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OFF CENTER

When Eevee didn't show up by two A.M. I wrote a note telling her to move out tomorrow and hung it on the door. At the window I watched an old French guy across the alleyway standing in his room, shirtless. It looked like he was pinching his nipples. Blue television light jumped on his walls, shook in the window, bounced off his round stomach. Eevee didn't come home; it got to be three in the morning. I put some clothes on and went out.

A lot of people on the sidewalks down Rue Oberkampf were drunk, spilling out of bars, leaning against the stonewalls that shed layers of political posters. I passed the fromagerie where Eevee bought chevre wrapped in orange wax paper every couple days. A wet smell of mold leaked from behind the shop's graffitied metal blinds.

When I turned the corner a homeless guy shouted from beneath a crooked scaffolding. I don't think he was speaking French—it sounded Arabic. His legs bent awkwardly in, knees meeting close to the ground. He held a hand out towards me, the other propped him against the wall. The way the streetlight slanted through the scaffolding I could only see pieces of him, the drooping corner of his mouth, a cigarette he pinched between two fingers. He spat at me. I started thinking Eevee's body could be stuffed into a bush somewhere down the sprawling median of Boulevard Richard Lenoir.

Before we left the States Eevee's father told me to take good care of her while we were in Paris. I told him I would though I wasn't sure what that really meant. It was late and Eevee was out in the city somewhere. She said she'd be back by one. I should have gone with her. This wasn't taking care of her. I started running.

Down by the Bastille kids in baggy pants and ribbed tank tops jumped onto each other's backs and passed around green cans of beer. I found the road, Rue de Faubourg, where Eeve had gone for drinks with some Americans from her language class. The street was full of dance clubs Eeve could've been in, dancing up against some French guy who'd whisper in her ear between songs, his hand on her hip.

I heard some Americans talking in a window so I went inside. People sat over very low tables or wavered up around the dark wooden bar, sipping from thin glasses. The place was lit by red paper lanterns hung from thick chains. I walked over to where the Americans were sitting and said, "Hey there."

They fell silent and looked up at me. "I was wondering," I said, "if you've seen Eeve?"

"What's that?" one of them said. I pulled up a chair and described Eeve, but they hadn't seen her. "Are you sure?" I said. A couple of them laughed and rolled their eyes.

When I was a kid I often fantasized on my walk home from school that the world would turn in some way so that when I got home my mom would no longer exist. Some old woman with thinning blue hair would answer the door, looking for my box of cookies or the pledge sheet. I'd be the only thing left in the world I recognized.

I told them this at the bar and everyone seemed to be listening, except a guy in a tight shirt unbuttoned down the front, a large silver medallion against his hairless chest, greasy curls falling down over his eyes. He stared at me with vivid hatred. I knew I shouldn't have been sitting there. I should've been looking for Eeve.

Across the bar a couple sat close together, heads leaning in, drinks ignored before them, hands all over each other's legs and arms. The woman slid her arm behind the man and pulled him closer. I told the Americans that I was almost always afraid of driving Eeve away, because when I saw her walk past a doorway through which I was looking and the way her legs shifted, just simple walking, this made

me happier than I could remember feeling in my life before I met her. They nodded as though they understood and maybe they did. You can never be sure. I left and walked up the street which was full of people pushing past me with lowered shoulders.

I stepped up into the doorway of a shoe shop. The gated window was full of pale, painfully pointed high heel shoes. Dark patches of urine stained the wall. I knew I'd never be able, in that mess of streets and crowds, to find Eevee. This was the kind of thing I think my mom needed to learn, with her search for my father back in the States: to just give up, because there are some things that you aren't going to find, because they aren't likely there to begin with.

I stopped for a beer in a place that spilled a sick green light. The place was almost empty, but the tile floor was littered with crushed cigarette butts. An old man at the bar started talking to me about America. That's about all I could understand, that and a word that I think meant responsibility. His voice slurred and I watched a large bumpy mole jump on his neck. I agreed with everything he had to say. He said something about *terroristes*. He pointed at his chest and said, "*Algerian*," loudly. I said, "*Oui, oui*," over and over and stared at his jowls, his mole. There were scars on his cheeks, like wagon ruts on an abandoned path, worn and softened over time.

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The next morning Eevee and I went for coffee. She spoke in French with the waiter. An old man at the counter glared at us, unhappy with our Americanness. To avoid looking at him, I stared at the pinball machine in the corner. The game was called Monster Mash. There was a decal on its side: a female Frankenstein, bright frizzy hair, bowling down a cluster of goblins with a human skull. I'd doodled this image in the margins of my French phrase book several times, while pretending to study. Coming to Europe had been Eevee's

idea. It was something she'd always wanted to do, study French in Paris. We'd been there three weeks and I still got around by pointing, nodding, waiting for people to speak English.

We drank our café crèmes and Eeve said a friend of hers had emailed and his photography exhibit was going to show in Paris that week. "We should go," she said. I knew without asking who this guy was: Edgar, not just a friend, an ex-boyfriend. I glanced at the old guy at the counter. He was grinding something up with his jaw, like a cow, and staring as though he wanted to tip our table over.

When I got home from the bar the night before, drunk, Eeve was in bed. I sat down in a chair and looked out our window. The apartments across the street were dark, curtains down. Eventually, Eeve sat up in bed and said, "What are you doing over there?" eyes barely open, hair standing up. I took off my pants and climbed in next to her and fell immediately asleep as though everything was perfectly under control.

While she got dressed the next morning Eeve asked if I'd had a good time. "You were out when I got home," she said. I dabbed a bead of water that was rolling down her cheek and said that I'd gone for a walk. "I was restless," I said. When I pulled on my pants I could feel the bulge of the note telling her to move out in my pocket.

In the café, I was also thinking about Edgar. Eeve had lived with him for three years before we met. "Did you ever think of marrying him?" I asked a while ago.

"Of course," she said. My stomach curdled. "But it wouldn't have worked out."

"Why's that?" I asked. I looked steady, but it felt like there were mice in my mouth, scraping at my cheeks.

"I wasn't very happy," she said.

We finished our coffees and ordered more while Eeve told me about Edgar's photography, how it had hung in a gallery in Chelsea and some rich French guy had loved it and invited Edgar to show at

his gallery in Paris. I interrupted, asked if Edgar was going to be staying with us.

“Here?” she said, looking around the café.

“Our apartment. Did you invite him to stay at our place, because I don’t think that’s going to work.” Eevee didn’t respond immediately because a caravan of police trucks poured into the intersection, small cars with the lights going and large blue vans, sliding doors open so we could see bored-looking men cradling machine guns, then two low black limousines with flags on the hood and then more vans full of men and eventually the sirens faded.

“Please, Ben,” she said. “Don’t do that.” I was being ridiculous. I stared at the pinball machine. A childish urge welled in my throat, like when I’m driving over a bridge and all I can think about is what it’d be like to plow through the barrier and watch the gray water rush up at me. I controlled myself and didn’t respond.

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That afternoon my mom called and told me that she’d found my father. Her voice was staccato, piling up in the undersea lines, then pouring out in a crumpled rush. We didn’t even say hello, she just said, “Ben?” and launched into it. “He’s living in Arizona. Some town I’ve never heard of. Williams, Arizona? Anyway, he lives there.” I’ve never really met my father. He disappeared when I was one.

“What are you doing, Mom?” I said. I went to the window and looked for the nipple-pinching French guy I’d seen the night before, but the curtains were still drawn.

“I’m curious,” she said. “Aren’t you at least *curious*?”

“No,” I told her. I hated the idea of meeting my father.

“Liar,” she said.

“Are you going to Arizona?”

"I'm not sure," she said. My mom retired a year ago at the age of fifty-two. Through she raised me alone, she finished her Ph.D. in biochemistry, worked for some large companies and was very successful. She's a brilliant woman. But sad. She should've kept on working, even if she didn't need to. The search for my father started as a pastime, like some people play at genealogy, but it came to dominate her life.

"You should come visit us instead," I said.

"Are you having fun?" she asked. I could tell she just wanted to talk about my father.

"Where is Williams?"

"In the northern part of the state," she said, happily. "Near Flagstaff, though I'm not sure if it's in the mountains."

"Oh," was all I could think of. After that we got off the phone quickly. Eevee was watching me from the couch. A Matisse print that came with the apartment hung slightly askew on the wall behind her. Our apartment was small, sterile, expensive and never felt like home. I sat next to Eevee and looked at the purple flowers in the terra cotta pot I'd bought her a few days before. She said she'd plant the flowers somewhere in the city before we left Paris, but when I imagined the scene I saw policemen with their hands tight on Eevee's arms, hauling her away. She took my hand and squeezed it, harder and harder until I started laughing.

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When I first met Eevee a friend of mine said, "Wow. She's out of your league, though, isn't she?" Most of me agreed with him. Eevee invited me over for dinner three nights in a row and I didn't try to kiss her, because the idea that she wanted me to was absurd. She invited me over for a fourth night. We watched three movies, drank three bottles of wine. The last bottle almost gone, she took my hand

and squeezed the tips of my fingers. I leaned over and kissed her. She pressed right up against me and I tried not to smile or laugh or scrape her with my teeth.

Evee was already planning on quitting her job and moving to Paris when we met. She asked me to come along. I felt like I was closer to her than I'd been to anyone in my life. And still, she was there in our apartment, slicing up bread and cheese, an open bottle of wine on the counter, but she could be, I felt, in what amounted to an entirely different world.

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The next day I got an email from my mom with a link to the Chamber of Commerce for Williams, Arizona. I wrote back, deleting out the link and telling her about all the armed policemen we'd been seeing. George Bush was coming to Paris in a few days and the security was heightened.

Evee was in class where I was supposed to go that afternoon, but I'd dropped out. She didn't know this and I pretended to study in the mornings. I looked over the colorful book of French phrases. There were pictures of happy young people walking around laughing and aerial shots of Paris, Nice, the cathedral of Mont St. Michel. Evee jotted notes and I doodled in the margins. She was always asking me to speak French, said we should practice. I acted evasive, joked and called her *ma petite canard*.

Instead of going to class I'd been walking around. In the beginning I stuck close to the classy neighborhoods: the Marais, Saint Germaine, the swank sixteenth arrondissement where our school was. I took pictures of streets lined with ornate facades, a rich old man in a beige, tailored suit holding a shiny cane topped with a golden knob. I spent a lot of time around fountains, walking back and forth across the Pont Neuf, visiting all the tourist sights. Then I started branch-

ing out into the peripheral neighborhoods, horrible suburbs slamming up into projects. Large apartment buildings of 1970s style architecture, fading blue and dirty white paint smeared over concrete walls. The buildings seemed on the verge of collapse, stabbing up randomly and individually, rusted railings hung with limp laundry.

In these neighborhoods everyone could tell I was American from my shoes and jacket. The afternoon after writing my mom, I was in the twentieth arrondissement near a chaotic flea market. I passed a black guy and he stuffed a flyer into my hand that announced a protest against George Bush on Thursday. When I looked back the guy was laughing.

Still, I felt more comfortable in the peripheral neighborhoods than I did down in the Place de la Concorde, where heavily armed policemen in bulletproof vests were stationed outside the American embassy. Down there I felt myself looking at the sky, waiting for a plane to come barreling down and plow, a fire ball, into the row of pale stone buildings. In the center of Paris people were too classy, too skinny, smooth skin, nicely arranged hair, unsuspecting of disaster, which could always be right around the corner. But in the fringes of the city people walked hunched, clutching their bags in white knuckled fists.

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Don't you want to know?" my mom asked many times.

I always said, "He's a stranger."

"To you he is," she'd say. She, after all, had known him. But after so much time, I could've pointed out, he was likely now just as much a stranger to her. At least he and I would have had in common our inability to understand my mom's need to know. "What do you think I want out of this?" she asked me. "I just want to meet him. I'm getting older. I want to meet him, take him out to dinner. We



can talk if he wants. I'm not trying to get answers, Ben, I just want to see him and be nice to him. What's wrong with that?"

Once my mom and I were driving through North Dakota to get to Canada to visit a friend of hers in Calgary. We stopped for lunch in Fargo, the largest town in the state, but which looked to me to be little more than rows of red brick buildings with warehouses on the horizon. Large dirty pickup trucks were parked all along the street, empty lots with drifting plastic bags catching on leaning wire fences.

We went to a diner. I didn't notice, dazed from three days in the car, that my mom wasn't eating until I'd finished. Her face was drawn and pale. I asked what was wrong.

"Shut up," she said. I looked around the restaurant. It was busy. At nearly every table men in suits sat with their jackets hung from pegs on the wall, eating sandwiches.

"Which one is he?" I said.

"Yellow tie, black shoes," she whispered.

In the center of the room a man was eating by himself, in a yellow tie, a faded blue oxford shirt and shiny black shoes. His eyebrows connected across his face in a thick line. There was a book next to his plate. Before my mom could do anything I got up.

"Ben," she hissed, but I hurried away from our table. "Get back," she said, loud. Some people looked at me. I walked over towards the man and when I got behind him, I tripped myself, fell and grabbed his chair as I went to ground. He looked down at me and smiled. One of his front teeth was dull gold, as though it'd been buffed with sandpaper.

"Sorry," I said. I wanted him to speak, but he didn't say anything. He smelled of garlic. I wanted to jump into his lap, to see if, with our bodies touching in such a way, I could remember something, dredge up one memory, because he looked, breathing over me, dark nose hairs trembling, unfamiliar and foreign.

My mom dragged me back to our table and ate her lunch primly. We left and she didn't say anything until the Canadian border. Then

she said, "I guess it wasn't him, huh?" and laughed and turned the radio up loud.

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Two days after telling me about Edgar's show, Eevee brought home something she'd printed off the Internet. I held the page, droopy with ink, in one corner, as though it was contaminated. "It's a stomach," she said, which was clear and she didn't have to tell me whose stomach. I recognized the bracelet on her thin arm. I also didn't need to ask where she'd gotten this, or who'd taken the picture in which she's standing a bit off-center with a gray wall behind her. She's wearing a black tank top that's a little too short and which rides up over her green checked skirt. The skirt is almost transparent. You can see a hint of the line of her underwear. There's a little story next to it that seems to be about Eevee, though it calls her a woman of convenience and talks about screen doors slapping shut.

I handed the page back. "Wow," I said, because she was waiting for me to say something. She rolled her eyes. "It's a good picture, Eevee, what do you want me to say?"

For a second we stood there and listened to another entourage of sirens crescendo past. "I want you not to be crazy," she said, eventually.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, and she gave up, sat on the couch. I sat too close and flipped through a book, but after a minute I looked at her. She looked sad. I kissed her cheek several times, feeling panicky that I could make her so unhappy so easily, so selfishly. She moved to the chair across the room.

Her family adored – the word they used – Edgar. Her mom called Edgar a genius. "Edgar is going to be huge," her mom had said, throwing her arms out wide. Eevee's father asked about Edgar each time we visited.

“So,” he said, and I always knew what was coming. “How is Edgar, anyway? I saw the write up of his show in the *New York Times*. Looks interesting.” Eevee was as good with this towards me as she could be, but she wasn’t about to deny a part of her life because it made me uncomfortable. I loved her for this. I loved her for standing up for her past when I acted absurd.

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When I was a kid my mom and I would occasionally go to New York for vacations to visit her sister, a lawyer who lived on Great Jones Street. During the day we walked around the city, frequently stopping for coffee so that by dinner our hands shook and we spilled water on the table cloths at the fancy restaurants my aunt loved. Sometimes my mom and I, while we walked, would pretend to find my father.

“There he is!” she’d shout.

“Where?” and she’d point him out, a bald guy in a business suit, scalp shaved meticulously and gleaming, as though rubbed with oil. We’d follow him down the street, ducking behind lampposts, or into doorways of shops where the clerks eyed us warily and my mom would whisper, “He always liked bad suits. Maybe he’s going to meet his mistress.”

“Or his wife,” I’d say and my mother would shake her head. She knew better than me. Every once in a while I’d pretend I’d found him.

“Mom, he’s over there,” I’d say. But the game only functioned when she started it. I’d point to an aging hipster with a guitar case cradled in his arms, hair ruffled, and she’d say, “Stop it, Ben,” with a concerned, angry look. She’d start walking faster without looking back so that if I stopped she might have turned the corner and been gone and I’d be left to stand like that with people bumping all around

me until night fell and the sidewalks cleared and yellow glaring cabs bounced wildly up and down the streets.

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When I helped Eeve move her things into storage before Paris I was left alone one afternoon with a box of her photographs. There were dozens of her and Edgar who had, in my opinion, too long a nose and a sour, smart-ass face. Worse than pictures with the two of them were the pictures of Edgar by himself. Edgar opening presents on his birthday, on Christmas, another Christmas, at Thanksgiving laughing with Eeve's dad, driving her car with a mattress strapped to the roof, smirking at the camera. I imagined Eeve peering through the viewfinder and loving Edgar on the other side.

From the whole pile of photos I kept only three. One of Edgar lying on his back with his glasses askew, eyes shut, grinning, no shirt on and, as far as you can tell, no pants either. A picture of Eeve pointing at a seagull. A last shot of the two of them together. I sometimes held this one up to pictures of Eeve and me. I'd try and find a way to compare the happiness I saw in her in each.

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Over the next couple of days I got a string of emails and phone calls from my mom. They built up to, "I'm going to Arizona," which she said two days before Edgar's photography opening. I didn't want her to find my father. I didn't want to know what he was like, because he was probably an asshole. Maybe, down in his heart, he'd want good things from life, for others. But likely he wouldn't know how to show this and so would be frustrated and feel trapped up inside his own mind, which is a sad, pathetic, common way to feel.

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Though I was determined not to let this happen I feel I've gotten this far and haven't made it nakedly clear why I love Eevee. Meeting her was as though you'd spent the first twenty-five years of your life on a shadeless stretch of sand with only a thin hotel towel. Sweat ran forever in small streams down your back. And then, while sweating, the sun baking and little flecks of too-bright light everywhere, you found in front of you the crinkled ocean. When you ran over the scalding sand and waded in the coolness, the release into the way you'd hoped things could be, seemed like the only sensation you'd ever known. As you floated there in the water, just a slight turning of your arms to keep you afloat, you could hear the shuffling of the rocks, drawn up and back down over themselves by the tide.

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Edgar's gallery was in the Marais, on Rue de Roquet, near the Jewish synagogue. Open vans full of heavily-armed policemen trolled the neighborhood. Eevee took my hand while we walked. We stopped to look through the thick iron fence of the Place de Vosges where gravel paths wound between low round trees. "We should come here," she said, "for a picnic on Sunday." I agreed and held onto this idea—what we'd bring, what Eevee would look like, chewing a baguette heaped with chevre, crumbs all over our laps.

Well-dressed people milled on the sidewalk outside the gallery and we went past them into the bright white space. The walls were hung with enormous photographs, each with white text dropped out: sometimes just a line at the bottom, sometimes a paragraph. I stopped to read one. The picture was of a woman though her head was cropped off, the middle of her body filling the frame. She was wearing a beige leather jacket with a red scarf hanging down the

middle. The text was a kind of fantasy, talking about the woman in the image in the plural, or maybe it wasn't a reference to her at all.

"It's so good to see you," someone said and when I turned around Eevee and Edgar were hugging. Edgar shook my hand. He was more handsome in person than the photos had prepared me for. He seemed nervous, shifting his weight from foot to foot and glancing around.

"Nerve-wracking," he said. Most of the people in the gallery were older and dressed as though this was the Opera. I could hear some American couples, trying their best to speak in low voices so as not to give themselves away, but mostly the crowd was Parisian and they studied the photos with squinted eyes that didn't tell if they were interested, disgusted or bored.

Evee told Edgar about our coming to Paris, how our apartment was only a ten minute walk away. "That's great," he said. "I wish I could do that kind of thing." I wanted to tell Edgar to shut his mouth (wasn't he here, doing that kind of thing, with his own goddamn gallery show?), but didn't, because, strangely, I liked him. He seemed properly afraid of the world and was trying to get through it without disrupting too much. Soon we were laughing. I started thinking I could be Edgar's friend. He could come over for dinner. Edgar said, "I'll get us some wine."

I was watching him walk across the room when Eevee touched my arm and said, "Oh, my god, I forgot. Your mom called. She said she's in Arizona." Eevee pulled a piece of paper out of her purse. "Here's the number of the hotel. She said for you to call her there as soon as you can."

I took the slip of paper. Eevee said she was sorry she'd forgotten. I looked past her at a large picture of a pickup truck parked in a dark green field. *This truck is centered*, was written at the bottom of the image. The piece of paper with my mom's number seemed to weigh a great deal and Eevee's forgetting, the fact that I hadn't been thinking about my mom's impulsive, stupid act, burned away all the light-

ness I'd been feeling. Edgar was coming back across the room. "I better call," I said and went out without looking back.

My mom picked up on the second ring and said, "Ben?" We had a crystal clear connection across the Atlantic that made me feel I was back in America. I closed my eyes to block out all the stylish French people, but little cars were honking everywhere.

"So, I made it," my mom said. I heard ice tinkling against glass. "I already drove by his house, but just once, there wasn't a car in the garage. It's a crappy house. I don't think he's married. I think he's living alone. But then I came right back here because I thought you'd call."

She kept on talking, but I lost the thread.

"Why didn't you wait until I got back?" I said. "I could've gone with you."

"Believe it or not, there are some things I can do for myself. I know I'm old and withered, but I can board airplanes, get a hotel room. It's amazing."

"We're at a gallery," I said. I was desperate to distract her. Maybe I could convince her to give up without things getting any further out of control. I knew my father was a bastard and he would, inevitably, make her miserable, again.

"Ben," she said, "I want you to know something." I knew exactly what she was doing. She was looking out the window of her hotel at the parking lot across the street where some kids were sitting in a car, doors open, tinted windows rolled halfway down, loud music pulsing out of the speakers in the trunk, sounding to my mom like static and she thought it was sad how kids spent their time these days. The kids looked, to her, full of violence. "I like Evee. Have I told you that? I think you should stay with her, and not drive her crazy, and then I think you two should get married."

I said, "That's what I want too, Mom." We sat in silence. Across the street a man in worn out jeans and coat was shouting. A white haired woman opened her window, leaned over her box of flowers

and threw a book at the guy. The book thumped open on the sidewalk. The man made an obscene gesture at the window, grabbed the book and took off down the street. I said, "When are you going home?"

"Before any of that," my mom said, "I'm going to go over to your father's house and meet him. This evening. It's early here, you know. I'm going to go and talk to him. I'll tell him how you're doing if you want. He used to love steak, so I'll offer to take him to dinner. If he doesn't want any of that, then I'll leave him alone. My flight is in two days."

"Sounds good," I said.

"Bye," my mom said and hung up. I touched the receiver after I put it back into the hook as if it retained something of our conversation.

I went and looked in the gallery window. Edgar had a hand on Eeve's back. In the glass, I could see the people passing on the street behind me, the haze of the sidewalk and the images, inside and out, blurring. Edgar leaned in towards Eeve, as though to kiss her and at the same I saw a guy climb out of a car on the curb in the street behind me with something in his hands, something dark gray, like a shotgun, and Eeve turned her head, at the last moment, so the kiss landed not on her cheek, but full on her mouth. I turned as quickly as I could, but by the time I did, the man on the street had moved up onto the sidewalk and had hidden the gun inside a black bag. He was handsome, had a goatee, was wearing a short black jacket with a silver zipper and tennis shoes. I looked through the window and saw Eeve laughing, and then she lifted her wine glass to her mouth and looked around quickly, for me. This unhinged me from the pavement. I turned to step towards the guy with the shotgun, to get to him before he could get to the gallery, but he'd already stopped and was talking with another man on the street. They spoke close to one another's ears and then the bag exchanged hands and the men moved quickly apart. My breath wasn't coming very clearly as I watched



this. The sidewalk was full of pleasant people. Should I have contacted the police in their vans to tell them about this, a weapon loose in the streets, passed around in a suspicious way? Though I wanted to commit an act of heroism, something with clear intention and flawless rightness, I didn't.

Spots climbed up in the corners of my eyes. Edgar and Eevee were talking to an older couple who kept shaking Edgar's hand. Eevee had her back to me. I stood outside, trying to catch my breath, waiting for her to turn and find me. Police sirens came from every corner of the city, all of them, I was sure, heading in the wrong direction.