NEW LIGHT

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I saw my first vision in St. Louis, Missouri, on the patio outside Boris Alexander's apartment. At the same time, inside, half the Washington University medical school partied on, getting drunk or stoned or laid. Not me. I got to have my mind-state altered without even raising a beer bottle to my lips. I was the chosen one, right? Out of a clear sky the night was suddenly altered for me—the stars rubbed themselves against my body, and Houdini came to me from out of the dark. I saw the world in a way I couldn't explain. I've since quit trying.

Contrary to what you might expect, seeing a vision is a physically demanding experience. After it's over you're left exhausted, especially if it's the first vision you've ever witnessed. That's why it's not good to have one at a party. By the time I came back in from the patio, Boris's Welcome to Spring bash was over, and Boris himself was crashed out on the couch. But I was lucky; Houdini stayed with me, out there on the roof top, after the vision spent itself. He was solicitous and kind, cradling me against him until I recovered. When it was over and I was myself again, he left. I became just some woman at a party. I was no longer in need of his attentions.

Boris's building is located in St. Louis's Central West End. It's tiered like a wedding cake at the top; his apartment, on the 14th floor, occupies the first of these tiers, and has attached to it one of the building's huge corner patios. It's a garage-like expanse three times the size of his apartment, a crazy amount of space for anyone in a city. It must've cost his father a fortune. But it was worth it: guests were invariably intimidated or impressed by the view, and it made a great party venue. It also made a great platform for visionary

transport. Only the eastern edge is bordered by the apartment building; on all other sides the patio opens onto empty air beyond the railings. You can stand and look north, south, or west, and feel like the whole of St. Louis is laid out before you. The wind roars past and if you close your eyes, you can see yourself, very small, high above the earth.

It was about eleven when I first wandered from the dining room out into the night. At that point the vision was still hours away. The volume of the party was turned up high; there were shouts and laughter coming from the far end of the patio where a crowd of people were dancing beneath the stars. Boris wasn't among them. In fact I hadn't seen him in a while—sometimes he liked to pretend he was just another guest at his own party, disappearing for minutes and then more minutes and then more, then turning up wanting to know what he'd missed. Since I was an out-of-towner and didn't know anyone anyway, I didn't mind acting as recording angel. I had the necessary detachment.

At that moment the vastness of the open night was inspiring excess. One of the dancers, a pretty, shapely woman, had stripped down to her underwear. The other women in the group, looking cumbersome in their clothes, continued to move half-heartedly to the music, glancing from her to the men whose eyes followed her every sway expertly. Her best move was an Egyptian kind of thing, palms together over the head, with steady undulations of the hips. She'd had lessons or practised by herself in front of the mirror; you could see by the concentrated precision in her face that she knew what every movement looked like. She was hardly aware of anyone else. Then a fat man picked up her dress. He began to dance with it, holding it up before him and sliding it sinuously across his chest and belly. This startled the woman; she grabbed the dress out of his hands and pulled it over her head. The men booed and she turned her back on them. She

crossed the desolate zone of concrete between the group of dancers and the partiers inside with remote face, as though she were walking in sunshine down a wooded path.

I stood back to let her go by, stifling an impulse to congratulate her. The people milling around on the patio looked lost now, as though she'd been the spirit of the dancing night, present among them unrecognized. After being ignored, mocked and derided, the spirit of the dancing night finally got fed up, put her clothes on, and went back inside. Leaving the men wilted and politically incorrect, the women put-out yet inexplicably saddened. They had all relinquished that sense of possibility that is so vital to parties, and didn't think to try to propitiate the offended spirit.

The preceding tells you more about the angel doing the recording than the people out on the patio. Truth be told, people in St. Louis know how to invoke the god of parties. As a matter of fact, there was a pleasing tension in the air at that gathering, an edgy buzz underneath the laughter and voices. The aura of expectation made people glance lingeringly at one another, before taking the plunge or moving on through the crowd. You could feel it in the air. The hesitation, the inability to act on impulse I just described—that was all me. I was still in observer mode. I'd been in St. Louis only a week; I didn't have a feel yet for the city or for the Midwest. I couldn't enter in.

I have a theory that explains this. I believe the spirit travels on foot. I didn't feel grounded yet because part of me was still wending her way westward from New York, vaguely following the exhaust trail my used Toyota had churned out behind it. Therein lies the danger of jetting off to some tropical island for a weekend. You fly down to Barbados for two days, zip back, and you're home before your soul has made it as far as Maryland. I don't mean to say that the soul is pedestrian and incapable of unearthly transports. Only

that it's honest. It earns its passage.

And yet, despite my lack of spontaneous participation at Boris's Welcome to Spring party, the truth is I left New York on impulse, after living there for three years. Maybe I was still stunned by the grandiosity of that gesture, still trying to fathom its meaning for my life. After all, it was only a week and a half earlier that I stood on the sidewalk by Morningside Avenue, looking down at the park spread out below me. I remember thinking, my God, it's the end of April and there's barely any green on the trees. It wasn't that spring was late that year. No, I thought, in New York springtime is meted out according to income. If you were wealthy the sun shined and the grass flourished. Though Morningside Park was on the edge of Columbia's airbrushed community, it belonged to the darker streets and pinched lives that lay beyond the wall.

Then I looked back at my neighborhood and decided that the poverty of springtime wasn't selective; it had infected the whole city. Everything around me seemed reluctant to open up. Nothing offered itself to the eye. Cars edging along the street looking for spaces, pedestrians passing with their chins in their collars, even the sidewalks leading up to the doors of buildings seemed to exist half-heartedly. The overcast afternoon hovered between daylight and the fade toward dusk. The city resisted any agent—weather, time of day, time of year—that might translate it into a place its inhabitants wouldn't recognize. And so I was trapped there, in the literalness of that moment. I had become a part of it, and like it, suffered from that failure of the imagination.

Three years in New York isn't a long time. Everything is in constant motion around you. You assume that you're moving too. And in a way you are. City life is a constant negotiation. You're confronted with so much that lies beyond the imaginable, in people, buildings, and random

events—layers of past amid relentless concessions to the present; collisions of culture and temperament. You don't need imagination in a city. At any rate, you don't notice its lack.

Four days later I had quit my job, packed up, and bought a car. I drove straight through to St. Louis, and a week later Boris threw a party to formally welcome the spring and me.

I left my post by the patio door and headed down the hall to the bathroom. En route I had to squeeze past a cluster of raucous med students, tall, wearing blue scrubs, smiling with set jaws, who deliberately blocked the way. At first they wouldn't move; then one said something about my ass and they parted to inspect me. I turned the hall corner and collided with a man coming from the other direction.

Caught off guard (my shoulder square in his sternum), the man froze the way a cat will when it's startled. He stared at me without expression, yet with disconcerting intensity. His eyes had a slight slant and his cheekbones were prominent and angular.

I looked at him, he looked at me, and I remembered a trip my family took when I was a child. We had pulled off the road into the parking area of a look-out point. I stood on the sidewalk staring out at the Grand Canyon. The wind was fierce. My mother leaned against the station wagon, hugging herself in her jacket; my father stood by the hood, looking at her, his jaw hard. Their expressions frightened me. I turned back to the view. The metal of the sign describing what I saw was cold, as was the wind, but the sun felt warm on my face. Before me, the earth fell away.

The recollection shimmered briefly, then the face of the man standing before me seemed to refocus, just slightly, the way a rock-face shifts when water is poured over it. I

thought his expression changed in some imperceptible way, but maybe the sudden thrust of memory had caused it to blur. I took a good look at him. He had a long nose, pronounced Slavic cheekbones, a full mouth. He was a little taller than me and took up room in a broad-shouldered way, as though he were used to having people move over for him. His hair curled around his ears. He reminded me of Baryshnikov in his thirties, only with rougher features. But it was the feeling of his eyes on me that I remember best. There was something invasive in his stare. Then, as though I'd imagined it, the look was gone. He nodded and stepped back to let me by.

I nodded too and moved past him. The whole thing could have been choreographed. It took only a few seconds. But in the bathroom I found myself contemplating my face in the mirror. He was attractive, but it wasn't that. The curious shift in expression seemed enigmatic; perhaps I was associating it with my memory of the Grand Canyon. My reflection frowned back at me. I made it blank, trying to recreate the look on his face. When I came out of the bathroom there were four people waiting.

I went back to the patio. When you don't know anyone at a party, it's good to have a view. A strong wind hit me in the face as I stepped outside, and I walked against that pressure to the far railing, opposite the remaining dancers who had begun to drift into private groups of two and three. I could make out the big dipper overhead, though the stars were slightly swollen with haze. The night felt like summer. I looked out over a quiet street lined with tall buildings.

I didn't call my parents to tell them I was leaving New York; I just dropped them each a postcard saying I'd call them from the road. When I arrived at Boris's I sent off a couple more postcards. I couldn't face talking to them. I

knew exactly what they'd say. My father would warn me that I couldn't expect him to fund my irresponsible lifestyle; while my mother would tell me I didn't know what I was getting myself into. Sure, the wandering life seemed glamorous from the outside, but I had to believe her that it wasn't. Both speeches would be irritating, though my mother's would be harder to take. Sometime in the last few years she had decided it was imperative that I Succeed. She wanted me to get into the corporate world and show them that I was Somebody. Don't follow my example, she kept saying. She'd had affairs with salesmen, used car dealers, stockbrokers, even one wealthy computer software designer. Boyfriends were for her like jobs were for me. Each one vanished forever once the glamour of the affair ended, and she, and I, moved tirelessly on.

But she wanted me to play by the rules. If I succeeded, it would be a vindication for her. It would be proof that the Martins, though they had money and connections, didn't have everything. It didn't matter to her that if I did succeed my father's family would claim that success as their own. But it did matter if I failed, because it would be her failure. They would blame her. I avoided talking to her in part because I felt I was letting her down, but more because I was embarrassed for her.

My father didn't embarrass me. After the divorce he sewed himself up like a child making a paper valentine with a border of yarn stitching. The child prefers a card whose edges are all sewn symmetrically to one that opens and declares I love you. He married a tall, heavy woman with excellent social skills who managed things for him. As for me, he decided I took after my mother and would never amount to anything. But even so, he went through the motions, asking what my game plan was and what kinds of skills I could claim for myself. I told him I was looking into com-

puter training. He got excited about dot.com companies and offered to send a check if I enrolled in a course.

After talking to my father, part of me always admired my mother. I knew she'd use me to get revenge on the Martins if she could, but at least she was willing to fight. It wasn't easy either—she had to defy them just to walk down the sidewalk feeling okay. That's why it was important to her that I succeed. It wouldn't matter then that she'd never see any of them again (except when she showed up, uninvited, at the odd funeral). Her victory would forever alter the world of privilege that had caused her so much suffering. She believed they would then concede that she had been the only real human being at all those gatherings, all those years, while they had been monsters, sharpening their fangs in their Back Bay lairs. And so she would vanquish their smug condescension to a woman who—she knew they knew—was smarter, but helplessly more exposed, than they.

Maybe she was smarter, in a quirky, useless way, but she knew none of the rules, and her abilities were emotional and intuitive, not tactical. They matched her earnestness with their mock-earnestness and she fell flat, and knew it. She felt outwitted. It was terrible to watch, especially because I was included in it all. They condescended to me as an extension of her. My father hid in his role of the new-barbarian corporate executive, and was as humiliated as she was, in his own way. But they each suffered alone.

I abandoned the patio with its view of citynight and streetlights and went back inside to get something to drink. In the kitchen I found the dancing woman, now standing by the refrigerator drinking a beer. She ignored the murmured comments made by men who leaned against the countertop across from her, expectancy on their faces.

"I wouldn't have had the guts," I blurted, surprising

myself. She glanced at me with fast eyes. Then she shrugged.

"Believe it or not, I wasn't doing it to show off." Her voice was flat. "I was going with the moment."

She tipped the bottle back and drank, then looked at me again. In that same flat voice she said: "What's the difference between letting yourself go because it feels right—with the wind and the music and the open sky and the stars—between that and being an exhibitionist?" For a moment the flatness in her voice disappeared and was replaced by a flutter of something exalted. She tamped it back down and gestured toward a man who continued to grin at her unpleasantly from across the room. "That guy over there said if I needed to show someone what I've got, he'd watch." She looked at him for a moment with cold eyes, then shrugged.

"It's probably all he's good for," I said, smiling.

She just looked at me. "How do you know Boris?" she asked.

I explained that we were roommates at Vassar and hadn't seen each other since graduation.

"Oh, you're his friend from college," she said. Her manner was instantly transformed. She smiled warmly. "I'm Lisa. I heard you were here—I just got back into town yesterday." She smiled again, now apologetic. "Listen, I'll see you later. I have to go find my boyfriend. He always disappears when I take off my clothes."

She left the kitchen, and in the other room I saw her stop to talk to Boris, who had reappeared. He came into the kitchen and gave me a smile. "I hear you met the other Elizabeth. Come on. I want you to meet Ty."

He led me to a group of black men getting high in the living room. "This is Beth," Boris said. "She just came in from New York. Thomas, John, Ty." He accepted the joint from John, took a drag and held his breath for a moment, then added, "Among their other occupations they're in a very

good band called the Three-Tones." He expelled smoke with the words and offered me the joint, then lifted it to his lips again when I shook my head.

I didn't know if the name of their band was meant to be a reference to skin color. Thomas had glossy black skin the eye is pulled into, becoming, like light itself, absorbed by the color's depth. Ty's skin was the rich dark brown of chestnuts. John was the lightest of the three.

"Boris, you know, he has excellent taste," Thomas said in a rolling Caribbean accent. He smiled charmingly, presenting the comment to me as a compliment. His flirting reminded me of a man elaborately doffing his hat to a woman. Another era.

"He does have good taste," I agreed. "In New York throwing parties is a lost art. Everyone's there to be seen. When you introduce two strangers they square off suspiciously, trying to decide if they should flatter or ignore each other."

Boris took another drag, smiling, and passed the joint to Ty, who handed it on to Thomas. "Oh, we've heard about New York," Boris said.

"Your party has possibilities. You can feel it. People are willing to be interested in each other."

Boris exhaled again. "It's not people's willingness I rely on. It's their desire to be seduced. Persuade me to do what I can't admit I want."

Thomas smiled at me. "I admit to everything."

Throughout this exchange Ty had been watching me. Now he said, "What brings you to St. Louis? Aside from the possibilities."

I smiled. "I came to see Boris."

"In search of her past," Boris said.

I nodded. "He's the only person from college I'm still in contact with."

"No ties?" Ty said. I looked at him and he smiled. "It's okay. These days it's hard to sustain things. Too much happens. Too many gaps to explain."

A woman came up to Thomas and they started conversing in French. John sidled off and Boris said he had to check on the beer supply. He kissed his fingers to us in farewell. We watched him weave through the crowd.

"How do you know Boris?" I asked.

"We work together. I just finished my master's in neuroscience. For now I'm still working in the lab."

"For now?"

"I start med school in the fall. At Wash U."

"Impressive."

He shrugged. "I like the idea of being a doctor. I don't know if I'll like being a doctor. That's why I'm doing the MD/PhD program. I can always retreat into research." He smiled again. "I'd like to work with people. If I can sustain it."

There was a pause and I glanced out at the crowd. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the man I'd collided with in the hallway. I turned so that I could see him better but by then his back was to me.

"What made you leave New York?" Ty asked.

"Oh, a lot of things," I said vaguely.

He waited and I realized he expected a real answer.

"God. I don't know exactly. I'd been there for three years. One day I thought, what the hell am I doing? I've worked in five different restaurants; I go out and get drunk with people I barely know. I decided it was time to figure out what I'm doing."

"And have you figured it out?"

"I just started. Won't it take a while?"

He gave me an odd smile. "Only you can say."

We looked at each other.

"It's not just the three years in New York," I said

lightly. "Your average troubled adolescence, then Vassar. Boris will tell you what that was like. We weren't exactly driven to find our future careers."

"You think a career will answer your questions?"

"No," I said. "But my parents do."

"What do they think of this trip of yours?"

I laughed. "I don't know. I haven't talked to them about it."

Ty studied my face for a moment, then nodded in silence.

"What?" I said.

But our conversation was interrupted just then by Boris, who returned with a woman in tow. "All the separate strands of my life are being woven together tonight," he said, and introduced us to Sarah, a tall, slender woman in her late forties. At first I didn't realize how old she was—the shining blonde hair and lithe body led you to expect a younger woman. She moved with slinky grace and men turned around to watch her. Then they realized she wasn't twenty and recoiled. From their expressions they seemed to think she'd played a trick on them.

Boris was talking about the striptease on the patio. "We won't see Lisa for a while. Not till after she gives up on Tony. Why she even bothers with him is beyond me. After tonight he won't speak to her for days."

"Most men don't want women to enjoy being looked at by other men," Sarah said, looking at me. "They want to be envied, but it's a transaction between men. The woman is supposed to remain passive."

"It's not even like she shows it *all*," Boris said. "He's envied even more because they see how sexy she is, but the mystery's still *intacta*."

Sarah slipped her arm around Boris. "You two used to be roommates?" she asked me. I nodded. She asked how I

liked St. Louis, why I'd left New York, what I hoped to do. When I hedged she talked about herself. She made the conversation seem natural, with a deftness I distrusted. The signals she gave off made me nervous: the politely interested tilt of the head, the prompts coming on cue, the almost invisible work of sifting and ordering as she searched for the category that fit me, and topics that would draw me out.

"I've known Boris since he was a teenager," she said. "I knew, even then, that he was an interesting person. His mother and I are friends. Have you met Marie?"

I had met Boris's parents several times at Vassar. They didn't like each other, and only came to visit him as a couple once. Alone, James Alexander was no more talkative than he had been with his wife. Marie, on the other hand, became much funnier and livelier without her husband. She took us shopping, made sushi, and insisted that we do no homework while she was there.

My unhelpful responses couldn't have satisfied Sarah's curiousity, but Boris told me later that I too was interesting. Based on what, I wanted to know, but Boris told me I was prejudiced.

"You always get like this. You resent the social instincts of the rich. You think they have it easier than everyone else."

"Don't they?" I asked.

"Of course they do. That's why they're the rich. But those instincts are a burden once you leave that sphere."

"If you leave."

"If you leave," he agreed, "you spend your life overcompensating. The point is, Sarah's not rich. When she and her husband divorced, it turned out he didn't have as much money as everyone thought. His reputation is his income. Or is it his income is his reptuation? Anyway, he's a mentalist. He travels around giving shows and conducting seances.

Can you believe it? She did all right; I mean, she's not broke. And now she's the ex-wife of a mentalist. That's much better than being the wife."

Across the room I spotted the man from the hall again. "Boris," I said, when Sarah paused for a moment, "who is that?" Sarah blinked, and after the brief interval it took to digest the slight, started up a conversation with Ty. Boris leaned in to follow my line of sight.

"Oh. That's Harry. Just the kind of man you should avoid."

"Why?"

"He's weird. Kind of intense. He's been working at the med school for the last few months. No one knows his story." He shrugged dismissively. Boris had a distaste for people whose intensity threatened to overwhelm his own. I insisted. With reluctance he told me what he knew.

The man's name was not Harry, but Houdini White. "Harry" was Boris's little joke. He was a consultant who'd been moving back and forth between psych, a few of the neuroscience labs, and several other departments. Boris said he was *supposedly* facilitating inter-department collaboration through some kind of research project. Someone said he was Hungarian, that his mother had christened him Houdini because his grandmother loved the great escape artist. Boris didn't believe it, but he did admit that he admired the invention.

"Still—what the hell is he doing?" Boris exclaimed. "If you press him he'll tell you something about experiments on the effects of a new designer drug on the acetylcholine system. But I mean, *what*? No one I know is working on acetylcholine."

"You're talking about Houdini?" Ty said then, turning toward us.

Sarah looked from Boris to Ty to me. "Harry

Houdini?" she said.

"If he is working on acetylcholine, that would explain why he's down in the sleep lab," Ty said. "Acetylcholine modulates dreaming in the brain."

"Harry Houdini's brain?" Sarah said with a smile. Boris explained.

I was having a hard time concentrating on what Boris was saying. I felt off balance, almost like I was drunk, though I'd decided not to drink that night. I listened to Boris and realized that I could also follow three other conversations going on in the groups of people around us. I was becoming increasingly conscious of the bodies pressing in, the many voices swirling like smoke, the air thickening. I heard Ty say that Houdini was also involved in the psych department's hypnotism studies. Boris claimed that the whole schtick was part of some elaborate suggestibility experiment, with the entire staff as the subjects.

I surveyed the crowd as though compelled. The voices and laughter seemed to simmer in a murmuring soup of unspoken desires, resentments, fears. It was getting hard to breathe. "This is ridiculous," I muttered.

"What is?" Boris asked distractedly.

I finally saw him standing by the front door. As my eyes focused on the elusive Houdini White, the act of looking became suddenly pleasurable. I gazed at him, transfixed, until some small part of me began to panic. I barely managed to wrench my eyes away. I turned my back to him through sheer force of will, and then I could *feel* Houdini there, behind me.

It was strange and oddly familiar at the same time. I tried to ward off the feeling by focusing on Boris. I tried to remember the conversations I'd had earlier. With a nervous clutching fear I attempted to conjure up New York. But I felt walled off from everything, as in one of those photographs

by Bellocq where the head of the female subject is scratched out. All you can see is her dress or lacy undergarment or naked breasts. The furniture and carpets and wall-hangings are luminously vivid in their elegant black and white tones, but the room is haunted by her absent presence. That's how I *felt*.

As I stood there with my back to him, I could visualize the space between Houdini and myself perfectly. It ached with possibility, like the distillation of being that emanates from a theater's empty stage. My sense of myself, each nerve-end of consciousness, arced up toward him, burning invisible pathways through the air to connect us. I couldn't help myself. I turned back. I had to see him.

He knew.

He mingled with the crowd as though seeking camouflage, and people unconsciously edged away from him, their faces troubled by dreamy unease. He stood near some men and women talking by the glass coffee table, and after a moment the group broke apart. Each person glanced uncertainly around, then drifted off to the kitchen or bathroom. Houdini watched them scatter, then moved on.

I glanced back at Boris again, and he and Ty were both watching me. Sarah was gone.

"He's aware of you too," Ty said.

"You don't know that," I said, my voice high-pitched and panicking. Ty didn't seem surprised. Boris was silent.

"No, I don't know. But I feel it." Ty looked at me steadily and for a moment I thought he was going to kiss me. Instead he looked away, and said in a casual voice, "Sometimes you sense things about people." He switched to a black dialect. "Everbody ride they own train. But sometimes you get off at the same station."

He turned then and made his way through the crowd across the room. When he came up to Houdini he stopped

and shook hands with him. They went through the motions of polite talk. I watched them and discovered I felt nothing. No curiosity, no concern. There was no room for anything but the overwhelming presence of Houdini, and the strange tingling in my skin.

I fled to the patio. Or perhaps I should say: the waiting vision called me forth.

Outside was space. A huge figured expanse of buildings, lights, night sky. The pressure instantly vanished. I took deeper, measured breaths. My skin continued to tingle but it was pleasurable again, not suffocating.

No one was dancing now; the patio was empty. I walked forward into the dark open expanse. The wind was stronger than it had been earlier and made the Christmas lights Boris tacked up tremble. I went to the far railing and looked out over Kingshighway, the park stretching west to my left. Downtown was to my right with the Arch rising up like a metallic shadow.

I felt exposed there, leaning on the railing facing north, with the city wide open all around. Overhead the big dipper was still faintly swollen, while here and there a scattering of pale city-stars gleamed fitfully through the haze. The lights in the streets below burned pink and white and orange, and the traffic glared in ripples of red and white along the interstate.

My skin felt like it was pulling away from its bed of muscle and blood. The electric feeling that combed my body grew more intense, even though I was calmer out there on the patio. The whole night seemed drenched in inevitability—the dark haze of sky, the wind in my face, the intimacy of Ty's look, and the draw I could still feel, out there on the patio, to Houdini. It was as though I knew him, as though there was something between us already. I had only to admit to it, as Ty

said, and everything would become clear. At the same time that I felt this, I also felt humiliated by it, like it was wrong, like I was giving in to a romantic fantasy.

I held onto the painted rail, face into the wind, and just like in a romance, he came up from behind me. He put his hands on the rail beside mine. It occurred to me that I should feel surprised. Instead I looked up at the sky and realized it was packed with stars, brilliant ones crowding out countless fainter others. All I could feel was the immensity of light, the burning beauty there. There was panic but it was somewhere small and distant inside myself. I said carefully, not sure what it would be like now to speak: "There are too many stars." I waited but they continued to crackle and hiss. I said: "No city sky could be this bright."

He looked up, considering, turning around to make a full scan. He looked back at me. His being there was a simple fact. He seemed to accept what I said in the same way.

"I'm not kidding," I said. It was as bright as noon on a cloudy winter day. The stars pulsed and roared dully like the steady background volume of surf when you're at the shore. Houdini's face was lit up—I could see every nuance of expression, every shielded thought. It wasn't that he didn't believe me. He was oddly sympathetic. "There are too many stars." I repeated. "Tell me what you see."

"Not that many," he admitted. He looked down at my hands and I realized I was holding on as though I were about to fall. I tried to relax my grip but I couldn't. "You're okay," he said gently.

"No I'm not. I'm not okay." I looked up again. I could *feel* the stars now. The tingling in my skin grew stronger. It wasn't unpleasant but it was terribly distracting. Beside me Houdini seemed to burn darkly. I wasn't afraid, but the palpability of the huge open space of city and sky was now too much to take in. "I can't hold on," I said, not sure what I

meant. He put his arm around me gingerly and I felt a rush of dark weight and strange weightless burning. His presence partially shielded me from the expanse overhead.

"I'm not drunk, I swear," I said. "Jesus Christ. I feel like I'm going to fly out in all directions."

Houdini didn't comment.

"I dropped acid when I was a teenager and it was nothing like this. It doesn't feel like a hallucination. I just—oh god." It wasn't vertigo—it wasn't even hard to speak. I didn't feel disoriented. I felt exactly like myself, except that I was faced with a huge volume of sensory information steadily rushing in. As though I could hear and feel and see with unbearable acuity. When I spoke, the words came out effortlessly, and the wind seemed to cradle our voices next to us for a second before carrying them away.

He didn't move, just held me steadily. I felt as though my expansion outward could carry us both into the pulsing night. I'd bear Houdini upward like a wave, and then he'd fall away, crash to the street.

"I don't think it's chemical," he said. "Not drugs anyway."

"How do you know?" I demanded.

His face was level with my own and for a moment our eyes locked. I almost let go of the railing. It was sexual, but it was also a strangely intellectual sensation, graceful, the way dancing feels intelligent, especially when you're in perfect synch with the music, or your partner, or the ecstatic night. I looked back at the crowded sky and shimmer of restless starlight. That tingling felt safer.

"It's a kind of entropy you're experiencing, isn't it? But believe me, you aren't really coming apart."

"How do you know what it is?" I couldn't feel suspicious of him, even though the burn of his presence was dark and obscure. He was unreadable, but I was impervious to

danger.

"It'll probably be over soon," he said, trying to be reassuring.

"How do you *know*?" I repeated. I tried to pull away and he drew his arm back. The empty surge I felt was awful. I shut my eyes and he steadied me again.

He had to make an effort to master his reluctance. He explained briefly. "I'm studying the phenomenon. It's happened to other people too. When I saw you in the hallway, I wasn't sure—there's a look people get as it's coming on and I thought I saw it in your face." He hesitated again. "Is it still as intense?"

I looked at the brilliant sky. The space around us seemed to have contracted slightly. The external world was less intrusive now.

"A few minutes ago you couldn't have pulled away like you just did," he said. "Usually, when it's this intense, it doesn't last that long. Here, sit down." He guided me so that I crouched down, and when I felt the roof beneath me, hard and solid and real, I finally let go of the rail. My hands were two clutched fists I couldn't unclench. I felt as though I'd been holding on for hours. I put my head on my knees. Houdini held me against him as the world returned to itself and my skin shrank to wrap muscles and blood and bone. I was too exhausted now to question him, and he seemed content to sit in silence.

To claim that my vision earned me a place in the company of American mystics would be silly. What I am is a kind of fringe character, she who was visited by the vision but lacked the faith of the mystic. But although I don't see myself as a visionary, having the vision did affect me. I mean aside from the fact that it brought me to Houdini's attention. It introduced a mystery into my life, just when I'd run out of belief in such things.

But from a more practical perspective, the vision gave me a new perspective on American history. I used to think that our forebears made that months-long Sunday morning trek across the Atlantic to go to the church of their choice—and arrived cured of their dreams. That is to say: they *landed*; they resolved themselves into an immensely pragmatic people who got down to the business of ekeing out a living from the wilderness. But I understand it differently now. Our history is riddled with people who spent their lives pursuing the invisible world that hovers just beyond this one. Many of them put the can-do side of their temperaments to work building mystic communities. There's a flair to that. One detects the stubborn insistence on having it all.

Over the past months I've been reading about them. I have a few favorites. There's Anne Hutchinson, a leader of the colonial Antinomian movement. She was brought to trial by the ministers and governor of Massachusetts for condoning heresy, and pronounced "like Roger Williams or worse." Kind and intelligent and much loved by many of the Massachussetts colonists, she "acquitted herself well" in court—and was duly banished. How did she envision herself, as she stood there in the courtroom, calmly defending

her belief in justification by faith? It took courage and self confidence. I imagine Anne would insist it took something else as well, something that didn't come from inside Anne. After they kicked her out she went first to Rhode Island, where Williams had established a democratic, religiously tolerant colony, then to New York. She established her own community, believing as she did in "the paramount authority of private judgement"—something we take for granted now, but which, then, was regarded as radical and incendiary.

The historian's pages smell like mildew; the elegant phrases that describe Anne's defiance seem at once incantatory and impregnable. Like other secrets of the past, even the sensibility that framed those words has disappeared. And in part, this is what draws me, makes me keep on reading. I am compelled by the mysteries that glimmer in the background, the sense of something lost, a thing that is vital to our knowledge of ourselves.

But, predictably, it's also seduction that I succumb to. Many of our visionary ancestors were outrageous and power-mad, their ardent desire for another world igniting all sorts of other hungers. I know their longing. I stood on the patio and felt my body raked by stars—and now I turn the crumbling pages of library books, or wander into bars, where I listen to the imaginations of the quietly drunk, that are after all a kind of vision quashed.

John Noyes is one of the black sheep. He founded the Oneida colony, inaugurating a form of free love there. It was hierarchical sexual liberation, in that the older adult members supervised the sexual activity of the younger members. That meant that the elders of Oneida got to satisfy their lust for the younger members freely. A primary tenet of the community was the practice of sexual continence, so as to ensure that the prolific sexual interchange didn't starve out

the colony. Children were produced only by those unions that had been declared acceptable; of course, Noyes fathered the most. All this is fascinating, but what really gets me is the group's law against falling in love with one person. It was seen as a kind of sexual selfishness; lovers who spent too much time together were no longer permitted to see each other. Did this bizarre set-up evolve out of some fear of intimacy on Noyes's part? And how did the younger members feel about being chosen by the elders for sex, and being unable to refuse a liason? While, secretly, their hearts ached with unpermissable love.

There are so many of these figures in our history, who shared in common the ability to organize the chaos of their followers' lives into a demented kind of order. Some of them, like Robert Owen, founder of New Harmony, were charismatics more than mystics, their social experiments a search for heaven on earth, rather than an attempt to leave the earth behind. Others were severe ascetics, like George Rapp, who sold Harmony to Owen and brought his followers east to establish a new community under the name of Economy. Rapp's repudiation of the sexual instinct was so extreme, he was said to have castrated his 28-year-old son for violating the group's voluntary abstinence pact.

They matter, these visionaries. All believed they had the calling and the power to reinvent the visible world. They trusted in the purity of the transformative vision. William James said: "The world suffers human violence willingly. Man engenders truth upon it." They lived by this.