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Opening extract from

Fly on the Wall

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friday. I am eating alone in the lunchroom.

Again.

Ever since Katya started smoking cigarettes, she's hanging out back by the garbage cans, lighting up with the Art Rats. She bags her lunch, so she takes it out there and eats potato chips in a haze of nicotine.

I hate smoking, and the Art Rats make me nervous. So here I am: in my favorite corner of the lunchroom, sitting on the floor with my back against the wall. I'm eating fries off a tray and drawing my own stuff–not anything for class.

Quadriceps. Quadriceps.
Knee.
Calf muscle.
Dull point; must sharpen pencil.
Hell! Pencil dust in fries.
Whatever. They still taste okay.
Calf muscle.
Ankle.
Foot.

KA-POW! Spider-Man smacks Doctor Octopus off the edge of the building with a swift kick to the jaw. Ock's face contorts as he falls backward, his metal tentacles flailing with hysterical fear. He has an eighty-story fall beneath him, and–

Spidey has a great physique. Built, but not too built. Even if I did draw him myself.

I think I made his butt too small.

Do-over.

I wish I had my pink eraser, I don't like this white one.

Butt.

Butt.

Connecting to: leg . . . and . . . quadriceps.

There. A finished Spidey outline. I have to add the suit. And some shadowing. And the details of the building. Then fill in the rest of Doc Ock as he hurtles off the edge.

Mmmm. French fries.

Hell again! Ketchup on Spidey.

Lick it off.

Cammie Holmes is staring at me like I'm some lower form of life.

"What are you looking at?" I mutter.

"Nothing."

"Then. Stop. Staring," I say, sharpening my pencil again, though it doesn't need it.

This Cammie is all biscuits. She's stacked like a character in a comic book. Cantaloupes are strapped to her chest.

Her only redeeming quality.

"Why are you licking your Superman drawing?" Cammie tips her nose up. "That's so kinky. I mean, I've heard of licking a centerfold, but licking Superman?"

"Spider."

"What?"

"*Spider*-Man."

"Whatever. Get a life, Gretchen."

She's gone. From across the lunchroom comes her nasal voice: "Taffy, get this: I just caught Gretchen Yee giving oral to some Superman drawing she made."

Spider. Spider. Spider-Man.

"She *would*." Taffy Johnson. Stupid tinkly laugh.

Superman is a big meathead. I'd never draw Superman. Much less give him oral.

I haven't given anybody oral, anyway.

I hate those girls.

Taffy is doing splits in the middle of the lunchroom floor, which is just gross. Who wants to see her crotch like that? Though of course everybody does, and even if they didn't, she wouldn't care because she's such a unique spirit or whatever.

I hate those girls, and I hate this place: the Manhattan High School for the Arts. Also known as Ma-Ha.

Supposedly, it's a magnet high school for students talented in drawing, painting, sculpture or photography. You have to submit a portfolio to get in, and when I did mine (which was all filled with inks of comic-book characters I taught myself to draw in junior high) and when I finally got my acceptance letter, my parents

were really excited. But once you're here, it's nothing but an old, ugly New York public school building, with angry teachers and crap facilities like any other city public school–except I've got drawing class every day, painting once a week and art history twice. I'm in the drawing program.

Socially, Ma-Ha is like the terrible opposite of the schools you see on television, where everyone wants to be the same as everyone else. On TV, if you don't conform and wear what the popular kids are wearing, and talk like they talk, and act like they do–then you're a pariah.

Here, everyone wants to be different.

People have mohawks and dreadlocks and outrageous thrift-store clothes; no one would be caught dead in ordinary jeans and a T-shirt, because they're all so into expressing their individuality. A girl from the sculpture program wears a sari every day, even though her family's Scandinavian. There's that kid who's always got that Pink Panther doll sticking out of her jacket pocket; the boy who smokes using a cigarette holder like they did in forties movies; a girl who's shaved her head and pierced her cheeks; Taffy, who does Martha Graham–technique modern dance and wears her leotard and sweats all day; and Cammie, who squeezes herself into tight goth outfits and paints her lips vampire red.

They all fit in here, or take pride in not fitting in, if

that makes any sense–and if you're an ordinary person you've got to do *something* at least, like dye your hair a strange color, because nothing is scorned so much as normalcy. Everyone's a budding genius of the art scene; everyone's on the verge of a breakthrough. If you're a regular-looking person with regular likes and dislikes and regular clothes,

and you can draw so it looks like the art in a comic book,

but you can't "express your interior life on the page," according to Kensington (my drawing teacher),

and if you can't "draw what you see, rather than imitate what's in that third-rate trash you like to read" (Kensington again),

then you're nothing at Ma-Ha.

Nothing. That's me.

Gretchen Kaufman Yee. Ordinary girl.

Two months ago I capitulated to nonconformity-conformity and had my hair bleached white and then dyed stop-sign red. It cost sixty dollars and it pissed off my mother, but it didn't work.

I'm still ordinary.

I take literature second period with Glazer. I rarely do the reading. I don't like to admit that about myself; I'd like to be the person who does the reading–but I don't.

It seems like I've always got some new comic to read on the subway, and the homework for drawing is more interesting.

In literature, I can't concentrate because Titus Antonakos sits next to me at the big rectangular table. He's an Art Rat, meaning he's one of the boys in the sophomore drawing program, group B. He's delicious and smart and graceful and hot. White skin, with high cheekbones and messy dark hair. Lips like a Greek statue–a little too full for the rest of his face. He's got a retro Johnny Rotten look; today he's wearing a green vinyl jacket, an ironic "I heart New York" T-shirt, jeans and combat boots. He's thin to the point that he's off some other girls' radar, but not mine.

He is absolutely on my radar.

Titus.
Titus.
Titus.
Touch my arm by accident like you did yesterday.
Notice me.
Notice me.

"Gretchen?" It's Glazer.

"Huh?"

"Vermin." She's obviously repeating herself. She sounds annoyed. "The word. I asked you to define it."

"It's a bug, right?" I say. "Like a cockroach."

"It can be," says Glazer, smirking. "Most people do assume that Kafka had his protagonist, Gregor Samsa, turn into a cockroach. That's the standard interpretation of 'The Metamorphosis.' But if you all turn to page five, you'll see that the word Kafka used in German–and the word in our translation–is not *cockroach* or *bug,* but *vermin*–a 'monstrous vermin,' Kafka says–which can be taken to mean any kind of animal, especially those that are noxious or repellent in some way: rats, mice, lice, flies, squirrels."

No idea what she is talking about. I just know the story is about some guy who turns into a bug.

Whatever.

Titus.

Titus.

Titus.

God, he smells good.

"Titus?" Glazer, calling on him. He actually put his hand up.

"Doesn't it also mean disgusting *people*?" Titus says. "Like you could say people who–I don't know–molest kids or steal from their mothers–they're vermin."

"Absolutely." Glazer lights up. "And by extension, you sometimes see the word used as a derogatory term for the masses–for large groups of ordinary people. Or for prisoners. It expresses contempt. Now: why would

Kafka use such a word to describe Gregor's metamorphosis?"

Titus did the reading.

He just seems good, somehow.

Like the core of him is good when the core of other people is dark, or sour. Like he'd do the reading even if no one was checking, because he cares about stuff.

I wish he didn't hang with those Art Rats. I have class with them every single day, but I can't figure those guys out.

Because they're boys, I guess, and because they try so hard to seem slick and sure. They're nice one minute and cruel the next.

And with Shane around all the time, I can't talk to Titus.

At least, I can't talk and make any sense.

Truth: with Shane around I can't talk to anyone.

The bell. "Finish through page sixty for Monday and enjoy the weekend," calls Glazer. A rustle of books and backpacks.

"Hey, Titus." My voice sounds squeaky. (Shane, thank goodness, is out the door.)

"Yeah?" His mouth looks so soft.

"Oh, I–"

Hell. Was I going to say something? Did I have something to say?

Oh hell,

oh hell,

he's looking right at me, I've got nothing to say.

"Do you–"

What?
What?

"–do you remember what the Kensington is?"

Titus bends over to pick his pencil off the floor. There's a strip of skin between his shirt and the top of his jeans in the back. I can see the top of his boxers. Plain light blue. "Sketch three sculptures of the human body at the Met, remember?"

Of course I remember. If I had a single bone in me I'd ask him to go there on Saturday with me.

I should ask him.
I should ask him.
I should ask him.

"Oh, right," I say. "That's it. Thanks."

Oh! I am a coward!
Spineless, boneless, vermin girl.

"Sure. See you in gym." I try to smile at him but it's too late. He's gone.

Later that afternoon, Sanchez the gym teacher makes us play dodgeball, which leaves bruises all over my legs. I'm not that fast, and I get hit a lot. Titus hits me twice.

"Do you think it means something?" I ask Katya after gym, sitting on the locker room bench in a towel.

Katya is naked in the shower like that's a normal way to have a conversation. She's washing her hair like she's just everyday naked in front of people.

Well, we *are* everyday naked in front of people. Gym is five days a week, shower required. But anyway, Katya is having a naked conversation like it doesn't even bother her, which it obviously doesn't–even though she's not built like a model, just regular.

The locker room is so cramped and tiny that I can feel the warm spray of her shower water on my knee as I'm sitting on the bench.

"It would have meant something if we were sixth graders," says Katya, scrunching her eyes as she rinses out the shampoo.

"Like what would it mean?"

"You want to hear me say it?" She's laughing.

"Yes."

"It would have meant that he liked you back."

"I didn't say I liked him," I mutter.

"Oh please," Katya says, ignoring my point, "that's very sixth grade. You know, how boys were always teasing the girls they liked, pulling their hair. But we're

way too old for that crap now. So I don't think it means anything if he hits you with the dodgeball. Sorry."

Katya is always such a realist. She's soaping her underarms like she's alone. I could never do that.

I make a quick dive out of my towel and into my bra and a T-shirt from the second Spider-Man movie, covered with pastel dust. "I didn't say I liked him," I say again.

"Oh, don't give me that."

"What? I'm analyzing the cruel and particularly complicated sociodynamics of sophomore dodgeball."

"No, you're not." Katya is drying off now. In the next row over, annoying Taffy is stretching and showing off her dancer's body while listening to our conversation. I hate this tiny-ass locker room.

"What, it's that obvious?" I ask.

"It's all over your face, all the time," Katya says, grinning. "Titus, Titus, Titus."

I'm blushing. I can feel it. And my Chinese half makes it so that once my cheeks go pink, they stay that way for hours.

Katya never turns pink. Broad, Russian American face and a lumpy nose and long pale brown hair—you wouldn't think she'd be pretty if you made a list of her features, but somehow she is. She's mysterious. You can't read what she's thinking.

"Well, he's better than the others," I say, conscious of Taffy in the next row, trying to sound less obsessed.

"Whatever."

"He is. Let's be objective. He's cuter than Brat Parker. Nicer than Adrian Ip. More interesting than Malachy."

"What's wrong with Malachy?" Katya sounds annoyed.

"He never says anything. Like having his ears pierced makes him so slick he doesn't have to talk."

"You don't have to be so mean about everyone, Gretchen."

"I'm not being mean. I'm doing an objective comparison of the Art Rats."

Which isn't true. I *am* being mean.

I feel mean. I don't know why. This school is making me evil, maybe.

"It's not objective. It's *subjective.*" Katya hooks her bra behind her back. "It's just what you think, not the truth."

"Don't bite me, Katya. I'm only talking."

"Well, you're talking about people you barely know."

"I know them. They've been in practically every class with me all year. I know Shane."

"We all know you know Shane. Enough with Shane." Katya gets into a dress she made herself on her mother's sewing machine.

"Wanna get a slice?" I try changing the subject.

"Can't. I've got to pick the monsters up at day care."

I wish she didn't have three little sisters. Wish she didn't live an hour-fifteen away from school on the F train, all the way in Brighton Beach.

"You're always busy these days," I say, and it comes out pitiful and whiny.

"That's life, Gretchen," snaps Katya. "I've got responsibilities. I'll call you later."

She's out the door. My only friend, really.

I can't count Shane, even though we said we'd be friends after last October.

We're not, obviously.

Not friends.

Just people who groped each other for a few weeks at the start of this year, when he was new and sat in front of me in math. One day, he wrote me a note about this nose picker sitting in the front,

and we wrote notes back and forth about boogers,

which led to notes back and forth about other stuff,

and he ate lunch with me and Katya,

and put funny sketches in my locker,

and we were friends. I thought.

But one day Shane walked out of school with me when classes were over,

and got on the subway with me,

and went home with me, without me even asking him.

He kissed me as soon as we got in the door. We made out on the couch, when my parents weren't home,

and watched TV on the couch together when they were.

After that, we made out in the hallways of Ma-Ha,

by the boat pond in Central Park,

on the corner by the subway stop,

and in the back of a movie theater.

People saw us. And he was my boyfriend. For a little.

Now, he's just someone whose mouth I stuck my tongue in,

someone whose spit got all over me and I didn't mind at the time.

Now, he's an alien being,

just like all the rest of those Art Rat boys–

or even more than the rest.

It goes to show that if you only have two friends in a whole godforsaken poseur high school, you shouldn't start up kissing one of them, because three weeks later he'll say he doesn't feel that way,

whatever way that was,

didn't feel like drooling on me anymore, I guess is what it meant–

and he'll say, "Hey, it was fun and all, but let's cool it now, yeah?"

and "You know we'll always be friends, right? Excellent. Let's hang out sometime, Gretchen, that would be great,"

only not with kissing,

and not with it meaning anything,

and then, when it comes down to it, never actually hanging out,

and never being friends again, unless people ask and then we both say:

"Yeah, we had a thing going for a few weeks there, but then we both decided we would just be friends."

Only he's *the one who decided.*

And we're not friends, not anymore.

Now he's got the Art Rats and goes out with Jazmin, and little Gretchen Yee isn't worth his time, like she was when he was new in school and lonely.

Hell.

I'll get my stupid slice of pizza by myself, then.

So I get some pizza and walk thirty blocks home instead of taking the train. That way, I don't have to hang around my house too long with Ma, who's supposed to be writing her dissertation but never actually is, and who's usually cleaning something and primed to quiz me about my day when I get home.

I slink into my room and read the new *Spider-Man* comic, plus a couple back issues, for an hour. Then Pop comes home from work with a sack of takeout, and we eat tofu in black bean sauce and fried rice cakes and soup dumplings, and it tastes so good I don't even think

about anything for a few minutes–and then Ma clears her throat and says: "Gretchen, your father and I have something to tell you."

I wonder if the school called because of that day I skipped out and went to the movies, but then Pop says: "You know things have been difficult around here."

"It's hard to know the best way to say this . . . ," adds Ma.

And it hits me. They're getting a divorce.

They talk about it for a while, saying
they're so sorry,
they went to see a marriage counselor,
they tried everything,
they can't get along together anymore,
they just don't know what to do, and
they're going in to sign the papers tomorrow.

I won't have to listen to them yelling.

I won't have to prick up my ears as I fall asleep because I'm not sure if it's the TV or the two of them starting in on each other again.

I won't have to try and talk them out of arguing in the Kmart

or Number One Noodle Son

or the subway.

And I won't have to hear them say stuff to each other like "You weren't very considerate when we were getting into bed

last night and I was trying to talk to you about the thing that happened right before dinner, do you know what I'm referring to?" or other crap like that before I go out the door to school,

and then have to have the unresolved parents-fighting ache all day, cold in my chest.

"Gretchen bubbee, we're going apartment hunting this weekend!" Ma is trying to sound bright, changing the subject to something more pleasant.

"What?"

"You and me. Tomorrow. Looking at apartments. Then we can talk about paint colors."

"Isn't Pop supposed to move out and get a bachelor pad?" I say. Bitchy.

"He *is* getting one," says Ma, bitterly. "We're selling the apartment."

"It's not a bachelor pad." Pop does that thing with his voice where it's clear he's intent on keeping his temper. "Hazel, don't go putting ideas in her head. Gretch, it's a studio."

"Where?"

"West Twenty-fourth Street. You can come see it. Tell me what I should buy to fix it up."

"See it?" I say. "What if I want to live with you?"

(Not that I do. But *come see it*? To your kid?)

"Oh. Um. It's a studio." Pop stands up and starts clearing the table.

"And how come you have it already and you're just telling me this stuff now?"

"I told you she'd be mad," says Ma. "I told you to get something bigger."

"Gretch, don't be like that." My dad, coaxing.

"Like what?"

Suddenly I'm almost crying.

How weird,

like you could think you were relieved and then you're crying,

like you didn't even know you were sad.

"I'm funding two households now," says Pop, as if we're both incredibly stupid and he has to spell stuff out for us. "A studio is what I can afford. What do you expect me to do, Ma?"

Why does he call her Ma? I'm the one who calls her Ma.

If I ever have a husband I am never letting him call me Ma, even if we have fourteen children. It's probably why they're getting divorced. If he'd have just called her Hazel everything would still be fine.

There's a hole in my shirt.

Why would I get a hole right there near the bottom edge? It's not like anything is rubbing on there.

I wonder if I should darn it.

If I keep thinking about the hole I won't cry,

darning is definitely not sexy,

would black thread look okay on a dark blue shirt? Or do I have to go to the drugstore and get blue?

I can't believe he's moving out

moving out

moving out.

Now no one will scramble eggs with dried fish from Chinatown and stink up the whole apartment,

no one will leave the toilet seat up,

no one will play Sinatra and try to make me dance,

or drag me to the dog run in Central Park to hang out with the dogs even though we don't have one,

or buy me comic books and hide them from Ma,

or watch TV in his ratty bathrobe in the middle of the night when he can't sleep and wake me with his too-big laughter.

Don't cry don't cry don't cry.

"I'll miss you, Gretchen," he says, coming over. "I hope you know that."

I haven't hugged him in so long.

Wait.

He smells like cigarettes.

I didn't know he smoked. Since when does he smoke?

He doesn't. Maybe he's got a girlfriend who smokes.

Oh hell.

It's obvious.

Obvious, obvious, obvious.

Crap.

My dad has a girlfriend:

I can't believe I didn't notice before.

He has someone else; that's why all this is happening. It explains the late nights and the long business trips and the tie he said the cleaners lost. My father has got some chain-smoking chippie on the side and he's leaving our family so he can cavort around town lighting her cigarettes for her.

I
can't
believe
he
would
do
this
to
us.

I run into my room and slam the door.

My room is a wreck. Here's what's on my shelves:

A stack of collectible *Spider-Man* comics in plastic sleeves,

six piles of ratty old comics, which include Spidey, some *Fantastic Four, Batman* and *Dark Knight, Punisher, Incredible Hulk, Doctor Strange,* a few *Savage Dragon, Witchblade, Grendel,* stuff like that. Oh, and *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen.*

A half-open box of old pastels,

three years' worth of *Fangoria* magazine,

some travel souvenirs from Hong Kong, where I went with Pop last year,

an old laptop computer that doesn't work anymore but seems like it's too valuable to throw out,

thirteen Pez dispensers (including Tasmanian Devil and Peppermint Patty),

a semi-huge collection of action figurines including G.I. Joe, Betty and Veronica, Rosie the Riveter, Spidey, Jar Jar Binks (someone gave him to me), and a few vampire-type guys,

four jars full of little plastic characters from Asia, left over from a phase I had when I was fourteen: Bean Curd Babies, Hellcats, Devil Robots, Snorkin' Labbits and Anti-Potato Head.

A big box of silly makeup from when I was younger: glitter eye shadow and blue lipstick, plus ordinary pink lipsticks Ma gave me when they were nearly worn down,

all my old picture books,

all my old chapter books,

a paper doll collection,

seven plastic baby dolls, all white babies except one little Asian one, none of which I've played with for years,

thirty-one stuffed animals (grimy),

five jewelry boxes, all given to me as gifts by my Chinese grandmother, all empty.

Oh, and on my floor:

dirty clothes,

clean clothes,

clothes I tried on and didn't wear,

"The Metamorphosis," which I still haven't cracked,

art supplies,

tablets of drawing paper,

shoes,

paper clips, all over where they spilled last week,

eighteen plates of plastic Chinese food, which I just started collecting,

tissue packets, partly open,

and half an old bagel, wrapped in paper.

I, Gretchen Yee, am a pack rat.

A pack vermin.

Divorce. Divorce. Divorce.

I have to do something to make me stop thinking about it.

Divorce. And my cheating, lying father–I have to get him out of my head, too.

I'll do my drawing assignment–not the one where I have to go to the Met–but the one I was supposed to have handed in

today. "Draw something or someone you love. Put your emotions onto the page, but draw from life, or from a photograph."

Okay, what do I love?

My stuff. My figurines, my comics, my old toy animals. But there's too much of it all to draw. And everyone will laugh at me if I do that, anyhow; everyone but Katya.

So not them.

What do I love? What do I love?

Ma knocks once on the door and leans in. "Gretch?" She sounds apologetic. "Are you okay, bubbee?"

"Yeah. I'm doing my Kensington."

"Listen. The appointment with the realtor is at nine a.m. tomorrow."

How did she get an appointment so fast? It's not like you can call up realtors after working hours on a Friday night and arrange to see apartments.

Oh.

Duh.

She's known about this for weeks. They only now told me. Ma has been on the phone with realtors for ages, planning our move, and is only telling me now, at the last minute.

"And Gretch?" Ma sits down on my bed. "Just so you know. The place we're gonna move to, it'll be smaller than this one. I mean, money's tight now, and

for a two-bedroom in Manhattan, they're asking a lot. But you'll like this one we're seeing tomorrow. It's in Chinatown, and there's an old claw-foot bathtub."

She's not only been on the phone with realtors, she's been to see apartments already. She's even picked one out.

"So. You might want to start thinking about what you want to keep, and what you want to throw away." Ma executes the should-be-patented Hazel Kaufman switch from sympathetic mother to critical nag.

"What do you mean?" I ask her.

"We've got to sort through your junk, Gretchen. We can't bring all of this"–she waves her arm to indicate my stuff–"to the new place."

"But I need my stuff!"

"You don't need all of it. You don't need most of it."

"Ma!"

"Gretch, you have to throw it out. We're starting fresh."

"*You're* starting fresh," I say. "I'm only moving with you because I'm legally obligated."

It came out worse than I meant.

"Don't be smart with me," Ma snaps. "Pop and I are going through a difficult time. The least you can do is be cooperative."

"Fine." I yank off my jeans and get into bed in my T-shirt. "I'll pack my stuff."

"No, that's not what I said. You'll go *through* your stuff and get rid of it. There's not room for all these bean curd creatures and whatnot in the new place."

"Bean Curd *Babies*." I turn out the light. "I'm going to bed now."

"This early?"

"This early."

"Aren't you going to brush your teeth?"

"No."

"Gretchen."

"I reserve the right not to brush my teeth on a night when my parents are getting a divorce and my mother says I have to throw out all my possessions and live like a monk."

"You know I didn't say that."

"Yes, you did." I pout.

She heaves a sigh. "It's a hard time for all of us."

And she's out. The door clicks shut.

I stare into the dark.

I still don't know what I love.

Saturday morning, I go see the new apartment with Ma. It's tiny and smells like fish and Chinese food. The white realtor lady asks if I'm adopted–like that's some legitimate, socially appropriate question to ask–and is

halfway through a gushy story about her friend's new baby from Korea when I say, "Haven't you ever heard of interracial marriage? It's all the rage in civilized countries," and she shuts up and purses her lips.

Then Ma takes me to lunch at the Second Avenue Deli in the East Village, which I usually like, but somehow I can't eat. I've got a grilled cheddar on rye and a side of coleslaw, and there's a huge bowl of good pickles on the table, but I'm not hungry.

"The new place is quaint, don't you think?" says Ma. Talking with a mouth full of Reuben. "I love those old moldings. And if we switch you to a single bed, your room will feel cozy. Ooh, or maybe a futon on the floor that you can roll up?"

"It's really small, Ma."

"The kitchen is small. I'll give you that. But you know I never cook. Pop did all of that. Anyhow, it's only till I finish my dissertation."

She's never going to finish that dissertation. She started graduate school when I was seven and she's been at it for more than eight years. Ever since she finished her coursework, she's been writing this incredibly long analysis of Early American Puritan whatever. "Then I'll get a real job with benefits."

She's deluding herself. I get all my procrastination tendencies from her. "Now, Gretchen," she continues. "I have something else to tell you. You know Marianne?"

"The one who drives the Lexus?"

"There's more to her than that. She's an incredibly kind person. Anyway, she called me last night after you went to bed and said that she and Gary were supposed to go on this trip to a tiny island in the Caribbean, a resort–and now Gary can't go because of some work obligation. She's furious at him. He's always doing this."

"And?"

"She knows what a hard time I've had separating from Pop, and she said she could switch Gary's reservation over to me, if I wanted. It's all already paid for."

"She's taking you on vacation?"

"She's offering. Only we'd have to leave on Friday afternoon. This Friday. Would that be okay, bubbee?"

"But Pop will be at that toy convention thing in Hong Kong."

"I know, but you stayed on your own that weekend last fall, didn't you? When we went up to the Kesslers'?"

"Yeah."

"Gretch, I wouldn't ask but I'm so exhausted I can't tell you." She's shoving an enormous fry into her mouth and washing it down with coffee.

"When does Pop get back?" I ask.

"The following Saturday. So you'll be a week on your own."

"Eight days."

"Okay. Eight days. And then I'll be back a couple days after that! It's this amazing place. There's a spa

where you can get massages, and there are no cars on the whole island. Everyone goes around by bicycle."

She's so bright, talking about it.

She loves the beach.

She's never been to the Caribbean.

And Ma hasn't looked bright for a long time, now that I think about it.

Sometimes I hate my dad. Even before this affair with the chippie,

and even before this divorce,

it seemed like all he did was make Ma unhappy.

Maybe they're just too different. Because he's Chinese American and she's Jewish.

Or because he owns a small toy company and she's trying to be a scholar.

Or because she's a blabbermouth and he's quiet.

Or he's a man and she's a woman.

"Sure, go on and get a tan." I try to smile. "I can deal."

"We can leave the extra key with Ramón down the hall." Ma squeezes my hand. "And I'll take you grocery shopping and leave you money and all that."

"Okay."

"You sure you'll be all right, on your own?"

"Absolutely."

●

Aside from the übervillains and murderers and vermin wandering the streets. Yeah, I'll be fine.

I escape from Ma and head up to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to do my Kensington homework. There's beautiful stuff in the Jaharis Gallery of Greek art, and I sit down with my pad and begin sketching a statue of a naked man reclining with a bunch of grapes.

This is hard. The stone makes the body look different; softer. Plus he's lying down. Superheroes never recline on their elbows, draping themselves around like that. They're always in action.

How do I make it look like stone?

How did the sculptor make stone look like skin?

Eraser,

eraser,

dust off–

hell.

A smudge.

Shoulder, shadow, forearm, shadow;

this one is coming out okay.

Maybe Kensington will actually like it. I do draw bodies better than most people in class. That's not conceited, it's true. Katya's bodies always look like they're stiff, like she's drawn a doll instead of a person.

Do men really look like this?

This guy has no hair.

I may not have seen any naked boys up close, but I've walked through Chelsea in the summer when all the men have their shirts off, and even people who wax themselves stupid still have hair on their arms, or their underarms, or somewhere. And lots of the nonwaxers are seriously furry.

Was it an aesthetic decision–like the sculpture looked better with no hair–or is it just too hard to carve chest hairs out of stone? Or were they waxing in ancient Greece?

Thank goodness I don't have to draw a gherkin, that's all I can say.

Fig leaf.

Titus is Greek. Titus Antonakos.

Titus.

Titus.

I wonder what he looks like naked.

"–I was thinking about basketball next year but I don't know. I don't actually like it that much." I hear a voice from the back of the room.

Titus! Could he be here, doing his Kensington assignment?

Don't turn around.

Don't turn around.

"Do we *have* to be on a team?" the voice continues. "What's the deal?"