

PERSONAL VELOCITY

Greta

Greta Herskovitz looked down at her husband's shoes one morning and saw with shocking clarity that she was going to leave him. The shoes were earnest, inexpensive brown wing tips. Greta was wearing a pair of pointy alligator flats. Lee was twenty-eight, the same age as Greta. He was six feet tall, had blond hair, powerful shoulders, and a slender waist. His cheeks were peppered with pockmarks, but they looked good on him. Since he'd left graduate school, Lee had worked as a fact checker for *The New Yorker* and was whittling away at an eleven-hundred-page dissertation about two firsthand accounts of nineteenth-century Arctic expeditions and how they reflected Victorian society. The cannibalism in particular. Lee was a kind, quiet man. If he ever fell out of love with Greta, she knew he would go into therapy and fix it. But she hadn't bargained on her own success.

One day about a year prior to the moment with the shoes, Greta was walking down the hall of the shabby, venerable publishing firm Warren and Howe in a pair of cheap pumps, carrying an

Personal Velocity

untidy pile of seven file folders, each containing a different recipe for rice pudding. She was currently editing a book by Tammy Lee Felber entitled *Three Hundred and Sixty-Five Ways to Cook Rice*. Aaron Gelb, the legendary senior editor at Warren and Howe, a wise, sad man with enormous pockets under his brown eyes and a slow, pessimistic, humorous pattern of speech, called out to her from his office.

‘Ms Herskovitz,’ he said, ‘would you come in here please?’

Greta turned, alarmed. She was wearing a fitted brown suit with a skirt that ended several inches above the knees, and she wondered if maybe she was pushing it. As she entered, Mr Gelb sat down at his desk and put his head in his hands, his customary posture when in thought. Greta sat down opposite him. Her nylons rubbed together as she crossed her legs. Worried that her skirt looked obscene, she gave it a little tug. Mr Gelb slipped his glasses to the top of his head, rubbing his eyes for a very long time and sighing. Then he looked out the window.

‘Thavi Matola wants to have lunch with you,’ he said.

Thavi Matola was the hottest writer of his generation. He was thirty-three. Greta’s publishing house wanted him badly. They were calling

Greta

his agent, trying to get to him through his friends. His first novel, *Blue Mountain*, was a love story about Bounmy, a Laotian male prostitute, and an Alabama gas-station attendant named Rory. It had won the PEN Faulkner Prize, sold half a million copies.

‘With me?’ Greta said.

‘He called me up and said he heard we had an excellent editor here. And it was you.’ Greta had never edited anything but cookbooks. ‘Do you have any idea why he might have said that?’

‘Maybe he likes to cook,’ said Greta. Mr Gelb smiled faintly.

‘If the lunch goes well, he’ll come to Warren and Howe. If not, he’ll go peddle his wounded psyche someplace else.’

‘Wow,’ said Greta. ‘This is really strange.’

‘One o’clock on Thursday at the Senate,’ Gelb said, opening a drawer and taking out a large roll of antacid tablets. ‘Wear pants.’ Greta got up. When she was at the door, Gelb said, ‘Wear what you want. What do I know.’ She shut the door. Poor Mr Gelb. She went straight out to the most expensive shoe store she had ever heard of and put the alligator flats on her credit card. She couldn’t even begin to afford them, but she needed to feel worthy, she needed to feel like a pro.

Personal Velocity

On the day of the meeting she wore a red suit with a fairly short skirt – just above the knees. It was a cool, clear spring day. She was twenty minutes early, so she walked over to the Museum of Modern Art and wandered around the cluttered gift shop with the fixed stare of a sleepwalker, little charges of anxiety going off in her belly, till three minutes to one. Then she rushed over to the restaurant, sat down at the corner table that had been reserved by Mr Gelb's secretary, and took out her notebook so she'd look busy. Inside was a shopping list: bananas, clementines, toilet paper, rice, batteries, tampons. She looked up and Thavi Matola was standing there.

'Greta Herskovitz?' he said.

'Yes – oh, hi!' Greta stood up, adjusting her hair band. She felt off-kilter. She should have been watching for him. Thavi sat down. He was slender, androgynous-looking, with smooth brown skin and short curly hair. His mother was Laotian, Greta remembered. Father, Italian-American soldier, dead. Refugees. Hard life. Three sisters, two left behind in Laos because of that government.

'I really loved your first book,' she said.

'It's a piece of shit,' said Thavi in a slight accent, lighting a cigarette.

Greta

'I think that's pretty common,' said Greta.

'Second thoughts?'

'Self-hatred.' A minor convulsion of amusement forced the smoke out of Matola's nose; he fixed his gaze on Greta like a child surprised to hear a stranger call him by his nickname. Greta felt her muscles relax. 'The pasta's good here,' she said, then ordered steak frites. Thavi convulsed again, air hissing from his nostrils, lips clamped shut. They started a bottle of wine. Greta didn't usually drink at lunch but she could tell he wanted to so she went with it, trying hard not to let her mind go slack.

'What's the new book about?' she asked. 'If you don't mind talking about it.'

'Laos,' he said. 'The trip over. I was on my own.'

'That must have been frightening,' said Greta. 'How old were you?'

'Thirteen,' he said.

'Have you written much yet?'

'About a hundred pages. Aren't I the one supposed to be asking the questions?'

'I don't know,' she said.

'What's your story?' he asked.

'Manhattan, I was born in Manhattan, went to the Flemming School uptown – a small private, you know – and then to boarding school, then to

Personal Velocity

college, then to law school, but I quit – my father’s a lawyer, we’re not speaking, my mother is – well, dead. They’re divorced. I mean they were. I’m twenty-eight. My father has a three-year-old.’ *God almighty please let me shut up*, she thought. Her steak arrived. She cut into it vigorously.

‘My friend Felicia Wong said you were great at trimming fat,’ he said, watching her do so. Felicia Wong had written short stories at Harvard. Greta had been one of the editors of *The Advocate*. She had an eye for the inessential and would sift through the undergraduate fiction, culling every superfluous word. The writers had called her the Grim Reaper. Yet they all wanted Greta Herskovitz to comb through their work. She had been a bit of a star at Harvard.

‘I have a tendency to overwrite,’ he said. ‘I need someone to kick my ass.’

‘I can kick your ass,’ said Greta accommodatingly, wondering if he was gay. By the time she got back to the office, Thavi Matola had called and said he’d sign with Warren and Howe if Greta Herskovitz edited the book. It was unbelievable. No more rice pudding. All the other editors came into her cubicle to congratulate her. Miss Pells, the sixty-five-year-old receptionist, showed Greta where her new office was going to be. She’d have

Greta

a door, a window. Before Greta left, Gelb called her into his office.

‘We’ll renegotiate your contract next week,’ he said, looking impressed and suspicious. It was surreal.

When she got home Lee was watching a documentary about boat building. Greta burst into the room, dropping her bag on the floor, yelling, ‘HE WANTS ME TO DO IT!’

‘That’s amazing, sweetheart,’ he said. Greta saw a shadow of anxiety cross Lee’s face, and she blushed, feeling strangely sheepish. As they talked over her triumph quietly on the couch, a toxic blend of anxiety and elation built up in Greta’s mind and seemed actually to be pressing against her skull. She craved air. She wanted to go out, she wanted to tell people her news, she wanted to get drunk, to celebrate. She remembered a party uptown being given by an old friend from Exeter, a girl named Mimi. Mimi was tall and thin, very blond, and so beautiful it was hard to look at her. She was, however, uneasy in herself, and had a tendency to join cults, which was to Greta a small consolation. Greta was squat, with short muscular legs and thick dark hair and squinty brown eyes and full lips. And charisma. Many men found her sexy. Her boyfriends had tended to leave her,

Personal Velocity

though, for girls like Mimi. The fragile kind.

At the party, Lee was having a laconic conversation with a couple of playwrights they both knew. Greta watched him as he talked. Lee's words were so carefully chosen that sometimes she imagined his ideas having to stand in line for inspection before they could be expressed. The delay must have been agonizing. As a rule Greta found Lee's withholding of language sexy. But tonight she was restless. She squeezed his hand and wandered off to explore the apartment, buoyed by her news. Mimi's bedroom door was open so Greta walked in to look at the photographs she'd glimpsed from the hall. She had always been curious about Mimi. As she peered into a silver-framed portrait of a portly Indian man in a robe, she heard a rustling behind her. She turned and saw Oscar Levy. Oscar had been a suitor of Greta's at Harvard, but she'd never slept with him. He was funny and pessimistic, a first violinist with some important orchestra now, Greta couldn't remember which one. He stood behind her in his rumpled gray tweed jacket and black turtleneck, holding a beer.

'Oscar!' Greta said. 'God, you scared me.'

'You scared me, too,' he said.

They chatted for a while, sitting on Mimi's

Greta

chaotic bed. The room stank of incense. There was a gentle neutrality in Oscar's tone that Greta didn't recognize. He was speaking to her as one speaks to someone who has been mentally ill or had cancer. She knew why, too. It was because she had turned out to be a loser. Greta thought of Lee in the other room, conversing tersely, groping behind him for her hand expectantly like a child on a shopping trip.

'I was sorry to hear about your mother,' Oscar said.

'Thanks,' said Greta flatly, looking at the little mole above his lip.

'Your husband seems like a really nice guy,' he said. 'I've just been talking to him.'

'He'll never leave me,' she said, and blushed, shocked by her own candor.

'That seems like a weird reason to—'

'It's not the main reason. I love him. I think he's funny. We have a good time. He's a wonderful person.'

'Okay, okay,' he said.

'What about you,' she asked, 'are you—'

'God no – I'm only twenty-eight!'

'So am I, Oscar. Do you have a girlfriend?'

'Yes. We don't see each other much. She's with the Boston Symphony. I'm with the Brooklyn.'

'Oh.' His sneaky boast irritated her.

Personal Velocity

‘Are you still with that publishing company . . .’

‘Warren and Howe. Actually I just found out I’m going to be editing Thavi Matola’s new book,’ she said. There was a pause.

‘The guy who wrote *Blue Mountain*?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Wow. That’s amazing.’ He looked at her as if her seductiveness was being refueled before his eyes. She suddenly felt angry at herself and got up. ‘I should get back,’ she said. She went to Lee, holding his hand, her head on his shoulder. At ten o’clock Lee went home because he had to get up early and call an author in Nova Scotia to check facts about a fly-fishing article. Greta hung around for another hour, speaking to people absent-mindedly as she watched Mimi giggling in her floor-length orange robe, a photograph of an old man hanging in a pendant around her neck. As she walked out the door Oscar was behind her. ‘You want to share a cab?’ he asked. On the ride downtown, as they drove by the park, Oscar leaned over and kissed her. Greta parted her lips; his tongue reached out tentatively, like a snail, and started poking around blindly inside her mouth. He tasted faintly of metal. The cab stopped at his apartment building.

‘Come in,’ he whispered.

Greta

'I can't,' she said. She wanted to go home. She wanted to pretend this hadn't happened.

'Come on. One conversation.'

'No. Sorry. Please.' She pulled the cab door shut.

'Ninth Street and First Avenue,' she said. The cab sped off. Greta leaned back and shut her eyes, sinking into a pit of self-recrimination. *Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit*, she thought. She hadn't slipped up once since the wedding. But it had been a problem before.

Three years earlier, seven days before she married Lee, Greta was sitting in a pastry shop near Columbia reading when a young man in a vintage tweed coat walked up to her table and asked her if she had a cigarette. He was in his late twenties, slender, clearly Jewish, and he looked like he had a cold. Behind him through the plate-glass window Greta could see fine snow swirling through the dusk.

'I don't smoke,' she said.

'Too bad,' said the young man.

'I actually think I should be congratulated,' said Greta.

'Why, did you quit?'

'I was never really addicted. I used to smoke occasionally, then it struck me that it was idiotic.' *Oops*, she thought. Greta was always insulting

Personal Velocity

people without meaning to, especially men. Even when she was eleven, slights were her way of flirting. Which explained why she had so few dates until she went to college. 'I mean,' she said, 'it wouldn't have been idiotic if I had actually been addicted. Then it would have been pathetic.' The young man was staring at her now, a bemused smile on his face. 'I'm sorry,' Greta said, blushing. 'I just got out of a shrink appointment.' She wished she was on the subway, a sure sign that she was having a bad time.

'You don't have to apologize,' he said, laughing. 'It's a stupid habit and I'm stopping when I turn thirty.'

'When do you turn thirty?'

'Seven days.'

'The twenty-third?'

'Yes,' he said.

'I'm getting married on the twenty-third.'

'Oh!' he said, averting his gaze. 'Terrific! Maybe we should celebrate together.'

'Yes. An abstinence party.'

'Well, good luck.'

'Thanks.' He walked over to the counter where the pastries were displayed and asked for a cup of coffee. Greta opened her novel. Out of the corner of her eye she watched the young man take his cup, sit down, and remove some papers and a

Greta

fountain pen from a battered leather shoulder bag. He became immersed in his work immediately and seemed to have forgotten all about her. *Married/invisible*, Greta thought as she drained her cup and put on her heavy camel-hair coat. As she passed him she said, 'Bye.'

'Bye,' he said with a pleasant smile, a smile reserved for married women and aunts. It was nearly dark now. Greta walked down the block, her mind congealed around the image of the young man seated at his table ignoring her. She walked as one hypnotized into the bodega on the corner and asked for a pack of Camel Lights. Three dollars and seventy-five cents! She had stopped smoking when they were one-seventy-five. She took the cigarettes and shoved them into the pocket of her coat, shouldering the wind as she trudged back up the block to the pastry shop, opened the door, walked over to the young man, who was writing into a leather-bound notebook, and set the packet of cigarettes gently down in front of him like a bird dog releasing a partridge from its mouth. The young man looked up at her quizzically, then smiled. They smoked together and talked for an hour. His name was Max. He was a theological student at Columbia, wanted to be a rabbi. Greta let out a shriek when he told her.

'You don't look like a rabbi,' she said.

Personal Velocity

'I'm not Orthodox,' he said, grinning, his hand on her thigh. Greta called Lee from a pay phone and said she was spending the night with her maid of honor. The rest of the week was a tangle of wedding preparations and subterfuge. It never occurred to Greta to call off the marriage because she was having an affair. She kept the two narratives distinct in her mind; they coexisted as if in twin universes separated by a vast field of space. The only trouble was that Greta was exhausted, what with traveling uptown to Max and downtown to Lee, the fittings, the fucking, the dinners, the bachelorette party, and the cold that Max had given her. Only her trusted, worldly friend Lola Sanduli, who understood Greta better than anyone, knew about Max, and Lola felt that the whole thing was harmless. It was just Greta being Greta. And indeed, at the end of that crazy week, as Greta sat smoking one last cigarette with her lover at the Hungarian pastry shop, an hour before she had to take a cab to the airport so she could marry Lee in Ohio, Greta was going over and over the things she'd packed for the wedding, wondering if she'd forgotten anything. She was excited to be getting married and felt very much in love. With Lee. The week with Max had left her feeling absolutely gorgeous. Now she wished he would disappear. But Max was very much extant,

Greta

staring glumly at his coffee cup, his thin, pale face and black curls making him look like a Spanish Christ, of all things. At last he spoke, breaking her concentration.

‘Is he even Jewish?’

‘No. What difference does that make?’ Greta asked, irritated.

‘It makes a difference.’

‘You really are a rabbi,’ she said, smiling.

‘Well,’ Max said sadly, ‘I hope you’re happy.’

Why the hell had she kissed Oscar Levy? Yuck. The cab pounded its way down Broadway, its suspension shot. Greta’s cheeks burned with remorse. The truth is that for some time now she had been dimly aware of a darkness gnawing at the edge of her mind, a gathering blackness that she couldn’t name, but she felt it as a hole, an emptiness into which something alien might step. It was a kind of hunger.

Lee was asleep when she came home. When she woke up, he was on the phone in the living room.

‘A “Connamaragh Black,”’ he was saying, ‘is for . . . right. Exclusively? . . . Okay. Okay, yes . . .’ Greta went to Lee and curled up on the floor, her arms around his strong calves. He leaned down and stroked her head. ‘I see,’ he said. ‘Right. I

Personal Velocity

think that's it, Mr Conway, thank you for your time. Good luck with the fish this morning. Bye.' He hung up the phone.

'What's the matter?' he said.

'I feel yucky,' she said.

'You want me to make you pancakes?' Greta nodded, crawling into his lap and burying her head in his chest.

'I love you so much,' she said.

Greta had decided to marry Lee on a trip to Ohio to visit his parents. His family lived on the border of Kentucky, and his strawberry-blond high school girlfriend Kelly had a charming southern accent and perfect limbs.

'Why do you love *me*?' Greta had asked Lee as they pored over pictures of him tossing footballs, accepting awards, holding his blue-eyed girlfriend's hand on prom night. 'I'm just a nasty little black-eyed dwarf.' He kissed her forehead.

'I love my nasty dwarf,' he said. And he did love her. But Greta was suspicious. She became jealous of everything and everyone out of Lee's past. Lee took on a power in her eyes, the power of having been loved by a girl with blond eye-lashes, of having grown up among these mystical beasts, slow-moving, broad-browed Germanic people who said grace and 'please pass the bread,

Greta

Mom', who weren't always yelling out ideas over dinner like they were selling fish in a souk. After four solid days of Ohio Greta felt so intensely in love that she wanted to elope. But they ended up having a proper white wedding in a country church in Ironton, a hundred yards from the golf course where Lee had lost his virginity to the girl with blond eyelashes. Greta was wearing a vast white dress. After they'd said their vows she turned around and saw her father. He looked annoyed. Tears stung her eyes.

Avram Herskovitz didn't think much of Lee Schneeweiss. He didn't think Lee had size. Everybody in the Herskovitz clan had to have size. Avram had white, sharp teeth, a booming voice, burning black eyes. He never put on weight. He was one of the best-known lawyers in the country, a self-made man. He defended the indefensible. He was on the news a lot, standing on some court steps, saying, 'This decision is a victory for justice in this country.' Many people thought he was a moral giant. Others thought he was a cynic who didn't care about guilt or innocence, only about winning. Greta knew he was both of these things. Avram Herskovitz had been forty when he married Greta's mother, Maroushka. Maroushka had been twenty-five, a tender-eyed Polish girl, born in Auschwitz two

Personal Velocity

days before the arrival of the Russians. Her father, a professor of ethnology, had been gassed a week before her birth. After the liberation, Maroushka's mother went quietly insane, and Maroushka was brought up in a series of orphanages. This story stirred some deep yearning in Avram. He had to save this woman, he had to give her a beautiful life. He brushed off his first family like leaves from a sweater. When Greta was born he cherished her. She was his new beginning, life sprung from the ash heap. He held her up above the waves on the beach. They were inseparable, alike. As unconsciously as a leaf unfurling, young Greta chose to embody her father's charming voraciousness, shrinking instinctively from the wistful sweetness of her mother, smelling as it did, ever so faintly, of death. Then when Greta was twenty-one, a dogged and rapacious law student, she came back to Nantucket for the summer, as she had every year since she was three, with some tremendous news: a paper she'd written on capital punishment was going to be published in the *Harvard Law Review*. She entered the hall, smelling the familiar mixture of must and potpourri, threw her bags down and charged into the living room, triumphant. Her father was standing by the window, watching the calm sea. A slight breeze fluttered the yellow

Greta

curtains. Avram turned and looked at his precious daughter with a strange, pained expression. Greta could feel that she had interrupted something. On the couch at the other end of the room, her elbows on her knees, head in her hands, was a young woman. She looked up at Greta. The young woman had green eyes, a thin face, curly dark hair, and a slender, wiry body. She was wearing white linen pants and a striped cotton T-shirt. Greta felt a terrible aching deep in her gut.

‘Where’s Mom?’ she said.

‘I think she’s in the kitchen,’ her father said softly. Turning, almost unable to move, Greta walked stiffly into the kitchen. Maroushka stood in the center of the room, arms limp at her sides, her slender body as erect and graceful as a Degas dancer, an expression of shocked acceptance on her face. It was as if the death sentence that she had been waiting for all her life had finally been handed down. Greta went to her mother and hugged her. Maroushka’s form felt so insubstantial, so light. It felt as though she could come apart in Greta’s hands.

Greta had trouble concentrating after the divorce. She wandered around campus, spent whole hours staring in cafés. She’d stopped speaking to Avram, returned his monthly checks unopened. Then one day she dropped out of law

Personal Velocity

school. She couldn't lend meaning to the words anymore. That November Maroushka was diagnosed with cancer. Greta moved back to New York to be with her, took a series of jobs in magazines, had a couple of boyfriends, lost them. Maroushka died. Avram's wife had a baby girl. Then Greta met Lee through a friend from Harvard. From their first conversation Greta wanted to be with him all the time. Just listening to his middle American voice made her feel safe. His lack of ambition struck her as spiritually advanced. Avram took Greta's new life as a personal affront. His brilliant daughter was wasting herself out of spite. The bland midwestern boyfriend seemed proof of her vendetta against him.

The night before she was married Greta had the following dream: She was in the house in Nantucket with her father and Lee. As they watched the evening news her father said casually, 'I think I'll kill myself after dinner.'

'Good idea,' said Lee, looking over at Greta amiably. 'I'll kill Greta.' Greta tried to smile in the dream but she was terrified. She escaped from the house and ran toward a dilapidated barn at the top of a small hill. It was dusk by now. She charged into the barn, panting. Immediately she

Greta

understood that it was a kibbutz. There was a fat, slovenly man standing at a high desk.

‘Please!’ said Greta. ‘Help me! My fiancé is going to kill me. I have to call the police. Can I use the phone?’ Irritated, the man picked up the phone and dialed 911.

‘Call me back,’ he said, and hung up. Greta assumed that 911 calls must be very expensive. Just then an enormous group of people bustled past Greta and she got pushed into a large van. Before she knew it she was on vacation with the kibbutz. A woman was driving. She was enormous, her dark sweaty hair swept back in a careless ponytail, her massive shoulders sloped forward as she leaned into the steering wheel. Greta was seated between a courting couple who insisted on kissing behind her back. The van stopped at a broken-down motel and everyone – there were about fifteen kids – clawed their way out. In the motel restaurant Greta sat miserably on the sticky Naugahyde seat, nursing a club soda. No one was paying any attention to her, or even wondering what she was doing there. They were all devouring some meaty substance, picking up the chunks with their hands. Now Mr Gelb walked over and sat down at the booth.

‘I hear you’re having a bad time,’ he said.

‘It’s not that,’ said Greta. ‘We get along really

Personal Velocity

well. It's just that he said he was going to kill me.' Lee walked in now, smiling. Greta was awash with relief and threw herself on his neck. They were as close as ever. It *had* been a joke. Just as they were leaving the restaurant, arm in arm, the father of the family stood up, his massive belly coming almost to his knees.

'Wait a minute,' he said. 'You owe me two hundred dollars!'

'What?' said Greta.

'For dinner, gas . . .'

'But I didn't eat anything!'

'All right. Twenty bucks for gas then. And the club soda.'

Greta woke up laughing, Lee beside her.

'I just had the most anti-Semitic dream, it was so – oh my God, it's so bad!'

Strangely, Greta had never felt particularly Jewish. Her parents hadn't ever brought her to a synagogue – being Jewish was taken for granted in the family, like having skin. A Catholic school-mate, Kate Donovan, had lived on the floor below the Herskovitzes on Park Avenue, and Greta often accompanied her to church. During the service she would always pretend she was a member of Kate's large, freckled family. Her fantasy was

Greta

ruptured each week, however, when each of the ruddy Donovans rose to take communion, filing by her one by one, until only Greta was left kneeling, watching the long line of lucky club members waiting for their wafers and wine. She would duck her head and move her lips at these moments, pretending that she hadn't gone to confession that week and so was not eligible to take the host. When Greta thought about being Jewish she thought of a dark room with an old lady in a rocking chair in the corner. She didn't know why. Once, as she ate raw cookie dough with Kate in the Donovans' orange kitchen, she heard Mr Donovan say, 'Something something damn Jews,' in the next room, and his wife had said, 'Norman!' very gently. Greta blushed scarlet, feeling a visceral sense of shame. It was the only moment in her life when she felt absolutely Jewish, right down to the tips of her toes.

The first two years of marriage with Lee were blissful. They fixed up their East Village apartment with little white Christmas lights and covered the tattered couches in heavy white cloth. They resanded the floors and hung paintings by their friends on the walls. Greta got a job as a copy editor at Warren and Howe and eventually Mr Gelb asked her if she knew anything about cooking. She did – Maroushka had taught

Personal Velocity

her. She got promoted. She didn't really care, though she liked the extra cash. With relief Greta felt the ambition draining out of her like pus from a lanced boil. She had stopped desiring other men. She wanted to have a baby. She was going to lead a simple, decent life. The marriage had worked like a magical charm.

Thavi Matola's writing about his escape from Laos was exquisite and filled with pain but there were patches of fat and confusion. Thavi encouraged Greta to make radical suggestions for rewrites. They met a couple of times a week. The red walls of his apartment made Greta feel like a surgeon who has entered the body of her patient; his sentences bound her like veins. She cut the veins and they bled words. At night when she looked up at Lee after reading the manuscript for hours, she had trouble focusing her eyes on him. Lee's voice actually seemed to have gotten fainter; she found herself asking him to repeat himself all the time, to the point where they both worried for her hearing.

One night as they ate together in silence, Lee asked, 'How long is it going to take Matola to finish this book?'

'I have no idea,' she said.

Greta

‘It could take years, right?’

‘Not everyone writes as slowly as you do,’ she said, grabbing for his hand immediately and smiling. But it was too late. She’d hurt him. Greta lay awake for hours that night, Lee asleep beside her, his long lithe arms thrown out above his blond head, his face young and smooth. Even in sleep he looked blameless as a baby. Sweating now, a taste like manure in her mouth, Greta felt like a sticky little gremlin crouching beside Apollo. She walked into the living room to make a cup of tea. Lee’s dissertation was lying open at his desk in the corner of the room. Greta walked over to it and switched on the light, perversely drawn to the text. She’d read bits of it over the years but a tacit agreement had grown up between them that she wouldn’t look at it until he was finished. As she read now it was all she could do to stop herself from crossing out whole paragraphs. The thing was swollen to bursting with redundancies. She found his language both naive and pompous with its old-fashioned academic flourishes. Greta wondered if it wasn’t fear that prevented Lee from cutting his dissertation down to a presentable length and ending his days as a permanent student. Once he had his Ph.D., he’d have to start applying for teaching jobs. He’d have to rustle up a little drive. *If he*

Personal Velocity

would just let me have it for a week, she thought to herself, *he'd have his Ph.D. by Christmas*. But he wouldn't let her have it, nor should he. She knew very little about the subject. She just knew language. It was a curse in a way. *Why can't he write like he talks*, she thought. The kettle boiled. She walked away.

A few days later Thavi was sitting on the floor of his apartment, reading Greta's notes when he asked, 'How does your husband feel about us working together like this?'

'Fine, I think,' said Greta, looking down at him from the couch.

'Why isn't he jealous?' he asked with mock pique.

'I told him you were gay,' she said teasingly.

'Is that what you think?'

'I vacillate,' said Greta.

'So do I,' said Thavi. Her bare foot was next to him on the rug. He stroked the top of it very gingerly. She slid off the couch and sat next to him on the floor. They kissed, groping furiously. Greta kept her hands above Thavi's waist. For some reason she was embarrassed to touch him below it. After a while they stopped and looked at each other, panting.

'You want some juice?' he asked. He poured her some and they went back to work. As the weeks

Greta

wore on the groping continued. They didn't talk about it; every now and then they would fall into each other's arms and make out, then stop, like a stalled car. At home in bed with Lee Greta felt spikes of violence rising in her suddenly like nausea while they were making love. She would push Lee, scratch him. She wanted him to pin her down and bite her, to rend the cocoon that she was weaving around herself. But he would never push back, he would never pin her down. He would hold her gently and whisper, 'What's the matter, baby?' A scream of frustration pressed against her throat at these moments; she clamped down her teeth, strangling it.

One night Greta got home at ten-thirty from working with Thavi. Lee was sitting in the living room with his friend Darius. Darius read scripts for Miramax and always had good gossip about the movie business. He had gray teeth. Greta had always found him pathetic. She greeted them both, went into the bathroom, grabbed a towel from the rack, and threw it down on the floor in front of the bathtub. Then she lay down on the towel, pulled off her tights and her underwear, and masturbated. She couldn't let herself think of Thavi so she thought about a stranger, a man with no face fucking her up against a wall. The orgasm was violent. When she came out she poured

Personal Velocity

herself a glass of orange juice and sat down on the couch.

Thavi Matola's book was hailed as a masterpiece and sold big. Thavi thanked Greta warmly in the acknowledgments. A week after the book was reviewed Greta had an offer from another publishing house. They wanted her to come and work as one of their senior editors for an enormous pay hike. Greta gave Gelb a chance to match it. When he balked, she took the new job and Thavi left with her. When Greta's father heard the news, he insisted on throwing a party. His apartment was on Fifth Avenue and Ninety-sixth Street, a vast duplex with enormous eighteenth-century paintings on the walls. Avram's wiry wife greeted Greta and Lee with two glasses of champagne, three-year-old Anya clinging to her leg. Then Avram came out of his study, his arms outstretched, and embraced Greta, shutting his eyes tight. She hadn't let him get this close to her in years. She could feel the coarse black hair popping over his collar, scratching her cheek.

The first couple to arrive were Marvin and Dot Green, a couple Greta had known all her life. Marvin, a small, quiet, and very powerful man, was one of the great investment bankers of the

Greta

last decade. Dot, a brash blond from Miami with great legs and mesmerizing stories about Florida high society in the 1950s, ran to Greta, greeting her as one thought lost in some terrible sea tragedy. Greta knew what Dot meant. Since she'd dropped out of law school Avram and Maroushka Herskovitz's daughter had been written off as one of those children not gifted or tough enough to survive so close to the brilliant light of their parents' world, one of those who had drifted down to live among the bottom feeders. But Greta's success had buoyed her back up from the depths. She had risen like some bubble belched out of the guts of a giant stingray, and here she was in the light again, with the sharks. As the guests arrived, it became clear that this was a party for Avram; they were all his old friends, some of the finest lawyers and politicians and businessmen in New York City, each of them rich. Greta had grown up with their children. It was touching in a way: Avram was showing his friends that his daughter was a success, that she had come back to him, and that she loved him. At one point during dinner someone made a crack about Greta playing dead all those years and now look at her.

'Well,' Avram said, putting his arm around Greta's shoulders. 'Everyone has their own

Personal Velocity

personal velocity.’ It occurred to Greta that in this very room she could probably find enough investors to start her own publishing house one day. Her eye fell on Lee, who was stooped, listening to an elegant matron with a serious, considerate look on his face. Her heart ached for him. When it was time to go, she couldn’t see Lee anywhere. She finally found him in the kitchen having a conversation with the barman. It turned out they’d gone to college together.

On the cab ride home, Greta reached over and held Lee’s hand.

‘It was sweet of my dad to throw me that party,’ she said. In her chest she felt the dull weight of alienation, as if someone were sitting on her sternum.

‘Yeah,’ said Lee.

‘Even if they were all his friends. Did you have an okay time?’

‘It was fine,’ said Lee softly. ‘Now that you’re done . . . maybe we could go away for a while.’

‘Mmm,’ she said, wondering how he could possibly still love her. If he did it was because he didn’t know her. She was rotten with ambition, a lusty little troll, the kind of demon you’d find at the bottom floor of hell pulling fingernails off the loan sharks. When she got into bed Lee turned over slowly and pulled her toward him, kissing

Greta

her. Suddenly he became very aroused. She tried hard to stay with it. Her mind was swarming with images – Dot Green’s big teeth, her father hugging her, her father’s wife grinning at her from across the room. Afterward, as she lay in the crook of Lee’s arm, she felt safe and content, almost as she had when they first met. She clutched at the feeling as it faded; it was precious to her.

In the morning, she showered and dressed for the new job. When she came out of the bedroom Lee was already reading the paper. The coffee had been made and there was a brown paper bag full of fresh muffins on the table. Greta kissed Lee on the head, took a muffin, and poured milk into her coffee, observing the light that spilled sparkling through the window onto the blond wood table, the white china, Lee’s white shirt, his golden hair. And then she looked down at his shoes. Suddenly a terrifying thought came into Greta’s mind, clear and cruel. Tears of shame filled her eyes. She was going to dump her beautiful husband like a redundant paragraph. She reached out impulsively, as if she’d stumbled, and grabbed his arm.

‘What is it?’ he asked. But it was too late. Greta felt herself falling away at tremendous speed, her hair whipped back, the skin vibrating against her face. There was nothing she could do.