

NATHAN HILL

## SUPERANGEL

### *The Actress Cannot Cry*

The script is simple enough—yet another story about boys and girls. The girl here is Princess Ann, and the boy is Joe Bradley, and Princess Ann is *leaving* him. It's their last scene together, the final night of shooting, and the crew is ready, and the lights are on, and the camera is loaded, and everybody is waiting for Audrey Hepburn to cry. According to the script, Princess Ann is leaving this boy Joe Bradley so that she can go back to doing her job, which is princessing, which delights Audrey Hepburn. And maybe that's why she cannot get this scene right. Playing a princess on holiday is just too lovable, and here in *Rome!* In Rome, where everything is better—the scooters, flowers, bells, beeps, the shops that sell such wonderful things, and sidewalk cafés, and *horses!* Even the way sunlight reflects through her champagne glass—breaking into triangles on the table that burst when the table jerks—is better in Italy. The whole shoot has been so lovely, the dances and costumes, the dresses sparkling and billowy, and all the stunts—she jumped into the river! Leapt from the *rinfreschi* cart! Drove the scooter! Dodged buses! Audrey has never had so much fun. But here the script says she should be crying. She has one simple line, one stupid simple line, and she can't get it right. They've been through twenty takes, and she knows, every time the words tumble out of her mouth, she knows they're flat, unfelt, already dead. She's holding the whole thing up, and it's raining, and everybody is miserable.

What she has to say is this: "I don't know how to say good-bye. I can't think of any words."

Her leading man smiles between takes. You are good at everything but tears, he says. He's being patient, the dear, not letting her know how important he is, what a huge movie star, how valuable his time. But she's heard the stories. She knows he's worried about the billing, that he demanded rewrites because she had too many lines. And she's heard the whispers on set—the crew is worried. The movie will flop. One star is reluctant, the other unknown, untested, and can't even cry on cue. And the whole thing is a rip-off anyway, yet another version of *It Happened One Night*—rich girl on the lam, reporter who knows the score, mistaken identities, sexual tension, suggested nudity, unexpected love—and this man is no Clark Gable, and she

is no Claudette Colbert, and that's what everyone will be saying when the movie arrives and is subsequently rejected: the whole world will be laughing.

Still, she cannot cry.

Mr. Movie Star asks her if she wants an onion. An onion? For the crying, he says. Oh, no, thank you, she says. Or what else you can do, he says, you can open your eyes as wide as possible and don't blink and do that for a long time, until there's tears.

She has watched herself crying before, in the mirror, studied it so that she could recreate it, watched her cheeks and eyes, the way her lip curls, how her chin tightens and divots, how her shoulders hunch—but the crying never lasts long enough. The act of watching it always makes it stop.

The director says, Let's do it again, and again Audrey tries her stupid line—"I don't know how to say good-bye. I can't think of any words." Then the director yells *cut* and the crew sighs and her leading man smiles his patient smile and Audrey Hepburn is wrecked with shame.

### *The Weaver Begins*

170 Here is Penelope, wife of Odysseus, Queen of Ithaca, weaving. Or, rather, here she is pretending to weave. She is thinking about weaving, but not yet weaving. She stands before her loom and stares at the figures painted over the wood of the top beam: two women, slim, one of them helmeted with spear and leather breastplate, the other in draping linens. It's that famous story. It's Athena and Arachne and their duel, their great contest—who between them was the finest weaver?—and Penelope hates this painting. She hates this story. Because it wasn't a fair fight. Because Arachne was mortal. She worked on earth. In the cold and in the dark, at her wooden loom, with the flax twine that bit into her fingertips, with clay weights and a brittle fishbone bobbin. But Athena, with her silver loom, and silk thread, and spun cloudstring, and in the sky where it's always light—well, it was no contest. Even the most gifted tailor cannot match a goddess.

But never mind the rules of fair play—the duel started. What else can one expect from a god? And Athena's tapestry soon whorled out shimmering, shot with gold, thin as a leaf, in every hue and color. Her patterns astonishingly *moved*. The threads scattered like ants, and all who looked upon the weave saw a different design. Some saw heroes crashing their swords into the necks of enemies. Gods hammering armor. Wolves hunting. Ships scuttling on rocks. Some claimed to see colors they'd never seen before. Others

swore that from the tapestry arose sounds—a parade, a battle whoop, an infant’s cry. And Arachne was good, but her stuff was ragwork compared to this. When she looked at Athena’s cloth, what Arachne saw was herself, with swollen blue face, monstrous, swinging lifeless from the branch of a tree. And in that moment of horror, Arachne knew that she was looking at her future. Why fight it? She ran to the woods, weeping with shame, and hung herself with the wire from her own loom.

That’s where Athena found her, swaying dead, and took pity, and turned her into a spider. That is why we have spiders.

Penelope stares at her loom, a wedding gift from long ago. How many years? Too many to remember, too many days worn down by all this waiting. There’s a litter of terra-cotta weights at her feet, baskets of wool already spindled, jugs of olive oil to smooth the thread, and she hates it. She can’t get the warp right. The yarn keeps moving on her, and she adds more weight to make it tight, but it goes too taut and snaps. And the weft is stubborn—she pulls it across but can’t keep it straight, can’t fix the proper angles needed for her weave. Her web is jumbled, inharmonious; it looks like the floor, like cracked clay.

Penelope—greatest weaver in all Ithaca. *What a laugh.*

She leans against the loom, in this chamber upstairs where only she is allowed—no servants, cooks, men, children—with the portal looking east, out onto the courtyard. By day the sun erupts into this room, and by night she can see by the fires lit in the courtyard, the fires that will burn till the waiting is over, till the day her husband comes back. (She supposes they will burn forever.) She hates this room. Pools of raw sheepskin, flax fibers cleaned and combed, wool strings dyed red and yellow and purple and black, amphorae of oil, the tools of the weave, the distaff, the spindle, and blankets hung on walls for instruction, for inspiration—she hates it. It makes her so tired.

It’s an overwhelming job, an unthinkable job, weaving the funeral shroud for the father of the king. And between now and then, between the first draw of thread and the last stitch on the selvedge, there’s so much to learn. The shroud must be perfect, must be eternal, and Penelope knows the task will beat her. She will never be good enough for it. They’re expecting something like Athena, but Penelope is no goddess, barely a queen, not at all good with her fingers, no talent for string. She will never be even as good as Arachne, another mortal, who for all her talent was turned into a bug. And that is why

Penelope cannot begin to work. And that is why, night after night, Penelope sits in this hideous room where no one else is allowed. She's not weaving up there. She's weeping.

*The Model in Real Life*

He looks at her.

He looks at her face, her cheeks, her lips, the blood vessels thrust from her wire neck, the tendril of hair curved over the plane of her forehead, and he beholds the way he wants to behold her. He looks at how she draws up atmosphere and light. He looks at her cigarette mouth. He looks at her liquid skin. Her collarbone sharp as a handgun. Her legs long enough to bend a river. He looks at her and he feels his own growing melodrama.

There's some beauty spritzed on this fairy tale.

He sees her numbers—five foot nine, 108, size two, figure in the appealing 3:2:3 ratio—and he realizes how homely mathematics are. Because there are intangibles. The neckline of her skintight dress. Hazel eyes as cool as autumn. Sharp high-heeled boots that look built to crack the pavement. Sophistication is on her like a flashbulb. Her name should be Cashmere or Rouge or Fendi, but it's not: it's Jennifer.

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Jennifer is birthday shopping. Here she is in this SoHo boutique that sells handsome frills from the Near East and Far East, and what Jennifer has her eye on is a metal vase in the shape of Ganesh. She wants it for her mother, for her mother's birthday, Ganesh charmingly juxtaposed in Mom's Tex-Mex fiesta-style kitchen. Here in the shop, where they know her, where they watch her, Jennifer could point at the vase and, with barely a word, with little more than a clucked syllable, Ganesh would be on his way to Mother, overnighted and hand-delivered. But today she's feeling sentimental. Today is a brilliant day. Today Jennifer found a delightful gift. Today she will bring the elephant-headed vase home, she will wrap it, she will package it, and she will write an honest, poignant birthday card, and she will do it all herself.

Do you need help with the carrying? he says. This man, who beholds the model with her boxed vase walking, struggling, shifting the elephant-headed weight from arm to arm, says: Need any help? No, thank you, I have it, she says. Because that looks heavy, I don't mind, says the man who sees her neck, and her lips, and her very appealing ratio. Jennifer sees him, and she sees herself being seen. No, I'm sure I've got it, she says. Please, allow me, you look so familiar, he says. I'm sure I'll be just fine. Do we know each other?

he says. No, no, I'm sure we don't. Because you look so familiar, like I swear I just saw you but I can't place you. No, I'm sure I'd remember, she says. Like we used to know each other or like you ride the train when I ride the train or something. I'm sorry, I don't ride the train. So you're sure we haven't met before? Yes, I'm sure, but thank you for your help.

And the man, with a bittersweet bend of the neck, says, All right, have a good day. And alone she carries Ganesh the rest of the way home.

She knows of course where the man saw her. It was the billboard, of course. Who could miss it? Ten stories tall—look up and it was a sunrise of leg, arm, face—an enormous Jennifer-sky. The billboard was over on Lafayette and Houston, an intersection where everyone around here eventually turns up. Her face was as big as a car, legs as long as buses, at the height of allure, and dressed in so much glitz: the slippery fabrics of high sheen, the gold and silver, the skyscraper heels, and skin. Her skin. Skin as accessory, skin as pure style, skin as the molten center of fashion itself. Her body was high on its own disclosure. Her face was a tangle of seduction and laughter, helpless with beauty, her fingers tugging down her mini in a fit of ecstasy, a sharp ringing spasm of youth and frantic lust, these breasts, legs, hands, this enchanted photograph. Another rabid game of sex and light.

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And this man saw the billboard. And this man saw her. But he did not see that she was the woman from the billboard, could not see that she was the one who ruled over the sidewalk, would not believe that she was any larger than the basic human dimensions. And Jennifer, struggling, lugging this unwieldy box, thinks: how big do I have to be?

*Letters Between Artists, Paris, 1865*

My Dearest Shrimp,

Sometimes you gotta shake things up or be rebel! Shock the beancounters!  
Sometimes you gotta be rebel or break the rules!

Sorry I am excited.

And if you want to know what I am excited about I will tell you, it is our painting. They put it in the Salon today and wow, was it rebel. They are raining insults on me because I am shaking things up. I am shaking things up because I asked a question, I asked *Why?* That is a very important question because only asking *Why?* shocks the establishment or beancounters, who are not easily shockable, owing to this being the sixties and all the romantics.

That's advice me to you.

I asked *Why?* I asked why should I have to paint Eve or Venus or Athena who I don't care about or love? I asked why if the girl is totally naked does she have to be a nymph or goddess? I asked why can't I paint just you? (No offense but you are not Venus or Athena, you are Victorine, you are my Shrimp, my favorite model I love you!) And now you are in the Salon and rebel! There is lots of buzz. They are raining insults, owing to having been shaken up.

I'm saying so because maybe the painting will sell big and we can divvy the money as arranged. I will let you know and keep you up on the news. How are you? How is it coming with those little drawings of yours?

—É

Dear Édouard,

You paint like a drunk porcupine.

I had occasion to go see this painting *Olympia* for myself. And I was astounded. Indignant. What were you thinking?

Next time you go to the Salon, go with your pants off. Then you'll know how I feel.

—V

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### *The Weaver Fails*

What's important to remember about Arachne is that she was born with no talent for weaving. No talent, that is, until Athena gave it to her—the first act of pity.

The second act was the spider.

But years before the spider, Athena saw only this incapable girl—poor with her hands, no strength in her fingers, and worse, the daughter of a clothing dyer, so there were certain filial expectations. Her father dyed with purple, that rare, expensive, and royal color, and the father, famous for his skill with cloth, would find his child before an empty loom eating olives. And he was furious, waving his discolored indigo arms, calling her worthless and unmarriageable and leaving her there weeping. That's how Athena found her, crying at the foot of an unwebbed loom. So the goddess touched the girl's head, and Arachne felt the sizzle of something supernatural and she looked at the loom and it made sense—the warp and weft, the heddle, cords, the beams and studdles—they were as easy as language then, as easy as speak-

ing. By the time the girl was a teenager, even the river nymphs were wearing her designs.

Penelope could use that witchcraft now.

Now, when Penelope leaves the loom-chamber, she feels all the eyes, all the questions, all these people in her house waiting. And they know something's not right. They know she's stalling. The suitors—one of whom she'll marry, just as soon as the weaving is finished, which is to say *never*—they wait, they eat her food, they drink and watch. She wants to marry and get on with her life, finally, mercifully, and they've been waiting months, years, and their eyes are no longer adoring eyes. They judge. They see that she is all wrong inside. She is in a house that doesn't love her, because in all this time she hasn't woven even a single thread.

So Penelope spends her time in that upstairs chamber, in her private room, looking onto the courtyard. So much time alone that the servants are worried. They send Melantho, the fearless and nosy one, to knock on the door, and Penelope screams at her to go away. The door is locked. Penelope built the lock herself—*that's* something she can do. She always had an aptitude for building. And for poetry, too, and history, mathematics, science. As a girl, she could name all the plants that grew on her island, perform feats of geometry, recite the epics of the gods. Her favorite was the one about Aglaia, one of the Graces, and how she married Hephaistos, the Limping God, doubly-lame, lame in both legs, who with shriveled feet, with heart broken by first wife Aphrodite, found this beauty to mend him. The story delighted her, and Penelope imagined the lame god, good with his hands but slow, at home with his young wife, where she'd caress his warped and bony legs and call him *gorgeous* and really mean it. They'd laugh at the folly of all the other gods, laugh at the struggles for power, laugh at nothing at all only because they were together, these two simple, satisfied beings.

Penelope wanted a boy like that—a humble boy, patient and slow, fulfilled and happy—but all she found were athletes. Horse-riders, arrow-shooters, sword-swingers. And when the biggest athlete—the future king Odysseus—wanted to be her husband, she couldn't say no, but she tried to talk him out of it. I don't weave, she said. I don't weave worth spit. Shocking, I know, because that's something that's expected of me, *demanding of me*, but I don't do it, and I never will.

But this big muscled boy surprised her. It will be our secret, he said.

So in public, her husband bragged about Penelope's skills at the loom, meanwhile smuggling the best tapestries from Rhodes, Byzantium, and Troy. These he claimed were hers, and thus Penelope learned about politics.

There were so many secrets shared between them, in that bed he had carved from the olive tree. Her husband, king of Ithaca, fiercest of all warriors, got vertigo at great heights, worried about his hair, was afraid of spiders. When Penelope said his muscles were intimidating, he pushed out his belly to make himself seem fat. When angry, he moped and cut wood, said *nothing's wrong, I'm fine* with that dumb kind of manly bravado. He was intimidated by her, too, he said, intimidated by all the poems she knew, all the stories, the math and theory, said he felt foolish that while she'd been reading he'd been sharpening knives. And for all his bulk, he was gentle in that olive tree bed, quiet, shy, embarrassed by his own needs. I'll never tell anyone, Penelope said, and she never did.

But that was so long ago, before he sailed away with his weapons, his army, his twelve ships to the misery of Ilion. Now there is only Penelope waging her own war—her awful loom, the shreds of string thrown about the chamber, the proof of her enormous failure.

Athena could do this job. Athena could end this, could lend some Olympian rags and be done with it. Penelope thinks the goddess owes her at least that much. Athena, who called her husband to fight. Athena, who helped mortals invent the sail, the instrument of his departure, the tool by which men invade. Athena, the gray-eyed goddess, the perfect virgin, the unbending maiden, the flying bitch.

*More Letters Between Artists, Paris, 1865*

Darling Victorine,

Something has gotten you sassed up! And mad! And you have always been sassy but never mad. You have also been always excellent with the imagery. (I cherish "drunk porcupine.") Maybe this is why you are drawn to draw still-life?

Since there was no explaining yourself on why you are so sassed up or mad I will have to guess, and I will guess it is probably because of the hooker thing. Or courtesan, sorry. Yes I painted you as a hooker or courtesan and totally naked and waiting in the bed and maybe that is why?

Should I say I'm sorry?



I should not! I shouldn't say I'm sorry because, excuse me, you are a hooker? Right? I only painted the truth? Or courtesan? And that is why it is so rebel! Totally naked nudes in the Salon are all lies and this is true every day of the week of every month! There is the baroque nymph. There is the rococo Athena. There is the romantic Eve with the leaf covering her beauty. And you know what I say to them? I say cliché! I say in your face! Beancounters!

They're all lies except for one and that is you the hooker!

Maybe you are sassed up because of your total nakedness. And yes, you are very totally naked. But this is me to you: you could have been *even more totally naked*. I painted conservative. I covered you strategically. Did you notice I painted your hand so that you were covering your—

—what's the right word?—

*Pussy* is so rude. *Vagina* sounds like a doctor's office am I right? Maybe *sex*? I painted your hand so that you were covering your *sex*. So you are not all the way uncovered. You are somewhat covered. At least your very most important part is covered. And there is also the shoe, because you are wearing one. And a bracelet and a necklace so there.

And what is not covered is beautiful and rebel! You are stern or powerful! You are confident. You look at the viewer like *C'mere you*. You say at the viewer *You want me*. And you say *Shame on you*. And you say *Come here and get it bad boy*. You are honest, which is so shaking things up right now! Venus is a lie! Athena is a lie! You are totally naked in bed for a reason! This is real! Bona fide! (If you want to know what the reason is I will tell you, it is for fucking for money.)

And also you are like a rose, you are so beautiful. You are like a rose that I pick and put in my foyer and maybe even paint. Please do not be sassed up or mad.

—É

Dear Édouard,

You must stop putting words in my mouth. I am not saying *you want me*. I am not saying *come here and get it bad boy*. Have you forgotten who here mixed the paints? Who here held the brush? That look you dabbed onto my face, the placement of my hand—you didn't paint it, but you suggested it—the thing the looker can own for a few extra francs.

You fucker, you whore.

It's not that I mind the nakedness. It's not that I mind, even, the pose. It's not even that I mind the critics, who are calling me a *gorilla*.

What I mind is that stare. Confident, you called it. A confident stare.

You are a brutal thief, Édouard, and a sentimental folly—beautiful as a rose?

Consider what happens to the rose, Édouard, the one in your foyer, on your canvas. What happens to the rose if you decide not to pick it?

*It lives.*

—V

### *The Model Beholds*

This is what Jennifer loves most, this moment of revelation, this beholding. She stands before the mirror, and she can't help it; she laughs every time. Every time, this impulsive giggle at the sight of the finished job—the hair, the make-up, the clothes, the shoes. It's a laugh that reminds her of some childhood game—freeze tag, hide-and-seek—the delirious horror of being chased. She can feel it now, tense, the thrill of running, the thrill of boys chasing her—she can sense them like the hum of electricity, their breathing and footfalls just behind her, and she's running so hard her legs ache. And always, at the defining instant, when the chaser could almost touch her, a kind of accidental scream bubbled up inside her, a reckless panic, and to take another step would be to burst and set it all loose, and so she collapsed, her body wrecked with this crippling laugh, hysterical, and that was what she loved—not the chase but the attention of being chased, the getting caught, rolling helpless after being tagged, breathless, a fit of elation.

She feels that now, in her belly, in her legs—this is some get-up to behold. The strappy dress, cobalt and shimmering and sheer; the black garter belt underneath; the sapphire polish at her feet from high, jeweled heels; the orange vinyl trains bursting behind her; all the flowers—dozens!—an efflorescence of pink and white roses tied onto her arms, into her hair, dotting the train in a confluence of petal and plastic; and her eyes, a swath of aqua over the left, jasmine over the right—she looks ridiculous, and unnatural, and fantastic, and she's in love.

The moment she takes it all in there's this laugh again, this squeal, berserk, she can't help it. She tried to hold it back, stuff it down into her throat, but it comes out anyway, choked—a cough, a bark.

Are you okay? says the man standing behind her, the stylist who's been at work for hours painting, primping, beholding. Jennifer quietly nods—she has an urge to hug him, hug someone, anyone, but she can't move. It hurts too much to move. There are metal pins needling her scalp, arresting her hair at the proper angles. And the ribbons tying the roses to her head are too tight, pulling her skin taut. And the dress is so small, so thin—she holds her breath, sucks in her belly, makes herself taller, thinner, to show the dress how much she's perfect for it. The garter-clips jab into her skin, the garter-lace itches on her hip and ass. And these shoes—spikes longer than her fingers, small knifelike tips that smash her toes, strain her calves, and her legs ache, just like when running, like when being chased.

To move is to ignite some gallery of pain.

What do you think? says the stylist, now adding more white to her cheeks. It's wonderful, she says. Does it hurt too much? he says. Not too much.

But she dreads walking. She even dreads breathing, dreads another laugh, so she turns away from the mirror. She will be tranquil. She will be calm. She will seize the ache of these clothes and she will swallow it. And she will know by the ache how fantastic it is, how lovely, how fashion is satisfied by the play of fabric, steel, skin, and bone.

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What hurts the most is the most beautiful.

### *The Actress Performs*

Night shot. Car interior. We see Princess Ann and Joe Bradley. He's driving; their shoulders are pressing together, they're touching, but not out of love. They're touching because they have no choice: it's one of those tiny Italian cars. We see Princess Ann looking at the dashboard and maybe at her feet. As they drive, we see lights from above flicker over their faces, like they're passing below a series of equidistant streetlamps. Or maybe like the car is not moving at all, and directly above them airplanes fly in perfect formation. But we're meant to think streetlamps. The alternating darkness and light of the streetlamps is a metaphor, because Princess Ann still believes she's fooling Joe Bradley, believes she's still incognito. What she doesn't know is that Joe Bradley is a reporter, has been onto her game from square one. We know this. And Joe Bradley knows this. But Princess Ann does not know this. This is what is meant when someone is "in the dark." Thus the streetlamps.

ANN:  
“Stop at the next corner, please.”

Just before she utters this line, Princess Ann looks at Joe Bradley, then looks down at her feet, then looks straight ahead, out the car windshield. The movement of her eyes is a metaphor. She looks in all three dimensions—X, Y, and Z—she looks on every axis, and when she looks through the car windshield what she’s seeing is the other dimension—time—the future, the past—she sees that everything is already decided, that the night’s conclusion is inevitable. We know this. Princess Ann knows this. Joe Bradley does not know this, because Joe Bradley cannot follow her eyes, because Joe Bradley is watching the road.

JOE:  
“Okay.”

180 There are violins playing in the background. Playing in a minor key. In the background of the movie, but not necessarily in the background of the car. So we know about the violins. Princess Ann does not, and Joe Bradley does not, but they can sense them, the violins, can sense their melancholy and longing. He’s wearing a tweed suit, white shirt, black tie. She’s in that casual white button-up. His left eyebrow looks like a checkmark. If we pause the movie here, they seem like a magazine photo—quiet, unrevealing. These people turn to stone and seem to die if we press pause here. We should not press pause.

Cut to night shot. Exterior. Now we see a narrow bricked road, tall buildings on either side that seem to lean menacingly over them. The car approaches the camera, rattling the way old cars do. It has a sunroof. We see Princess Ann inside with Joe Bradley. They stop the car, and to their right is an alley, and at the end of the alley is a gate, and beyond the gate is a building. This is the embassy building. This is where Princess Ann rightfully belongs. Everybody knows this, although we might like to believe they’ll run away together, that she’ll stop princessing and he’ll stop reporting and they’ll both stop lying and move to Venice or Paris or New York. We might like that. We might like that very much. But we don’t believe it. Because we caught onto the foreshadowing, that telling line from earlier in the film: “Life isn’t

always what one likes.” We knew then that the movie would end in splitsville. Anyway, here they are. They’re at the gate; they’re looking at the gate.

JOE:  
“Here?”

Their words come out as heavy and slow and stubborn as barges.

ANN:  
“Yes.”

Cut to point-of-view shot from Princess Ann, as if we’re in that car, sitting in the passenger side, as if her eyes are ours. We’re looking right, looking into the alley that slopes downward to the gate with the bars like spears. This is what Princess Ann is seeing. This is what we are seeing. This is not what Audrey Hepburn is seeing. Because the whole car scene was filmed on another night. On the night they filmed the car scene, it was raining. In the movie, it is not raining. Continuity is difficult to achieve. Audrey Hepburn knows this, but Princess Ann does not. Joe Bradley certainly does not.

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Cut back to the car. We see them both staring downward, as if there’s something that could help them, some kind of answer, swimming in their laps.

ANN:  
“I have to leave you now.”

We see Joe Bradley nod, because he knows what will happen next. He knows what she will say. He knows about foreshadowing. But he waits on it, because even inevitable things must still actually happen. We must allow them to become real.

ANN:  
“I’ll go to that corner there, and turn. You stay in the car and drive away. Promise not to watch me go beyond the corner.  
Just drive away and leave me. As I leave you.”

The corner is a metaphor. It's a fulcrum. It's the turning point between youth and maturity, excitement and duty, lust and chastity. This is what is meant when someone is "turning a corner." Princess Ann knows this. And we know this. But Joe Bradley does not know this. He's still thinking about the dance on the barge, the swim in the river, their first kiss. If we pause it here, we see his face is a vault of memory.

JOE:  
"All right."

The violins cannot settle on a key. They are repeating a dissonant seventh, a soft note that's begging to resolve.

ANN:  
"I don't know how to say good-bye."

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The camera is steady, doesn't pan, doesn't zoom, doesn't cut. The camera trusts Princess Ann, and it trusts Joe Bradley. They don't know this, but we know it.

ANN:  
"I can't think of any words."

For the first time in this whole sequence, they meet each other's eyes. It's an important moment. The violins tell us so.

JOE:  
"Don't try."

The violins get louder, finally modulate into the major key, are joined by cellos, violas, and a harp. The music here is a metaphor, because music is about tension and release. Tension moving toward release, moving back to tension, and so on. That's it. That's the whole bag. Tension, release. Just like this scene, like this movie, but not quite like life. Art, after all, is full of deception. We know this. And Princess Ann knows this. And Joe Bradley knows this. We see them embrace, then release. We see them embrace, squeeze, we see them kiss, that odd, quaint, old-movie variety of kiss where

they don't move their necks or lips, just smooch their mouths together and push, like a printing press. Then they release. And Princess Ann is weeping. We definitely see her weeping. And if we slow down the movie, if we watch frame-by-frame, we'll see Princess Ann release, and we'll see Joe Bradley release, and if the movie is going very slowly, and if we pause it at exactly the right frame, we'll see the slight curl of a smile on her face. It happens for only a frame or two. If we're to catch it, we'll have to be diligent about our pausing technique. This smile. We'll wonder why Princess Ann is smiling. We don't know this, why her lips bend into a smile and then release, for less than a second, barely noticeable. We don't know this. And Joe Bradley doesn't know this. Nobody knows this. Not even Princess Ann knows this.

*More Letters Between Artists, Paris, 1865*

Mademoiselle Meurent,

Your sassiness and cursing is frightening. I don't know who you are. I am confused. You say I am a thief? Why not gratitude? All this buzz! They attacked the painting with sticks and umbrellas! The administration posted guards! You are an icon! That stare, that confidence! You will be remembered always! I have captured your beauty! I have made you immortal!

—É

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Monsieur Manet,

I was not yours to capture, and not yours to make.

You are a thief because you stole everything from me. My stare—mine—will now be an imitation, a knockoff. You fixed me with your brush, and there I am, in your tacky paintwork, the allegedly self-assertive hooker.

But it wasn't your stare, it was mine. It wasn't your confidence, it was mine. It wasn't your pussy, it was mine.

Please get this through your head, Édouard.

It's not your beauty. It's mine.

—V

*The Weaver Quits*

What's important to remember about Hephaistos is not that he's lame-footed, not that he married one of the Graces, but that before he met his second wife, the guy was some jerk. The god of work and toil, the god of fire and blacksmiths, he was sweaty, sooty, foul-mouthed. A prankster, he

helped create Pandora, and her box. He riveted Prometheus to a mountain. He killed men with molten iron. He burped flames. And after his marriage with Aphrodite ended, angry and horny, he tried to fuck Athena. Actually, he tried to rape her—Athena, the perfect virgin. He didn't get far, though, and rebuffed, the lame god ejaculated onto her leg.

Penelope could never love a man like this.

She loves men with weaknesses, but not weaknesses of character. Her husband she loved—she came to love him, learned to love him, felt loved—and now she wonders if she'll ever be loved again. She's long since stopped trying to weave. Now she sleeps on the floor at the foot of her loom. When she wakes, she opens her eyes, and from this angle the loom seems bigger, seems to have swollen while she slept, its emptiness bloating. The space in the middle where thread should be seems instead a colossal barren mouth.

Penelope knows that wars make good stories, that battles and heroes and epics have a certain staying power. She hears men talk about the fighting at Ilion, and men will go on talking, upwards and forever. Penelope will surely find a place in that story, and she feels history on top of her, pressing in on her. It's not a physical sensation, not one that she can place, not like when she pulls at yarn so hard her fingers bleed. It's not so acute. It's more like an obliterating pressure in her mind, and she responds by sleeping, and waking, and when she looks at her loom she feels it again, the crush of fame, of civilization, the collective attention of millions of eyes, like a pyramid upside down, Penelope lanced by its spire.

How will the story go? Will they say her husband would have never fought in that war if his wife weren't such an awful weaver? If she were more apt, more worthy, a better wife, would he have stayed? Penelope the faker, the phony, the meek, her sharp ringing shame etched in the permanent record.

She wants to be done with this.

And she has an idea. It's not a complicated idea, but it's a radical idea.

Today when she leaves the house, she leaves the door to the loom-chamber open, unlocked, the first time in years. She leaves the door open and goes out walking around the estate, the eyes of her suitors not far behind. She goes through the olive orchard, up the hill, where she can see the island's rocky coast, stares out at the water. She naps there in the grass and dreams of twelve ships on the water, damaged and slow, making their way back to Ithaca, the men drinking wine and shouting outrageous stories.



When Penelope returns home, sure enough, Melantho is there in the chamber—the brave and nosy one. She’s looking at the loom, looking horrified. You haven’t done *anything*, the girl cries. Penelope touches her shoulder. You’re wrong, she says. I’ve been working every day.

But why is there no weaving here?

Because every night, says Penelope, I undo all that I’ve done that day.

The slow grin of a conspiracy grasped crosses Melantho’s face, and she says *You’re tricking them!* Penelope nods. She says *You’ve outsmarted them!* And Penelope nods. She says *You believe your husband is alive!* And Penelope nods in painful, false agreement. She makes the servant promise not to tell, shakes on it, dismisses her.

A worthless promise, Penelope knows. Melantho the big mouth, the gossip. She’ll tell the suitors, and then the game will be up, this suffering will end, her reputation cemented, and Penelope, standing alone now in this hideous chamber, looks again at the figures painted onto her loom—the two women, the goddess and the mortal, their duel—and she wonders about Athena’s victorious tapestry, the threads that danced, how the picture changed depending on who was looking. Penelope decides that if she ever saw that tapestry, this is what she’d see: Athena, the greatest of all weavers, taking a husband’s hand and tugging it into war, Athena the pure, holding a wisp of cloth, fabric shimmering and shot with gold, thin as leaf, strong as stone, Athena, overcome with shame, weeping, using her cloth, the fibers from her own loom, the finest in the universe, using it to scrub away the lame one’s come.

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### *The Actress Cries*

Here is Audrey Hepburn learning how to cry.

It’s the thirty-fifth take, and now the director is screaming. He’s saying she’s untalented, she’s a fraud, casting her was the biggest mistake of his life. He’s screaming, but Audrey isn’t listening, isn’t hearing even a single word. What she’s thinking about is this line: “I don’t know how to say good-bye. I can’t think of any words.”

This movie is making a liar out of her.

Because Princess Ann *can* think of the words, Audrey is sure of it. Princess Ann knows exactly what to say, knows exactly how she feels, knows precisely how to say good-bye, which is to say she will not say good-bye, or if she bothers to say good-bye, she will say it quickly, because who is this Joe

Bradley anyway? Always leading her around by the arm, trying to be *the man*. What a scheming jerk. He means nothing to Princess Ann—a tour guide, an annoyance who pays for champagne, a seriously below-average kisser. She's using Joe Bradley just like Joe Bradley is using her. It's a cost/benefit thing. It's politics. It's always open season for princesses.

But here is Audrey trying to say this stupid line—"I can't think of any words"—when really the person who can't think of the words is the writer. And the director also cannot think of the words. And the crew cannot think of the words. And the producers cannot think of the words. And Joe Bradley most definitely cannot think of the words.

Audrey can think of the words. But she cannot say them, and she hates this, and Princess Ann hates this, and what Audrey realizes here is that Princess Ann is not crying over Joe Bradley, over damned silly Joe Bradley. She is crying over the script, which is a kind of cage, or a costume, counterfeit—she is hemmed in. And when Audrey Hepburn thinks about this—the duties, the responsibilities, the charade, the lying—she begins to weep, and the director yells action, and the camera rolls, and she's crying. She embraces Joe Bradley, releases him, and she knows that she is really saying good-bye to Princess Ann—here in the last scene of the movie, on the last day of shooting, tomorrow marking her return to being Audrey and Audrey only. And so by way of saying good-bye, and by way of saying she's sorry, and by way of saying she knows these tears are false tears, Audrey Hepburn smiles. It's an act of rebellion. Her way of annihilating all that she is being asked to do. She smiles for just a moment, for less than a second, and maybe not everyone will catch it, and maybe not everyone will understand, but she will. And it will be a secret. And Audrey Hepburn will never tell.

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### *The Model Unclothed*

The matter is not to express the clothes but to express the *idea* of the clothes. Their innate character. Clothes as love requited. Clothes as the language of beauty. Thus the writing on the model, the words on her legs, arms, torso, the groove of her spine, the frame of her ribcage, the furrow where her legs meet—tools of creation, all. The widgets of fashion. On the model's left forearm, in calligraphy, in black ink, the photographer has written *ShimmerKnife*. On her right thigh, *GlowTorch*. On her left palm, *RibbonWax*. Above her belly button, *PennySting*. Below her belly button, *RoseWar*.

The photographer is writing across her breasts now, deliberate, methodical. He says, I'm covering you with action words because of how much you move me.

Behold the model—naked, waiting, slowing colonized by words. Her face is an exercise in Pythagorean harmony. Her eyes are wide and brown, vulnerable or seductive, alternatingly, whenever such occasions arise, whenever certain atmospheres are needed. See her rich auburn hair now pulled back. See her neck and rigid throat, her shoulders, her scrap of shoulder-freckle, behold.

On her hip, *NightWiggle*. On her right shin, *FlickerSpit*.

The black pen tip tickles when the photographer moves it so slowly. He talks about his ideas, his concept; some people have called this man a genius. He says fashion is not about fabric but about how fabric sings. Says fashion requires a suspension of disbelief—a fantasy, a nightmare, both. Says fashion is a grenade lobbed into eyes.

This man has some salty smile.

But what of this nudity? Jennifer has been standing here for well past an hour, waiting on the photographer's slow hand, waiting so long that being naked has lost its erotic marrow—stare at a body long enough and the body loses its mysteries; stay naked long enough and the surprise, the charm, the charge, dilutes, and all she has left is skin, basic and ordinary pinkish elemental skin.

Don't breathe too hard, the photographer says.

Not to mention how unflattering this is. *DaisySlap* over her left knee. *SuperAngel* on the meat of her right underarm. How does this accentuate? How does this make her look fantastic? Clothes—real clothes—are active, they work, they accomplish. High heels *do* something. Sunglasses and mini-skirts *do* something. Clothes perform a kind of magic, and the camera is an audience hoping, waiting, thrilled to be duped.

Are there many more words? she says, and she tries to keep her chest still.

There are some more, he says.

Many more?

Are you bored?

No.

We'll hurry it up, he says, and he snaps his fingers twice, summoning his assistants, three men hanging at the outskirts, along walls, in shadows. They move in toward her; she can sense them, though she cannot move her head,

her chest; she must keep still. She hears the clicks of pens coming uncapped, the photographer's brisk instructions: You, there. You, there. And you, there.

They begin work, the four of them, hivelike. The model feels the tips of pens on her back, her legs, her ass, creeping over her. She feels like the swarmed object of some hungry insect colony, a troupe of beetles, gnashing claws, pincers out.

She tightens her eyes shut.

With more words, this nudity will give way to something else—innuendo, art, fashion. With more words, she'll begin to feel covered, feel clothed. She waits on the photographer, now finished with her breasts, looks into a mirror to see what he's written there—*GlitterFuck*—and she thinks: there are never enough words; there will always be more words.