all.

Make yourself small. Make yourself the way a small pansy – right now an orange one in one of those small gardens optimistic people plant around the base of a tree is reaching towards me – can somehow be larger, in some strange internal trick of perspective, than the hulking presence of the tree which dwarfs us both. This is a property not of the flower, nor of mine alone, but it is induced by my capacity, my power, to reduce my size. In order to redistribute size and attention like this, Reena realized that her size, her speed, and her location were analogous in some way to the properties of wavelengths and their waves.

Dogs, apparently devoid of color sensors, were virtually blind in comparison to the way Reena felt herself moving towards this flower now – they sought always to make themselves larger by barking, the land equivalent of dolphins' sonar navigation, but she liked dogs anyway, because they didn't consider themselves larger

than the tiny olfactory particles whose smelly trails they slavishly follow. What power of identification was in operation here, that a dog could reduce itself to the size of a particle in order to befriend, follow, chase and terrorize these odors? Her conclusion was that a dog must have a way of perceiving itself at such a great distance in time or space and realizing itself *there* at the size of a particle, rather than where it was, at the size of a hairy flea-bag. A dog chasing its tail is not an imbecile, but a physician of genius, chasing itself in and out of scales of magnitude. She was walking in the wavelengths of color beyond color.

Smell the concrete, steel, metal parts, debris of today, debris of tomorrow. To hell with a structure. Hell, you people. She did not like standing still for hours after hours. She liked moving softly. Mobility and illusion: her tools, her hope, her dream of making a dream possible again. 66th Street: The feeling that something might explode.

Here, life resembles the part of the fashion magazine that suddenly addresses the reader face to face, so to speak, or as one knowing girlfriend to another. Here, life and bodies are as clean and organized as a magazine, picture perfect. Who do you love? How do you love? I am continuously killed by love. In bed, in the street, in the movies. I'm addicted to maximum exposure and maximum identification with whatever touches me, a conspiracy involving myself and everything. Is that love? Over coffee, people urge me to get my thing together. Rickety, demented banjo music is coming out of the speaker. I am in there somewhere, coming out too, blasting it. I have never felt more open to anything. Meanwhile, at a table nearby, a conversation about Modernist color theory, the Bauhaus, color wheels, Joseph Albers...

Page 129: a glowing skinned girl in a pristine white tank top, summery sarong, and flip flops sits on a sidewalk bench drinking fresh fruit juice and talking into her cell phone. Page 84: all the outdoor tables of the neighborhood café are filled with good-

looking, cargo-panted creative types lounging away the afternoon. The trees, bodies, small designer-ish boutiques, the neighborhood atmosphere, the sun, form so many idyllic scenes. In each, the morality of plump skin and healthy bodies, the uniformity of laid-back stances, and lips that redundantly pronounce individual lifestyle preferences... exactly like magazine copy. Scream of a mind: I need money, give me money! Stupid girl.

Breaking her nose once in London trying to cross Oxford Street. Looking right, then left. Aware of the traffic. Spotting an opportunity to cross, stepping off the high curb while looking right, her right foot describing an arc up, falling down, providing a route into which all the weight of her body rushed, her head turning back to the left, seeing too late that a small old man had appeared in front of her, his temple met by her head with all the force familiar to those who sit in the end of a roller coaster, seeing him fall to the ground. In cartoons, one sees brightly colored stars in such circumstances. In hospitals, she ponders, one cannot see the color which slides straight through her make-up, her skin, her eyes, paints the inside of her head, her broken nose. The ability of the short and energetic x-ray wavelength to pass through obstacles – alternatively its *inability* to rest, to lazily and gloriously pool itself on a surface – was what excited her about color. And these qualities of different wavelengths were like a book of strategies for her: to pass through solid objects, or to decorate surfaces.

Everything here is heavily sooted. The massive boulevard is a horizontally coursing field of metal, machine, impatience, bouncing rubber, aggression, exhaust fumes, horns, sirens, and bass. The turning red of the traffic light – whereupon a segment slams to a stop just short of the crosswalk – effects rhythmic gouges in the consistency to let pedestrians through. Where does my (boyish, jaunty, smooth, freckle-dusted, foxy, stiff, screen-like) body end and a real event begin, for once? A body is a living, breathing image that thinks while exposing itself to others. An event is like a place

where two or more bodies become mutually exposed, reach a certain degree of improvisation and contamination. What if nothing belonged to anybody?

The machines of the heavy asses, lifted and moved one cheek at a time, the machines of incessantly moving jaws and snapping gum; packs of teenage boys who give forth exclamatory bursts of sound; breasts in tight sport jerseys; buttocks in tight denim; bouncing shoulders in soft leather; and the traffic of shouting voices. And then there are immobile things like dangling street signage, fire hydrants, and rusted garbage cans, and ‘painfully broke’ stores whose merchandise is more assaulting than seductive. She was drifting into one of those spaces that barely exist: spaces that are created by beautification and pedestrian control projects which, when one steps into such a useless nook or cranny, are filled suddenly with the melancholy of a Western ghost town, redundant in the wake of the new railroad.

A sliver, twisted pipe. Out of commission. A foot in diameter, it’s thick and disturbing to look at. It’s lying along the sidewalk for about 12 feet. It twists at 4 joints, like a robot snake frozen in mid-writhe. It’s hollow inside and makes a “bongk” sound. Inside, its walls are thick with some sort of blackened buildup. Sitting on it can give a feeling of sitting on a fallen tree trunk on a tropical island, until it starts to suck the heat out of your rear and you know there’s no way you could be at the beach.

Reena fastened a grip on a lamppost and hoisted herself up onto an electrical box hidden amongst the flower beds to get a better view, to sight land. From her crow’s nest, peering across the vast vistas of the Avenue, she was astonished to see with the greatest clarity, other islands amidst the seas. Most were uninhabited. But on one, a small movement gave away another human under a weight of gray cloth and dirty plastic. On another, a taxi driver pulled a letter from a bottle washed up and caught in his net of windscreen wipers, though he did not appear either excited or

pleased at this miracle. On yet another, volcanic eruptions as a middle-aged couple argued, heatedly. But she was no Robinson Crusoe. She cursed the sunshine for hiding the positions of the stars and forcing her to make do with *Bud Lite*, *Oyster Club*, and *CitiBank*.

A deep breath and a push, and she was out again on the frothy mixture. Then she was being fairly whipped along in a current of gray Italian cotton, too fast, too turbulently to develop an exit strategy, feeling depressed. Rage rising. Rage ebbing. There was what she called malaria of the soul. The total being is one large breeding ground for the shocks of the world past, present, future. All living and dying, all vibrations pass through her and over her. Annihilate her. It comes and goes whenever it likes. It rules her, commands her, envelops her, everywhere and all the time. It bloweth where it listeth. It sucks her up and grows through her. In the spine, in the brain, in the blood, in the guts. Is it love?

Finally 14th Street: It's an attraction to something that gives a person their shape, a life its form. A lifestyle is defined by taste, or even by a taste for absence, but a life-form, here in the city or wherever, happens when a body is affected by an attraction. And whatever a body leans toward also leans toward it. So a life-form is something between bodies, in every situation, and is always new each time. These inclinations are reciprocal and improvised and intense.

The blue-jeaned tourists, have gone. Taxis have spread to the strips along the East and West Sides. Younger men rush to meet their mothers. Doormen laze in their thresholds. You are taking care of business after a weekend of deserved rest, perhaps Upstate, or after the movies. Outside the Henry James brownstones on the north side of the park, teenage couples stroll towards Broadway, towards the subways that will take them back to Queens or Harlem or somewhere. Certain couples fight or brag. A girl swings her purse at her boyfriend, who ducks between a parked Volvo and a

newspaper box. Neither suspect that under its heaps of ransacked bulletins the box contains fifteen tin-foiled cakes of pinkish Ecstasy, placed there at dawn by a middle-aged white drifter in the employ of Jamaican drug workers. Reena had somehow lined up all her particles in the same line, positive and negative charges in order, such that she was moving through the city in the way that power flows across an imbalance in charge – she had been navigating by polarities, across voids even, and would arrive at a spot, or at least be in movement towards that spot even before a conscious decision to get there could articulate itself.

Prince Street: You can use other citizens as shields to block the cameras and mirrors. Take your time, relax. Peel off the magnetic sticker thing while keeping your eyes up on the shelves, just browsing. I fill my pockets with Dr. Hauschka's face milk, Uncle Grimes' old fashioned tooth powder, a sponge made out of a real sponge from the sea, tea tree oil impregnated toothpicks, lavender scented roll-on deodorant. Only the best.

If what we mean when we say lifestyle is a leaning into programmed nothingness, a life-form is like a line of increased and increasing potential, distinct from any other line in a situation. If only I could find my line and follow it. If my life-form were that of a warrior, for example, everything I touched would be immediately transformed into a weapon. Or if it were a priest's, everything I touched would become a prayer. To follow my line and abandon myself to the process that is my form-of-life. A life-form is a process that elaborates me, and that I abandon myself to.

In the window of Dean & DeLuca, on the left, is a display of about seven human forms, momentarily evacuated. Whatever qualities or functions normally animate them, the coffee break has unplugged them from it, leaving slack postures in a raincoat, leather briefcase, beige skirt, flower-patterned pants, crew neck sleeveless pullover, jean jacket, and camel-colored boots. With hands about the gray and white cups, seven pairs of eyes, seven

heads, seven haircuts, seven current-less bodies, their fronts pressed against the glass, all gaze. My ass.

Sexedup, sexeddown, whatever.

I climb two flights of stairs. No Jonas. No Nathan, Jason, Priscilla. And again two flights. No cats. No cat food. Is it that I forgot or that I didn't want to buy any. Two flights again. I will not play "shopping ass" to Antonio's "glad and sad" shop-owning ass. "Do you know how to make potato soup?" Mom had said. I was happy and didn't know how to, and still don't. Tonight I will sup on nuts, and a squid salad. Sixth floor: Hi Mark-Andy, Hi, top of my building. Hi door, Jonas. I kiss you all. Hail, pink plastic trash on floor, a kiss to you via my hand. Hallway, and long block of air, hi, a kiss to you and a visit soon. Books, TV, laptop, napkins, backgammon board, hi, and fuck you. Hail, floor. Chairs and futon, hail and fuck you. I'll soon sit on you. Nudity. Taking off my shirt. Untying hair. Pissing, washing. No calls. Should I go out tonight? Try not to flip out at Liz's party as you did last March.

Three cop cruisers sitting in a row, showing only profile. Headlights poke out one from behind the other. They are navy blue with white letters. The occupants of the cars are not visible. But they must be there, the cars are idling. White exhaust breaks up out of their tailpipes. They are sitting below a dark overhang over which a sign reads, "Midtown Packing." One of the cop cars pulls out like a silent shark, and after a moment all of them are gone.