

Impasse

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Turning the frame so that the painting better reflected the meagre light filtering through the window, Carl scrutinized his work. It was a still life, dissimilar only in its crudeness from any one of the thousands like it hanging in galleries and homes: The reds and yellows had been dulled with too much blue, giving the apples and bananas an over-ripe, indigestible appearance; the green cloth lay in folds that only paint and brush could make it assume; the bowl was as unnaturally distorted as the fruit was artificially symmetrical. Slowly Carl moved in a semi-circle in front of the picture, examining from different angles, and as he moved, the dirty lines in his face lengthened. Finally he stopped and raised his arm in a contemptuous gesture, as though he would strike the painting with the back of his hand, but instead he turned away and stared despairingly out the window.

It was drizzling rain and the little people on the sidewalk below were hurrying, heads down and shoulders hunched over. "Will I ever have a sidewalk to follow? or a street sign to read? or a place to go that I know exists?" Carl asked himself. "Or is it that I have these things and am too proud, or too stupid to use them? or afraid that if I do use them I'll be bored to death? Am I going to wander around in a goddamned jungle the rest of my life simply because to do otherwise would be a confession that I am no different from anybody else — wander blindly from tree to tree because I want to demonstrate my individuality?"

Carl stood at the window for a long time looking at everything and seeing nothing, then he turned and walked to the wash basin, rinsed his face and combed his hair,

and left the room.

He watched her intently as she made her way between the tables to the corner booth. (Not over twenty-three . . . the Intellectual Type . . . lipstick the only bit of ornamentation, unless the tan is pancake . . . brown hair brushed away from the face and back of the ears, emphasizing the contours of the cheeks and nose . . . probably intentional, nice nose . . . tailored suit too concealing, but the legs tell the story . . . simple almost to the point of being plain, but, all in all, not displeasing.) She sat down, ordered a drink, then put on dark-rimmed glasses and studied the menu. Carl dropped his gaze to the empty glass in front of him and didn't look up again until she was eating her dinner.

Is she an artist, or a writer, he wondered, or merely a traveller who wants to be able to tell the people back home that she has been in Greenwich Village? He was certain that he had never seen her before, but he realized that this didn't mean anything. Although he had been here more than a year now he had made few friends — none, in fact, in any of the higher circles. Carl decided that whoever she was, or wherever she was from, he'd still like to meet her.

The girl had finished her dinner, taken a cigarette out of her handbag, and was rummaging, unsuccessfully, judging from the frown and monologue, for matches. She was discreet enough not to notice when Carl almost knocked a chair down getting to her table.

"Allow me?" he asked, smiling. She returned his smile, lit her cigarette, and thanked him. The contrast between her clean freshness and himself made Carl self-conscious and, forgetting his inten-

tions, he had turned to go back to his table when she asked him if he wouldn't join her. He accepted, introduced himself, and sat down.

"My name is Ruth Davies," the girl was saying. "I suppose you live here, Mr. Hartman?"

"Yes. I paint. And you?"

"Just visiting. I came to New York to see about a place to live this fall. I'm going to do some post-graduate work at Columbia. My home is Galesburg, Illinois."

"I'm from Chicago, myself," Carl replied. "What will you be studying at Columbia?"

"History. I'm working on my master's. You say you're from Chicago? How long have you been painting?"

"Four or five years — or perhaps I should say I've been trying for four or five years. You see, I had an art teacher at Lane Tech who once told me that I had talent, and it seems that my life since then has been dedicated to proving her wrong."

"You're destroying all of my illusions," Ruth said. "I've always thought that all artists were egocentrics, convinced that their work was great whether anybody else agreed or not. I'd like to see some of your paintings and judge for myself."

Carl closed the door behind them and turned on the light. He had grown accustomed to the room and all its defects: the filthy floor, spotted here and there with paint that he had spilled and not bothered to wipe-up; the wrinkled and cracked wall paper; the table, littered with crumbs, saucers, a hotplate and a percolator, and cups, one of which was half full of stale coffee; paintings stacked against the wall, some of them still mutilated from the night he had come in drunk and tried, in his stupid frenzy, to destroy them. Now he realized how all this must look to Ruth, and he was ashamed of himself for bringing her here. There was a long silence,

then Carl finally spoke.

"At least this should be in keeping with your illusions about artists and how they live. I doubt if there is a more garretish garret in the world." She didn't make any comment, and he continued. "If you will sit in that chair, Ruth, I'll drag out a few of my masterpieces. Toss the apron on the table; the paint on it may still be wet."

She did as he told her, sitting down carefully and folding her hands in her lap while he busied himself with the paintings. He brought out the street scene — the only picture he had ever been offered a price for — and the two landscapes that he had done a year ago when he was in Maine, but after that he was at a loss. Then he realized that it didn't matter. Ruth glanced at the pictures just long enough to decide that, "The two with the woods and streams are nice, but the other one is too . . . too surrealistic," and then continued her inspection of the room.

Carl leaned back against the door, lit a cigarette, and looked at her. He stood there, trembling slightly, watching her and wanting her.

As soon as he had released her and stepped back her terror gave way to anger. She struck him in the face with her handbag, knocking him back against the table and to one knee, and then ran out of the room. Carl got to his feet and stumbled out into the hallway crying, "Ruth, Ruth, I'm sorry . . . Ruth, wait . . ." But she had already disappeared down the dark stairway.

He turned and walked slowly back to his room and to the window. It was still raining, and the streets and sidewalks were deserted. Deliberately he drove his fist through the glass, then drew it back and stared at the dark blood as it spread over the white skin.