

and got us." She did not sound ashamed of this in the least. As she handed me my box in its plastic bag, she said, "He came all the way over, he had to. Or else we would've stayed forever."

Amanda closed the register drawer and walked me out to the street. The day was warm, and we both wore short sleeves. Her arms were smooth and lightly tanned. On my own arm, the scar was no more than a thin pink line.

We stood a moment in silence, and then Amanda kissed me goodbye on the cheek. I caught her smell—the warm, breadly smell that comes from inside people's clothes. She waved from the door of the shoestore, then went back inside.

I felt a sudden longing not to move from that spot. I could feel where her arms had pressed, where her hands had touched my neck. The smell was still there, warm and rich like the odor a lawn gives off after hours of sunlight. I tried to spot Amanda through the store windows, but sunlight hit the glass so that I couldn't see beyond it.

Finally I began to walk, swinging my bag of shoes. I breathed deeply, inhaling the last of her smell, but it lingered, and after several more blocks I realized that what I smelled was not Amanda. It was myself, and this day of early summer—the fresh, snarled leaves and piles of sunlit dirt. I was almost fifteen years old.

Jennifer Egan

Emerald City and Other Stories

NY: Random House, 1996.

## EMERALD CITY

Rory knew before he came to New York what sort of life he would have. He'd read about it in novels by hip young authors who lived there. He saw the apartment, small but high-ceilinged, a tall, sooty window with a fire escape twisting past a chemical-pink sky. Nights in frantic clubs, mornings hunched over coffee in the East Village, warming his hands on the cup, black pants, black turtleneck, pointed black boots. He'd intended to snort cocaine, but by the time he arrived, that was out. He drank instead.

He was a photographer's assistant, loading cameras all day, holding up light meters, waving Polaroids until they were dry enough to tear open. As he watched the models move, he sometimes worried he was still too California. What could you do with sandy blond hair, cut it off? Short hair was on the wane, at least for men.

So there it hung, golden, straight as paper, reminiscent of beaches he'd never seen, being as he was from Chicago (in Chicago there was the lake, but that didn't count). His other option was to gain or lose some weight, but the starved look had lost its appeal—any suggestion of illness was to be avoided. Beefy was the way to go; not fat, just a classic paunch above the belt. But no matter how much Rory ate, he stayed exactly the same. He took up smoking instead, although it burned his throat.

Rory stubbed out his cigarette and checked to make sure the lights were off in the darkroom. He was always the last to leave; his boss, Vesuvi, would hand him the camera as soon as the last shot was done and then swan out through the sea of film containers, plastic cups, and discarded sheets of backdrop paper. Vesuvi was one of those people who always had somewhere to go. He was blessed with a marvelous paunch, which Rory tried not to admire too openly. He didn't want Vesuvi to get the wrong idea.

Rory swept the debris into bags, then he turned out the lights, locked up the studio, and headed down to the street. Twilight was his favorite hour—metal gates sliding down over storefronts, newspapers whirling from the sidewalk into the sky, an air of promise and abandonment. This was the way he'd expected New York to look, and he was thrilled when the city complied.

He took the subway uptown to visit Stacey, a failing model whom he adored against all reason. Stacey—when girls with names like Zane and Anouschka and Brid regularly slipped him their phone numbers during shoots. Stacey refused to change her name. "If I make it," she said, "they'll be happy to call me whatever." She never acknowledged that she was failing, though it was obvious. Rory longed to bring it up, to talk it over with her, but he was afraid to.

Stacey lay on her bed, shoes still on. A Diet Coke was on the

table beside her. She weighed herself each morning, and when she was under 120, she allowed herself a real Coke that day.

"What happened at *Bazaar*?" Rory asked, perching on the edge of the bed. Stacey sat up and smoothed her hair.

"The usual," she said. "I'm too commercial." She shrugged, but Rory could see she was troubled.

"And that was nothing," Stacey continued. "On my next go-see the guy kept looking at me and flipping back and forth through my book, and of course I'm thinking, Fantastic, he's going to hire me. So you know what he finally says? I'm not ugly enough. He says, 'Beauty today is ugly beauty. Look at those girls, they're monsters—gorgeous, mythical monsters. If a girl isn't ugly, I won't use her.'"

She turned to Rory. He saw tears in her eyes and felt helpless. "What a bastard," he said.

To his surprise, she began to laugh. She lay back on the bed and let the laughter shake her. "I mean, here I am," she said, "killing myself to stay thin, hot-oiling my hair, getting my nails done, and what does he tell me? I'm not ugly enough!"

"It's crazy," Rory said, watching Stacey uneasily. "He's out of his mind."

She sat up and rubbed her eyes. She looked slaphappy, the way she looked sometimes after a second gin and tonic. Eight months before, after a year's meticulous planning, she had bought her own ticket to New York from Cincinnati. And this was just the beginning, Stacey hoped to ride the wave of her success around the world: Paris, Tokyo, London, Bangkok. The shelves of her tiny apartment were cluttered with maps and travel books, and whenever she met a foreigner—it made no difference from where—she would carefully copy his address into a small leatherbound book, convinced it would not be long before she was everywhere. She was the sort of girl for whom nothing happened by accident, and it pained Rory to watch

her struggle when all day in Vesuvi's studio he saw girls whose lives were accident upon accident, from their discovery in whatever shopping mall or hot dog stand to the startling, gaudy error of their faces.

"Rory," Stacey said. "Look at me a minute."

He turned obediently. She was so close he could smell the warm, milky lotion she used on her face. "Do you ever wish I was uglier?" she asked.

"God no," Rory said, pulling away to see if she was joking. "What a question, Stace."

"Come on. You do this all day long." She moved close to him again, and Rory found himself looking at the tiny pores on either side of her nose. He tried to think of the studio and the girls there, but when he concentrated on Stacey, they disappeared; and when he thought of the studio, he couldn't see Stacey anymore. It was a world she didn't belong to. As he watched Stacey's tense, expectant face, Rory felt a dreadful power; it would take so little, he thought, to crush her.

"Never mind," she said when Rory didn't answer. "I don't want to know."

She stood and crossed the room, then leaned over and pressed her palms to the floor. She had been a gymnast in high school and was still remarkably limber. This limberness delighted Rory in a way that almost shamed him—in bed she would sit up, legs straight in front of her, then lean over and rest her cheek against her shins. Casually, as if it were nothing! Rory didn't dare tell her how this excited him; if she were aware of it, then it wouldn't be the same.

Stacey stood up, flushed and peaceful again. "Let's get out of here," she said.

Her apartment was right off Columbus, a street Rory scorned but one that nevertheless mesmerized him. He and Stacey walked arm in arm, peering into the windows of restaurants as eagerly as

diners peered out of them. It was as if they had all been told some friend might pass this way tonight and were keeping their eyes peeled.

"Where should we go?" Stacey asked.

Rory cracked his knuckles one by one. The question made him edgy, as if there were some right answer he should know. Where were the people who mattered? Occasionally Rory would be stricken with a sense that they had been exactly where he was only moments before, but had just left. The worst part was, he didn't know who they were, exactly. The closest he came was in knowing people who seemed to know; his roommate, Charles, a food stylist who specialized in dollops, and of course Vesuvi. Vesuvi was his main source.

They headed downtown, enjoying the last warm days of fall, the pleasant seediness of Seventh Avenue. They passed intersections where patches of old cobblestones were exposed beneath layers of tar, relics of another New York Rory dimly remembered from novels: carriages and top hats, reputations and insults.

"Rory," Stacey said, "do you feel more something, now that you've gotten successful?"

Rory turned to her in surprise. "Who says I'm successful?"

"But you are!"

"I'm no one. I'm Vesuvi's assistant."

Stacey seemed shocked. "That's not no one," she said.

Rory grinned. It was a funny conversation. "Yeah?" he said.

"Then who is it?"

Stacey pondered this a moment. Suddenly she laughed—the same helpless way she had laughed on the bed, as if the world were funny by accident. Still laughing, she said, "Vesuvi's assistant."

At Stacey's suggestion they took a cab to a TriBeCa bistro where Vesuvi often went. It was probably expensive, but Rory had just

been paid—what the hell, he'd buy Stacey dinner. Maybe he would even call Charles to see if he was back from L.A., where he'd been styling all week for Sara Lee. Rory didn't envy Charles his job, although he made good money; sometimes he was up half the night, using tweezers to paste sesame seeds onto hamburger buns or mixing and coloring the salty dough that looked more like ice cream in pictures than real ice cream did. Rory had been amazed to learn that in breakfast cereal shots it was standard to use Elmer's glue instead of milk. "It's whiter," Charles had explained. "Also it pours more slowly and doesn't soak the flakes." Rory had found this disturbing in a way he still didn't quite understand.

Inside the restaurant, Rory spotted Vesuvi himself at a large round table in back. Or rather, Vesuvi spotted him, and called out with a heartiness that could only mean he was bored with his present company. With a grand sweep of his arm he beckoned them over.

The waiters pulled up chairs, and Rory and Stacey sat down. Stacey ordered a gin and tonic. Rory could see she was nervous—the girls at the table were faces you saw around a lot: red-headed Daphne, Inge with her guppy-face, others whose names he'd forgotten. What distressed him was seeing Anouschka, a moody girl whose journey from some dour Siberian town to the height of New York fashion seemed to have happened in an afternoon. Once, she had lingered at the studio while Rory cleaned up after work, humming a Fine Young Cannibals song and flipping aimlessly through his copy of *The Great Gatsby*. "My father is a professor," she told him. "He teaches this book." "In Russian?" Rory asked incredulously. Anouschka laughed. "Sure," she said, curling the word in her accent. "Why not?"

Outside the studio, Rory and Anouschka had hovered uncertainly in the dusk. Rory was supposed to meet Stacey, but felt awkward saying so to Anouschka. Instead, he blundered forward and

hailed a cab, leaving Anouschka standing on the curb, then paid the driver three blocks later and took the subway to Stacey's. He arrived shaking, mystified by his own idiotic behavior.

Anouschka had frightened him ever since; last week, while he was loading Vesuvi's camera, she had casually reported the numerical value of her IQ, then subjected him to a humiliating quiz on the Great Books. "Have you read much Dostoevsky?" she called up the rickety ladder, where Rory was grappling with a light. "*The Brothers Karamazov*? No? What about *War and Peace*?" When Rory called back down that *War and Peace* was by Tolstoy, Anouschka colored deeply, stalked back onto the set, and did not speak to him again. Rory felt terrible; he'd never read a word of *War and Peace*. He even considered confessing this to Anouschka after the shoot as she grumpily gathered her things. But what the hell, he decided, let her think he was brilliant.

Now Rory looked at Vesuvi sprawled amid the models: sphinx-like, olive-skinned, his close-cropped beard peppered with gray, though his wild curly hair showed no sign of it. He was short, and wore high-heeled boots that Rory found spectacular. Vesuvi was a man of few words, yet he often gave the impression of being on the verge of speech. Conversation would proceed around him tentatively, ready to be swept aside at any moment by whatever Vesuvi might say. Rory watched him adoringly over his glass of bourbon, unable to believe he was sitting with Vesuvi after all the times he had watched him glide away in cabs, feeling as if most of what mattered in the world were disappearing with him. Yet Rory wasn't entirely happy: everyone at the table was watching him, especially Anouschka, and he felt that in return for being included, he was expected to do something stunning.

He glanced at the next table, where conversation seemed more lively. It was a group of downtown types, the men like deposed

medieval kings in their bobbed haircuts and gigantic silver medals. During his first month in New York, Rory had gone out with a girl like the ones at that table—Dave, she'd called herself. She wore nothing but black: bulky sweaters, short loose skirts, woolen tights, and round-toed combat boots. The thrill of the relationship for Rory lay mostly in watching Dave undress—there was something tremendous in the sight of her slender white form emerging from all of that darkness. Once she finished undressing, Rory often wished she would put part of the outfit back on, or better yet, dress completely again and start over.

Vesuvi was eyeing Stacey. "You look familiar," he said. "Did I use you for something?"

"Once," she said. "Four and a half months ago."

"Right, I remember now. It was that . . ." He waved a languid hand, which meant he had no idea.

"For *Elle*," Stacey said. "Bow ties." It had been her best job, and she was crushed when the pictures the magazine printed had failed to include her head. To use them in her book would look desperate, her agent said, so she kept them pasted to her bathroom mirror. Rory looked at them while he was shaving.

Vesuvi sat back, satisfied. The question of whether or not he had worked with a girl always troubled him, Rory had noticed, as if the world were divided between girls he had shot and girls he hadn't, and not knowing which side a girl was on caused a cosmic instability.

"You worked for *Elle*?" Anouschka asked Stacey.

"Once," Stacey said.

"So far," Rory quickly added.

Anouschka glanced at him, and then at Stacey, with the same startled look she'd worn when Rory left her on the curb. He felt guilty all over again.

"You must've worked for them, too," Stacey said to Anouschka, who nodded absently.

"I heard you got a cover," someone said.

"Yes," Anouschka said dully. Then she seemed to take heart, as if hearing this news for the first time. "Yes!" she said, grinning suddenly. "I am the cover for December."

Rory felt Stacey move in her chair. Anouschka lit a cigarette and smoked; exotic, dragonlike, her black hair tumbling past her shoulders. For a moment all of them watched her, and against his will even Rory was moved by a face so familiar from pictures. Never mind what you thought of Anouschka; she was *that woman*—you recognized her. There was an odd pleasure in this, like finding something you'd been looking for.

"When do you leave for Tokyo?" Anouschka asked Inge.

"Next week," Inge said. "Have you been?"

"Two years ago," Anouschka said in her heavy accent. "It's okay, but when you take the morning airplanes, you see the Japanese men are coughing their lungs into the trash cans. They smoke like crazy," she concluded, wagging her cigarette between two fingers. Rory listened miserably; poor Stacey was barely surviving in New York and here was Anouschka, who not only had been to Japan but had the luxury of complaining about it. He rattled the ice in his glass and impatiently cleared his throat.

Anouschka glanced at him and turned serious. "Still," she said, "the culture of Japan is quite important."

"The culture?" Inge said.

"You know, the museums and this sort of thing."

Vesuvi, who had seemed on the verge of sleep, roused himself and turned to Anouschka. "You, inside a museum?" he said. "That I don't see."

The girl looked startled.

"You must have gone there on location," he said.

"Not location! I went for fun. How do you know what I do?" Vesuvi shrugged and sat back in his chair, his lazy eyes filled with amusement. Anouschka blushed to the neck; the pink tinge seemed at odds with her extravagant face. Helplessly she turned to Stacey. "You have been to Japan?" she asked.

"I wish."

"But Milano, yes?"

"No," Stacey said, and Rory noticed with surprise that her drink was almost gone. Normally one cocktail would last Stacey an entire night, her sips were so tiny.

"Paris?"

Stacey shook her head, and Rory noticed a change in Anouschka's face as she sensed her advantage. The others were quiet. Vesuvi sat forward, looking from Anouschka to Stacey with great interest, as if they were posing for him.

"You never worked in Paris? I think everyone has worked in Paris."

"I've never been to Paris," Stacey said.

"London? Munich?" Anouschka turned to the other girls, confirming her surprise. Though she didn't glance at Rory, he sensed that all this was meant for him, and felt a strange, guilty collusion with her. He saw Stacey's hand shake as she lifted her glass, and was overcome with sudden and absolute hatred for Anouschka—he had never hated anyone this way. He stared at her, the gush of hair, the bruised-looking mouth; she was ugly, as the man had said today. Ugly and beautiful. Confused, Rory looked away.

"So," Anouschka said, "what places you have been?"

Stacey didn't answer at first. She looked double-jointed in her chair, heaped like a marionette.

"I've been to New York," she said.

There was a beat of silence. "New York," Anouschka said. Vesuvi started to laugh. He had a loud, explosive laugh that startled Rory at first. He had never heard it before. "New York!" Vesuvi cried. "That's priceless."

Stacey smiled. She seemed as surprised as everyone else.

Vesuvi rocked forward in his chair, so that his heavy boots pounded the floor. "I love it," he said. "New York. What a perfect comeback." Anouschka just stared at him.

It began to seem very funny, all of a sudden.

A chuckle passed through the group like a current. Rory found himself laughing without knowing why; it was enough for him that Vesuvi had a reason. His boss gazed at Stacey in the soft-eyed way he looked at models when a shoot was going well. "It's a hell of a place, New York," he said. "No?"

"The best," Stacey said.

"But she has gone only here!" Anouschka protested. "How does she know?"

"Oh, she knows," Rory said. He felt reckless, dizzy with the urge to make Anouschka angry. "You don't get it, do you?" he said.

"What can I get when there is nothing?" she retorted. But she looked uncertain.

Vesuvi dabbed with a napkin at his heavy-lidded eyes. "Next time you go to New York," he told Stacey, "take me with you."

This was too much for Anouschka. "Fuck you!" she cried, jumping to her feet. "I am in New York. You are in New York. *Here is New York!*"

But laughter had seized the table, and Anouschka's protests only made it worse. She stood helplessly while everyone laughed, Rory hooting all the louder to keep her in her place.

"That's it," she said. "Goodbye."

"Go back to Japan," Rory cried. He had trouble catching his breath.

Anouschka fixed her eyes on him. Her makeup made them look burned at the rims, and the irises were a bright, clear green. He thought she might do something crazy—he'd heard she once punched an ex-boyfriend's upper lip by hurling a fork at him. He stopped laughing and gripped the table's edge, poised for sudden movement. To his astonishment, the charred-looking eyes filled with tears. "I hate you, Rory," she said.

She yanked her bag from under the table and hoisted it onto her shoulder. Her long hair stuck to her wet cheeks as she struggled to free her jacket from the chair. Rory thought of his high school lunchroom: girls stalking out mad, clattering trays, their long, skinny legs skittering on high-beeled shoes. He felt a pang of nostalgia. She was just a kid, Anouschka—so much younger than he was.

"Hey," Vesuvi said, standing and putting his arms around Anouschka. "Hey, we're just having a joke."

"Go to hell with your joke." She turned her face away so that no one could see her crying.

Vesuvi stroked her back. "Hey now," he said.

Chastened, the group sat in guilty silence. Stacey and Rory traded a look and stood up. No one protested as they slid their jackets on, but when Rory opened his wallet to pay for their drinks, Vesuvi winced and waved it away. Anouschka still clung to him, her face buried in his neck.

Vesuvi spoke to Stacey in a lowered voice. "I've got something coming up you'd be perfect for," he said. "Who are you with again?"

Stacey told him the name of her agency, barely able to contain

her joy. Rory listened unhappily; Vesuvi said this all the time to girls, and forgot the next minute. It was just a pleasant salutation.

They left the restaurant and headed toward the East Village. Rory longed to reach for Stacey's hand, but she seemed far away from him now, lost in her thoughts. Outside a market, a boy was perched on a stool cutting the heads off beans. A barber swept thick tufts of dark hair into one corner of his shop. From an overhead window came music, and Rory craned his neck to catch a glimpse of someone's arm, a lighted cigarette. The familiarity of it all was sweet and painful to him. He searched the dark shopfronts for something, some final thing at the core of everything else, but he found just his own reflection and Stacey's. Their eyes met in the glass, then flicked away. And it struck him that this was New York: a place that glittered from a distance even when you reached it.

They climbed the four flights of steps to Rory's apartment. A slit of light shone under the door, which meant Charles was back. They found him standing at the kitchen table, wiping a slab of red meat with a paper towel. He had a blowtorch plugged into the wall, and a dismantled smoke alarm lay at his feet.

"You poor thing," Stacey said, kissing him on the cheek. "You never stop working."

Charles's mouth was like a cat's, small and upturned at the corners. It made him seem happy even when he wasn't. "Meat is my weak point," he said. "I've got a job tomorrow doing steak."

He was prematurely balding, and Rory admired the look of hardship and triumph this gave him. Lately he'd searched his own hairline for signs of recession, but the blond surfer's mane seemed even more prolific. Most cruel of all, it was Charles who'd been born and raised in Santa Cruz.



"Here goes," Charles said, firing up the blowtorch. They watched as he moved the flame slowly over the meat, back and forth as if he were mowing a lawn. Its surface turned a pale gray. When the entire side was done, he flipped the steak over and lightly cooked its other side.

"Ugh," said Stacey. "It's still completely raw."

"Wait," Charles said.

He held a long metal spit to the flame until it glowed red. Then he pressed the spit to the meat. There was a hiss, a smell of cooking, and when he lifted the spit, a long black stripe branded the steak. He heated the spit several more times and pressed it to the meat at parallel intervals. Soon it was indistinguishable from a medium-rare steak straight off the grill. Rory felt an irrational surge of appetite, a longing to eat the meat in spite of knowing it was raw and cold.

Stacey opened the refrigerator. Rory always kept a supply of Cokes for her in there; Diet, of course, but also some regulars in case she had earned one that day and not yet rewarded herself. To his surprise, she pulled out a can of regular now.

"What the hell," she said. "I mean, really, what difference does it make?"

Rory stared at her. She had never said anything like this before. "What about Vesuvi?" he asked, regretting it even as he spoke.

"Vesuvi won't hire me. You know it perfectly well."

She was smiling at him, and Rory felt as if she had peered into the lying depths of his soul. "Vesuvi doesn't know shit," he said, but it sounded lame even to himself.

Stacey slid open the window and climbed out onto the fire escape. The sky was a strange, sulfurous yellow—beautiful, yet seemingly disconnected from nature. The shabby tree behind Rory's building was empty of leaves, and made a pattern of cracked glass against the sky. Stacey drank her Coke in tiny, careful sips. Rory

stood helplessly inside the window, watching her. He needed to say something to her, he knew that, but he wasn't sure how.

He shook a cigarette from his pack and placed it in his mouth. Charles was working on a second steak. "By the way," Charles said, pointing with his chin at a spot near Rory's head, "I baked us a cake—a real one."

Rory turned in surprise and lifted a plate from above the refrigerator. It was a tall, elegant cake with giant dollops of whipped cream along its edges. "Charles," Rory said, confused, "haven't you been doing this all week?"

"Yeah," Charles said, "but always for strangers. And never to eat."

He bent over the steak, his blowtorch hissing on the damp meat. He looked embarrassed, as if his preference for real cake were a weakness he rarely confided. Charles's honesty shamed Rory—he said what he felt, not caring how it sounded.

Rory climbed out the window and sat beside Stacey. The bars of the fire escape felt cold through his jeans. Stacey held her Coke in one hand and took Rory's hand in the other. They looked at the yellow sky and held hands tightly, as if something were about to happen.

Rory's heart beat quickly. "So maybe it doesn't work," he said. "The modeling. Maybe that just won't happen."

He searched her face for some sign of surprise, but there was none. She watched him calmly, and for the first time Rory felt that Stacey was older than he, that her mind contained things he knew nothing of. She stood up and handed her Coke to Rory. Then she grasped the railing of the fire escape and lifted her body into a handstand. Rory held his breath, watching in alarmed amazement as the slender wand of her body swayed against the yellow sky. She had no trouble balancing, and hovered there for what seemed a long



time before finally bending at the waist, lowering her feet, and standing straight again.

"If it doesn't work," she said, "then I'll see the world some other way."

She took Rory's face in her hands and kissed him on the mouth—hard, with the fierce, tender urgency of someone about to board a train. Then she turned and looked at the sky. Rory stared at her, oddly frightened to think that she would do it, she would find some way. He pictured Stacey in a distant place, looking back on him, on this world of theirs as if it were a bright, glittering dream she had once believed in.

"Take me with you," he said.

## THE STYLIST

When they finally reach the dunes, Jann, the photographer, opens a silver umbrella. This is the last shot of the day. The light is rich and slanted. Around them the sand lies in sparkling heaps, like piles of glass silt.

A girl toes the sand. She wears a short cotton skirt, a loose T-shirt. A few feet away from her the stylist pokes through a suitcase filled with designer bathing suits. The stylist's name is Bernadette. She's been doing this for years.

"Here," she says, handing the girl a bikini. It is made of shiny red material. The girl glances at Jann, who is busy loading his camera. She slips her underpants from beneath the skirt and pulls on the bathing-suit bottom. She is not close to twenty yet.