

The Start of Something

Subway grates, steaming tamale carts, charcoal braziers roasting chestnuts, the breaths of the pedestrians outpacing stalled traffic, the chimneys Gil can't see from the window of the airline bus—all plume in the frigid air. It's cold enough for Gil to wear, for the first and only time, the salt-and-pepper woolen trousers he bought at an estate sale last summer. He'd stopped on a whim when he saw the sale sign, an excuse to tour a mansion that looked as if it once could have belonged to *The Great Gatsby's* Tom Buchanan before he'd moved from Chicago's North Shore to Long Island “in a fashion,” Fitzgerald wrote, “that rather took your breath away . . . he'd brought down a string of polo ponies from Lake Forest.” Perhaps the deceased had left only debts, for the heirs, haughty with grief, were selling off the furnishings. Those there to buy spoke in subdued voices as if to seem less like scavengers. Gil browsed the sunlit rooms with no intention of buying anything, then in an upstairs bedroom he found an open cedar wardrobe filled with old, handsomely made men's clothes. He selected the trousers and held them up before a walnut-framed full-length mirror, and told himself he might wear them for cross-country skiing even though he hadn't skied in years. Later, when he tried them on at home, they fit as though they'd been made for him, causing Gil to wonder who the man who'd worn them had been. In one of the pockets there was an Italian coin dated

1921, and Gil thought it might be worth something to a collector. He kept it in a cuff-link box with spare buttons, a St. Christopher medal, a class ring, and cuff links he never wore. Even after he'd had the trousers dry-cleaned they smelled faintly of cedar.

The airline bus has nearly reached downtown when the woman in the seat across the aisle leans toward Gil and asks, "Are those lined?"

"Pardon?" he says.

"Are those lined? They're beautiful but they look itchy." Wings of dark glossy hair and a darker fur collar frame her narrow face. Her smile appears too broad for her, but attractive all the same.

"Partially," he says.

"Knee-length?"

"Not quite. Actually, they are a little itchy, but they're warm."

"They look right out of the Jazz Age. They've got that drape. I love anything from the twenties—music, furniture, the writers."

"Some of my favorite writers, all right," Gil says.

"They still read so alive! Like that newly liberated, modern world was just yesterday."

It sounds like she's speaking in quotes and Gil smiles as if to agree. Her hairstyle and the coat she's bundled in both suggest another time. The coat has a certain Goodwill-rack look that exempts a woman from the stigma of wearing fur. Gil has no idea what kind of fur it is. It matches the luster of her hair. He has the vague feeling they've met before, which makes talking to her effortless, but Gil doesn't say so for fear it would sound like a line. She'd know a man would remember meeting someone who looked like her.

"Where'd you find them?" she asks.

"At a kind of glorified garage sale."

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“I didn’t think they were new. When designers try to bring back a style they never quite get it right.”

“They’re the real deal all right, complete with little buttons for suspenders. I probably should be wearing suspenders.”

“Not even half lined, though, huh? Bet it feels good to get them off.” She smiles again as if surprised by what she has just said.

“You sure have an eye for clothes,” Gil says.

“Don’t I, though?”

Outside, snow settles on Chicago like a veil, as if it is the same veil of snow that was floating to earth earlier in the day when he boarded the plane in Minneapolis, returning from his father’s funeral. The airline bus has stalled again in traffic. She’s turned away, staring out the window. He doesn’t know her name, has yet to ask where she’s traveling from, if she lives in the city or is only visiting, let alone the facts of her personal life, but all the questions are already in motion between them.

Why not end here, without answers?

Aren’t there chance meetings in every life that don’t play out, stories that seem meant to remain ghostly, as faint and fleeting as the reflection of a face on the window of a bus? Beyond her face, snow swirls through steam from exhausts and manholes. Why not for this one time let beginning suffice, rather than insist on what’s to come: the trip they’ll take, before they know enough about each other, to Italy; those scenes in her apartment when she’ll model her finds from vintage stores, fashions from the past he’ll strip from her present body? Her name is Bea. She’ll say they were fated to meet. They’ll play at being reincarnated lovers from the First World War. Sometimes he’s a soldier who died in the trenches, sometimes a young trumpet player poisoned by bathtub gin. Scene added to scene, fabrication to fabrication, until a year has passed and

for a last time he visits her apartment in the Art Deco building on Dearborn with its curved, glowing glass brick windows. There's an out-of-place store on the ground floor that sells trophies—an inordinate number of them for bowling. Its burglar alarm, prone to going off after hours, as if the defeated have come by night to steal the prizes they can never win, is clanging again. She's been doing coke and tells him that in a dream she realized she's been left with two choices, one of which is to kill him. She laughs too gaily when she says it and he doesn't ask what the other choice is. She's mentioned that she's been "in touch" with her ex-boyfriend—a man who over nine years, with time-outs for affairs, has come and gone at will in her life, a relationship it took her a while to reveal fully because, she explained, she didn't want to give the impression she has a taste for "damaged men." If she's implying it's a relationship that redefines her, she has a point.

"Does he know about me?" Gil asked.

"I'd *never* tell him you exist," she said, her eyes suddenly anxious and her voice dropping to a whisper as if an omnipotent master might overhear.

"In touch" means Gil has noticed bruises when he hikes her skirt to kiss the curve of her bottom. She'll have asked for them, he knows, she'll have begged, "Leave your mark." The boyfriend is an importer, she says. He's a connected guy whose family owns a chain of pizza parlors. He carries a gun, which she says makes her feel safe, though what she really means is that she finds it thrilling, and when she disappears into her bedroom Gil isn't sure whether she'll emerge armed or wearing a chemise from the thirties that she's found at some flea market. No matter how often he strips the past from her body, she finds a way to wear it again. His impulse is to let himself out, but he doesn't want her—and for that matter, doesn't want himself—to be left with a final image of him running for his

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life. An escape might make it seem as if the choice in her dream were justified. He doesn't want to admit she's made him afraid, and so he sits and waits for her to reappear.

The heirs were selling off the furnishings. Gil browsed the sunlit rooms with no intention of buying anything, but in an upstairs bedroom he found an open wardrobe smelling of cedar. He held the trousers up before a full-length mirror that like everything else in the house wore a price, everything except the clothes—for those he'd have to bargain. His reflection, gazing back, fogged behind layers of dust, appeared ghostly. The trousers looked as if with a little tailoring they'd fit, and maybe he could wear them for cross-country skiing. How could he have known then that he was only at the start of something?