

## Only in the Moment of Creation

## 1

Out of the blue Suzanne received an email from Allen Federman telling her that he was moving to the Land of Zim and saying goodbye. A few days later she received a letter from a man who wanted to commission a personal study. (Did that mean nude?) He wanted to give it to someone who was leaving the country as a farewell gift. Would she meet with him to discuss this?

When the email arrived, she asked herself what could have drawn Allen to Zimbabwe and what he meant by “goodbye.” Had he met someone in the gold mining business when he was posing for a jewelry ad? She wrote back, “I don’t know what to say except good luck. From what I read, it’s now the worst country in the world. You must have your reasons.” Allen replied, “I do.” That’s all. Just, “I do.” She found this ominous. Was he saying he was dying without wanting to be clear, which would be exactly like him—punishing her for ignorance he himself created?

She had the longest and most difficult relationship of her life with Allen and brooded about him a great deal the next few days. As she engraved a block of boxwood with her burin, one part of her mind was silent but another part spoke.

She remembered that when they were together, she’d sometimes say, “I’ll end up in the Land of Zim.” By that she meant she wouldn’t be able to survive as an artist in America and be deported. Zimbabwe, like the letter Z, was her symbol for the end of the line. (She didn’t think about it as Southern Rhodesia anymore, the name of the country she left when she was eight.) But she’d laugh, curious about what it would be like to return to the beautiful place where she had been a child, though now as a member of the dispossessed. Her father was furious at her for not taking U.S. citizenship; she didn’t because she thought it was unwise to surrender the things that made you who you were. You only ended up like him, impoverished in ways that were truly painful, not simply impoverished in the literal sense. That never scared her. She’d always find some way to make do. She and Allen were together for five years during his final cruises as a nuclear sub captain and before he became an international male model. Their relationship was like the beating of a heart, full of blood, then empty, full of blood, then empty. The alternating eroticism of presence followed by absence. All the anticipation, the entrancing mystery and enigma of who he was and who he thought she was and her reckless acceptance of everything he gave her without ever asking for it. He set the terms. Twenty years older. In command except for the extreme moments of lovemaking (the whimpering, the pleas) and whatever he thought as he pondered her work.

They met in New York during that dismal post-college period when she was selling things on the street. He bought three prints one Saturday morning in Washington Square and came back Sunday to buy two more, a man in his forties with compelling eyebrows and inquisitive blue eyes and leanness everywhere and the pure, unshined skin of the submariner. He asked her to lunch that Sunday. She hesitated but agreed. Afterward she was too embarrassed (and wary) to let him let him tote her portfolios back to her dismal flat on the Lower East Side.

She told herself that he couldn’t really be interested in her; it had to be her work. She was too young and unkempt (his pet name for her became Raggedy Suzanne, shortened to Raggedy, also the name of the doll he gave her quite gravely one day, the way another lover might present a ring), and still pudgy with baby fat, and just not sophisticated. That made New York hard for her. You had to be assertive, but you had to preserve your solitude, too.

This is what Allen taught her, how to steer herself anywhere without getting lost. “I knew I was meant for submarines the first week at Annapolis,” he said. He needed the confinement and danger and discipline of guiding a nuclear-powered vessel through canyons miles below the waves. But he confessed that long undersea journeys wore on him and everyone on board. After they took the first dive of a cruise, the real depths they entered were the depths of time. “The pressure builds but you can’t admit it, certainly not the captain. The captain must remain relaxed. No sunlight. Everything made out of metal. Temperature always the same.”

“What do you see?”

“We don’t have picture windows. Even if we did, the water is blacker than the darkest night. Could you engrave that?”

“How would I?” she giggled.

“I don’t know. Variations on ink?”

“Are there any variations?”

“You think you feel variations—water temperature, currents—but that’s just an extrapolation from your instruments. You couldn’t see them with your eyes.”

He had bought prints of Suzanne and a little friend of hers (white girl and black girl), a man driving a donkey cart with a boy on the donkey’s back, worshippers exiting the Zim cathedral, sinewy men hauling tobacco into the auction house, and a portrait of her mother in a room she almost never frequented, the kitchen. Suzanne’s style in those days was a mixture of influences: Van Gogh, Kollwitz, to a lesser degree Max Beckmann. Her shapes were blocky, stable, and elemental. The heads were disproportionately larger than the bodies. There was a certain amount of crowding. She did not restrain herself early in her career; she was too caught up in trying to turn a wood block into a movie screen. Had to squeeze in a patch of crumbling wall, a knife-slice of face cropped along the print’s edge—Ernst Kirchner.

“Will you take my prints with you on your next cruise?” she asked, not seriously. But he said yes. Apparently this was a significant matter to him. He always took a portfolio of images with him at sea in a tubular leather chart case whose brass end pieces doubled as weights to keep the charts from curling up when they were removed. She asked what other works he’d take along.

“Just yours.”

She said she didn’t believe that.

The romance began the next time Allen was in New York. He bought another piece of her work (Suzanne and her friend Amadika having tea in the grass, her father reading a book on the porch, her mother staring down into the garden reprovingly from a second floor window, and her sister Alma, if you looked carefully through a ground floor window, in a bassinet: not actually Alma, just the reed bassinette in which she nestled, and not Alma’s nurse, just her black hand on the bassinette’s rim.) Afterward he invited Suzanne to a restaurant she couldn’t go into because of her clothes. He remedied this by cajoling her into letting him buy her a blouse and skirt in a store across the street. Then he marched her back to the restaurant, almost as if she were his little girl, her temperament flaring. Was she angry with him? Flattered? Turned on? She didn’t stop struggling until they were settled at the table. Then she asked him questions about his life at sea because she

was too timid to ask him about his life right there on land, where he struck her as a gorgeous marine creature that had been evicted from its shell, leaving him in a state of vulnerability that was almost prenatal, his armor and even skin peeled away to the delicate, iridescent cells beneath. Every private tissue and membrane and electric connection between their nerves and thoughts and pleasure centers spun together as they sat there having sex across the table without even touching.

This quirky first date set a template that they followed, more extravagantly, even after she'd moved up to Connecticut, where he introduced her to the people at the Art Barn, and she established her studio and managed to buy the tiny farm house with its half acre of apple trees. He would return from a voyage, and they would drive to Manhattan in his Alfa Romeo, and he would buy her some new "outfits," as he called them, because he was a sailor who always wanted a new woman when he came into port.

She couldn't imagine submitting to this benevolent dictatorship now, but then she had no money for clothes, and women's fashion fascinated him. He would walk into a store, look around, say, "Not for you," and lead them right out. Or he'd stop before a display window and sketch out a full strategy before they went through the door—those boots, that bag, this sweater, and perhaps a scarf or a shawl to go along with these blouses. He could be difficult with the sales people. His eyebrows grew oratorical, expressing dismay and disappointment. His eye for the precise length of cuffs, the cut of collars and shoulders, and the flow of fabrics was impeccable. No one else she knew in the arts who didn't have a rich husband could dress this way. There was never a proposal, however, just the clothes, which served her well when people came to her studio from Greenwich and Darien and Old Lyme and were taken by her elegant formality in striking contrast to the increasing daring of her work, her subjects less naively portrayed and enjambed.

They would make love two or three times a day in their hotel suite—before they went out, when they came back, before they slept. She was a young woman who set no conditions on her free days, didn't care if she got a thing done, and wouldn't always stop when he stopped, continuing on, much the same way she did at the table on that first date, their companionship uninterruptedly sexualized by her drive and eagerness for more. But he'd take his time, stirring things up with long interludes of faux crescendos and insertions of normal life as foreplay. This was the eros of him as the captain and her as the ship, until that desperation she saw in him but never mentioned when he was the ship and she was the sea.

After shopping, they visited galleries, starting with Tommy DeMarco, to whom Allen had introduced her and who now carried her work, the first big break of her career. When Allen recounted her life story, he made sure people knew she was African, enjoying their ambivalence about her whiteness. He told how he found her selling her work on the street. He seemed to adore her if not love her. She didn't know if he was capable of love. Maybe she wasn't, either, preferring these wind-whipped trysts, boat and water lost in the foam. What did she know about love with a family—mother, father, sister—that always split emotions into two, or ten, or a thousand, like crystals refracting light? Warm became cold. Laughter incited tears.

At night he hired a car. "Where to, Harry?" he'd ask.

"Sir, I'm drowning in good ideas," Harry would say. "I'm thinking you need to see Feathers. You need to see Club La Frontera. You're going to die when you hear the singer at Mr. Morgan's. Years of second string opera, then bam—the city's best chanteuse, Ingrid Bierstadt."

"What a name!"

“What a voice, sir.”

Allen asked Suzanne if she could sing. Suzanne said no.

“But have you ever tried?” he pressed, apparently thinking she must be wrong about herself.

Suzanne laughed and looked out the window, not answering.

“I’ll bet you could,” he insisted.

“No, I couldn’t. Now stop it.”

In a way she grew up with him. He was like a marker against which she measured her progress through her twenties (more self-confidence, more assertiveness) although he remained the grown-up in their relationship.

And yet sometimes he would talk to her in a funny child’s voice as they lay in bed, treating her as if she were the doll he’d given her. He’d say that he wished they could nestle together forever. He’d say that he wished he could hide her in his cabin on the submarine, his dear Raggedy.

Suzanne teased him once by suggesting that he take the doll along on a voyage since he couldn’t take her. “Just hide it in your things, no one has to know.” She thought the idea of a submarine captain with a doll in his footlocker was hysterical. Allen grew furious—really furious—when she kept laughing about it. He got dressed and left and wouldn’t accept her apology.

They squabbled. If he was too awful in a store. If he tried to give her hairdresser instructions. If he lectured her instead of asking her about German expressionism. He could be unbearable when he tried to sound better informed and more worldly than he was, or when he was making up for sixty dry nights at sea by drinking too much.

“How do you go so long without a drink?” she asked.

He said that he went without almost everything when he was at sea.

“That doesn’t bore you?”

He said that land bored him more.

“I’m here on land.”

He ignored her protest, insisting that he was more aware of things when he was at the bottom of the ocean. “The isolation keeps me engaged.”

He made her feel that he wanted to hurt her when he said something like this, deriding the erasable quality of terrestrial life, its lack of what he called danger, or, on occasion, necessity. (His highest praise for a piece she or another artist produced was that he found it necessary, it couldn’t be otherwise, it had to be exactly as it was. He detested things he found arbitrary.)

It was better when she had moved to Connecticut, and they limited their New York sprees to two or three days, and she could get back in her house and return to her studio while he did follow-up reports and planning and training exercises, often staying at the sub base and not coming to visit her

too often. This was good. She had to work to make her living, and she liked working. Any day was too long if she didn't work. She took one day off per week, but only one, Tuesday.

Allen had never married. She assumed that he never would. This didn't prey on her mind because in some ways he was like a child. Who would marry a child, or have a child with a child? He bored her sometimes with Cold War bluster and tales of undersea roughhousing with the Soviets—tedious accounts of war games, moves and countermoves. She preferred hearing him describe surfacing through the polar ice cap, and what it was like to mount the conning tower in a field of nothing but white. He said the sky couldn't escape the white and the air couldn't escape it either. He felt something like panic. You can't be here, he thought; this wind will consume you; why have you surfaced in this nowhere?

"If I could draw or paint or engrave anything," he said, "that's what I'd try to do. It was the exposure. I felt so exposed."

"It would be a sheet of white paper, or a blank canvas, I suppose."

"No, that wouldn't have the right gnawing quality." He was very troubled by this memory. "I'd wanted to come up through the ice for years; you have to do it; but I never had. Then you go up and have a look and nothing can prepare you for how desperate it makes you feel. For weeks you've been encased in your vessel, and there is always a restricted line of sight. Then you're caught up in the whole epic of ice. It will grind you down to your bones in a matter of minutes. It's unbearable." She would have given anything to see the polar ice cap and welcome its terror. Equally, she would have given anything to know how to place her hands on the ice inside him and let the warmth of her touch melt the wall between his sea world and land world.

She asked him once what he did for sex on his cruises. He turned the question back on her. "What about you?"

"When you're away? Why should a girl tell her secrets?"

"Do we have secrets from one another?"

She joked that everyone had secrets. His whole job was a secret, and wasn't he a secret inside his job? "With all you've told me, I still don't understand who you are."

"Are you saying you really want to?" He was referring to what he did for sex on the submarine as if she were being literal, which she wasn't. She was trying, actually, to be close. "Don't I make love to you enough when I come back?"

"Okay, let's drop it."

"No, I'd like an answer. You seem eager enough when I show up."

"Exactly, you have nothing to worry about."

"But you think you do?" His head was cocked at an angle that was unfamiliar to her, making him seem not just irate but aggressive. His tone was alarming.

Suzanne thought she should work her way out of this exchange. “I was only asking, the way lame-brained people do, how the whole question of sexuality gets sublimated. I know you can’t be having affairs on a submarine. That’s obvious.”

“Is it so obvious? Don’t you think there’s ever a time we have to deal with that?”

“If you mean blowjobs in the bathroom, I don’t want to hear about it.”

“What do you know about blowjobs in bathrooms?”

“I don’t know anything.”

“I’ve never even heard you use a word like blowjob.”

“I shouldn’t have this time either.”

He said she could be an awful hypocrite. He told her that her suggestiveness was spoiling her art now. She’d lost her early vision, which sometimes happened to artists, unfortunately.

She laughed at him. A thought that had been on her mind for some time came out in that laugh. His superiority for being more sophisticated and a submarine captain and spoiling her had worn out. Her laugh dismissed his judgments and obsessions about her and her art.

He hit her. The blow landed on her right ear so hard that she found herself on the floor without knowing what happened. When she tried to get up, she pulled over a lamp. Its glass globe broke and sliced into her temple, which began bleeding profusely.

Allen shouted, “Look at what you’ve done!”

She tried to scuttle away from him, but he grabbed her and picked her up and hurried down the stairs to get to his car, now moaning in his familiar, little boy voice, “We’ve got to get you to a doctor, we’ve got to get your to a doctor,” as if whatever possessed him to strike her didn’t exist anymore. But Suzanne was furious at him. She scratched at his eyes. She tried to bite him. They fell and struggled in the dirt behind the house. Finally, he hit her with the butt of his palm below the sternum, rendering her breathless. She was almost grateful to him for stunning her this way, but it was a ghastly experience, followed by their embarrassment at the emergency room as they lied about what obviously had happened and were told she might lose her hearing in her right ear. Afterward, he tried to look after her, bringing her meals and paying the bills for her ruptured eardrum. “This won’t ever, ever happen again. Please believe me.”

“How can I believe you, Allen? Why did you do it? You haven’t told me.”

“I don’t know why.”

She didn’t like being alone with him. She asked him to stay away and give her time, at least until she got rid of her cane and wouldn’t be tempted to hit him with it.

“You could hit me all you want.”

“Oh, please,” she said. “Look, if we can be friends, let’s be friends.”

“I can’t be just your friend. You mean too much to me.”

“Allen, I am not going to be your...whatever.”

“The word is lover.”

“Is it?”

He said he wanted to return to who they’d been.

She said no, regretting that it was too late tell him she wouldn’t mind if he led a double life. The only thing that made no sense to her was people lying about themselves.

A cruise intervened, making things easier for her but apparently not for him. When he returned, he wanted to hold her if not make love, just hold her, forcing her to tell him to stop calling her Raggedy and accept how things had turned out.

He stammered that he was going to retire from the Navy.

Was he saying he feared she would reveal what he had done? She wouldn’t but didn’t want to say so. Any intimation that she was judging him might turn him against her again. That’s what she must guard against, just as she must guard against him drawing her into responsibility for his decisions and their consequences. They had grown together, their strange, sensitive skins intermingling, for Suzanne was a creature without much of a shell, too. Now those interconnections had to be torn loose.

In the face of her resistance, Allen seemed to give up. He began discussing retirement the way a person normally would, not a person who was panicked about where he would hide if the oceans were going to be sealed against him. He drew a cloak of practicality around himself, dissecting offers he’d had in industry and international trade—counting the money and comparing the benefits, showing her pictures of the kind of ketch he planned to buy and talking about moving to Washington, which he had always disliked, or perhaps Annapolis, which he had loved since his days as a midshipman at the Naval Academy.

Suzanne regretted his newfound conventionality, but they needed to secure a truce; and this is what did it. And they never, in subsequent years, reflected on how differently he managed his retirement from how he foreshadowed it, or how much becoming a model revealed about him, although he always brought his latest magazine ads when he dropped by her studio and talked about them so much that there was never time to discuss her new work, which he would glance at surreptitiously and anxiously but never again buy.

She called the man who wrote her the letter about a commission and told him to come to her studio, remembering to point out that she was in the Periscope Plant now, not the Art Barn, which had burned. Of course, he wouldn’t have written to her at the Art Barn if he hadn’t come across her through something or someone from the past—Allen, for instance?

William, the letter writer’s name, was just beginning to surrender his second adolescence as people do when they’re approaching thirty. She contemplated him as a print as soon as he walked through

the door—the scalloping between the corners of his eyes and the bridge of his nose, the dominance of the high forehead, the scrollwork of his ears, his springy black hair, his chin padded by a buttery knob of flesh. He called himself a *fashionista* and was wearing a black jump suit he'd copied from the Italian *carabinieri*. He said he made it himself. All the lettering and unit symbolism and marks of rank were meaningless variations on the originals, as decorative and impenetrable as Koranic quotations on the walls of mosques.

“Do I look like someone you could do?” he asked, blushing at his unintended double entendre. She wasn't hiding the fact that she was scrutinizing him. His smile generated parentheses at the corners of his mouth, but he wouldn't be smiling in the print. She wondered what that would do to the parentheses, and how he held his head when he wasn't animated.

“You said a ‘personal study.’ What did you mean by that?”

“I meant all my person.”

“Nude?”

“Yes.”

She couldn't see much of him in his jump suit, but he would be sinewy. She thought of her sister Alma, also sinewy, a former dancer. Had William been one, too? His bony knees, elbows and shoulders would anchor his long spine. He would have a flat, fish-like belly, chevronned with black hair. There was never any predictability about a male model's genitals. The penis and scrotum were as specific as the male face and more difficult to render because of their constant mollusk-like squirming.

Did he plan to talk about the friend who was moving abroad for whom this study was to be a gift? Wasn't he an emissary from Allen? Weren't the email and the letter too linked in time and topic to be coincidental? Allen did not look well when she last saw him; he looked older and hoarier, but still good enough to attract someone as compelling as William, and, being Allen, Machiavellian enough to send William to her to confess through him what he could never say in person. “I'm gay, Suzanne, but now my relationship with William is over and the only thing left for me is Zim.” Was Allen dying? Did he have AIDS?

William, however, said nothing about the friend who would receive the print. He chose to talk about himself, self-centered but cheery, energetic and friendly. “I want to give you the opportunity to know me as you work on me. I mean, after all, look.” He pointed at her work surrounding them on the walls of her studio. “I know you.”

She did not believe that the artist and the work were one and the same. Only in the moment of creation. “Okay, why not start now? Tell me about yourself.”

William said he was barely making it in the fashion business. “Very small runs for very small vendors, and a lot of disappointment in production. I have to wear the manufactured pieces and keep my handmade studies in the closet so these machine jobs don't suffer by comparison.” He held up his arms.

“Are you telling me that isn't one of your handmade pieces?”

William giggled. “Well, of course it is. Today's different. I'm modeling for you, not selling!”



He had his things produced by his former neighbors and high school classmates in Millville, Tennessee, where he grew up. He said he didn't want to be sexist, but he had to teach them all how to sew, which he had learned how to do right at the Fashion Institute of Technology. He got his ideas from second hand stores, military surplus stores, and industrial clothing manufacturers. "Everything I do is a variation on something else. I'm about roles as much as about style and elegance, but I do try to get past the clichés."

"Does everyone have to be built like a dancer to wear your things?"

"Oh, even with your curves, we could fit you," he laughed. "Maybe as a grease monkey? Sunoco had wonderful coveralls."

"I'd try anything," Suzanne confessed, liking him.

He had sat down on a shipping container. His eyes flickered at the blocks she had arranged like books on three long shelves above her worktable. "You said the Art Barn burned. I guess I got confused looking at your website so that's where I wrote you. You didn't lose anything?" "A few of us were spared. I was one of the lucky ones."

"I used the periscope downstairs to watch you working up here. It's amazing. You could have been on the moon."

"That periscope probably gets more people in here than the art."

The center of the building was an open well, permitting periscope assembling and calibration during World War II and for decades thereafter. Three catwalks encircled the well, providing access to studios that occupied the upper floor space once used for machine work and mirror grinding. "Where do you live, outside town?"

Again, William seemed to know something, but it was out of date, the way Allen would be out of date—he hadn't come to visit her in more than two years; he didn't know about the changes in her life.

"I moved into town when we came here. I bought a little house a few blocks away."

"I mean, I don't think I could pose here, could I?"

She had already considered locking the door, putting up a closed sign and hanging a curtain. It wouldn't work. They wouldn't have the things they might need to give him context, a bed, a sofa, a doorway, a table, unless she simply studied him sitting there on the box, naked as if he were a one-man show in a theater. Had anyone ever done that, walked on stage nude, taken a seat, and told stories? What effect would that have, the man (or woman) oblivious to the impact of nudity, wrenching the audience away from the body self to the talking self, the observing, reflecting, feeling self?

After Allen hit her, male-female moments were uncertain for her. She doubted she wanted William nude in her house, but that was the logical, perhaps only, place for this.

"You said this is a going away present for someone? Someone moving overseas?"

“Yes.”

Maybe he didn't know what he wanted to say about Allen; maybe he'd been bullied into this; maybe he had rethought why he was there; maybe he assumed she had figured it all out. “If it's a nude, would it be a lover? Do you mind my asking?”

William's face darkened slightly, but he wasn't blushing. “Well, that's over, and everything else.” She waited for him to say more. He wasn't going to. He was stubborn because he was upset. That upset her, too. Allen might be dead, and this might be, who knew, a work that William would burn and sprinkle into Allen's ashes in his chart case before dropping it into the sea.

3

The following Thursday William drove up from New York in the white van he used for trips to Tennessee. He had agreed to model for a full morning and pay her \$2500 for the print that emerged without precluding her from selling more from the same block. Perhaps that really was enough, Suzanne thought; perhaps it was better that he didn't reveal why he had come to her. There was a reason why she had never done a print of Allen or any other lover. What she did with a subject didn't correspond to what she might see and feel walking down the street holding someone's hand. She saw and felt other things and did not want anything to alter that.

Her narrow row house had a small living room, dining room and kitchen downstairs, and two bedrooms and a bath upstairs. William tramped around a bit, eyeing everything, commenting on the fact that there was no food in the kitchen and letting his hand graze her worktable in the dining room. She didn't have her own pieces on the walls, just things she'd received over the years in trades with other artists. He said he was sorry about that. She didn't reply, already studying him.

“How do we do this?” he asked.

“You take off your clothes and when you're ready, I'll take pictures with this little camera. Then I'll make some sketches.”

“It's funny. I watch models undress all the time, but now we're talking about me.”

She could feel the tug of his abashed arousal, the aggressive-apologetic way a man stood square to a woman he knew didn't want him. “It was your idea,” she reminded him.

“Well, is there somewhere I should go?”

“I think you should go wherever you want to. The light's good in the kitchen, but kitchens aren't that personal.”

He was wearing a Mao suit made of heatherish wool with yellow piping sewn into the cuffs and around the buttonholes. It gave him a penal, runaway look.

“Do we pretend you're not here? As though your place was my place?”

“Take that thought as far as you want.”

“Me as you?”

“Maybe not that far. We want you to be you.”

“But I hide in these clothes. Why do you think I make them?”

“I was fourteen the first time I drew a nude male,” she said to reassure him.

“I’ll have to go upstairs. That’s where you undress, isn’t it?”

“We’re talking about you, William.”

William climbed the steep staircase. Suzanne waited a few minutes, listening to the floorboards squeak overhead, the sound of a man urinating, the rush of the water closet. Then she heard him open the door to the front bedroom where she had a daybed and many racks of clothes because she didn’t ever throw clothes away. She heard metal hangers sliding this way and that. He was riffling through her blouses and dresses, going back to things Allen had bought her, the very beginning of what could be called her wardrobe. Was he nude yet? Had he left his Mao suit in the windowless bathroom?

She climbed the stairs and looked at him running his fingertips over the sleeve of a white mohair sweater she wouldn’t wear again in a million years. He was barefoot; his legs were lean but not especially muscular. His penis resembled a young deer’s budding antler, thick and furry, just poking out of the tuft of his black pubic hair. Then his finger-like ribs, his broad collarbone, and the arc of his nose and depth of his eyes settled beneath his cloudbank forehead.

She took several pictures of him inspecting her clothing, each article doll-size in his large hands but with no doll inhabiting them. Did he already know these pieces? Had Allen told him about them? Suzanne had an uneasy feeling about Allen, who didn’t know this house, whose gifts no longer fit her. Her baby fat was gone; and Suzanne didn’t sew well enough to alter the things he’d given her, which was the question William seemed to be asking as he held up a pair of trousers like a valet inquiring of his mistress whether it really made sense to keep them.

He walked to the double casement window and stared down into the street, letting her photograph him from behind. His buttocks were plumper than she expected, reminding her of the pad of flesh on the point of his chin. His back was long, the vertebrae prominent.

He turned and sat down on the floor, leaning back against the wall below the window, letting her study him with the grocery store across the street visible in the background, his knees raised, his genitals hanging free of his groin, his expression something that did not have a name as she worked. (There was no time for a name, nor did she have any interest in a name.)

He got up and walked past her into her bedroom. Finding the bed unmade, he crawled into it and lay on his side looking out the window toward the sagging row houses across the alley.

Was he going to tell her that he had been getting nowhere? That he one day he decided to put on a French sailor’s suit and hold poses in Washington Square? That a man came who invited him to lunch?

No, he said it this way: He said he was still in love—of course he was still in love—but there was no remedy and the image had to be, obviously, as dark as the feeling, which he could express now, working his way down into the sheets.

“As dark as the sea?” she asked.

“As dark as the sea,” he agreed. “I mean, you’re particularly good at that.”

“People seem to think so.”

“Well, I’m not. He won’t even tell me where he’s going.”

Who, Allen? She waited for him to say so. But he didn’t, afraid she would explain to him what the Land of Zim meant, or could mean: that Allen had found a way not to hit someone to say goodbye; that Allen had finally found a way to love someone; that William should be happy, even if Allen was going away to where you died.

“But I found your stuff rolled up in an old leather tube, and I’m putting this print in there, too, and when he opens it wherever he’s going, I’ll be there, too.”

William turned onto his back and looked across the footboard at Suzanne, a gloomy look of triumph on his face, her sheets swaddling him, his forehead as bold as an infant’s. This was his pose, she knew, and he knew it, too.