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**The Mammoth Book of  
Best New Erotica  
Volume 9**

Edited by Maxim Jakubowski

Published by Robinson

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THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF

# Best New Erotica

Volume 9

Edited and with an Introduction  
by Maxim Jakubowski



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# Introduction

Maxim Jakubowski

Welcome back to the realm of the senses.

It's been nearly fifteen years since I began compiling this anthology series (although this particular volume is advertised as the ninth in the series, there were five additional books before we began numbering the anthologies . . .) and I keep on being amazed and delighted that, year after year, erotic writers still manage to surprise, push the envelope, challenge my perception and that of the many readers who follow the Mammoth Erotica series every year.

When we began, erotica was still somewhat undercover, with the exception of canonical authors and books like Henry Miller's, Anaïs Nin's, Anne Rice's, *The Story of O*, etc. The art of the erotic short story was still to a large extent in its infancy. This was very much due to the fact there were so few outlets for it, either in magazines, anthologies or book format.

This has changed a lot since then. In parallel with this series the redoubtable Susie Bright launched her Best American Erotica annual volumes, which lasted well over a decade, and I think that our combined influence soon sparked a minor renaissance that continues to this day.

In order to uncover the forty-two stories in this book, all previously published in 2008, I had to read through over thirty other anthologies, countless print magazines, many of which published the occasional erotica, as well as a plethora of web magazines. The latter market is one that has exploded over the last ten years, and I must confess that I have been pleasantly

surprised by the average level of quality found there (as well, naturally, as the worst too, in view of the generally poor levels of editing practised on the Internet . . .). But an increasing number of erotica writers are making their presence known first on the web, before graduating to print, and I am grateful for the Internet's role in fostering erotic short story writing. A more recent phenomenon is that of e-books. They also lend themselves particularly well to our medium, even if the general level of competence is still, in my personal opinion, rather low, not unlike the early years of Internet publishing. But it provides an invaluable literary laboratory, which encourages new writers and offers a training ground of sorts, for which we must be grateful.

Again, I am especially proud to be able to present many new names here for the first time: Laurence Klavan is no unknown, having won the prestigious Edgar award for his mystery fiction, but this is, to the best of my knowledge, his first foray into the waters of erotica; Larry Smith has already been published in the revered literary *McSweeney's* magazine; Carrie Williams is the author of several well-received erotic novels; while others like the mysterious Remittance Girl, Karen Sutow, Thom Gautier, Erin O'Riordan, Roger Bonner, Amanda Fox, Erin Cashier and Mark Farley are all newcomers to our series and may be big names for the future. Another first for this volume is the small audio play by Polly Frost and her husband Ray Sawhill, which has only appeared so far on CD.

In addition, there are several handfuls of repeat offenders, or should I describe them as the usual suspects; some have now clocked up regular contributions to the Mammoth Erotica series while others made their initial appearance only in the last year or two. It's great to have them all back.

Writing about sex, and emotions, is nowhere near as easy as many imagine. Just because it is a human activity that all of us think we know all about means that not only taboos must be broken when it comes to describing it with a modicum of authenticity and honesty, but the author must try to relate to the reader in a particularly naked way. Our sex lives are a

secret that only our close ones actually perceive correctly, and when you put pen to paper (or in this day and age, finger to keyboard) you have to find a way that strangers can relate to your story, your complex relationships. If you cannot achieve this connection then the end result can prove either vulgar or clichéd or both. This, for me, is where the frontier lies between erotica and pornography. It's an eternal debate and will continue to rage forever, I have no doubt. But I strongly believe that the stories we offer you in this volume will both titillate you and make you think, will trigger your imagination, sometimes make you question your own acts or relationships or past experiences, and might also scare and/or amuse you. Or all of the above.

If they achieve any of these aims then I feel we have achieved the goal of our sensual mission.

So, enjoy another year in the daring and provocative world of the sexual imagination. Shudder, hold your breath, smile, allow your heart to beat just that touch faster, and give in to all your most secret senses. This is erotica at its best.

Maxim Jakubowski

# Alert

Laurence Klavan

Hands, so many hands of other travelers were hanging beside her own, lined up like winter coats in a closet or fish in a school under the sea – or like trains themselves, waiting to take off, trains stopped in their tracks, that was it – except one hand, his hand, more disobedient than the rest, moving up her thigh, then gently beneath her skirt, the fingers cool and slightly chapped even though it was summer.

Allie was trembling but so was everyone else: trembling and rocking back and forth and sometimes lurching forward as if pushed from behind. Allie was aware that her reaction to riding the subway was like someone's in 1904 – the year the system started, an overhead sign informed her – but she was, after all, innocent of the experience, never having done it before.

And it was twice as terrifying today, she knew, despite the unclean conditions then, the – she could only guess – cholera and diphtheria and the TB, that was the other one, at the turn of the century. It was so much more treacherous today that she never would have agreed to come if not for – and now she thought of nothing other than his hand, because his fingers had found and were touching the little raised flower stitched on her underwear between her legs. His was like a blind man's hand and so she closed her eyes to be like him and only know what it was like to feel and never see, never in a crucial way to know anything but what you felt. Doing this, only feeling, in the dark, she went into a new tunnel, one that led back to the blackness of her sleep that morning, a tunnel she had exited by opening her eyes.

Allie had been angry those few hours earlier – she was a punitive girl, punishing, which was surprising, for she was short and blonde and pale and pretty, and others in their shallowness assumed that she was sweet – she’d been angry because she had not wanted to come, had spent eighteen perfectly pleasant years without going down to the city, which was ninety miles south of the town where she was and had been born. Why should she add to her “experience” in such an arbitrary way, like those people who fly private planes without expertise or jump into gorilla cages just for the “rush” and end up in frozen pieces on foggy mountaintops or as bloody stumps in fake zoo streams, their last startled sense being pain, their final feeling regret (or who were so drunk that they were dead already before being blown or torn to bits)? She had no sympathy for these people who asked for what they got – and since she was unlike them, was sensible and not stupid and heedless, she was angriest at herself for agreeing to go. She had been weak – being guilty was a way of being weak – and that especially irked her.

But Dan Stabler was an old family friend and had offered her a job in his store for the summer, right after she graduated from high school. Loafin’ was the town’s most popular bakery and café, and while Allie hated the store’s stupid name and having to wear the apron with the smiling slice of bread on it – a logo other people liked, apparently, though how many over the age of four, Allie couldn’t imagine – she had accepted. Allie hadn’t gotten into Picard, the local college, and so would have to wait to apply again next year. She didn’t want to go any farther from home – and why should she when there was a perfectly good school within driving distance, she could even keep her old room; it was pretentious and phony to want to “see the world,” wasn’t this the world right here? Of course it was.

Her parents hadn’t been as happy as she thought they’d be when she said that she’d be staying put, had never really understood her only applying to one place, and had gone behind her back to ask Dan if he had something, anything, for

her to do. When he came up with the job, invented it out of thin air, by adding another counterman, woman, or whatever, her parents made it plain there would be no saying no.

Allie thought they'd be glad to still have her around, but the job seemed like a punishment for what they felt was her bad idea. (Allie's scolding sensibility was a direct inheritance from them, but she didn't make the connection, for she always felt totally justified in her harsh and severe judgments of others.) So how could she refuse when Dan asked her to do more, to work the stand in the Farmer's Market down in the city that day, because someone else had gotten sick?

That meant getting up at five to take the trip, sitting beside Dan on the lumpy front seat of his bread truck, while he listened to the radio repeat the same exact weather report (sunny and hot, sunny and hot – what did he expect, it was summer?!), depressing news stories from overseas (we're here, aren't we? We're here, we're not there!) and songs from the seventies, a time when apparently all people had lank and dirty hair, took too many drugs, and sang songs that made absolutely no sense at all (well, why don't you give your horse a name? – then your horse would have a name!).

Dan, who still looked like someone from that era, actually remembered the words well enough to repeat them in a flat, horrible voice that sounded like the world's worst walrus singer. Allie had never had an opinion of Dan – he was like a hundred years old and so hardly even alive to her – but today she disliked how he dwelled on the radio's news reports about the city, the threats to the city, and actually turned it up to catch every last disgusting detail.

This was, of course, another reason Allie had not wanted to go and for her to condemn anyone reckless enough to live there. She had no doubt the threats were real and that the government people communicating them were sincere. This was just the sort of thing you'd expect to happen in such a place, and what was wrong with warning people? She herself would want to be warned (which wouldn't be necessary, because she wouldn't be living there) and she would heed those warnings. Even now,

as Dan changed channels to hear the same information from a different source, she said, “Maybe we should just turn around and go back.”

The remark unnerved Dan enough to make him snap off the radio altogether. He considered being concerned enough to lose a day’s profit, and it was clear it was a new idea and not one he was at ease with.

“It’ll be okay,” was the best he could come up with; then, after additional thought, “Why let our enemies win? It’s our country.”

Stymied, Allie didn’t say anything, just looked out the window at the highway, increasingly crowded and unclean as it approached New York. Roadkill was being replaced by potholes, as if nature itself had ceased to exist and great gaps were now appearing as evidence of a new nightmare world, and all would soon collapse as a result. She bet Dan thought that worry would protect him, when only turning back (or not even going) was the only action that made sense. But that would take guts, and Dan was too greedy.

“I had a piece of the walnut loaf this morning,” she said, petulantly, to punish him. “I almost broke a tooth.”

Dan didn’t answer right away, then said, quietly, “Then you should talk to your parents about orthodontia.”

Referring to her parents had the desired effect – she felt young and diminished and guilty again about her aimless summer, which she had been sure her mom and dad would want to share with her, and why hadn’t they? – and took the focus off his bread, which truth to tell, wasn’t bad, and she had never even tried the walnut. Dan seemed to be getting sneakier as they hit the bridge that brought them into town, as if he were absorbing a big city character through the automatic traffic pass Velcro-ed to his windshield that let him be billed later. (And that was another modern idea she couldn’t abide: you ought to pay then and there.) Allie pulled over her the sweater her mother had insisted she bring, as if it were a lead apron to prevent her being filled with the same flaws now entering Dan. Then she saw him peel off the pass and place it

in the glove compartment, which he locked; he never had to do those things at home.

Allie looked at the big buildings, the suffocating crowds, the water that surrounded it all – everything made vulnerable to attack because of its decadence, irresponsibility, and excess. She found herself getting angrier and angrier, the way she always did when – and her parents knew this even if she didn't and she absolutely did not – she was utterly, unbearably, and to her unforgivably afraid.

The Farmer's Market was held at Union Square, on what looked to Allie like a big concrete slab that probably used to be a parking lot. It scalded in the morning sun, and not even the stand's awning provided any relief. Allie started sweating the minute she left the truck, and large dark rings appeared on her white track team T-shirt that looked like those potholes in the road. Now she was marked, damaged, too, by "progress."

A never-ending parade of people filed by, some obviously on their way to work, looking self-important yet also stifled and suffering in overpriced suits, others obviously wasting their lives riding rollerblades on the way to nowhere. The people who bought bread from her were stingy young executives who forfeited fifty cents for tiny raisin buns not big enough to feed a baby or demanding yuppie mothers who acted entitled to stop traffic with their strollers and didn't say "thank you" when Allie handed them their loaves. She felt like a hick serving at the pleasure of sophisticates, and she bet she was better read than any of them. (Who had gotten through the whole "Dune" cycle last summer? Certainly not that young business boy whose hair goop couldn't hide his hair loss and who bought a tiny bun.)

Throughout the morning, Dan acted pleasant and didn't even seem to feel the heat. He told her, "acting surly never sold a scone," but she pretended not to hear and walked disgustedly back to the truck for more bread.

Dan had parked in an allotted area behind their stand, right near a rope that cordoned off the lot. She thought it looked like

a carny van in a circus convoy she'd seen once in a movie; at day's end, they'd pull up stakes and go someplace else where people made fun of freaks. She was carrying out a new supply of *miche* – and leave it to New Yorkers to buy the bread with the phony Frenchiest name – when she was stopped by someone's voice.

“Hey.”

Allie looked up and over the rope that separated the market from the rest of the metropolis, the only thing that lay between her and its awfulness, a protective ring she hadn't realized was a comfort until she looked up and over. A skinny boy her own age was resting on the rope, oblivious it appeared to cars flying by, hardly making the effort not to hit him.

His face was dark, darker than any in her own town – he was Spanish or Italian or Jewish, it was all the same to Allie – and his hair wasn't even brown but so black it seemed to have been colored, but it couldn't, could it, he was a boy. Still, it was a pleasant face, the face of an orphan in a bombed-out Italian town during World War Two she'd seen in a documentary once in school, and his voice had the innocence of a child when he asked, above the street sounds, “What's it, bread?”

Allie, of course, had been taught not to speak to strangers, so she didn't respond right away. But the question was so open, direct, and benign – and the questioner so seemingly guileless – that after a second she said, with much less hostility than she'd intended, which surprised her, “Well, what does it look like?”

The boy took the question as he heard it – not as rhetorical or sarcastic but as sincere – and answered, “Bread.”

Was he kidding, this kid? He didn't seem to be – and he wasn't flirting, either, not in the usual way, which is what Allie had figured at first. A weak wind made her belly feel cool and she remembered that her shirt was sweated through, he could clearly see the flower pattern on her bra; but the boy didn't look there, didn't direct one guilty glance, engaged her eyes the whole time, which was a first since she was fifteen with men and boys of any age. (Allie wasn't a virgin but her experience

was limited to one encounter with an ex-boyfriend which didn't even last as long as the commercial break on the TV not muted opposite them. Since then, she spoke in a worldly and dismissive way about men and love-making, unable to admit that hers was a subjective observation based on one unpleasant event and not an objective wisdom that put all others in the shade. In truth, she wished simply to put off doing it again for as long as possible.)

But that was not an issue here: the boy seemed as innocent as a sprite, like a spirit of the forest that had escaped to the city and gotten lost. Is that why he asked about bread? she wondered. Was he hungry?

"Here," she said, keeping her voice down, and then reached over the rope and handed him one and then two of the little raisin buns, let the yuppies buy something bigger.

Without looking again at him, she turned away with her bag of *miche* and started back to the stand. Behind her, she heard over car horns, sirens, and boring cell phone conversations, his small voice saying, "thanks," with a surprise that convinced her he had not been angling for it but had only asked her something to be friendly or maybe to make his own morning less monotonous or maybe even because he thought she looked miserable and wanted to help. All of these possibilities – but especially the last one – made Allie turn around suddenly and less subtly than she'd wished to smile at him or do something, she wasn't sure what. But the boy was gone, his place taken by the traffic of which he had been so unafraid.

Allie returned to the stand where Dan was, and where he was impatiently wondering why she'd been gone so long. Apparently, it was the height of over-consumption and time-wasting hour; after nine, they'd merely be selling food to people who were hungry.

"I got lost," Allie said, aware she was being slightly too snotty, but it was too late.

As the day wore on, and she waited on more jaded or entitled people, she thought that seeing and feeding the boy by the

truck would be the highlight of the day; everyone else had much uglier motives than he. She found herself checking out the crowd, craning for any sight of him, but soon felt it was silly: he didn't seem to have the same empty purpose or worthless destination that might make him one of them. His ambling was honorable, like sidling by a stream or sauntering down a dirt road, inviting adventure in its natural state; it was not his fault that he had wandered onto an artificial world.

It was a world where, for instance, there was no shade. More fat gobs of sweat dripped down her back to her waist, making the other side of her shirt sheer as well. Allie thought she heard a sizzling sound behind her; with a smirk, she supposed that something had been set ablaze by the sun or was merely manifesting the burning hatred she was sending out. Then, slowly, she realized it was static from a transistor radio: Dan had been a few hours without upsetting updates, and that had been too long.

"Uh-oh," she heard him say, holding the radio close to his head. "Oh, no."

Allie was even more curious than annoyed, so she bent a little backwards to pick up what now worried him.

"Alert," was all she heard, because the radio was practically covered by Dan's hair. "Credible threat" and "subway."

For a second, sneering, Allie shook it off. How weird was Dan, cruising through stations until he found something to upset him – which he could then, what, disarm with his anxiety? What a nerd he was. But then she saw him spin the station again and then again, and each time the information was the same.

"Trusted source . . . Below ground . . . Possible bombs . . ."

Now the fact that every voice said the same thing seemed more disturbing than tedious; it was a bulletin their obligation to report, a repetition for everyone's own good. Allie slowly felt the awful heat around her head replaced by a kind of cold, as if someone had rubbed an ice cube on her, the way her mother would in the summer when she was small.

She missed her mother terribly now, and her father, too.

Ninety miles north seemed the space from where she stood to a star in the sky. It would take her a thousand years to get home, and a different species would have evolved there by the time she arrived. She was trapped.

When Allie looked at the faces flying or trudging past, she couldn't help but add another element to their expressions: an awareness in their eyes that something awful was around them, a threat that loomed above like a giant bird from a bad horror movie, its massive wings spreading and obscuring the sun. (It was just a coincidence but a convenient one that a cloud – the first of the day – had just passed over.) She refused to feel compassion for them; indeed her contempt grew – or did it drop? – to a new degree. What did you expect, living here? Don't come crying to me! In other words, she placed her own panic and her hatred of it in herself on them.

She soon realized that the imagery wasn't exact: the threat – credible, corroborated, or whatever the hell they said – was from below, not above, in the subway, or would be once the bad people completed their plotting and gave the signal to begin. So it was more like a giant burrowing worm was underneath them all, another idea from an awful movie, that soon would suck them under and obliterate them – and they would have gone down not by accident but of their own accord, entered by a simple staircase, even paid for the privilege of being killed.

She thought it only added to the anxiety they all must feel everyday, entering the tunnels of a transportation system Allie would never in a million years want to take. Just thinking of the subway made her start to sweat more, and it wasn't the sun, it was no longer that strong. The idea of being crammed next to all those people, nose to nose, nose to neck, zooming into oblivion, was bad enough on a normal day: now it seemed inconceivable.

Slowly, she started to see the people passing without pigment, as pale as ghosts – like zombies, that was it, their skin sallow, their eyes scooped out, their steps scary because they were so slow, dogged, and steady. Allie felt faint, or what she imagined was faintness because it was the first time she'd felt

it, and she nearly fell into one of the cheap fold-out chairs Dan had set by the stand.

She thought she passed out for a while but she didn't, she just sat there with her eyes closed for a minute. When she opened them again, the crowd pushing past was bigger than before and going the other way: it was the evening journey home from work. This was the second "big sales" period; there were two more hours before they could leave. Allie glanced at Dan, but he was counting change for customers, the radio now barely audible. There would be no fleeing early while he could still earn.

Everyone was doomed, and Allie realized that she wasn't angry any more; for the first time, she could admit it, she was afraid. But since she had to be angry at someone, she decided to denounce those who would judge and condemn her fear: well, how else was she supposed to feel? What were they, crazy? This allowed her to cross over to this new emotion, as if using a rock in a river as her bridge to another bank.

When Allie focused on the crowd of the condemned again, to her surprise, she recognized a face.

She was sure that the boy from before was standing across the square. Was she imagining it or was he smiling at her and even coming closer? If she waved at him, would she be making a mortifying mistake and have to turn her wave into a hair comb, like a comic she'd seen on TV?

She wasn't wrong: immediately, as if moving on an imaginary escalator, the boy was at her booth, standing right before her, they were no longer separated by a bungee cord or whatever wrapped around the fair. Each was on the inside now, and Allie felt safer just seeing him.

"So," he said, "how's business?"

Allie couldn't answer: she had no idea, it seemed fine, busy, lots of bread had been sold, so she only shrugged and saw it was the right reply, he didn't care, either, was just making conversation, needed an excuse to come back, and that made her smile at him, with her biggest and maybe only real smile of the day.

“I’m Sonny,” he said. Sorry? Ari? What had he said? It was obviously his name and she hadn’t heard it and within a second it would be too late to ask again, and then she never could – and there it was, it was too late, she’d never know.

Resigned to it, “I’m Allie,” she said, and at least the name she imagined he had sounded a little like hers, so that was something.

“You, do you work here or—”

“I come from a little upstate.” A little upstate? What did that mean? She couldn’t even speak English, how appealing was that?

“Look, uh – you going back right away, or—”

Was she? She had no idea, was not in control of her life – she turned to check with Dan, and he was at once selling a chocolate croissant to a lady too fat to be buying one and speaking on a cellphone crushed ridiculously between his shoulder and his tilted head, probably to his wife, who had gray hair Allie thought was way too long for her age.

When she turned back, she was aware that the boy could have seen again through her soaked shirt, her bra straps through the crude track team stick figures – she was completely exposed to him everywhere, and her mom’s sweater had long since fallen to the ground – but again his eyes were on hers and seemed never to have moved.

“I don’t know,” she said, and thought she sounded stupid, without a thought in her head, his worst image of someone from “a little upstate.”

“Well, maybe I could show you around – we could take a walk or something – see the city – I mean, if you feel like it.”

There was something in the way he said it – it went beyond his tentative quality, which was courteous, by the way, not clueless – that didn’t mean mere tourism; he was offering himself up as a companion in an unstable world currently under siege, at least that’s how she heard his idea, as a form of – not presumptuous or pushy but protective – partnership. If he’d intuited earlier that she was unhappy, now he knew that she was nervous; he was her link to something essential and

real, not tricked-up like the city she believed they both were lost in. This made her agree to go and made Dan immediately a minor detail she could handle without really caring how.

“Let me just deal with this,” she said.

Dan was now off the phone and customer-free, so unfortunately he had a clear head with which to hear Allie’s request and in which to find a new cause for concern.

“But we’re going back soon,” he said, and then added something about Allie’s parents which this time she didn’t let sway her, as if she were ignoring an insult, and then he even mentioned the “alert,” which Allie couldn’t say but sensed that she alone would now be safe from. Assuring him that she would soon return and knew his cell phone number – actually, just yelling this back to him as she ran away – Allie was gone, the boy behind and then right beside her, Sonny or Ari, or whoever he was.

Enormously relieved, Allie found herself jabbering on to him – about her family, the whole college thing, her job, Dan, the city, the country, what she wanted from life – an explosion of honesty that was a working definition of trust, at least to her, who was wary of almost everyone. The boy said nothing yet still seemed to hear – a plus given how other boys just listened long enough to learn when you’d stop and let them start talking – and the crowds, no longer of zombies or horror movie victims but merely hot and harried people, seemed to part for them and let them pass.

Allie was talking so much that she didn’t notice where they were headed: across the pavement space of Union Square that led to, among other places, a park, a set of stores, and the wide thoroughfare of 14th Street.

None of them was where – with a brief but definitive touch of her arm – the boy signaled her to stop. When Allie looked up, people were no longer coming directly at them like rain on your windshield in a thunderstorm but were safely off to either side. She saw what they had reached: the entrance to the subway, the 4, 5, 6, N and R.

“What do you mean?” she asked, as if he had said something

instead of simply stopping, and then she even smiled a little at the absurdity of what she saw.

“What’s the problem?” he said. “Haven’t you ever been on it?”

“No,” she said, inferring “of course not,” and how had he if he was just as innocent as she?

“Well, this is the day to do it,” he said, “with this phony alert – this is when it’ll be the most fun.”

Phony? It was as if his words were in a foreign tongue – or words you’ve repeated so many times they’re incoherent – and it took a while before Allie could turn them into words she knew. Suddenly, she understood: he was not like her, an alien visitor, he was the opposite: a native so steeped in this environment he knew its every corner and so cynical he could distinguish a false alarm from a real emergency – and laugh about it – and then go right into the teeth of where it was supposedly least safe.

Allie instinctively felt the cell phone in the little fanny pack tied about her waist (which of course tagged her as from out of town), then turned back to see the stand where Dan was waiting. But it was lost behind New Yorkers, as if they had closed over and consumed it, an experienced army that kills with one shot an amateur naïve enough to intrude on its territory.

When she turned back, the boy was beckoning her, his face promising only pleasure – no, nothing that profound, just dumb fun, and amazed she wouldn’t take the opportunity, how many would she ever have?

It was hard for Allie to go back to anger once she’d experienced fear – she’d left it on the other shore as it were, when she’d crossed over – and it was hard to feel fear once she’d experienced trust. She was young, younger than most people her age, and so insecure that she held onto every emotion fiercely until she could find a new reason all by herself to release it. With whom would she be safer, someone as ignorant as she or someone who knew the city better than anyone else? Of course – what were you, nuts?

So she let the boy guide her gently toward and down the stairs.

Immediately, it was like hell – so many steamy people on the narrow staircase you could take only tiny steps, orderly enough going up and down on either side, until someone decided to breach the boundary and cross over and then all became chaos. The boy preceded her and, in the crush, her hand slipped from his and she grabbed onto the back of his belt, a gesture more intimate than she'd intended and one that made her fingers touch for a second the bare small of his back before she could loop them on the leather again. His skin was cool and covered in a thin down of hair as dark as everything else about him – except for his eyes, which she had only now noticed were blue-green and shone as bright as an animal's from its den when they're the only things you see. Soon they reached the floor of the station and the last sight of any sun vanished; there was no reversing course, at least not without her clawing through that crowd again and alone, for he was obviously committed to continuing.

“Come on,” he said. “This way.”

Holding her hand again, he weaved expertly through an onslaught of other people as if he was a white water rafter and they the waves, or some other image from “a little upstate” she clutched to keep calm. In truth, there was nothing from the natural world about what he did: he was more like a video game player entering and ace-ing an invented environment, evading all enemies, and since she had never played before, what had been trust became total and utter dependence; she could not make a move without him.

They passed a table where police were opening and examining the bags of commuters, supposedly at random but really targeting young and attractive women. Allie heard her companion scoff, seeing this – saying “right” with a special spitting take on the “t” – before tugging her hand harder.

“Down here,” he said, and they went – it was possible! – even lower.

Descending to the next level, Allie again held onto his belt,

but this time she intentionally dipped her fingers over it and onto him, curling them so she'd rub against and feel his hair and scratching him a little when she did, in a way that could have been deliberate or not, he'd never know. How could she not want to become closer to him when he was all she had and without him she was literally lost?

Soon they had no choice but be inseparable, for there was no room at the base of the stairs to edge apart. So many people waited for a train to come down the track that they milled in a giant mass, stuck together with sweat and the stink of themselves. Her front pressed against the boy's back, and since he wore a white T-shirt, too, it was as if she had partly disappeared into him, like the invisible man does into things in other, older movies.

If something exploded now, there would be no saving anyone, each person would be propelled into and annihilate his neighbor. But Sari knew it was nonsense and there was nothing to worry about; he remained almost dry on the damp platform; she noticed it when, with absolute ease, he brought her arm around him onto his stomach and held her hand there; and her heart beat so powerfully she was sure he must feel it: they were so connected now her heart was pumping into his.

Then, from a distance, the track was illuminated. They all stirred, like refugees hit by a spotlight, their emotions ranging from anticipation to relief to fear. The ground started rumbling and Allie suddenly held the boy's hand tighter, her fingers wrapping around his palm.

"Here we go," he said.

The sound grew louder, the light became brighter, it seemed as if the station itself was about to erupt, no bombs were even needed. Then the rumble was joined by a shriek of gears that hurt her ears and what seemed a hysterical, high-pitched, mechanical scream from a new gizmo that could feel and express pain. Allie saw the "R" of the train cab come at and pass her, blowing up her hair, the letter seeming to stand for some place mysterious, a final destination far in the future where there were only letters and no names. The train lasted

forever before it finally stopped, the doors opened, and there was no turning back.

Allie saw that inside there was already no room. Each seat was filled and riders jammed the aisles, pressed together in brightly colored summer clothes, like the roasted peppers in that unopened jar in her mother's kitchen. Allie imagined it was impossible each had enough air, but what was there was cool and that was something, a seductive reason to get on and stay.

And they did get on, all of them – even if someone had wanted to walk away, he couldn't, there was no way out. Allie felt the new people must make the train bulge out from its sides, as in a cartoon – but, amazingly, it maintained its shape as they added to what could not be increased.

She and the boy managed to make it to – or merely were rammed toward – a middle pole, which Allie grabbed onto as if it were a floating relic of a shipwreck that kept her from being swept away. She wrapped herself around it and, from behind, the boy wrapped around her, and Allie felt this was the last place they would ever be, they could never leave and would have to live there.

They waited for what seemed an unbearably long time, the cool air slowly being diluted and polluted by the hot air from the platform, which seeped in like poison and threatened their survival. Then, after an almost comical ding-dong of a make-believe bell, the doors coughed and stuttered and finally closed.

Their savage peeling into the dark of the tunnel made her cry out, once, weakly, not sure she made a sound; but since Sari had promised, she was certain it was no longer death they were racing to find, and her freedom from fear was like discovering a second, braver self, and it was thrilling in a new and startling way.

As they left any recognizable place and were imprisoned at high speed in a tube, Allie's cries grew louder, became a kind of moan, and she scanned the signs overhead that told her of the system's origins to center herself somewhere, anywhere, in space.

It was then that she became aware of the hands at her side and felt one hand, his hand, moving slowly and determinedly beneath her short denim skirt with the sparkly studs she thought so cute until it reached the rose (was that what it was?) that bridged her thighs.

“I want to hold all your flowers,” he whispered, and then his other hand moved to encircle and squeeze her right breast, the cup of the bra covered by its own bud. (He had seen her! How had it happened without his even sneaking a peek? Was it a bizarre gift all boys had or had he merely looked so cleverly he hadn’t been caught?) Then he kissed gently at her neck and said, almost with sorrow, “I wish I had a hundred hands to hold all your flowers,” and his fingers moved under her panties, as if burrowing to the place from which the rose had grown.

He put one, then two, then three fingers inside her, and Allie was ashamed and grateful that she was growing wet, and she moaned more and, never having done this before, darkness all around her, her death no longer imminent, moved her hand down amid all the other hands to press him in deeper. Then she got so wet his fingers fell in to their knuckles, and he caught her nipple between the first and second fingers of his other hand, as if he were using a soft scissors to snip it or something. She couldn’t think straight, it was all connected – the flower – like she and the boy were connected, and she leaned her head back so her cheek was on his, and she came, which only ever happened to her when she was alone, using that old embroidered pillow her parents had given her as a tenth birthday gift.

“This stop is Times Square,” someone who wasn’t real announced.

It was every man for himself now – no more of one mind, some in the car struck out on their own, showing little concern for those who stayed behind, indeed using their arms and legs as springboards or stepladders to get out the door. Disentangling from each other, Allie and Sari were soon among this exiting and unsentimental group, though Allie whispered “excuse

me” to a woman she practically jabbed unconscious with her elbow, a courtesy attributable to a country upbringing not yet as far behind her as Union Square.

“Let’s go uptown,” the boy said.

Soon there was a new platform and more new people – would she ever see the same face twice in New York? Allie wondered. (In her own town, even the guy at the gas station remembered she’d been a colicky child.) Well, of course you would: she had seen the boy again, as clear as if she’d conjured him; if she’d hadn’t so desired, he would have disappeared. This was another truth about the city: you could work your will on it just as it did a job on you. If it called an alert, you could become awake in your own way; it was a contest of wills that anyone could enter, even Allie.

Now it was as if the boy and she were starting something over – was it their lives? as big as that? – because the new train they fought to board was numbered 1, the first of its kind. It was just as jammed, and they quickly laid claim to the same center pole, the way an old couple always had the same seats in the movie theater back home and resented you irrationally if you had the temerity to sit there.

This time, from behind, he hung his hands off the belt of her skirt, the sides of his thin arms brushing her breasts and even flexing a little, so she’d feel it. This time, as they took off, she felt the erection in his jeans up against her behind, half-exposed in her tilted and distorted panties, still not fully fixed from the last time. He used it to push open her cheeks the way he’d barreled by people in the crowd, and it felt fatter than the only other one she’d felt, the one of her ex-boyfriend, what was his name, and she tensed her ass around it, something she’d never done before and yet knew immediately how to do. He moved slowly up and down against her opening, and then suddenly he stopped moving and his arm rang tightly around her waist and he kissed into her hair and whispered, “Oh, no, not here,” and Allie felt sorry she had forced something from him, a promise or a story from his past, except she suspected he really was going to share it with her, anyway, and only wanted

her to think she'd convinced him to, she was that sophisticated now.

After standing there utterly unconscious, Allie looked up. For the first time, she was aware of someone watching her, from only inches away. It was a middle-aged man in a business suit with a ferrety face and a five o'clock shadow Allie was immediately prepared for his disapproval – and weirdly she couldn't look away, as if not allowed not to wait for it – but instead he stared back with a mixture of desire and disgust so strong that it startled her. She had never been aware of provoking such intense feelings in someone (though she had, in the very guy from the gas station who'd seen her grow up, though he never stood so close, that was another difference in the city). Allie stared back to confirm and then truly understand what she had inspired. But her comprehension was cut short by their arrival in a station she had not even known they were approaching.

“Seventy-second street,” an unseen robot woman said.

They raced across the platform to the 2 train – child of the first, look what they had created! – and, as far as they were concerned now, the more crowded the better. For a change, they sat down, covered by a curtain of people, and he had one hand under her and the other around her and his feeling and fingering of her was so intense she felt it caused the train to blast by stations, as if the thing itself was staring at them and lost its place, as Allie herself had, so far from home. Then she noticed the word “Express” where the train's number was and knew that meant they had been matching its momentum and not it their own. To muffle her moans, she pushed her tongue into the boy's ear, another new experience, and it tasted nasty like everything adult did, she figured, before you learned to like it.

They got off at 125th Street, a stop actually and improbably outside. The crowds were sparser, and the boy seemed in no more hurry to catch another ride. Instead, holding her hand as gently as a child, he guided her slowly to an escalator so long it looked like something out of that song “Stairway to Heaven”

Dan had droned along with, except this one led oddly up to Earth, which turned out to be a street hiding shyly beneath an elevated track.

The boy brought her to a brownstone, the bottom floor of which held a Spanish restaurant, and the tasty smell of cooked bananas followed them up the stairs until they climbed so high they lost it and stopped at the top.

His apartment had two or three rooms and, though they were alone in it, Allie could tell there were other inhabitants, that maybe he still lived with his family, too; she hoped so, for this would link them more.

In the kitchen, which had a bathtub, he gave her a glass of water but he was kissing her before she could finish it. His own room had just a bed and TV and a few self-help books on shelves. He mumbled something about his mother having gone to work; it was around five and, if she had just gone and was not now coming home . . . but before she could ask or he offer anything else, he was on his knees, raising her skirt, kissing lightly between her legs, then licking at the rose itself before, nearly begging her, he took off her underwear altogether.

It was different from how it had been on the trains – they were alone, obviously, and less hot because a breeze blew in from the window – yet she still had a sense of their subverting other people’s desires, maybe just his mother’s now and not the whole city’s. And it was different from the other time for her – there were no TV ads in the background, no sounds at all except an occasional car horn passing or a car radio playing salsa – and it was not as fast as the first time: as he completely undressed and touched and kissed her all over, she felt everything he intended her to feel, and when she reciprocated it was not out of resentful obligation as before but with a sense that getting and giving were now the same thing, a new idea she could not completely explain, even to herself.

She whispered “wow” when she finally found him in her hand, almost unnerved by how much there was and how complicated it seemed. There were so many lines and streams and little dots like stars upon him, as if he had his

own transportation system and was so big the map of it was magnified, she could find her way around it easily: she was surprised by how much more excited she was about this penis than the last one.

He fought a condom onto himself and she helped him do it, gingerly, not wanting to hurt him, but she did, anyway, when the rubber got caught in the hairs at the base, and he had to pull each one out individually, wincing the whole way.

Then, it was funny, both were wearing nothing but gold chains. Allie's said "Allie" and his said "Tony" – it was his real name at last; she read it the instant he entered her, as if she really only knew him then, and she said his name and kept saying it each time he pushed inside, expanding her knowledge of the world. He came a second after she did, he actually had that ability, it was incredible, and Allie thought (typically for her, for she was still the same girl) he was one of the very few and maybe the only person on Earth who did.

Then he turned her over on her belly and straddled her and whispered, as an apology, "I have to do this," as if it was a secret no one else could ever know, and he didn't enter but only adorned her, and his sweat and other body liquids lacquered her, and she felt enjoyed to the last drop like that turkey on Thanksgiving everybody liked so much; so little had been left of it, and that's what she wanted, too, to disappear for his pleasure, leaving only bits of skin behind; he'd need a new one of her next year.

Afterwards, he considerately cleaned her off with a Kleenex, then kissed her gently from her neck to her knees before she saw his pretty face again.

She slept for an unknown amount of time, anywhere from two minutes to twenty-four hours. When she woke up, not knowing where she was, she saw the boy too close to be in focus, stretched alongside her, staring right into her eyes and smiling, like a child waiting for a parent to get up.

They took a shower together, and they would have started up again – there was something about his being so wet and

scrawny except for, well, you know where; and ready to go again, he was like the New York City subway, available at any hour – but, through the tiny bathroom window, she saw that the sun had set, and she realized what time it must be and what trouble she was in.

Allie was surprised how different the kinds of disobedience could make you feel. This kind immediately eliminated any interest she had in more love-making and made dread an almost physical feeling, a form of nausea.

She quickly put her clammy clothes back on, which were soaked by shower water she had hardly wiped away, and her hair was so wet it dripped even more on her shirt and skirt and onto the floor, where it made an amazingly big puddle for someone with such a small head, and it was helpful to concentrate on that and not on the dialing of Dan's cellphone on Tony's home phone, which was just about to end, oh, why weren't there more (a never-ending amount of) numbers to it?

To her relief, Dan was more frantic than furious, and his cellphone had such bad reception she only caught every other excoriation. His main points, however, were clear: he had trusted her and she had betrayed him, he hated but would have to tell her parents, this was no day to be running around wild in the city, he didn't know who this boy was, anyway, and they had to leave now, not in half an hour but now.

Allie noticed that Dan could give full flower to his fears now that the day was over and there could be no more selling of *miche*. Nonetheless, she would have been mortified by his admonishments if Tony had not been standing beside her in his underwear, dripping wet as well, making screamingly funny faces to mock what he was sure Dan was saying. When he put his hands on his narrow hips and strutted around like a stupid idiot, then moved his lips as if Dan were a pissed-off pigeon or something, Allie had to lightly bite her cheeks not to laugh when she said, "I'll be there as fast as I can."

When Tony heard that, he got strangely serious. He pulled over a piece of old newspaper, then swiftly scribbled on its side

margin, then raised for her to read: “Take the train. I want to see you off.”

The certainty of the words impressed Allie, more than Dan was impressing her – after all, what had he done for her today? Tony knew where it all stood in the city – the truth about the threat – he was the wisest person she had ever met, and she felt closer to him than to anyone in the world. Egged on by Tony nodding over and over, pointing to his penciled message – not aware he looked kind of funny now, because he was the one so serious – Allie obediently blurted out, “I’ll take the train,” then pressed the button and deserted Dan, a gesture nowhere near as satisfying as slamming down the phone but the best she could do and actually not so bad.

They took the subway back downtown. By now, there were only a few passengers scattered through the cars, those who chose not those who needed. The tension – the terror – of commuting during a catastrophe had eased, and the people who remained were either resigned or indifferent to it, and too few for it to be fun or feasible to fool around in their midst. Besides, the urge had passed.

When they reached Penn Station, it seemed massive and clogged but not in a good way. Allie felt small and lost in its frankly grubby expanse – so many people were pushing valises on wheels with the sad faces of those traveling to funerals of friends – and she held onto Tony’s arm tightly now, not wanting him to drift away an inch.

She noticed that he seemed impatient, glancing around, as if anticipating something. “All’s clear here,” he said, and sounded disappointed.

Then the two of them stopped, because they were forced to.

Three policemen in the near-distance were waving at them and everyone else. Not wasting time with courtesy, they yelled to “go back” and “get out.” Soon other officers of all sizes and both sexes were crudely herding then virtually pushing them back the way they came.

Dozens of them were deposited outside, many obviously late for trips they had planned much longer than Allie had her own.

Those who joined them were offended, annoyed, or – quietly but it was clear – made uneasy by having this happen. Allie heard someone say, “They found something,” and someone else, “a suitcase,” and finally, in a New York-accented voice trying hard to sound more inconvenienced than afraid, “Jesus Cwist.” Then there was the approaching sound of sirens and car after car after car of cops pulled up.

When Allie looked to Tony for an explanation, she saw he was smirking in his by now signature style.

“Idiots,” he said, with certainty. “All of them.”

Allie was comforted by his typical tone of voice which seemed to restore and bring about calm. Yet she couldn’t help recalling that he had said he’d see her off, yet had never mentioned seeing her again. And that he breathed a bit easier – and spoke with satisfied bitterness – now that the cops had found a bag.

“It’s nothing,” he said. “A fake. And they fell for it. They always will.”

He lit a cigarette, something she had never seen him do, and exhaled smoke with indifference into the surrounding crowd. He appeared to enjoy the discomfort it caused and replied with a smiling obscenity when someone asked him to stop.

Allie couldn’t help it, she saw more images from awful movies: Tony dissolving into a wolf or whatever villain the actor really was. Was there not a second he could be serious about such a thing? Was that how deep his disgust with the world went? And what did that say about how he felt about her? She was afraid to ask.

Slowly, she felt an alteration in herself, as well. She felt her judgment of others returning; from fear of being tossed away by him, she was morphing like people in movies, too, back into a moralist.

“Well,” she said. “I think it’s awful.”

“What?”

“That someone would do such a thing. Plant a bag.”

They certainly would never have done it back home – a phony phone call was the worst kind of prank they pulled.

“Don’t get on your high horse,” he said.

“I’m not.”

“You’re going to buy into this now?”

“Well, why not? What would officials get out of faking it?”

“Lots of things. Keeping us controlled. Making us behave. And what do you mean, ‘get out of it’? It’s not like you did so badly by it.”

The remark shook Allie like seeing a death notice in a newspaper of someone she knew. She imagined ringing in her ears like a kind of cash register, the daily exchange of services that went on where they were, that you would always hear as long as the city existed, no matter how many silent computers took their place to do the tally: the way of a world in which people lived too close to do anything decent with each other. Even in this new era – even if it was the end of the world – there were opportunities to make a deal, and she’d been smack in the middle of one and was mortified by it.

“Please get away from me,” she said.

Allie fought through the new crowd – after those which had been so secret and stimulating, this one felt fit to suffocate her. Her need to escape was greater than the crowd’s to gather and so soon she was free of it and him, the boy she hated now because she was vulnerable and he had made her ashamed.

“Help me, help me,” she said to a female cop whom she crashed into and who – not very kindly – told her to please clear the area.

Allie hid a few blocks away in a chain coffee store, one not yet transplanted to her town. She checked out the window with false casualness, but she never saw Tony approaching. Did she want him to pursue her? Definitely not, which meant yes, though Allie was so rattled it was hard to imagine what he could have said to mollify her, and besides, he didn’t come or couldn’t find her.

Soon some of the people chased from the station had drifted as far as she had fled and were standing outside and smoking, philosophically. A few even joined her in the shop, shaking

their heads at the modern world, and that's how she heard that the station was open again, the emergency was over, and the bag had been a bad joke.

She walked back in the dark, asking strangers for directions when she only had to retrace her steps, not wanting to know, to be at ease any longer in this environment. When she reached the station, she saw no one she recognized – he was not there waiting, in other words. She paced outside, ostensibly to catch her breath but really to see if he'd show up; but she was soon shooed inside by overeager cab drivers who could tell she was a tourist (the fanny pack was just the beginning) and wished to take her anywhere on Earth for way too much.

On the escalator going down and in, Allie called Dan's cell and told him she was on her way, her parents shouldn't worry, let him break it to them that she'd be late. Maybe – she thought with hope that was really fear that was really disillusionment – they might not mind so very much.

Dan was still on the road, alone in his truck without even bread along for the ride, and was relieved and conciliatory. He told her what train to take, something she could have learned for herself, if she hadn't again made herself helpless.

After she boarded, Allie watched out the window to see if Tony would come running in, last-minute, like someone from another movie, a romantic one this time, and maybe he'd get stuck on the train because he'd taken so long to say he loved her, and he'd have to actually go upstate with her, and that would be the end. But he didn't come or had gone to the wrong car.

The train pulled out – it was a commuter model, with cushioned seats unlike the subway and still sort of crowded, for there'd been back-ups due to the disruptive bag. Allie stared at the receding platform and thought about the boy. She cried in great choking, child-like sobs, hoping the humiliating sound would be smothered by the train's exhaust. Then she dried her face on her bare forearms, for she had no tissue or even sleeves.

By going to her home the train seemed to be taking her back in time. Yet – like everything else on Earth – Allie was actually going forward. Slowly, she felt even angrier now than before she'd come, more prone to punish, and this was a mere glimpse of how she'd be later in her life.

On her cellphone, she dialed 911 and spoke loudly enough to be heard by the operator but low enough not to disturb her seatmate, a man dozing fitfully. She didn't know the boy's last name or actual address, but she knew his first name and the number on his family's phone, and she thought someone could use the information.

"He was dark, probably foreign. Maybe he had something to do with planting that bag."

Even though he was innocent, he might be taught a lesson and given a good talking to. She didn't say her own name and hung up when they asked.

Then the train went into a new tunnel, one so dark she could no longer see herself. And in it, she fell asleep.

The alert, in which the boy had not believed, was about to become very real for him. For Allie, it would quickly become an edited, censored, self-aggrandizing anecdote she repeated to her family and friends back in town. And, inevitably, it would fade like a flower, until it was a memory as distant, foggy, and half-forgotten as a dream.