

ANATOMIES

Corner of A and Fourth/Eye

In New York, there is an important distinction to make between where you live and where you sleep. You sleep in your apartment. You live in the city.

It is a dripping August, which you know by the smell of it: dried urine, rotting garbage, and the unleaded smell of cabs burning off fuel as they idle in the shimmering heat, each a mirage, a promise of something better on the other side. You can't get into a cab today because the ten dollars in cash and change sitting on your desk in your apartment is all you have until payday, which is Friday. Today is Sunday. You don't have a bank account because the check-cashing place is convenient to your apartment. Also, you don't trust yourself with a bank account; the margin of error is always, always so small. Instead, you like to watch the stack of cash dwindle in front of you. It causes you anxiety, but it also makes you feel as though you are in control of something here, in New York. You are in control of nothing, of course, but the illusion helps.

Because you sleep in the East Village, in a studio apartment in an old tenement that you share with a roommate, you walk the streets for entertainment. On paydays, you allow yourself a Cuban sandwich from the takeout counter on Avenue A. Today, however, you simply stand in front of the door for a few minutes, because smelling something is almost as good as eating it, and smelling something other than urine and garbage makes you happy. The smells are engrossing, in fact, which is why you don't notice what has been going on behind you until there is the sound of something whining through the air, not very far from your head, and then the noise of the bystanders, who must have been there all along, suddenly rushes in and you turn in time to see two men grappling with each other, in the street, just feet away. One of them has a hammer. In the moment it has taken you to notice the scene and become confused by it, the man with the hammer bounces it off the side of the other man's head and there is a sound that would, under other circumstances, be satisfying—the sound of a job being completed, of something being forced into its proper place. You actually see the eye of the struck man wobble in its socket, as if it has just been dropped there to settle. They are both screaming—one in anger and the other in pain—but the sidewalkers are screaming too and so the scene takes on a kind of miserable white noise wherein

no one person's distress can be sorted from another's.

The police sirens are what finally cut through the cord that had knotted around you, anchoring you to this place to watch a man maybe get killed. This is true for everyone, and when the cop car screeches up, the men have already run off together, wild elopers, one with his hand over his eye and a trail of blood down his shirt, the other just behind him, brandishing the hammer like a cartoon wife with a rolling pin after a mouse.

St. Vincent's/Lower Left Quadrant

David Beckham has broken the second metatarsal of his left foot. You do not care very much except that the picture of him in the sporting publication open on your lap—he sits on the ground, one hand over an eye, one hand on the foot, worried and in pain—is the only thing distracting you from your own pain (back, lower left quadrant), which is unlike any pain you've had before. It is also distracting you from the St. Vincent's ER, which is the least comforting place you've ever been. Everything is a shade of grayish green. There are no plants or tissue boxes. There are spots of dried blood on the floor in front of you. You sit facing the windows and feel

like you're in prison. You are trying not to pay attention to the couple seated to your left. You try to focus instead on the lesser pain of Becks, but your neighbors are difficult not to overhear.

It's the meth, the boyfriend says, he's been doing it all weekend. The ER attendant asks the man who is not the boyfriend how much meth he has done this weekend. The man is weeping quietly. He sits straight up in the green vinyl chair, one hand gripping the chair arm, the other twisting his boyfriend's hand, which has gone white and slightly blue from the pressure. His eyes don't look anywhere. I don't know, all of it? says the boyfriend, grimacing at his twisted hand, but content to bruise, to share. The expressionless attendant makes a note on a clipboard. And when did he do the, uh, procedure? she asks. I don't know, says the boyfriend. I just woke up and went to the bathroom and he was sitting on the toilet like that. Like what? asks the attendant just because she wants to hear it again. With his...the boyfriend whispers but can't talk too quietly because his man has started to make a low whining sound in his throat. With his testicles stapled to his thigh, he finishes and puts a hand on the head of the whining man who is wearing loose, dry-weave exercise shorts.

You have glanced up from Becks to catch this glimpse

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and you'd almost forgotten yourself but here is the breathless punch again. You jerk in your seat and pant. Your vision tunnels, momentarily, the periphery dark and fogged out. You seem to pulse in empathy with your neighbor. Later, you will learn that a UTI has crawled up your urinary tract to your kidneys, which are infected. This can be life threatening but is also easily treatable.

The man with the staples in his balls lets out a thin howl, which is unlike a dog howl. It is not rounded and full and conclusive. It's the sound of pure pain. The ER attendant has come back out of the triage station and even she looks concerned now. You look back down at the photo because you feel very strongly that you would also like to howl, that you would like to hold this man's hand and go a little hysterical with him.

There is a bustling—the attendant and the boyfriend are trying to coax the patient into a wheelchair. You can't imagine how he got here, how he walked at all, down the stairs of his apartment building, to the curb to hail a cab. It must have taken tremendous reserves of strength. He must be exhausted. There is a yelp and a moan followed by some rustling, and the squeak of rubber tires on sanitized linoleum.

David Beckham looks very tired and perhaps as if he is about to cry or has just finished crying. Probably just about