1. Mad Diamond

Lately I dream I am stoned. Last night I was rolled in Bambu paper like Cleopatra in a Persian carpet being carried to Antony.

I was at Bennington College for the July Program. I was going to be a Visiting Poet for two days. John Ashbery had gotten me the gig. I was put in Wooley House, where I had had my own room as a student. Philip Lopate was next door.

I gave the reading as soon as I got there. Then I was introduced to a bearded novelist, and I thought it doesn't matter about his beard, which looked scratchy, at least I wouldn't be alone that night. It would be an adventure that I would read about in his next novel. I heard someone behind his back mutter that the novelist was a redneck. I was not deterred. I was separated, and jilted, and I had to have an affair. I looked up at the redneck smiling; he smiled back. His smiling back meant that I was safe, I would never be alone. I was drinking wine in a plastic cup. I turned around to get a Triscuit and he was gone.

“Are you looking for the novelist with the beard?” Sam Cohen's girlfriend Gwendolyn asked in a weird singsong voice—Sam Cohen was a student I shared with John Ashbery—“because he left with a friend of mine.”

On my second night I sat next to Gwendolyn. She had become my best friend. The theater was crowded. “There are no men anywhere,” I complained. I was ready to go back to New York. It was comforting to be able to pour my maudlin complaint into Gwendolyn's ear. She listened earnestly. Suddenly a handsome stranger in a white shirt climbed over the hard wood bench from the row behind us and sat down on my other side.
“Hello, I’m Kazimir Noble,” he said. “I’m an artist. They pay me to do nothing.”
I was enormously embarrassed. Kazimir Noble. His name alone was too handsome and improbable. “Well, hello and goodbye,” Gwendolyn sang in a loud singsong. She was gone.

He had a beauty mark on one ear lobe as if it were pierced for an earring. The lights dimmed. The poet on stage, who was the poetry editor of the New Yorker and had published me three times, announced that his first poem was about a Russian poet, Osip Mandelstam. “Russian was my first language,” Kazimir whispered to me.

“Are you Russian?” I asked, surprised, as if I had just opened a book by Turgenev, and he was the hero.

“Yes. But I was born here. I grew up in New Jersey,” he said.

His Russian face was both gaunt and voluptuous. His nose was more beautiful even than my father’s. He was tall and broad-shouldered. In the middle of the reading I touched his arm to reassure him, to reassure myself that he was real. “Let’s leave,” Kazimir whispered. We left the theatre rudely. Outside, I was staggered at every step by his beauty.

“How old are you?” I asked.

“Twenty-seven.” It seemed almost obscene for him to be that young.

“I’m from New York,” I said quickly. “Where do you live?”

“I don’t live anywhere.”

“Where would you like to live?”

“New York,” he said. We kissed in a grove of shadows near the pottery barn. It was like a marriage, like breaking a wineglass in the sight of God. “Do you want to stay with me tonight?” he asked.

“I do,” I said.

In the dark, Kazimir undid my dress. He bared one breast. “They’re big,” he said admiringly, touching me.

“Oh, they change during the course of the month,” I confessed, “they get bigger and smaller as the month goes along.”

“It’s like getting several women at once,” he replied. I was an Indian goddess covered with breasts. I combed my long dark hair with the fingers of both hands, drawing it out to its full length, and letting it
fall around my face.

"Your hair is like a character in a novel," he said, closing me in his arms.

The artists and the writers lived in houses that were far apart. I was going to sleep with him in his room. He came with me first to my room so that I could get a change of clothes for breakfast in the dining hall.

"How do you want me to look?" I asked.

"I want you to look well-fucked," he answered. I took it as a promise that I would be.

Then we were naked in front of a fire. There was a rainbow Canadian blanket on his bed. I admired his Cyrillic hands and feet, the sweat raining from under his soft brown hair.

His penis like the trunk of a tree.

I went down on him. He seemed impressed. "Jewish girls," he said. He didn't come. I was glad. I wanted him too much. He entered me with one thrust. My legs were bent. I kissed his Adam's apple. "I like the idea of your small feet somewhere around my knees," he said on top of me. He looked like Nureyev, it was a miracle that he wasn't gay. I kissed his neck again and again. I never thought of coming myself. It was too new. I was too happy. I waited for him to cry out in pleasure. A long prolonged cry, like "Tim-ber!" His silence grew deeper. There was a forest of silence. He had come.

"Why did you pick me?" I asked the next morning.

"I like your small feet," he said. "If you're unfaithful, I'll cut them off."

I laughed, pleased. I couldn't imagine how I would ever need to be unfaithful to him. I loved everything about him.

"As soon as I saw you," Kazimir said, "I wanted to have a child. I wanted to impregnate you." No man had ever said this to me before. It seemed so primitive. It was a sign of commitment. I was touched. Then I was afraid I would lose him because I couldn't have a child.

"I can't," I confessed.

"Why?"

"I had my tubes severed."

I saw the shadow slide along his Russian cheeks.
“I had a son,” he admitted. “But I didn’t like the mother.”

“Oh,” I said, relieved. Nature was appeased. He had had a son; he wouldn’t have to leave me.

“You’ll love my children,” I said. I thought they were my chief assets, that I was most desirable in my motherhood, like a coral illustration in _Water Babies_ of the good fairy, Miss Doasyouwouldbedoneby, surrounded by little ones with gossamer wings. Summers in Cape Cod, I read this book over and over to Lily but always cried when I came to the part about the otter who had a ‘sweet obedient husband,’ because it reminded me of Daniel. Finally Lily grabbed the book away from me.

“I can read it faster by myself,” she said.

“Do you want to go swimming?” Kazimir asked.

“I have to get my suit.”

“You won’t need it,” he said. I climbed into his tall truck, and we drove to a local waterfall, called Buttermilk Falls. We were the only ones there. We swam naked in shallow water as if we were in paradise. He caught a fish with his bare hands. But then I saw the fish was wounded and dying. Its flailing tail was nearly torn off. He let it go.

Two state troopers arrived. Swimming wasn’t allowed. We had to put our clothes on while they watched. I dressed very slowly, my layered skirts sticking to me, wet. The more I hurried, the slower I went. They stood on a rock right above us, their smiles of pleasure clearly visible. They were gawking. It was too early for him to accuse me of immodesty; too soon for me to suspect him of prudery. We left under their watchful gaze, the spell unbroken. We came to a deserted spot on a road. Kazimir stopped, and unrolled the foam rubber in the bed of the truck. He pulled me down under him. He kissed me with his great closed lips.

One summer in North Truro, the children in the back seat of the car, vanilla ice cream dripping in the dark, little Nat had announced, biting into the sugar wafer, “It’s cone time.”

It was cone time for me.

I wanted him to touch the top of my head with both hands as if he were reading my thoughts in Braille. To enter me. I wanted his penis to penetrate my womb. I wanted, at the moment that my womb would
open to receive him, for him to thrust his tongue in my mouth. I wanted to feel as if my womb were splitting open, as if I were Katherine the Great tupping with a bull.

   Somehow I couldn't quite get into the right position. Then it was over.
   “Slam bam thank you ma'am,” he said.

My marriage had started with a typo.

   Mad Diamond
   to wed
   Daniel Wiener

   The Times left out the 'u' in my first name.

   Daniel and I had been married fifteen years. I came, and he didn't. Afterwards, I turned aside to sleep and pretended that I didn't feel the shaking of the bed. We were both perpetually disappointed. I wanted to have great sex, like Louis XIV, who had fireworks set off every time he had an orgasm. But instead after sex we often had a fight. Once, Daniel got out of bed, left our apartment and walked downtown to 42nd Street. He came home with paperbacks that he hid. One day in his shirt drawer I found The Delivery Boy and the Dominatrix.

   Soon, I couldn't stand to be in the same room with Daniel.

   My mother was on her deathbed in the hospital for Joint Diseases—she had refused to have her breast ‘lopped’ and had gone on a diet of raw greens—when I told her I was getting a divorce. “I'm very happy for you, Maud,” she said. “I want you to marry an equal.”

   She knew I was in love with Carl Vaggio, a famous artist, who had said he would marry me in 1980. It was December, 1979. Then my mother died.

   When Carl Vaggio jilted me like Henry the Eighth, right after Christmas, because his wife got pregnant, I knew for a fact that I would never again be happy, or sexually fulfilled. And I had failed my children. If I had married Carl Vaggio, my children's future would have been assured. The world ended. I smoked grass. I had my own dealer, a wandering troubadour, who came to the house and had published an Ashberian book of poems.