

“How?” Aslam asked, perplexed.

“Keep talking to me.”

They stared at each other. His whole body swayed as if signaling its assent.

“Let’s leave,” she almost begged.

“I can’t,” he replied.

“Oh, I see,” she said with mock disappointment. She swirled her drink.

“I’m sorry,” he offered an apology. “You are a beauty and on a different night, you could’ve put a leash around my neck and carried me outta here.”

She shrugged her shoulders, puckered her lips as if offering them for a kiss all the same before pursing them. A typical cat! He looked away, wondering if he was making a mistake by turning Amelie’s offer down. Granted there was no guarantee that leaving with Amelie would lead to a night of non-committal pleasure, he also knew the chances of spending the night with Debbie were almost nonexistent. He suddenly felt ashamed of letting such a thought linger in his head. But as they engaged in casual, meaningless chatter, he became convinced that the thought of a golden opportunity dangling right in his face wouldn’t vanish unless he excused himself. Ah, that would be too rude, he thought. He’d wait for Lev to return.

“What do you do? I mean for a living?” Amelie asked.

The question startled him. No one asked such a question right off the bat. At parties like these, one would start with other questions, questions about hobbies, tastes, sexual escapades, brushes with authority, connection to artistic pursuits and only then when such curiosities had been laid to rest would a person dare go for the jugular but never to put the other person in his or her place.

“If you’re looking for a sugar daddy, I’m too young for that,” joked Aslam but felt that perhaps the joke was a bit out of place.

“I’m not looking for anything. Just curious!” she replied.

Before Aslam could tell her about his work at a cafe, he

noticed how defeated she seemed. Was that because of being stuck with Lev? He felt sorry for her. But, he'd made up his mind, if Lev didn't show up in the next five minutes, he'd have to make a dash for the restroom.

"How do you know Lev?" Aslam asked.

"That's a long story. But if you like to know, I feel trapped, though I understand it's not your problem," she sighed before sipping, dramatically.

He had a feeling. Still, unsure whether to totally believe her or not, he touched the side of her arm to offer sympathy. He wanted to say something as frivolous as that we all felt that way sometimes or things would get better.

"Please take your hand off. I am not a beggar!" Amelie reproached him.

He pulled back. The Janice Joplin song had ended.

"How long have you known Lev?" she turned the tables on him.

Despite her irresistible pull, he wanted to get away. Aslam thought hard. He told her how many years ago both of them were part of what he called the cafe crowd. They had common friends. "Some of our roommates knew each other. The usual stuff, running into each other at parties, bookstore readings, and art openings," he added. Unbeknownst to her, a wave of resentment rose in him, steadily, regarding a long forgotten moment stirring base instincts in him. When revisiting through the window that opened up in Aslam's mind, whether he was drunk or lonely, it narrowed his vision of the past moment when Aslam let Lev crush his chances to woo a young woman some five years ago. She was from Spain, he recalled her face, and a wonderful poet. What was her name? How strange! Yes, it was Livia. Because of Lev's rude intervention that day, Livia never gave Aslam another chance. It had been a terrible mistake to let Lev become his roommate. If he could free Amelie from Lev's claws, that would be a noble revenge. Livia wanted to be a writer, a published poet, a bi-lingual poet, and praised and critiqued what Aslam showed her as part of his early drafts. They seemed to like similar writers,

from Juan Rulfo to Goytisolo, and had the same taste in music. Lev destroyed that pristine possibility.

“Hello?!” Amelie waved her hand in front of him. And when he snapped out of it, she shook her head. “Are you high? Man, you just spaced out!”

Aslam apologized, said he was a bit drunk. There was another commotion, with Maria’s voice reaching a high pitch, but one could also hear Matt’s calm yet persistent baritone. Aslam took it as a good cue to peel himself off of Amelie, but she too felt enticed by the quarreling mayhem.

“But that’s not art,” Matt insisted.

“That’s wonderful!” exclaimed Amelie looking into Aslam’s eyes.

“That’s what I do, Matt. That’s the kind of art I do. You always belittle me,” Maria shouted from the other end.

“Oh, come on, Maria. What you do is interesting, but it’s not art. That’s gimmickry!”

“Fuck you and your idea of art!” hollered Maria.

“Well, fuck you too!” responded Matt.

“What gives you the final vote to decide that conceptual art is not art.?” demanded Maria.

“Conceptual art or mixed media is one thing; slamming found objects on the back of pizza boxes is another,” retorted Matt.

“It’s not just slamming things on to something, asshole. It requires thinking, a conceptual framework. It’s different from your oil paints and canvas thing. Lighten up!” huffed Maria before storming out of the kitchen and, as she passed by Aslam, “See you guys later. I don’t need to take this bullshit from anyone.”

Aslam tried to stop Maria, but she politely told him she was alright, she needed to go home. He said he could walk her, but she said she was fine walking home alone and patted his cheek lovingly.

“Come and see me sometime,” she suggested as she grabbed her jacket from a pile on the floor.

“I will,” promised Aslam, seeing her walk out like a graceful

warrior.

David hollered from the room that the second reading session was about to start. It was a play someone at the party had written. Aslam, standing next to Amelie, saw two women and two men whom he barely knew walk into the room holding sheets of paper to read from. Where was Debbie? Where was Louise? Aslam almost tripped on something. Fucking, stupid shoes! he muttered. Debbie could be sitting in some jerk's lap for all he knew. When people were drunk, anything could happen, he pondered. He mustered courage to confront Amelie and expressed that he needed to check on a friend. He briefly waited for her response, which never came, just a blank stare, (*did he say something in Urdu or Punjabi?*) and then he made his way through the kitchen crowd. What a helluva vacant stare! he pondered as he drifted away. Something wasn't right about her.

Lamb had already been taken out of the oven and the majority of it consumed, but he had no hunger left at the moment. He felt nervous about being caught by her looking for her with an impatient expression on his morose face. Getting caught snooping on her could mean either he didn't trust her or was jealous. Either way, that would be disastrous. That would be worse than being rejected by her. Spying had to be done casually. Easier said than done. There were times when emotion held reason by the nose and led it to the gallows. Barbara almost collided with Aslam as she turned away from the sink with a glass full of water. A little water sloshed out and splashed on to Aslam's cuff. The voices of the actors from the adjoining room oscillated without leaving any recognizable impression on Aslam's mind. Aslam and Barbara said sorry to each other in unison. Although Aslam wanted Barbara to get out of his way, he found himself following her to the backyard where usually no one hung out because of its slovenliness when he heard her say, "Oh fuck! Shit!"

Pushing past a few self-absorbed guests, he caught up with her before she opened the door to the outside and asked,