

## Chapter 3

### THE THRESHOLDS

On the outside, Waste still looked like the fishermen's supply shed it had once been way back in Herman Melville's time. Getting in was as simple as knowing whose name to mention at the door: "Debbie Mayfield." Crossing the dark entry and on through a low arched way, cut through what in old times must have been a great central chimney with fire-places all round, you entered the main upstairs party room, dark, with such low beams above and such old wrinkled planks beneath that you would almost think you trod some old craft's cockpits on a howling night. On one side stood a long low, shelf-like table covered with glasses and cracked-open cases of beer. Projecting from the far angle of the room was a dark-looking den – the bar, behind which bustled a withered man selling the girls and boys their deliriums.

Distracted by a guy she once dated making out with a girl she used to share a studio with, Reena stumbled in the entryway and scraped her face either on a rusty nail or on somebody's long fingernails as they tried to break her fall. Then she lost her one twenty-dollar bill under some feet in the dark. On her hands and knees, she was trying to recover the money but lost an earring in the process. The twenty dollars weren't so important but the earring was sentimental. She waited at the bar, dabbing her face with a paper napkin until it stopped bleeding. At least her drinks would be free tonight.

She noticed the place had been repainted in the style of certain late Francis Picabias. Depicted in muddy browns and mossy greens, sad and startled women's faces were superimposed with birds, guns, ships and bowls of fruit. A black vagina-shaped hole or eye was splitting the sky open in the background of one of the wall paintings. Reena stared at this last detail for a long time, and every so often a bright, but alas, deceptive idea would dart through her – It's the Black Sea in a midnight gale. – It's the unnatural combat of the four primal elements. – It's a blasted heath. – It's a Hyperborean winter scene. – It's the breaking-up of the ice-bound stream of Time. But at last all these fancies yielded themselves back to that one portentous something in the picture's midst. *That* once found out, all the rest would be plain. The place looked much better before when the only decoration to speak of was a winking, blinking, dusty, year-round Christmas tree. As always, she had to look around to find the way downstairs, down to the party behind the party beneath the party.

At the bottom of a long flight of concrete steps (whose entrance was curtained with a net of army vehicle camouflage) was a room of dressed masonry out of which several archways stretched, forming an al-Queda-like underground party-maze. In the hallways the music from the medium-sized rooms containing the bars and DJs was only a faint murmur and the speakers out here/there played a soundtrack consisting exclusively of the summery sounds of crickets. The central room was painted black and against the wall opposite the steps was a long row of cheap vinyl restaurant chairs whose tall backs had been transformed into gravestones, Magik Markered with the names and life spans of various deceased ex-regulars: Lil' Nut 1971–1999, Tweetie 1968–2001, Kurt Kokaine 1975–2003, Karin E. Glabb 1982–2004, Stubbs 1819–1929, etc. Sparsely lit and with a number of TV monitors showing videos ranging from amateur Mexican bull riding to a film of a Mick Jagger-in-the-early-seventies look-alike putting his dick through the window of

a subway booth (onto the attendant on the other side), the locale made for slow navigation. There is no DJ in this room. He is upstairs, on the second floor, alone, named Sunny, in a brightly lit room, with beer cans. His bright music is being pumped down to this basement cave, two levels below the main floor.

After dodging a dancing Paris Hilton look-alike with no arms to pick up a few free drinks at the bar, Reena sat down on a low bench in one of the narrow hallways, next to a group of French guys wearing home-customized jeans of the kind girls in dancehall videos used to wear, facing a video about a rowdy group of fashion models on a camping trip. They had lost their way and were trying to build a makeshift shelter in a storm. Cut to a close-up of a waifish boy screaming into the camera with terrorized abandon. The camera pulls back to reveal his broken body lying at the bottom of a pile of loose boulders. He can't move but he can sure scream. A jagged leg bone has pierced his plaid pants. Reena did not yet know she was watching a Maris Parings production, the first of the rising culture-preneur's silent club-films, a cheap but slick genre of her own invention and a clever way of keeping her boys in the spotlight in slow times. Fade to a Freddie Mercury-in-the-early-80's look-alike playing frisbee with a Labrador retriever, wearing very short shorts. The camera follows the frisbee as it sails out of view, into a dark forest at the edge of the field.

Tonight the party is in full effect. You know this immediately. A party like this one has a very simple graph to it. In about an hour, or two at the most, people will be vomiting, but now, in this particular party room, this appendix, people are euphoric.

"Will someone please stand up?" (Reena was talking to Peter Janovins.) "The man in the back there, will you please stand up. I felt she was talking to me but I didn't want to assume. She was in on my energy, which made me feel dishonest. And it is essentially dishonest to have an energy. Will the blond man in the back part of the theater stand up, with the thinning hair... Now, I liked her

very much, I liked everyone in there. Nipples. I stood up and left. If it ever happens again I would like to stand up and not leave. But with my energy, which she was picking up on, I had to either leave or lose that energy, which is hard to do. The energy was, I was liking them. There's really no sticking around, with that energy. So I got up and went to pee, and never saw them again."

Smoke, perfumes and body odor. Girls, competing crazily for attention, drugs, jobs, beauty. Luck was on Reena's side. At least in her vicinity. She's not the frozen statue tonight. She is shiny hair. A new product brushed into it before setting off to the party. A dress borrowed from one of her model-girlfriends, who has made a name for herself as the toughest party girl and was now trying to figure out how to translate this into becoming-an-actress. A room packed with ambition. There is a hat too, and it's too warm to wear a hat. But she is not someone who corrects herself easily. It's a take it or fuck you attitude. She wears it like an invisible armour... every party is a battle. Will she get out of here alive?

The party was reaching the level of panic of good times, which is the only comfortable level for a party-in-itself, when it can know it is alive, although the people in the party are not accorded any special knowledge of whether they are alive or not, or happy or not. The people in the party are swept into an orgy of considerations about the other people in the party, into lubricated thought. The panic of good times is something that draws people into it, and flees from them, hence the panic, which is later remembered as a good time. Reena told Peter Janovins her dream about going up to Anchorage, Alaska at great expense. "Like a salmon," said Peter. A girl named Heather was fighting her way upstream, exuberant, belligerent, toward the drink table, in a tube top. Her breasts rubbed against Reena's and Peter's backs and elbows in passing. "Who *assed* you?" said Jonathan Martiniss to someone behind him. Jonathan was a man with two eyes pointing in slightly different directions, which gave him an air of being untouched by psychology.

Reena wanted to crawl under the crowd, pull its weight onto her like a blanket and fall asleep there. She closed her eyes and floated in its noise – sea water lapping against rocks made of skin and rubber, pierced through now and then by a wheezing, Peckinpah cackle from the end of the bar. There was also the distant sound of fox hunting horns being piped in over the speakers. The music was both aristocratic and barbaric and summoned up images of blood-splattered cashmere and tweed. When Reena looked again she was staring into an urgent, chattering, red-nosed face, a W.C. Fields-from-the-30's look-alike who had his leg cocked up on a black air purifier.

Black three-foot-high candles in tall glass beakers trimmed with peacock feathers and fragrant white orchids flickered everywhere. Jenny had never seen anything this cool in her life. “God, I don’t know anyone here,” she said nervously. Roberto nursed an aching testicle while talking to Jim about Odile. Dan felt like Cinderella. He shoved his hands in his pockets to keep them from shaking, and tried to plan his next move. He would walk over and suavely offer to buy Semanta a drink. Too bad the only suave thing about him was his outfit. Even it was only half as suave as it could have been if he’d kept the Ungaro from Barney’s. “Hey,” Dan said when he reached their table, his voice cracking. “Hey Dan,” Semanta said, “nice tux.” The rumors couldn’t possibly be true. Semanta didn’t look like the sex-crazed drug-addicted maniac Maris had made her out to be. She looked delicate and perfect and exciting, like a wildflower you stumble upon unexpectedly in Central Park.

Reena fell in and out of conversations. Two different people told her the slapstick joke about the blonde who walked into a library by mistake. Then she was being physically moved across the room and into the far corner by a sort of invisible undertow. She landed next to Isabelle, the Swiss exchange student who was always everywhere these days, always all in black and always in the corner. Isabelle was going on about “human money,” saying how the kids’

bodies were like dollars circulating in an open market, how even the most destitute and threadbare of them carries himself into the night like a millionaire or some sort of walking business-or-pleasure proposal, etc, and how this was maybe the secret of their undeniable beauty as well... Her voice came out in a thin warble, a weak and broken signal coming through under the fox horns. Reena moved closer to catch her words, bending her ear to the slowly moving lips.

A big, unspoken issue at the party was money. It was a kind of boundary line that everyone respected. A line of mutual unkindness. This is where my money ends and yours begins. There were people who had it and didn't care about it, people who were acquiring it and didn't care about it, people who cared and were not in the act of acquiring it, who didn't have it and didn't care, who cared and had it, and so on.

Then Reena was enjoying the sensation of walking in a garden of talking, kissing, smiling and serious mouths. The toothless, cackling cowboy mouth at the end of the bar was still erupting every few minutes in the most surprising way. She was surrounded by mouths and could feel their warm breath on her face. They were little wet caves. She wanted to stick her fingers into them, or nipples or coins. Mouths everywhere, opening and closing. She noticed one with hardly any lips at all, just like Irm Hermann, her favorite Fassbinder actress. Reena loved to look at mouths because to her they were like eyes looking at hers. She looked at their mouths with her own Pasolini mouth, and she sometimes ended up swimming in spit at the end of the night. She couldn't tear herself away from mouths.

The sound of the party was rising now, and supporting itself, like a fire. Anyone who spoke had to refer his or her voice up to the general ball of sound and let it bounce back down. "You look mad." "I look Mad?" "And bored." "Ha ha ha. That's a damn shame, mad and bored!"

Here was a woman whose skin was powdery and soft, an opaque, Shiseido-coated shield. Against this pure field her over-glossed lips stood out almost like a... like pussy lips. Speaking as a man, it was the most vaginal effect possible in a face, but still they were perfectly pretty, perfectly formed, classical lips with their corners almost imperceptibly upturned. Their obscenity was all in the application of the gloss, its slick film bleeding ever so slightly over the actual edges of the lips and onto the powdery skin, extending the mouth beyond itself, unleashing it in simulated wetness. This gave the impression of a mouth just kissed, or having just sucked somebody off, or even a mouth asleep, or a sleeping vagina. Her cool, subliminal smile, on the other hand, confounded this suggestion with something haughty and impassive. It was very effective, this collision between brainless cocksucker and imperious manageress. The one and only Maris was at Waste tonight.

Presently a just-photographed head jerked around in surprise. The photographer gave a cheerful nod equivalent to a thumbs up.

Reena saw beautiful men. My god, angels, burning bright. You just wanted to take their pants down. Velvety genitals all in one. So great to see sexy friends. Like violets growing on a little bank together. Of course they grew that way together. Lilies-of-the-valley. Their hair, their talk, was theirs. Who tasted one tasted the other. Boy-friends.

She tries to get her hand on this pretty boy, obviously fucked with a zillion times recently, flirting like a manic rabbit with all the beautiful girls and even the not so beautiful ones. Soft-spoken and slightly druggy looking with that intentionally slightly greasy hair curving in his face. There was a certain amount of drippy openness to this guy, but some notion of lost drama too. Her girlfriends had lost their opinions when it came to this one. They were through with him and he with them already over and over again. She had never been attracted by the game, but in this case it seemed it was failure, the being-thru-ness, that made the boy attractive. He

had been through everything and was still open and searching? But to what ends? Reena tried to figure out the possibilities of generating something unexpected in this encounter... but couldn't see it yet.

Then her drink was gone and she was sharing his. Then his double-jointed fingers were snaking their way under Reena's dress as she tried to climb his narrow body like a tree. Isabelle wagged her head in despair and was now going around the room starting small fires with a cigarette lighter. All the fires were stomped out by laughing friends until the girl gave up and fell asleep with her face buried in Semanta's lap. As Reena crossed the room, laughing out loud, Maris Parings reached out and stabbed her bottom with a lit Marlboro Light.

"Ha. Ha. Ha. Ow! Wow, bitch...!"

Maris wasn't sure what had made her want to burn Reena. She tried to behave apologetically and fished an ice cube out of her glass.

"Oh dear, I don't know how that happened. Here..."

Reena let this thirty-something woman rub her down there with the ice cube. It was a slightly embarrassing spectacle that froze her on the spot.

"I was watching you before. You're having fun."

Reena was out of words.

"You're kind of cute, but you don't have a lot going on up there do you?" said Maris pointing at Reena's messy hair.

Reena helped herself to one of the woman's cigarettes and lit the wrong end of it.

"I like your face."

Somebody's coat was smoldering under the table, sending whiffs of burnt nylon into Reena's tired, smiling face. She was suddenly in the mood to befuckedintheass, but not by any of these citizens in particular. Lizzi was sleeping in broken glass, her tongue slightly protruding while an off-duty cop prodded her with the



tip of his Reebok, wanting to know who would be paying for all the damage. Without looking up, Maris Parings surrendered her credit card.

Reena started to leave the room. There was a half slap-happy air in the way she moved her body forward, ready to bump into something. The fox horns seemed to clear a path between the bar area and the bathrooms, and Maris followed her down it with her glass of ice cubes. People were lounging in the anterooms like so many cats with hair on their heads. A wave of snappy, small rhythms was apparently following Reena, reading her body, making her almost turn around. All rattling cubes and clattering heels, Maris finally threw her body into a plush banquette and wondered where the girl would disappear to next. "How many of us," she thought, "it takes to change a light bulb into a flickering light bulb." Only the people under 5 feet tall could feel the breeze from an open door glide around their necks.

There was Reena again, coming out of the bathroom with a long piece of toilet paper trailing from her shoe. "I'll take that," said Maris. She took a fast step forward, jumping through the crowd, viciously forcing a heel of her sandal through the paper trail. What was it about Reena that was already erasing the other girls – Blair, Jane, Barbara, Ludmilla, Hanna, Nebraska, Ines – from her mental Polaroid file? This was large; Maris's thrill would not soon subside as she entertained the question Reena seemed to inhabit: genius or idiot? The ambiguity of her attitude drove Maris crazy, and that ambivalent hair even more so. If you could turn a person over and over in your mind like a pig over an open flame, that's what Maris had been doing with Reena for the past forty minutes. Her ice cubes had long since turned to water. Her mind boiling over, thoughts attached like sticky wings.

Just then two muscle-bound men were muscling their way into the banquette with Maris. Reena was watching frankly. She could not get enough of that view, intensified by stroboscopic spasms of

light from the dance floor. “We just won a body building contest,” they shouted over the music, “Look, our picture is in the paper!” Maris was like a sardine between two potatoes, and her mood floated and splashed like water on these glistening rocks. How to get through it now, should I embrace it all, including the steamy muscle-men? The two men were unzipping their nylon gym bags which were crammed with newspaper clippings, shining trophies, and several zip-lock baggies containing what looked to Reena – she was riveted now, approaching – like cocaine. Reena’s proximity and interest was to Maris nothing less than a wish come true. So there was only one thing left to do: the first line together. “We’re so psyched,” the largest of the men told Maris. “You have to help us celebrate. We don’t know anybody here,” said the other.

A cloud of sweat hovered above the dance floor. Newcomers kept bursting through the doorway, eager to immerse themselves. A woman pushed through the crowd with her hands on the waist of her friend ahead. Party train, chugging through.

“WE’RE SO WET!!!” they drunkenly scream in unison, totally aware of absolutely everything in the world.

The voices commingle, making a body of their own, which clamors higher and higher, out-climbing the music even. It leaves down below the darkened figures to their limited gestures and facial expressions, making its own lively party overhead.

“All this spread out momentarily for you to gaze at.”

“Do you have another candle for our table?”

A few, who find themselves talking with someone they adore, enjoy the conditions of having to bring their mouth into the loved one’s hair, nestling right up to the ear to speak there, in that little private zone of warmth. And then the reciprocal pleasure of having the other do the same to them, tingly breath against their ear which we call lovers’ telephone.

Maris and Reena were perched on the bodybuilders’ steely laps. The crowd was pushing up, but allowed this fateful conference its

very own tiny island in the alcoholic haze. They were leaning into each other now, their words lost to everyone but themselves.

“The only interest that penetrates us because of its own death.”