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Arriving in New York for the first time was like wearing a sign that said CHEAT ME.

Muggers mugged. Junkies jacked up. Pickpockets picked pockets. Flashers flashed, rapists raped and perverts perverted. Psycho bag ladies shouted obscenities at miscellaneous crazies. You could get shot just for being in the path of a bullet. AIDS knew where you lived.

Heaps of garbage stank on every corner. Taxis honked, hawkers shouted, brakes screamed. Women jeered, flirted, complained in a barely comprehensible language. *Gedda hell oudda heah! Don' fuckwidme mistah.* The midday sun bounced off ten million glaring surfaces.

Dragging her suitcase out of the station on the hottest day of the year, Beth dripped sweat. Signs made unhelpful suggestions: Seventh Avenue, Eighth. Thirty-first Street. Thirty-third. She didn't dare ask directions for fear of being taken for a fool. Or worse, a tourist.

She stuck out her arm and a taxi swerved. Shoving her suitcase on to the seat, she fell in after it and closed the door.

'Christopher Street,' she gasped, hoping he'd know where that was. And then, just like that, they were off. The sweet smell of decay blew in through the open window mixed with exhaust fumes and melted tar.

Beth sat back in the cab and sighed. *Remember this time and place*, she thought. *New York City, June 1983. This is where it starts.*

Already her life felt like a miracle.

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‘Which corner?’ In the mirror the driver waited for an answer, rolled his eyes.

Which corner? She frowned. Why did it matter?

He screeched to a halt. ‘Two thirty-five,’ he said, shaking his head, thinking (no doubt) he could have charged this girl anything.

She fumbled in her purse, found three dollars, handed it over, threw open the door and fell out on to the melting sidewalk with her bag.

‘Keep the change,’ she whispered as he sped away.

The lock on the building’s front door was broken. Inside, a single bulb illuminated peeling paint and a row of dented metal mailboxes. The heat was

unbearable. She hauled her suitcase to the foot of the stairs and began to climb, stopping on each landing to wipe the sweat from her hands.

On the fifth floor she flicked the light switch and recoiled.

A figure sat slumped against the door, glaring. 'It's about fucking time. I've been waiting in this hell-hole all day.'

Beth gaped.

'Open the door, for fuck's sake.' The strange girl snatched Beth's keys. 'I'll do it,' she said, pushing her own suitcase in first. 'Christ what a fucking dump.'

'I'm ...'

'I know who you are. You're Rachel's friend. Bernie. Betsy. Barbie.'

'Beth.'

A dark hall led to a tiny living room (no window) with a door on each side. The kitchen was only big enough for one person, the bathroom too small for a

sink. A definite scurrying in her peripheral vision when she turned on the light. Cockroaches.

The apartment came furnished. In the living room, a Chinese scroll hung sideways over a small oatmeal-coloured sofa, like you'd find in a dentist's waiting room. A wooden folding chair and a small glass coffee table completed the suite. The only shelf held a dusty wine bottle covered in drips.

Rachel's sister dumped her bag in the near bedroom and ran the water in the kitchen, waiting unsuccessfully for it to cool. 'I'm Dawn. Tom should be here already. He has the keys.'

Beth hated people referring to strangers as if you should know them. Who was Tom? Her boyfriend? Her cat?

'Oh,' Beth said. 'Thanks for letting me live here.'

'Couldn't afford it without you. Have to find a job. You got one, right?' She looked Beth up and down, as if to say, *If you got a job, I can get ten.*

Beth nodded.

‘We’ve got to do something about this place. I can’t live in a fucking slum.’

‘Do you mind if ...’ Beth edged towards the door.

‘Be my guest.’

Beth dragged her bag into the second bedroom. Small double bed, narrow bedside table, chest of drawers. Barely room for a person. Bare bulb overhead.

How could it be so hot?

Across the way, a brick tenement identical to theirs had fire escapes running up and down like zips on a biker jacket. She opened the window and stuck her head out over the street, desperate for air. A muffled clamour rose from below. It was hotter outside than in.

Stripping off her clothes, she fell back on the bare mattress.

Ugh, she thought. I need a shower.

The door to Dawn’s room was closed when Beth stepped out in a towel. She hurried to the bathroom, stood under the cold shower till her blood cooled, then stood dripping on the wet tile floor. No bath

mat, no shower curtain. Water trickled from the ceiling and ran down the walls; the entire apartment had become a rainforest. She was sweating again by the time she reached her bedroom.

Beth made the bed and unpacked into the chest of drawers. A few stray items at the back – green nylon underpants, torn T-shirt, single grey sock – she dumped guiltlessly in the trash.

And that was it. Home.

Lying naked on the bed, she spread the damp towel over her torso. If you didn't move, it wasn't too bad.

As the light slipped away, Beth heard a male voice in the next room. *Must be Tom*, she thought. Not a cat then. She lacked the energy to check. It was too hot to get dressed. Too hot to talk. Definitely too hot to talk to Dawn.

Outside, singing, swearing and shouting rose up in a spew of noise. New York City after dark sounded savage.

She turned off the light and tried to sleep.