

NINETEEN

A change in lighting.

His eyes remain closed. The fingers of the left hand, still affixed to the chair, have become slightly more cramped. Otherwise, same as before.

"Oh yes, you may," I said, "Right here. Please do."
 And there beside me on my
 Solitary bench
 She sat down, her thigh in its smooth skirt
 Touching mine in my
 Rumpled
 Trousers. Yes, that's her, I thought, this silken-voiced
 Woman of the world—
 This is Miss Two! Leaning into me, looking
 Across me,
 Apologizing with murmurs and touches for the quick
 Progress
 Of our intimacy—Miss Two
 Was speaking to me, talking about
 My hand!

"In concert," she was saying, "I play
 A more modern instrument—really the descendant,
 The great grandson,
 Of the kind you have. Isn't it just like me,"
 She said, laughing and touching
 My thigh—
 "How I always think of them as male. It must
 Be the valves—" she said,
 The fingering."

And I thought to myself
 How wrong
 A first impression can be—here I had
 Assumed
 Miss Two to be
 A kind of vestal virgin, a traveling priestess
 Sanctifying the station
 With her meditations on the slow
 Passage of time. Now that I was—well,
 Getting
 To know her—

I could see only passion in my memories of her
Unwavering
Gaze, only the outward-looking
Inwardness of a bold
And sensual
Artist.

"It's only the second or third I've ever seen,"
She was saying, "If you
Count that one in Milan. My teacher
Had a very good one, he let me
Play it once..."

She paused to laugh
And touch
My thigh once more, leaving her fingers
Gently upon me
For the whispered conclusion:
"But his wife
Objected. As if she
Owned it. Well that was the end of that. Time
To find
A new teacher, anyway..."

I caught
What she was saying only in snatches, and I had to struggle
To keep up
My end of the conversation with an occasional
Nod or choking
Grunt of assent—though she didn't
Seem to mind.
And as we talked, as she
Talked to me, I could feel my hand
Becoming part of myself, fully, at last, a part
Of *me*—
Swelling up with her attentions, aching
To be played, to release
The music
It held within. Its satisfactions would now
Be my satisfactions, its joys
My joys.

Then there was a pause—was it my
Turn
To say something?

"Well," she said, "May I?"
She looked at me, her green eyes sparkling, the joke
Being the preposterous
Idea that I
Might possibly refuse.

"I have to put it
On my lap," she patiently added, "You know—
To play it."

"Of course," I said, and I reached over with my
Good hand, my other
Hand, the hand I still took
For granted, and I pulled back my cuff
And with the strength
Of both arms, tried to lift it
Up off the bench.

(He cannot lift it.)

I turned back and gave her the sort of look
I'd given women
Before—when we ran
Into technical
Difficulties in bed, when a condom, say,
Refused to unroll
Or a towel
Was urgently needed: a look that was meant to say,
Relax, now don't
Worry—
This is all part of the fun, I still
Want to—
I still can.

I gave her that old reliable look but I saw
She was staring
No longer at my hand, at my beautiful
Built-in
Instrument, but at my wrist—at the boundary—

The margin—
The place of attachment.

"There's something I should tell you," I said, "Before we
Go any further. This instrument—
It's not
Just a thing I own. It's part of me.
Part of my body."

"Oh. I see,"
She said and her lips pursed
And her small
Round Adam's Apple
Moved
As she swallowed
Once quickly and her cheeks grew pale and her eyes—
Her green
Flirtatious eyes—
Tightened with horror,
Panic,
And disgust.