



**EROTIC LIVES  
OF THE  
SUPERHEROES**  
BY **MARCO  
MANGASSOLA**

**'A DEEPLY MOVING NOVEL, AND A FIERCE CRITIQUE OF THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD'**

**VOGUE**

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EROTIC LIVES  
OF THE  
SUPERHEROES

MARCO MANCASSOLA

*Translated from the Italian  
by Antony Shugaar*

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# **MISTER FANTASTIC**

May 2005 – April 2006

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There was a time when it was the centre of the world, a bouquet of concrete stalks hammered into granite, a grid of streets dotted with manholes from which there issued, in a never-ending stream, the vapour of dreams. Once this had been his city, a place where he performed great exploits, where he designed wonders, where his wife loved him unconditionally and where every word he uttered rang perfectly true.

Manhattan glistened like a mirage, at his feet, in the late morning light. Reed Richards ran a hand over his forehead. He was looking out at the city through the plate glass window of the panoramic sauna on the twenty-ninth floor of the George Hotel. The temperature was rising and his skin was exuding a sheen of sweat and an elusive, fluid sense of disquiet that even he couldn't put into words. He squinted. This was New York. This was his city, luminous and distant, on the far side of a sheet of glass, outside the panoramic sauna of a luxury hotel.

He tried to relax. After all, this was a place designed for relaxation. Reed used the sauna frequently: he came here to shed toxins and tensions, and to sit, gazing out, in the state of contemplation that view always inspired in him. Around him, other men lay on the wooden benches, silent in the half-shadows, their gazes lost in the view outside. There was nothing here but peace, sweat, and a discreet reciprocal indifference. At least, that's how it usually was. Today, though, things seemed to be different.

There were four men. When he walked into the sauna, Reed had sensed the sudden, unmistakable silence of a conversation interrupted, and once he sat down, he could feel their eyes begin to brush over him, in the half-light, like curious tentacles. Reed felt a slight edge of annoyance. He didn't like being recognised. He hadn't appeared on television for twenty years now, but he knew his picture was sometimes published in pieces about the glories of bygone decades, or in an article about his son, Franklin.

Years ago, Reed chose to step out of the spotlight and let Franklin be the famous one. It was with a sense of relief that he had rid himself of other people's eyes. He'd freed himself of the attention of the media, the buzz of gossip, the morbid quivering vibration that clusters around people who are too famous. He'd freed himself of the annoyance of being recognised everywhere he went. So now he felt



uneasy, being eyed in the sauna, as the sweat slid down his elastic body.

The wood was scalding hot. A ridiculous awkwardness kept him pinned to the bench. Pretending to be captivated by the view, he let time slide by, minutes and seconds, a succession of instant stretching out in the heat. The men surrounding him were all younger, a piece of data that he found himself registering, unwillingly, more and more these days. What's more, they seemed resistant: no one made a move to leave the sauna. He could hear them breathing in the fiery silence.

He knew it was late and a car was waiting downstairs, in the street, to take him out of town. He knew he had important things to do, that all this was foolish, that the challenge of outlasting the others was senseless. The heat had grown intolerable. He lurched to his feet. The sweat surged down his body as he stood there, his head spinning, trying to picture himself as the others saw him: there's Reed Richards, Mister Fantastic, the Rubber Man, the fading glory of the chronicles of the twentieth century's superheroes. Watch him as he struggles to keep his balance there by the window, naked and dehydrated, with all Manhattan as a glowing backdrop.

Outside the sauna he found the salvation of cool air and of a cooling shower. He clutched the wall, letting the water pour over him. He almost felt as if he would melt. Staying that long in the sauna had been a foolhardy act, the kind of reckless behaviour his doctors had been warning him against for years now. *Your body is special, Reed. It requires special care.*

It took a few minutes before he began to feel better, before his heartbeat began to slow down. His doctors also recommended against using his powers, except for a weekly regimen of exercises performed under the supervision of specialist trainers. In the shower, all the same, he carefully elongated his arms. He stretched them down to the floor and then back up. He felt a slight burning sensation. He did the same with his neck, upwards, and expanded his chest like an accordion. He started stretching out his head, too, trying to give it the rudimentary shape of an umbrella: an old trick he used to do for Franklin when he was a little boy, a trick he sometimes still did under the shower. The effort caused him a sharp stab of pain.

He stopped trying. Anyone watching him would have had the impression that invisible hands were playing with him, manipulating his body, stretching and twisting it only to restore it each time to its original shape. His shape. His body. Over the years, Reed Richards had come to believe that his real talent, his real superpower, was not the ability to deform his body but rather the ability to restore it to its original shape. The rubbery material he was made of had worn out a little as he aged, losing elasticity and become much more sensitive. And yet, in spite of the work of time, in spite of the thousand ways in which it had been elongated and stretched and deformed, his shape had remained roughly unchanged. That was the miracle of Reed Richards. Or perhaps his curse. *I'm still the same. I'm still me*, he said to himself, as his body's temperature slowly dropped.

A short while later, he emerged into the changing room, comfortably wrapped in a bathrobe and surrounded by the soft sound of the music that filled the entire floor. A feeling of melancholy satisfaction swept over him. Maybe it was the way the last traces of water vanished, molecule by molecule, from the surface of his skin, or else the feeling of cleanliness that spread through his body, or even just the pure, elementary fact that he had a body: *My arms. My belly. My cock.* He stood motionless next to the wooden locker where he'd left his clothes. He shook his head. He could never resign himself to the sequence of clashing sensations, nameless desires, and obscure instincts that came with ageing. For example, his embarrassment in the sauna just now: so absurd. For him—mature former superhero, a respected scientist, the chairman of the Richards Foundation—to react in such a paranoid way. Like a fearful little boy. He thought all this over, in the warm air of the changing room, while his skin dried off. Then he opened the locker and saw what someone had left him.

There was a piece of paper inside. It was white, folded in half, perched on top of his trousers. Reed looked at it while his body tensed instinctively, ready to lash out against any potential danger. The world changed consistency around him, turning into a stark list of facts. The light in the room. The sound of a shower. The hum of the ventilation system. Reed had been a warrior, he had survived a thousand ambushes, and he knew that kind of moment. The moment when reality is transformed, and everything becomes important. Everything is a signal. Everything is other than it seems, everything could conceal a threat, or else help to understand the sudden fragment, now, the out-of-place object that had triggered the alarm.

A sheet of paper. In his locker. Reed picked it up, holding it cautiously between his fingertips. He elongated his arm several yards, setting it down at a safe distance. He left it there, in the far corner of the changing room, as if it were a piece of infectious waste. He focused his attention on his clothes. He examined them one by one, carefully, without finding a thing. No suspicious stitching, no evidence of tiny listening devices, no minute drops of epidermic poison, none of the other diabolical contrivances he had encountered in the past, when he was the target of constant attacks. It looked to him that his clothes had not actually been touched. He sighed. The only thing left to do was to stretch out his arm again and pick up the paper. It was a simple white sheet, nothing more, and at last he unfolded it, and read the message written inside:

SO LONG, MY MISTER FANTASTIC

Just that simple phrase, run off by a computer printer in capital letters. Reed couldn't understand. Such a simple phrase; yet at the same time so obscure. Who could have broken into his locker, in the time it took for a sauna, to leave him such a message?

He stood there staring at the words, as though waiting for other phrases, other words to materialise. Was there some reference he was missing? His scientist's brain worked methodically. He

tested every conceivable anagram, code, and secret cipher that could be concealed behind that phrase. Over the course of his lifetime, he'd worked with languages of all kinds, real and invented, living and lost, but that message resembled nothing in his experience.

## SO LONG, MY MISTER FANTASTIC

Reed gave up. It seemed to be nothing more than a bizarre salutation. Some loony had decided to send him a personal farewell. Maybe it was a longtime fan crossing the line into stalkerdom, someone who believed they'd had a relationship of some kind with him? He refolded the paper and slipped it into his trouser pocket, wondering whether it was worth worrying about this odd prank. Maybe not. He couldn't say. In the solitude of the changing room he began to dress.

\*

He heard a noise. It took him a second or two to identify it and associate that sound with a specific thought, a possible source. Tapping. Glass. Reed moved hesitantly, retracing his steps from the changing room back to the sauna. There was no one in sight, complete silence. Only that tapping sound.

He found himself again at the door to the sauna, breathless, incredulous. Someone was knocking on the door from inside. Reed saw the hand against the glass. He had a vague notion that someone might have been locked in and was asking for help. He decided he had to help that person, he had to save a life, exactly the kind of thing he had once done routinely—or at least believed he did. To save someone's life. And yet—that tapping didn't seem like a call for help. It was too unruffled, too *inviting*.

When he opened the door the wave of heat caught him head-on, once again, like a breath from a giant mouth. He was barely able to make out the shape of the person, who had in the meantime moved further into the half-light of the sauna. A woman's shape. Reed waited by the door uneasily, wondering what a woman was doing in a men's sauna, where the men who'd been there earlier had gone, and whether it was safe to go back into the sauna after already spending so much time in there. He hesitated, transfixed by these rational thoughts, until he felt them fade like a dying whisper. He stepped in and shut the door behind him. The silence in the sauna was even more powerful. Only the sound of his own breathing, and the woman's.

They were alone. She withdrew still further, into the hottest alcove at the far end of the sauna, and from that position sat watching him, calmly, as though she'd always been waiting for him. Reed drew closer. He sat down next to her. In the dim light he couldn't distinguish her features. He saw her legs gleaming with sweat, and the blurred sheen of her pubic hair, and the triangle of white flesh le

by a swimsuit. He saw her slender arms, the shape of her breasts. They sat there, side by side, sweating and breathing, quivering, each looking at the other's body. Reed felt confusion and heat, a heat that gripped him tighter and tighter, squeezing his chest until he began panting. Against the flesh of her thigh, his penis was a seething rock.

He knew she was smiling. Even though he couldn't really see her, he knew. And he knew he wanted to touch her, and so he reached out a hand, and it struck him as a beautiful thing, deep and moving, that there could be such a simple bond between desire and action. So immediate. His fingers brushed her breast. He followed the curving flesh with astonishment, shyly at first, and then he grasped her. When she reached for his penis he felt firm in her grasp, so real, so definitive, *here I am, here's my body, there's no need for me to stretch or deform myself. Here's my cock in your hands. Here's your crotch under my palm... Here's your soft thatch, the opening fissure. Even our breathing seems solid, scarily heavy, in the extreme heat...*

He awoke with a start. His eyelids fluttered. He was in the back seat of a car. Outside, an impassive landscape was streaming by. Greenery. Trees. They were already deep into New Jersey. Reed took a dazed breath and tried to accommodate this new reality. The car was sailing along a semi-deserted road. He must have fallen asleep the minute the driver picked him up from the front door of the George Hotel, heading out of Manhattan.

He'd been fast asleep the whole way. His eyes met the driver's smiling glance in the rear-view mirror, prompting an unpleasant doubt in Reed's mind. Had Reed sighed once too often as he dreamed about going back into the sauna? Had the driver guessed? He sat up a little straighter, shifting uncomfortably, doing his best to camouflage the partial erection that still jutted between his legs.

"We managed it," said the driver, continuing to smile at him in the mirror. He had a Hispanic accent and the face of a man of about thirty. It wasn't the first time he'd had this driver. Reed knew he was from Ecuador but couldn't retrieve his name.

"What?" he replied, in confusion, still dazed from the force of his dream.

"We managed to make up the time," the driver went on. "When we left you told me we were running late, remember?"

Reed nodded, somewhat reassured, even though everything still struck him as strange and vaguely distorted. The driver's voice. His own voice. The excessive light flooding the roadway. The sunshine pouring in the car windows, imposing a sense of suffocating heat. Reed looked at the other man again, making an effort, as though regaining full possession of reality depended on his ability to remember the man's name. He couldn't do it. He was too stunned. "I shouldn't have fallen asleep," he murmured.

"No, it was good for you," the driver responded. Then he slowed down, following the arc of a curve in the road. Only once they were back on a straight stretch did he add, with a sigh, "Sleep heals the soul. If only I could get some."

Their eyes met again in the rear-view mirror. Reed noticed the young man's face: it was open, but marked by unmistakable signs of torment. "Woman trouble," Reed said instinctively, in an almost fatherly tone, like a doctor diagnosing a patient's illness.

"My wife," the driver agreed. After another sigh, he went to the heart of the matter: "It's not the same as it used to be with us. New York has gone to her head."

Reed nodded. He didn't have much to add. Unhappy love stories all struck him as sad, and all more or less alike. All made up of urgent confessions, all just so much torment marking the face.

Reed touched his own face, at that point, amidst the vibration of the moving car. He'd always been satisfied with his appearance. He'd experienced a thousand triumphant victories but his features had never twisted into arrogance; he'd encountered a thousand disappointments, including a divorce without taking on any marks of bitterness. Nothing ever sticks to a rubber face. Everything slides off without leaving marks.

And yet he was worried. He wondered whether he looked sleepy, he wondered if any trace of the absorbing dream had congealed on his features. *I have to get a grip on myself*, he thought. *I have a tense afternoon ahead of me*. He lowered the window to get a little oxygen, letting the rushing wind blow everything away: the last traces of sleep, hangovers from erotic dreams, and the melancholy notes of the driver's voice.

They remained silent for the rest of the trip. Two men immersed in their respective anxieties. Then the car turned into a service road running through the woods and Reed recognised, in the distance, the peculiar structure of the space centre.

\*

It looked like an enormous mushroom without a stalk. A nipple jutting up from the line of the land. A sort of swollen blister. Every time he came here, Reed found new comparisons for the space centre's shape: a low, flattened hemisphere that rose out of nowhere, in the midst of the green countryside. A strange place. You spontaneously found yourself wondering what on earth the designers had in mind, and it was just as spontaneous, just as inevitable, to leap to conclusions about the era in which it was built. The Seventies—too much LSD on the street.

Actually, Reed knew precisely what the designers had had in mind. He knew that the flattened curve was meant to evoke a certain organ of the human body, and that if you looked down on the structure from the air you would see, on the roof, an enormous green-glass iris. An eye. The space centre was a gigantic eyeball protruding from the ground, scrutinising the sky in eternal astonishment.

Reed went through security at the front entrance. The guards waved him through respectfully. After all, he was still an important man. A venerable figure, a member of the scientific advisory boards of half a dozen institutions, including this space centre. Reed indulged in these thoughts

smiling to himself, knowing well that if he went back, he would hear the guards exchanging very different remarks. *Hey, was that...? Yeah, that was him. Franklin Richards' father.*

The temperature inside was pleasantly cool. A few young scholars were loitering in the front lobby. The atmosphere was somewhere between that of a government agency and a small college. The structure was used for training young astronauts, for lectures, and other institutional activities: the kind of place where schoolchildren from New York City came once a year on field trips, where diplomats passing through New York City were brought to listen to reports on the state of American space research.

“Richards!” A voice called his name. He didn’t turn around at once. There was no need. He knew that right now a woman was heading across the lobby straight for him. He knew that the woman was walking with a brisk, almost mannish stride, and that although she was not a member of the armed forces or any other official corps, every aspect of her appearance smacked of some kind of uniform: the elegant attire with its rigid cut, the hair gathered back in a bun, and even the expression, a blend of the seductive and the ironic, that certain women of her type, attractive singles in their fifties, wore almost as a badge or an epaulette. Reed knew all this. Last of all, as he was turning to face her, he knew he was about to plummet into the embarrassment that engulfed him every time he was in the presence of Mrs. Glasseye.

“I thought you’d never get here,” she said. “Reed Richards arrives somewhere a few minutes late. A red-letter event. I’ve already called your office in Manhattan,” she added, smiling a little too warmly, in a tone that implied an unquestioned intimacy.

Reed smiled in turn, vaguely, barely meeting the gaze of the woman standing in front of him.

“You look good,” she continued as she linked arms with him and went on walking at the same brisk pace, dragging him along beside her. “Will you ever tell me your secret?”

Reed made a generic comment about the benefits of saunas. He let himself be led unprotestingly down the hardwood-floored corridor.

And so it was that, in front of everyone, he let himself be paraded along, arm-in-arm with Mrs. Glasseye: she who for years had directed the centre with an amiably dictatorial flair. She who—despite a headquarters with a psychedelic appearance, despite the fact that they were working on the margins unoccupied by the major space programmes, and despite the ineptitude of the bigwigs in Washington—had managed to keep the space centre operating at a dignified level of prestige. She who could wear blouses with plunging necklines without undermining her perennial air of a colonel. A woman in her fifties with breasts that still stood to attention and practically saluted. A woman who wasn’t afraid to stare at the zipper of a man’s trousers. A woman who looked everyone in the eye, with a firm gaze, unaware of or indifferent to the awkwardness that she provoked. She who—leaving aside the fact that she was the chief executive officer of a space centre that stood in the middle of New Jersey, with the unlikely shape of an eye gazing into the firmament—owed her nickname to the

additional fact that she possessed, thanks to one of those paradoxical tricks that chance seems to favour, one prosthetic eye.

Mrs. Glasseye walked Reed to one of the lecture halls. "It's an excellent group," she stated, gesturing towards the interior, without missing the opportunity to unfurl another of her too-warm smiles.

Reed looked into the lecture hall. He could only see the legs of the waiting students, but kept his eyes fixed in that direction, with a feigned air of distraction, studiously avoiding her glance. He couldn't look her in the eye. He couldn't and he wouldn't. Never so much as when he was in the presence of Mrs. Glasseye did he understand the tremendous fact that looking someone in the eye meant exactly that—looking into just one eye. Staring at a single point. A single iris, a single pupil. The point where one gaze meets another can only be singular, and he was terrified he would pick the wrong one.

"I'm afraid I have to ask you something," said Mrs. Glasseye, crowding in closer and forcing Reed to make an effort not to snap his neck back a yard or two.

"Ask away," Reed muttered, reluctantly shifting his gaze onto her, onto the thousand details of her ambush-face: a soft and apparently innocuous chin. Lips glistening like a wet street. Skin as firm as an ice rink, along which it was so easy to slide up, up, up to the dizzying curve of her cheekbone where with fatal centripetal force Reed's gaze was sucked in, only to be spat back out, with even more fatal centrifugal force, towards the precipice of the edge of one eye. He stopped just in the nick of time. *If only I could remember*, he keened, *which one is the glass eye*.

Mrs. Glasseye explained the problem. She explained that she'd encountered snags with next week's workshops. Tremendous scheduling snags. Changes in the programme. She explained that even though she had originally made different arrangements with Reed's secretary, she now needed him to come back next week to finish training that same group. She knew that what she was asking wasn't easy, but after all it was just one more appointment. She explained all this as she drew closer, inch by inch, until she was on the verge of grazing him with a breast. And since he continued to resist, objecting that it was out of the question, that he was already dramatically overbooked... she started laying insidious traps for him. She now began looking elsewhere, towards abstract points in the distance, so that Reed's gaze would cautiously venture closer, like curious prey, and when it did she looked straight at him, without warning, ambushing him. Reed managed to dodge a couple of the attacks and finally stood there, staring at the floor, paralysed, arms folded across his chest. The woman knew how to corner a person.

"I'll call you tomorrow," he conceded. He had no intention of accepting her request, but it sounded like an adequate answer. Sufficiently ambiguous. Mrs. Glasseye nodded with satisfaction. She took a step backwards, lifting the siege. Reed was free. Free to say goodbye, free to put an end to that scene, at once so awkward and yet reassuring, the role-playing that was a routine for them both.

now: bold-woman-with-handicap-terrorises-courteous-gentleman. He was free to go, to a appearances safe, untroubled by any trauma, without having gazed deep into any indistinguishable iris into any black-hole pupil. Free to make his entrance into the lecture hall, at last, where a group of young astronauts was waiting for a lesson taught by Reed Richards himself: ex-superhero, respected scientist, and consultant to the American space agency. Free to move on through the hours of the day, that day so filled with elusive promises, that day he would long remember.

\*

“You will do great things. You’ll discover new planets. You’ll touch comets’ tails. You’ll see the dust of an exploded world glittering all around you. You’ll understand loneliness when you discover satellites without planets, or asteroids that wander through empty space like prophets. You’ll write your names on the sand of a deserted world, where no one will ever be able to read it or erase it. You’ll celebrate Christmas in a distant constellation. You’ll feel time stretching out in the vacuum of space. You’ll experience the twenty-fifth hour, the eighth day, and the fifth season. You’ll do all this,” Reed went on in a dreamlike voice. “Or else,” he resumed after a pause, scrutinising the slightly baffled faces that looked up at him, “you’ll spend your lives accompanying wealthy Russian mafiosi into space—men who will pay millions for an excursion into geostationary orbit, take pictures for their friends, and tip you like they’d tip their chauffeur.”

His audience laughed. He’d broken the ice. There were six people in front of him, six young sets of lungs breathing calmly, six pairs of attentive eyes. Five men and a woman. Reed went on talking about the uncertain, intangible boundary between the possibility of performing glorious exploits and the risk of wasting their lives in mediocre occupations. “Glory and mediocrity,” he said, “are like two distinct but contiguous frequencies. There are those who spend their lives hearing echoes from the correct frequency, without ever managing to tune it in. That’s hard. It depends as much on you as on the world that surrounds you. An astronaut’s career is an ambiguous path, where you can only hope that a crushing burden of sacrifice will allow you one day to experience life without gravity...”

The lesson continued. The words flowed. Reed had to talk fast, without pauses, to keep himself from realising how ridiculous the situation was and bursting out laughing. He believed there was something inherently ridiculous about all lessons. Finding himself teaching other people, the focus of a roomful of eyes, breaking up the flow of normal life to take on the role of professor, someone who administers knowledge, someone who sets forth his own understanding with unshakable confidence. All this had always struck him as hopelessly comical. A sort of embarrassing pantomime.

At the same time, he had to admit, he liked teaching. Despite the ridiculous, ceremonious side of it, despite these lessons, and the conferences and the other institutional roles he played, being nothing more than a way to finance his foundation, despite all that: there was something he liked about it. If he



let himself go, if he stopped over-thinking, he could hear his own words vibrate in the air, fitting in the surrounding context. He could feel his words fill the room, accepted and recognised, in a way that rarely happened any more. The right lines for the right stage. He could hear his own phrases spill out one after the other, with that blend of seriousness, humour, cynicism, and sincerity that over the years had become the hallmark not only of his lessons, but of his very existence. After all, he knew that the people sitting before him had a complete technical education. What they were expecting from him, from his reputation and his white hair, was something else. A little experience. A touch of wisdom. Ridiculous, perhaps, the way old professors and supposed wise men always were. And yet needful.

Class was over. Two hours had gone by. Reed said goodbye to the six young astronauts without anyone referring to another lesson next week. He'd joked with a couple of them, one of whom had Russian origins, about the Russian mafiosi that Reed had mentioned. No one had taken offence. They had laughed together. Reed remained in the empty classroom, organising his notes, in the sudden loneliness of a lesson's end.

"Excuse me?" said a voice.

Reed looked up. The only woman in the group had circled back and was now walking toward him with an enigmatic smile. Reed watched her come closer, surprised, almost afraid, as if he were witnessing the appearance of a ghost. The young woman's hair glowed in the light from the window. Her green eyes had a deep, marine transparency, almost incorporeal. Reed had already noticed those eyes during the lesson, as well as her hands, lithe, pale as ice. Hands that were holding...

"I don't believe it," Reed commented. He stared at the object the young woman held in her hands, shaking his head in amazement. "I thought it had vanished from general circulation years ago."

"It may have vanished from book stores," she said, continuing to smile. "But not from my bookshelf." With that, she handed the book to him.

Reed took it delicately, like someone handling an ancient artefact, and leafed through a few pages. Then he looked again at the cover, with the title:

## REED RICHARDS—A 'FANTASTIC' BIOGRAPHY

Under the title was a picture of him in his official costume. The book must have been published at least fifteen years ago, right after his group of superheroes disbanded. An eternity. He couldn't believe he was holding it in his hands. "When it was published," he said, turning to look at the young woman, "you must have been a little girl."

"I was twelve years old," she replied, sitting on the corner of the table, with an incomprehensible mixture of shyness and nonchalance. Her skin was fair and she had a sprinkling of freckles on her nose; it wasn't hard to glimpse in that face the young girl whose imagination had been captured fifteen years ago, by the biography of a superhero. Then she ran a hand through her thick, reddish hair.

and Reed noticed details of another kind. Her cat-like eyes. Her unquestionably athletic body.

“I guess I’ll have to sign it for you,” he said, looking around for a pen. He patted his pockets. No sign of one. “I know I had one,” he muttered.

Somebody appeared at the door to the lecture hall. It was another member of the astronaut group. A tall guy, with a pair of rimless glasses. He adjusted his glasses and stood at the door discreetly, shooting the young woman an unmistakable glance.

She leapt to her feet. “Here’s what we’ll do,” she suggested. “You keep the book, and you can give it back to me, signed, next week. They told us you’d be teaching another session, right?”

Reed didn’t know what to say. He tried to find the words to explain the situation but he hesitated a little too long.

The young woman had already joined her friend at the door. She squeezed his arm apparently to reassure him, or to emphasise his ownership, *I belong to you* or something of the sort. That gesture struck Reed, in some inexplicable way, leaving him even more tongue-tied. That hand. That arm. He could almost feel that physical contact on his own skin. That white hand which in reality, he imagined must be dry and scalding hot. He stood there watching them, him and her, framed by the light streaming through the door. *A handsome couple*, he thought. There was something logical, natural, and at the same time heartless about the union of two such young and attractive bodies. Or maybe that was what he thought later, when the image started coming back to him, relentlessly. For the moment he stood there staring at them.

“If you want to sign it for me,” she said, “my name is Elaine Ryan.”

Then they were gone, leaving him alone, with his biography in his hands.

\*

It was a sleepless night. He woke up a number of times, in the dark, in his chilly bed, each time in the same position, as if the same instant were being replayed over and over again, a fragment snagged from the stream of time.

Something must be wrong. An obstacle that kept him from sleep. A thought that refused to untangle, a secret waiting to be grasped. He lay there motionless, eyes wide open, wondering what it could be. He finally slid into sleep, two hours of golden blackness in which his body was able to relax and, in the safety of slumber, perform its nightly labours. Slowing his respiration. Rebuilding tissue. Eliminating toxins, consolidating sensations. The work that any body performs, on any given night, in any given bed, anywhere in the world. But this time, when Reed reawakened, dazed, to the pale blue dawn, he discovered something different had been going on. His arm. It had stretched across the bedroom. It lay on the floor, a tentacle at least ten feet long, extending towards the door as if trying to call for help. Reed tried to remember if he’d had a bad dream. He went on staring at his arm in the

pale light. He practically couldn't feel it. Too numb. It was almost like an alien limb, a pitiable, dream strip of flesh.

Then came the pain. As soon as he tried to move his arm, a shock zapped through him, a burning flash that left him breathless. That was when an aching, crystalline clarity surged up inside him, and everything finally made sense: his tormented night, the elusive thought that had kept him awake. Now he understood. *That wasn't a gesture you'd expect from a couple. A woman wouldn't grab her boyfriend's arm in such a comradely manner*, he whispered to himself in the silence of the dawn, thinking back to the young female astronaut and the male friend who had been waiting for her. *Those two aren't a couple. They're just friends*. He felt certain of it, suddenly, an absurd but convincing certainty. He had no idea why it should even matter. He instantly relaxed. He restored his arm to its normal size and closed his eyes, satisfied, sinking back into slumber.

He thought everything had been resolved. He thought to himself that the sun was rising. He thought to himself that downtown a baker was sliding into the oven the bagel that he'd eat for breakfast, that his secretary was getting out of her bed in Brooklyn to come into the office, and that the new day would be a succession of words, phone calls, emails, coffee breaks, glances out of the window, minutes ticking by, and fleeting distractions. The same as it ever was. In spite of everything, he thought that nothing had changed.

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Light rose over the city, filtering down the streets and into the shop windows of the bakeries, into the kitchens of the diners that were about to open. Millions of bodies emerged from sleep. Men and women emerged clumsily from their beds, starving, blood sugars plunging, comforted by the prospect of an imminent breakfast. At that hour of the morning, there was something ancestral about hunger, something urgent and universal. Hunger lurked everywhere. Hunger in the apartment houses of Williamsburg, the brownstones of Park Slope, the buildings of Tribeca and in the Barrio and up in Washington Heights. In Central Park, women in nylon running pants were finishing their morning jogs, dreaming of a muffin and a bowl of cereal. In the dozens of NYSC franchises, bulky-armed men were finishing their workouts, hoping they still had time for a plate of lean bacon and a protein shake before heading for the office. Other city-dwellers would start the day with a sandwich. Or a plate of pancakes with maple syrup, fried plantains, a noodle soup, or who knows what else. Breakfast in New York came in a thousand colours, belonged to countless religions. Some preferred a doughnut. Doughnuts and coffee for the guards at the Metropolitan Museum, for the professors at Columbia University, for the bus drivers changing their shift. Doughnuts and coffee for the girls in the nail salons, for the sales assistants in the boutiques of Madison Avenue, for the cashiers in the box office lining Broadway, and for the art dealers in Chelsea.

Annabel came into the office around eight o'clock. Reed heard her in the room next door, turning on the computers and listening to the messages on the answering machine, and then walking over the door between their two offices. He called to her to come in before she could knock. He'd been working for an hour and he was starving. She called out an excessively cheery good morning, handing him the newspapers and the paper bag with a couple of cinnamon bagels that, like every morning she'd stopped to buy for him on her way in. Reed opened the bag and inhaled in delight.

As she moved off to make the coffee, Annabel announced that the morning outside was, to say the least, *completely heavenly*.

Reed watched her go. In too-skinny women, he mused, there was at times something out of place: an overblown vivaciousness, a kind of pained, fake nonchalance. Not that it constituted a problem. Annabel was a capable assistant. And however disturbing the thought might be, he had to admit it: it was strangely satisfying to eat the food that a skeletal woman, almost surely anorexic, brought him every morning. Certain contrasts gave him that kind of feeling. A perverse feeling of being alive. He pulled out a bagel and bit into it. He loved the taste of cinnamon.

After breakfast, the morning flew by. It was just before lunchtime that the aftermath of his unsettled night began to emerge, making him feel momentarily dazed, as if a sudden, tiny breach had opened up between him and the surrounding world. He took a breath. He stared at the telephone on his desk. That whole morning he'd been putting off a certain phone call, but now the time had come. He had to call. He had to confirm or reject that request for an extra lesson at the space centre. Just then, as if obeying a telepathic impulse, the phone rang.

Reed lifted the receiver. When Annabel said that Raymond Minetta was on the line, it took Reed a few seconds to realise who that was. It had been just twenty-four hours since the last time he'd visited the George Hotel, and yet it seemed a distant memory. As little as he felt like it, he told Annabel to put the call through. "Raymond," he spoke into the receiver, with the courteous yet detached tone he always used with his financiers.

"My dear friend," Raymond breathed into the phone, with an unctuous voice that penetrated into Reed's ear. How he hated that kind of voice. How he hated that person. Not so much for his way of talking, or his manners, or even for his political views. It was the fact that he was such a walking talking stereotype, such an obvious personality type, as uninteresting and unappetising as a big hamburger. Raymond Minetta, the owner of a luxury hotel, an evident case of a repressed homosexual, an ultra-conservative Christian fundamentalist. For reasons that Reed had never quite understood, that man was one of the financiers of the Richards Foundation. "I haven't seen you in a while," Minetta cooed.

Reed avoided telling him that he'd been in the sauna at his hotel just the day before. Probably Minetta already knew that. He also avoided telling him about the strange message he'd found in the locker, though for an instant the idea had occurred to him.

“The reason I’m disturbing you,” Minetta went on, “and you know how sorry I am when I have to disturb other people, well, the reason is that this morning...” The voice faded away briefly, with a vague moan, perhaps a stifled sneeze or a stab of pain. Who knows. Reed thought of the piece of gossip he’d once heard, namely that Minetta, under his thousand-dollar Italian suit, in fact wore a cilice, or something of the sort. Reed kept from laughing. Self-inflicted pain had always struck him as something ridiculous, absurd, and obscene. *Here I am on the phone with a millionaire who wears a cilice under his trousers.*

His impatience mounted. Now that he was holding the receiver in his hand, he felt the urgent need to make that other call, the one to the space centre, the one he’d been thinking about all morning. He had to make that call. Give that answer.

“This morning,” Minetta’s voice resumed. “The thing is this morning, actually, I read something about Franklin.”

“Franklin?” Reed asked, with a fleeting hint of interest.

“In the *Daily News*,” came the answer. “That interview where they ask Franklin what health club he attends...”

Reed pulled the *Daily News* out of the pile of newspapers Annabel had brought in. He hadn’t even leafed through it yet. He started turning the pages, with the receiver wedged between his ear and his shoulder, the kind of uncomfortable position that he might once have resolved by deforming a part of his body, say, by reshaping his shoulder into a rudimentary third hand, but which he now chose to accept like this, the way anyone else would. He kept the phone clamped between shoulder and ear. He found the article and the photograph that illustrated it. There was Franklin Richards, the Prince Charming of the morning tabloids, America’s most beloved son. His son. A stab of love surged through his chest.

Time was running short. He needed to make the other phone call, the real one, the important one, the call that was becoming more urgent second by second. Minetta wasn’t about to hang up: “You can imagine,” he was saying, “my bafflement when I saw that Franklin told the interviewer, of all things, that he had a membership in a health club at another hotel. I mean to say, as you know very well, for years he’s been our guest, as welcome as can be, as are you for that matter, and our hotel’s health club...”

Reed’s anxiety intensified. What did Minetta want? Had he taken him for Franklin’s publicist? He ran his gaze around the office, exasperated, until it came to rest on the object he was searching for: the book. His biography. He had set it on a shelf at the far side of the office, ready to be signed with a brilliant dedication. He thought back to the young female astronaut. The extra lesson. He restrained the impulse to reach out his arm to grab the book, as well as to put a brusque end to the conversation.

“What I’m trying to say,” Minetta said, “is that it would be a pleasure for me to have a chance to express to Franklin my undiminished esteem, perhaps by sending him, that is, in a gesture

friendship...” Reed ran his gaze repeatedly from the book at the other end of the office, to the picture of Franklin in the newspaper, as if there were some link between the two things. Some relationship. His son was smiling in the picture, young and perfect, and a strange sense of melancholy swept over Reed.

“You’re right,” he said, taking advantage of a new ambiguous pause on Minetta’s end of the line. Another stifled sneeze? A spasm of pain as the cilice penetrated into his buttery flesh? Whatever the motive that had triggered the pause, Reed took advantage of it. “It can be tough to get in touch with Franklin. He doesn’t even have a secretary. He’s what people call an indie star, but that’s what America loves him, right?” Without giving Minetta the time to break in, he went on: “Which means that now I’m going to transfer you back to my secretary, who will be more than happy, I feel sure, to give you her advice about when and how you can best get in touch with Franklin, so that you can renew your invitations and send him your gestures of friendship. All the gestures you like. It’s been a pleasure, Raymond.” Without waiting for an answer, he transferred the call to Annabel.

He rested the receiver against his ear, relieved, listening to the perfect silence of the telephone.

That silence. That instant. If only it had gone on forever. If only he hadn’t heaved a sigh, just then, and started punching buttons. If only he’d never done it. Afterwards, more than once, he would wonder whether that had been the point of no return, the irreparable turning point. He would ask himself exactly where the line fell, the moment after which his life no longer belonged to him, the portal that led him onto a different plane of existence, the plane of obsession and need, the plane from which it was not possible to escape, not now, any more than from the orbit of a black hole. The turning point. The threshold.

He listened to the series of rings. Reed waited until he heard the receiver being picked up at the other end, and finally the voice, slightly mannish but nonetheless silky, of Mrs. Glasseye.

She didn’t seem very surprised to hear his voice. After all, she’d been expecting his call. She had been expecting his answer.

Reed took a deep breath, and as the sunlight of Manhattan came in through the window, and lunchtime drew near, and an army of impatient bodies poured out once again into the streets, in search of the perfect meal... As his anorexic secretary in the next room was politely answering the question of a millionaire who wore a cilice, and everything seemed to be suddenly linked together in Reed’s brain, in one last fleeting unified vision: eyes, erotic dreams, mysterious notes, cilices cutting into the flesh, smiling blond sons, biographies rediscovered, arms extending outwards, unhappy drivers, hungry bodies... He gave his answer. He’d be glad to go to the space centre for the extra lesson. “It’ll be a pleasure,” he said. “A real pleasure to be there again.”

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A week later, he was in a car again, heading back from the space centre, after teaching his extra lesson. A different chauffeur was driving this time, steering quietly through the New Jersey sunset.

Reed felt exhausted, afraid, and triumphant. He'd spent a week practically without anxiety, thinking at times of the space centre and the young female astronaut, and then that day he had appeared to teach his lesson, just as punctual as ever, dressed as neatly as ever, feeling a sort of childish satisfaction at the simple fact that he was there, and she was there too. He'd experienced a sort of primordial wonder: two people, both there, at the same time, in the same place on the face of the planet. More than once his glance had met hers and had rested on her eyes for a moment, like someone peering through a door left half-open.

Otherwise, he'd done a fine job. He'd taught the lesson with confidence. He'd made them laugh and made them reflect. He'd held them in the palm of his hand, those six young astronauts. When the lesson was over, he'd lingered, organising his papers, the way he normally did, so that his audience would leave the room with this perfect image in their minds, an older former hero putting his lecture notes in order.

She had come up to him. Reed had smiled, vaguely, pretending not to remember, then he'd pulled the autographed biography out of his stack of files. "Thanks," she had said, lifting the cover ever so slightly to peek at the dedication. *To Elaine Ryan, who'll fly high.*

She had touched her hair, tucking a lock behind one ear, a gesture that might mean anything, and which Reed had taken for shyness. There wasn't a lot left to say, after all, and everything could have come to an end right there, on an afternoon in May, as the sun sank behind the trees of the grounds outside. Reed had nothing to ask, nothing to add, just a pure and mechanical sense of attraction. Not exactly a sexual attraction, rather something like the pull of gravity, one body sucked into the orbit of another body.

And so in the end he made his proposal. It wasn't a proposal he'd thought out in advance, nor was it entirely innocent. He'd done his homework and learned that she lived in Brooklyn. He'd offered her a ride back to the city in his car... The car slowed down as it approached an intersection. "It's nice to travel in comfort for once," Elaine commented, sitting next to him in the back seat. She smiled and looked calmly at the sunset outside the window.

Reed followed her gaze, losing himself in turn in the vision of the fiery horizon. "I imagine," he said, "that you usually go back to the city with that classmate of yours." He was referring to the young man with rimless glasses, who had waited at the door for Elaine, and who Reed had at first assumed was her boyfriend.

Elaine turned to look at him. "That's right, with Bernard. He has an old beat-up Volvo, without air conditioning, and almost without brakes." She smiled: "Every time I ride with him, it's quite an adventure."

Reed nodded. His brain registered every detail. Words, expressions, the slightest moves.

recorded Elaine's well shaped nose, dusted with freckles like the face of a young urchin, her eyelashes, thick and not too long. The triangle of flesh left naked at the top button of her blouse. The way her wrists emerged from her sleeves. He glanced at each of these details with an astonishment that verged on the scientific, regretting that he was unable to study them openly. Oh, he almost wished she would fall asleep in the back seat next to him so that he could observe her at his leisure. He and she, sitting side by side, in the car flooded with scarlet sunlight. Reed realised that the conversation was languishing. "So, I hope your friend didn't mind having to make the drive all alone in his Volvo for one evening," he said, returning to the topic of conversation.

"Bernard?!" She seemed to find the idea quite amusing. "I doubt it," she said. "Knowing him, the minute I get home I'll find a dozen messages from him on my voicemail, asking me to call and tell him in detail how this ride back went."

Reed frowned.

"He's a curious friend," Elaine explained. "And you..." she seemed to be searching for the word. "Well, you must know. You tickle people's curiosity. You're a living legend."

Reed had a technique he'd developed for reacting to compliments, or at least to phrases that sounded like compliments. A technique that involved a mixture of more-or-less sincere modesty, self-deprecating irony, and a coolness that sometimes verged on annoyance. In this case, he limited himself to batting his eyelids. He felt her words spreading in his stomach, like a mouthful of scalding hot food, with their electrifying taste. He tried to play it down: "A legend that's a little rough at the edges, I'm afraid. A legend that's become a little dull," he added, waving his hand at the pile of papers and files that he'd set on the seat, between them, attesting to what he'd become over the years: an ageing professor. Something of an intellectual.

"Don't make fun," Elaine said, placing a hand, with sudden recklessness, on the stack of papers. The outline of a vein ran over the back of her hand like an underground river, and the skin of her knuckles was faceted into minuscule triangles. "A personality like yours," Elaine was saying, "can play an important role these days. I mean, after that horrible murder. Who would have guessed that a legend in his own time, like Batman... We're living in strange times, don't you think?"

Reed wasn't thinking. He didn't want to think. He didn't want to talk about the recent murder of Batman or about the times they were living in or any other grim topics. He was determined to avoid the morass of depressing subjects. Dreariness just tended to engender more dreariness. Instinct told him to move on to other subjects, in order to show Elaine that he knew how to kid around, how to keep it light, and that he didn't always have to carry with him the burden of all his past experience. "Watch this," he said, placing one hand next to Elaine's and starting to model it, shaping it with the dedication of a sculptor, so that the two hands were soon identical. Perfectly identical.

She opened her eyes wide. "But what the..." Then it dawned on her and, enchanted by that little trick, she exclaimed: "My hand!"



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