

It's like this, Saul Adler: when I was twenty-three I loved the way you touched me, but when the afternoon slipped in and you slipped out of me, you were already looking for someone else. No, it's like this, Jennifer Moreau: I loved you every night and every day, but you were scared of my love and I was scared of my love, too. No, she said, I was scared of your envy, which was bigger than your love. Attention, Saul Adler. Attention! Look to the left and to the right, cross the road and get to the other side.

I

Abbey Road, London, September 1988

I was thinking about how Jennifer Moreau had told me I was never to describe her beauty, not to her, or to anyone else. When I asked her why I was silenced in this way, she said, 'Because you only have old words to describe me.' This was on my mind when I stepped on to the zebra crossing with its black-and-white stripes at which all vehicles must stop to allow pedestrians to cross the road. A car was coming towards me but it did not stop. I had to jump backwards and fell on my hip, using my hands to protect myself from the fall. The car stalled and a man rolled down the window. He was in his sixties, silver hair, dark eyes, thin lips. He asked if I was okay. When I did not answer he stepped out of his car.

'I apologize,' he said. 'You walked on to the crossing and I slowed down, preparing to stop, but then you changed your mind and walked back to the kerb.' His eyelids were quivering at the corners. 'And then without warning you lurched forward on to the crossing.'

I smiled at his careful reconstruction of history, blatantly told in his favour. He furtively glanced at his car to check if it had been damaged. The wing mirror had shattered. His thin lips parted and he sighed sorrowfully, muttering something about how he had ordered the mirror from Milan.

I had been up all night writing a lecture on the psychology of male

tyrants and I'd made a start with the way Stalin flirted with women by flicking bread at them across the dinner table. My notes, about five sheets of paper, had fallen out of my leather sling bag and, embarrassingly, so had a packet of condoms. I started to pick them up. A small, flat, rectangular object was lying in the road. I noticed the driver was looking at my knuckles as I handed him the object, which felt warm and seemed to be vibrating in my palm. It was not mine so I assumed it was his. Blood dripped through my fingers. My palms were grazed and there was a cut on the knuckle of my left hand. I sucked it while he watched me, clearly distressed.

'Do you need a lift somewhere?'

'I'm okay.'

He offered to take me to a pharmacy to 'clean up the wound', as he put it. When I shook my head, he reached out his hand and touched my hair, which was strangely comforting. He asked for my name.

'Saul Adler. Look, it's just a small graze. I have thin skin. I always bleed a lot, it's nothing.'

He was holding his left arm in a strange way, cradling it with his right arm. I picked up the condoms and shoved them into my jacket pocket. A wind was up. The leaves that had been swept into small piles under the trees were blowing across the road. The driver told me the traffic had been diverted because there was a demonstration that day in London, and he'd wondered if Abbey Road was closed off. The detour was not signposted clearly. He did not understand why he'd become confused, because he often came this way to watch the cricket at Lord's, nearby. While he spoke, he gazed at the rectangular object in his hand.

The object was speaking. There was definitely a voice inside it, a man's voice, and he was saying something angry and insulting. We both pretended not to hear his words.

Fuck off I hate you don't come home

'How old are you, Soorl? Can you tell me where you live?'

I think the near collision had really scared the driver.

When I told him I was twenty-eight, he didn't believe me and asked

for my age again. He was so posh he pronounced my name as if a pebble had been inserted between the roof of his mouth and his lower lip. His silver hair was slicked back with a product that made it shine.

I in turn asked for his name.

‘Wolfgang,’ he said very quickly, as if he did not want me to remember it.

‘Like Mozart,’ I said, and then, rather like a child showing his father where he’d been hurt after falling off a swing, I pointed to the cut on my knuckle and kept repeating that I was okay. His concerned tone was starting to make me tearful. I wanted him to drive off and leave me alone. Perhaps the tears were to do with my father’s recent death, though my father was not as groomed or as gentle as shiny, silver-haired Wolfgang. To hasten his departure, I explained that my girlfriend was about to arrive any minute now, so he didn’t have to hang around. In fact she was going to take a photograph of me stepping on to the zebra crossing in the style of the photograph on the Beatles album.

‘Which album is that, Soorl?’

‘It’s called *Abbey Road*. Everyone knows that. Where have you been, Wolfgang?’

He laughed but he looked sad. Perhaps it was because of the insulting words that had been spoken from inside the vibrating object in his hand.

‘And how old is your girlfriend?’

‘Twenty-three. Actually, *Abbey Road* was the last album the Beatles recorded together at the EMI studios, which are just over there.’ I pointed to a large white house on the other side of the road.

‘Of course, I know that,’ he said sadly. ‘It’s nearly as famous as Buckingham Palace.’ He walked back to his car, murmuring, ‘Take care, Soorl. You’re lucky to have such a young girlfriend. By the way, what do you do?’

His comments and questions were starting to irritate me – also the way he sighed, as if he carried the weight of the world on the shoulders of his beige cashmere coat. I decided not to reveal that I was a historian and that my subject was communist Eastern Europe.

It was a relief to hear the animal growl of his engine revving as I stepped back on the pavement.

Considering it was he who had nearly run me over, perhaps it was he who should take care. I waved to him but he did not wave back. As for my young girlfriend, I was only five years older than Jennifer, so what was he going on about? And why did he want to know her age? Or what I 'do'.

Never mind. I was looking at the notes in my hand (which was still bleeding), in which I had transcribed how Stalin's father had been an alcoholic and was abusive to his family. Stalin's mother had enrolled her son Joseph into a Greek orthodox priesthood school to protect him from his father's rage after he had tried to strangle her. I could not easily read my own writing but I had underlined something about how Stalin would go on to punish people for their unconscious sins as well as their conscious sins – such as thought crimes against the party.

My left hip began to ache.

Take care, Soorl. Thanks for the advice, Wolfgang.

Back to my notes, which were now smudged with blood from my knuckle. Joseph Stalin (I had written this late at night) was always pleased to punish someone. He even bullied his own son – with such cruelty that he attempted to shoot himself. His wife also shot herself, more successfully than her son, who, unlike his mother, lived to be bullied again and again by his father. My own late father was not exactly a bully. He left that task to my brother, Matthew, who was always up for a bit of cruelty. Like Stalin, Matthew went after his own family, or made sure he made their lives so miserable they went after themselves.

I sat on the wall outside the EMI studios while I waited for Jennifer to arrive. In three days I was travelling to East Germany, the GDR, to research cultural opposition to the rise of fascism in the 1930s at the Humboldt University. Although my German was reasonably

fluent they had assigned me a translator. His name was Walter Müller. I was to stay for two weeks in East Berlin with his mother and sister, who had offered me a room in their tenement apartment near the university. Walter Müller was part of the reason I had nearly been run over on the zebra crossing. He had written to say that his sister, whose name was Katrin – but the family called her Luna – was a big Beatles fan. Since the 1970s, albums by both the Beatles and Bob Dylan had been allowed to be released in the GDR, unlike in the '50s and '60s, when pop music was seen by the ruling socialist party of Germany as a cultural weapon to corrupt the young. Officials were obliged to study all the lyrics before albums could be released.

Yeah yeah yeah. What could that possibly mean? What was it that was being said yes to?

It had been Jennifer's idea to take a photograph of myself crossing the zebra on Abbey Road to give to Luna. The week before she had asked me to explain the whole concept of the GDR to her but I had become distracted. We were caramelizing peanuts in the kitchen of her flat at the time and I was burning the sugar. It was quite a complicated recipe in which we were instructed to add the peanuts to the boiling sugar syrup and then bake them in the oven. Jennifer did not understand how the people of a whole country could be locked up behind a wall and not be allowed to leave. While I was banging on about how Germany came to be ideologically and physically separated into two countries divided by a wall, communist in the East, capitalist in the West, and how the communist authorities called the Wall the 'anti-fascist protection rampart', her fingers had slipped under the waistband of my jeans. I was burning the sugar and Jennifer was not exactly taking notes. We had both lost interest in the German Democratic Republic.

I saw her walking towards me carrying a small aluminium stepladder on her arm. She was wearing the Soviet pilot's cap I had bought her at a flea market on the Portobello Road. I kissed her and told her

briefly what had happened. Jennifer was preparing for an exhibition of her photographs at art school, but had taken the afternoon off to do the 'photo shoot', as she called it. Some sort of camera was strapped to her leather belt; another hung around her neck. I did not disclose the details of the near crash, but she noticed the cut on my knuckle. 'You've got thin skin,' she said. I asked her why she was carrying a stepladder. She told me that was how the original photo of the Beatles on the Abbey Road zebra crossing was taken in August 1969 at 11.30 a.m. The photographer, Iain MacMillan, had placed the ladder at the side of the zebra while a policeman was paid to direct the traffic. MacMillan was given ten minutes to take the photo. But as I was not actually famous in any way, we couldn't ask the police for five minutes so we had to work quickly.

'I think there's been a diversion and Abbey Road is closed today.'

As I was speaking three cars sped by, followed by a black taxi for hire, a motorbike, two bicycles, and a lorry loaded with wooden planks.

'Yeah, Saul, it's definitely closed,' she said, fiddling with her camera.

'I reckon you look more like Mick Ronson than any of the Beatles, even though your hair is black and Mick's is blond.'

It was true that my hair, which was shoulder-length, had been cut by Jennifer two days ago in the style of Bowie's lead guitarist. She was secretly proud of what she called my rock-star looks, and she loved my body more than I loved my body, which made me love her.

When the road was clear she set up the ladder in the same place that Wolfgang was supposed to have stopped his car. As she clambered up and sorted out her camera, she yelled instructions: 'Put your hands in your jacket pockets! Look down! Look straight ahead! Okay, walk now! Bigger strides! Go!' There were two cars waiting but she held up her hand to keep them there as she put a new roll of film into her camera. When the cars started to hoot, she flamboyantly bowed to them from the top of the ladder.

To thank Jennifer for her time, I bought six oysters from the fishmonger and a bottle of dry white. We spent the next couple of hours in her bed while her two flatmates, Saanvi and Claudia, were out. It was a poky, dark basement flat, but they all enjoyed living there and seemed to get along. Claudia was a vegan who was always soaking some sort of seaweed in a bowl of water in the kitchen.

When we kissed fully clothed on the bed, her pilot cap kept falling over her eyes, which really turned me on. Now and again blue lights flashed in my head, but I didn't tell Jennifer, who was playing with the string of pearls I always wore around my neck. When I finally took off my white trousers, she noticed that I had a large bruise on my right thigh and both my knees were grazed and bleeding.

'Can you tell me what actually happened, Saul?'

I told her more about how I had nearly been run over just before she arrived and how I was embarrassed about picking up the packet of condoms. She laughed and then slurped an oyster and threw the shell on the floor.

'We should look for pearls inside those oysters,' she said. 'Maybe we could make you another necklace?'

She wanted to know why I was so keen to go to East Germany, what with its citizens stuck behind that wall and the Stasi spying on everyone. Perhaps it wasn't a safe place to visit. Why didn't I do my

research in West Berlin so she could visit me and we could go to concerts and drink cheap beer?

I'm not sure Jennifer truly believed I was a scholar and not a rock star.

'Your eyes are so blue,' she said, climbing on top of me and sitting astride my hips. 'It's quite unusual to have intense black hair and even more intense blue eyes. You are much prettier than I am. I want your cock inside me all the time. Everyone is frightened in the GDR aren't they? I still don't understand how the people of a whole country can be locked up behind a wall and not be allowed to leave.'

I could smell the sweet ylang-ylang oil she always combed through her hair before she walked into the tiny sauna that had come with the basement flat in Hamilton Terrace. Some nights I would arrive there from work in the evening and listen to her talking with Claudia and Saanvi in the sauna, while I marked my students' essays at the kitchen table. When Jennifer finally emerged from the sauna, sometimes an hour later, naked and oiled with her homemade ylang-ylang potion, she often tormented me by withholding her affection, making camomile tea, buttering a crispbread, then she pounced. I couldn't have wished for a more ravishing predator to pull me away from an essay in which my worst male student had ended by attributing some of the most famous lines in the world to the wrong author.

'The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a whole world to win.'

I crossed out Leon Trotsky and wrote Karl Marx.

I knew that Jennifer was turned on by my body, but I got the impression (as she guided my fingers to touch her in the places that most thrilled her) that she was not that interested in my mind. She started to tell me how artists like Claude Cahun and Cindy Sherman meant more to her than Stalin and Erich Honecker ('No,' she said, 'here, here,' and I could feel her coming), after which she lay by my side (as I guided her fingers to the places that most pleased me) while she explained that she

preferred Sylvia Plath to Karl Marx, though she liked the line in *The Communist Manifesto* about a spectre haunting Europe. ‘I mean’ – she was whispering now – ‘usually a ghost just haunts a house or a castle, but Marx’s ghost was haunting a whole continent. Maybe the spectre was standing under the Trevi Fountain in Rome to cool off from the slog of being a haunter, or buying some bling in the Versace stores in Milan, or watching a Nico concert?’ Did I know that Nico’s real name was Christa (I did not want to know that right now) and that Nico/Christa, who was born in Cologne, was haunted all her life by the sound of the bombing in the war? Nor did I want to know (and Jennifer stopped touching me at an erotically fierce moment to reach this thought) that a spectre was inside every photograph she developed in the dark room, and I did not recall the scene she liked in the film *Wings of Desire* (which we had recently seen together) where one of the angels says he wants ‘to enter the history of the world’, but now, she said, she wanted me to be the spectre inside her.

We had quite vigorous sex and afterwards I really began to ache. It was clear that something was wrong with my hip, which wasn’t bruised at all.

We lazed around and finished the bottle of wine and talked. After a while Jennifer asked me what I most wanted in life.

‘I would like to see my mother again.’

It wasn’t the sexiest answer, but I knew it would interest Jennifer.

‘Then perhaps you should visit her.’

‘You know she’s dead.’

‘Go to your family house in Bethnal Green and tell me what happens.’

She had found a stick of charcoal and was balancing a sheet of paper across her naked thighs.

‘I can see cobblestones and a Gothic university,’ I said.

Her hand did not move across the page.

‘I thought you were going to draw?’

‘Well, there isn’t a Gothic university in Bethnal Green. I’d rather draw your mother than a building. Do you miss her more than your father?’

It was hard work being tangled up with someone like Jennifer Moreau. We heard the front door slam.

‘That will be Claudia.’ Jennifer placed my hand in the middle of the sheet of paper and drew around my fingers with the stick of charcoal. Her bedroom was next to the kitchen and we could hear Claudia filling the kettle.

I was lying on my back and could see a bunch of flowering nettles on Jennifer’s green Mexican desk in the corner of the room (made from wormwood, or something that sounded sinister), also her passport, also a pile of black-and-white photographs. I wanted to tell Jennifer that I loved her, but I thought it might put her off me.

The bedroom door suddenly creaked open. Claudia, who always soaked seaweed overnight, was naked because she was about to step into the sauna, a pink towel wrapped around her head. She was yawning, slowly, massively, languorously, as if the whole world bored her shitless, one arm stretched above her head while her left hand rested on her flat tanned stomach.

I asked Jennifer Moreau if she would consider marrying me. In that moment I felt as if I had just split an atom. She leaned forward and followed my gaze.

‘You know, I think it’s over between us, Saul. We should call it a day, but I’ll send you the Abbey Road photos anyway. Have a good time in East Berlin. I hope it works out with your visa.’

She lay back on the pillow next to me and pulled the pilot cap over her face so she did not have to look at me.

I stepped out of bed, slightly drunk, and closed the dodgy bedroom door, tripping over the empty bottle of wine we had thrown on to the scratched floorboards.

‘Your white suit is on the chair,’ she said. ‘Can you get dressed quickly? I have to get into the dark room at college before they lock it tonight.’

I had bought the suit at Laurence Corner, the army surplus store on the Euston Road. It was where the Beatles had found their *Sergeant Pepper* jackets in the 1960s. I think my white suit used to be a Navy uniform, which was just as well because my marriage proposal had sunk to the bottom of the sea. I was shipwrecked amongst the empty oyster shells with their jagged sharp edges and I could taste Jennifer Moreau on my fingers and lips. When I perched next to her on the bed and asked her why she was suddenly so angry with me, she did not seem to know, or understand, or care. She was calm and rather cold, I thought, as if she had been thinking about this for a while.

‘Well, apart from anything else, you have never once asked me about my art.’

‘What do you mean?’ I was shouting now. ‘There’s your art, it’s on your walls, there and there.’ I pointed to two collages taped on the wall of her room. One of them was a blown-up black-and-white photograph of my face in profile, hung above the bed like a religious icon. She had traced over the outline of my lips in red felt-tip and written the words *DON’T KISS ME*.

‘I look at your art all the time.’ I was still shouting. ‘I think about it and I think about you. I am interested.’

‘Well, seeing as you’re so interested, what am I working on now?’

‘I don’t know, you haven’t told me.’

‘You haven’t asked. So, what kind of camera do I use?’

She knew I had no idea. It was not as if Jennifer had much interest in communist Eastern Europe either. I mean, she hadn’t exactly asked me for a reading list and I didn’t hold it against her.

‘Oh yes,’ I said, ‘you took a negative of me and taped it on your shoulder and lay in the sun and then you peeled it off and you had a sort of tattoo of me on your skin.’

She laughed. ‘It’s always about you, isn’t it?’

In a way it was. After all, Jennifer Moreau was always taking photographs of me.

When the bedroom door creaked open again, Claudia was eating baked beans from the tin with a giant spoon.

‘Jennifer’ – I was pleading now – ‘I’m sorry. Since my father died I’ve just been trying to get through the day.’

We could hear the hiss of the kettle boiling on the other side of the door.

‘As it happens,’ she said, jumping out of bed and slamming the door shut again, ‘a curator from America came to my studio and bought two of my photographs. And she has offered me an artist’s residency in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, after I graduate.’

So that’s why her passport was lying on her desk.

‘Congratulations,’ I said miserably.

She looked so excited and young and mean. We had been together for just over a year but I knew I had met my match. For a start, the deal that Jennifer Moreau (French father, English mother, born in Beckenham, South London) had made with me was that she could praise my own sublime beauty (as she put it) in any way she liked, the shape of my body, my ‘intense blue eyes’, but I was never to describe her own body, or express my admiration for it, except with touch. That is how she wanted to know everything I felt and thought about her.

Claudia had now switched off the wailing kettle. When I glanced at the wall again I noticed a photograph of Saanvi taped to the crumbling plaster. The basement flat was damp and some sort of fungus crept like deranged ants over the walls of Jennifer’s bedroom. In the photograph, Saanvi lay sweating on her side in the sauna. She was reading a book, her left nipple pierced with a small golden hoop.

‘Get going, Saul. I don’t know why you’re still hanging around.’

Jennifer slipped on a kimono with a dragon embroidered on the back and then edged her feet into her favourite sandals, which were made from car tyres.

She was practically pushing me out of the door.

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I spent some time fiddling with the latch on the front gate. I never could get in or out of that gate; I had watched Jennifer and Claudia leap over it on days they were late for class. Their other flatmate, Saanvi, had no problem with the latch because she was patient, but Jennifer said that was because she had a degree in Advanced Mathematics and knew a lot about limitless time.

The late-afternoon sunshine felt harsh on my eyes. My intense blue eyes. I suddenly turned around because I intuited that Jennifer was watching me. And she was. With a camera in her hand. She was standing by the front door in her dragon kimono and sandals made from car tyres, still flushed from making love with me, her left hand rummaging in her silk pockets, searching for the jelly beans she always kept there. Her camera was pointed at me. As it whirred and clicked, she said, quite dramatically, ‘So long, Saul. You’ll always be my muse.’

For a moment I thought she was going to throw me a jelly bean in the way that circus trainers throw treats to their performing animals after they have jumped through a flaming hoop.

‘I’ll get the Abbey Road photos to you before you leave. I’m sorry about your father. Hope you feel better soon, and don’t forget the tinned pineapple for your translator.’

Abbey Road was a twelve-minute walk from Hamilton Terrace. Something compelled me to return to the site of the near accident. I would have to take it slowly because I noticed I was limping and that my white jacket was torn at the shoulder. Jennifer Moreau was ruthless and she seemed to know a lot about my life. How did she know that Walter Müller had requested I bring a tin of pineapple with me to the GDR? I couldn’t remember if it was because I had told her or she’d asked. It was true that she had accompanied me to my father’s funeral three weeks ago, so she knew about his death. Her own father had died when she was twelve, as had my mother. We often talked about losing a parent at the same age. It was a bond between us, though she thought she was freed by her father’s death because he