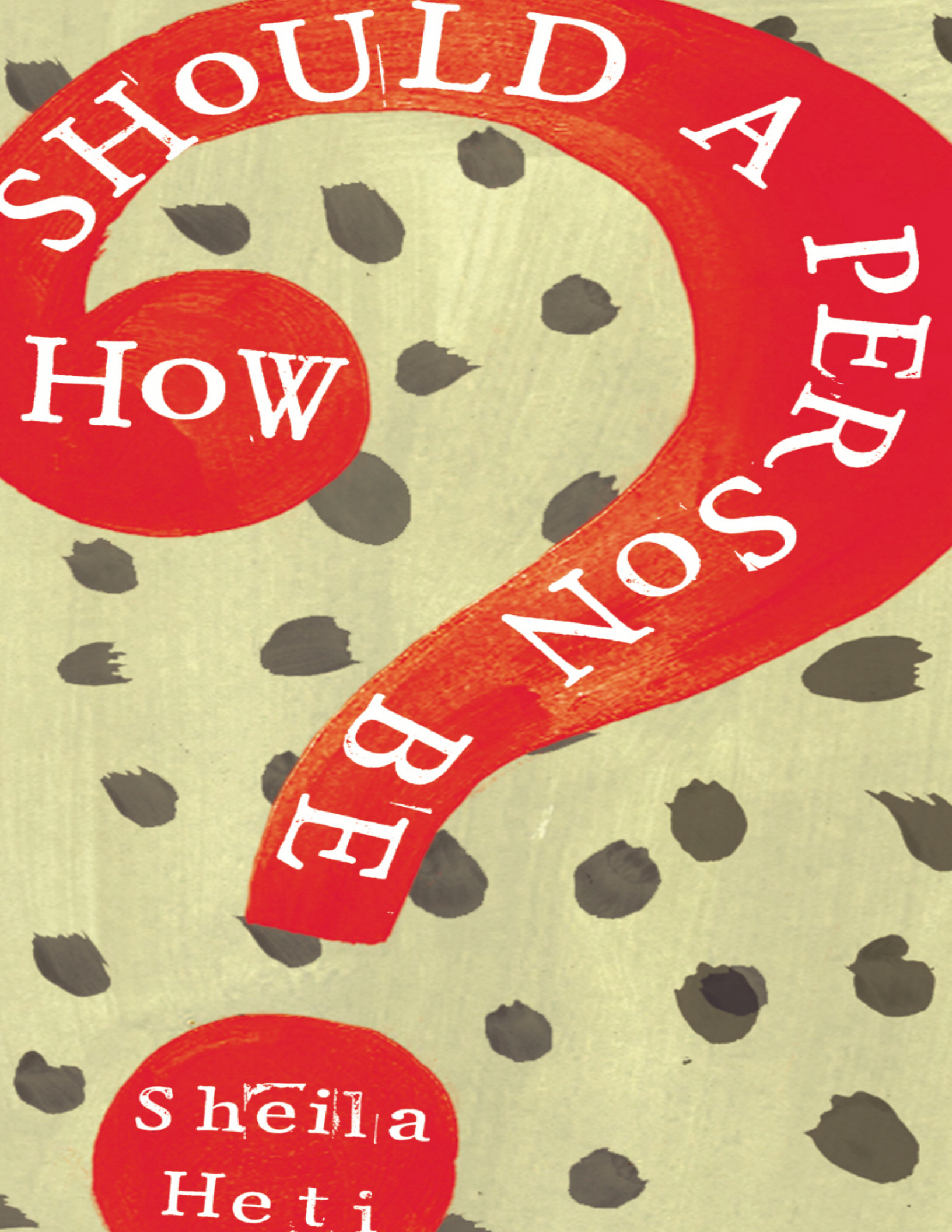
HOW SHOULD A PERSON BE?
Sheila Heti

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About the Book

Reeling from a failed marriage, Sheila, a twentysomething playwright, finds herself unsure of how to live and create. When Margaux, a talented painter and free spirit, and Israel, a sexy and depraved artist, enter her life, Sheila hopes that through close – sometimes too close – observation of her new friend, her new lover, and herself, she might regain her footing in art and life.

Using transcribed conversations, real emails, plus heavy doses of fiction, the brilliant and always innovative Sheila Heti crafts a work that is part literary novel, part self-help manual, and part bawdy confessional. It’s a totally shameless and dynamic exploration into the way we live now, which breathes fresh wisdom into the eternal questions: What is the sincerest way to love? What kind of person should you be?

About the Author

Sheila Heti is the author of several books of fiction, including *The Middle Stories* and *Ticknor*, and a book of 'conversational philosophy' called *The Chairs Are Where the People Go*, written with Misha Glouberman, which was chosen by the *New Yorker* as a best book of 2011. Her writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Bookforum*, *McSweeney's*, *n+1*, the *Guardian*, and other places. She works as interviews editor at *The Believer* magazine and lives in Toronto.

Also by Sheila Heti

The Middle Stories

Ticknor

for children

We Need a Horse

with Misha Glouberman

The Chairs Are Where the People Go

for Margaux

HOW SHOULD A PERSON BE?

SHEILA HETI

Harvill Secker
LONDON

PROLOGUE

HOW SHOULD A person be?

For years and years I asked it of everyone I met. I was always watching to see what they were going to do in any situation, so I could do it too. I was always listening to their answers, so if I liked them, I could make them my answers too. I noticed the way people dressed, the way they treated their lovers—in everyone, there was something to envy. You can admire anyone for being themselves. It's hard not to, when everyone's so good at it. But when you think of them all together like that, how can you choose? How can you say, *I'd rather be responsible like Misha than irresponsible like Margaux*? Responsibility looks so good on Misha, and irresponsibility looks so good on Margaux. How could I know which would look best on me?

I admired all the great personalities down through time, like Andy Warhol and Oscar Wilde. They seemed to be so perfectly themselves in every way. I didn't think, *Those are great souls*, but I did think, *Those are some great personalities for our age*. Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein—they *did* things, but they *were* things.

I know that personality is just an invention of the news media. I know that character exists from the outside alone. I know that inside the body there's just temperature. So how do you build your soul? At a certain point, I know, you have to forget about your soul and just do the work you're required to do. To go on and on about your soul is to miss the whole point of life. I could say that with more certainty if I knew the whole point of life. To worry too much about Oscar Wilde and Andy Warhol is just a lot of vanity.

How should a person be? I sometimes wonder about it, and I can't help answering like this: a celebrity. But for all that I love celebrities, I would never move somewhere that celebrities actually exist. My hope is to live a simple life, in a simple place, where there's only one example of everything.

By *a simple life*, I mean a life of undying fame that I don't have to participate in. I don't want anything to change, except to be as famous as one can be, but without that changing anything. Everyone would know in their hearts that *I* am the most famous person alive—but not talk about it too much. And for no one to be too interested in taking my picture, for they'd all carry around in their heads an image of me that was unchanging, startling, and magnetic. No one has to know what I think, for I don't really think anything at all, and no one has to know the details of my life, for there are no good details to know. It is the quality of fame one is after here, without any of its qualities.

In an hour Margaux's going to come over and we're going to have our usual conversation. Before I was twenty-five, I never had any friends, but the friends I have now interest me nonstop. Margaux complements me in interesting ways. She paints my picture, and I record what she is saying. We do whatever we can to make the other one feel famous.

In this way, I should be satisfied with being famous to three or four of my friends. And yet it's an illusion. They like me for who I am, and I would rather be liked for who I *appear* to be, and for who I appear to be, to be who I am.

We are all specks of dirt, all on this earth at the same time. I look at all the people who are alive today and think, *These are my contemporaries. These are my fucking contemporaries!* We live in an age of some really great

blow-job artists. Every era has its art form. The nineteenth century, I know, was tops for the novel.

I just do what I can not to gag too much. I know boyfriends get really excited when they can touch the soft flesh at the back of your throat. At these times, I just try to breathe through my nose and not throw up on their cock. I did vomit a little the other day, but I kept right on sucking. Soon, the vomit was gone, and then my boyfriend pulled me up to kiss me.

Aside from blow jobs, though, I'm through with being the perfect girlfriend, just through with it. Then if he's sore with me, let him dump my ass. That will just give me more time to be a genius.

One good thing about being a woman is we haven't too many examples yet of what a genius looks like. It could be me. There is no ideal model for how my mind should be. For the men, it's pretty clear. That's the reason you see them trying to talk themselves up all the time. I laugh when they won't say what they mean so the academies will study them forever. I'm thinking of you, Mark Z., and you, Christian B. You just keep peddling your phony-baloney genius crap, while I'm up giving blow jobs in heaven.

My ancestors took what they had, which was nothing, and left their routines as slaves in Egypt to follow Moses into the desert in search of the promised land. For forty years they wandered through sand. At nights they rested where they could, against the dunes that had been built up by the winds. Waking the next morning, they took the flour from their sacks and moistened it with their spit and beat together a smooth dough, then set off, stooped, across the sand, the dough spread across their backs. It mingled with the salt of their sweat and hardened in the sun, and this is what they had for lunch. Some people spread the dough

flat, and that dough became matzo. Others rolled tubes and fastened the ends, and those people ate bagels.

For so many years I have written *soul* like this: *sould*. I make no other consistent typo. A girl I met in France once said, *Cheer up! Maybe it doesn't actually mean you've sold your soul*—I was staring unhappily into my beer—*but rather that you never had a soul to sell*.

We were having Indian food. The man next to us was an Englishman, and he brightened up. He said, *It's so nice to hear English being spoken here! I haven't heard any English in weeks*. We tried not to smile, for smiling only encourages men to bore you and waste your time.

I thought about what that girl had said for a week. I was determined to start the task I had long been putting off, having for too long imagined it would take care of itself in the course of things, without my paying attention to it, all the while knowing in my heart that I was avoiding it, trying to patch myself together with my admiration for the traits I saw so clearly in everyone else. I said to myself sternly, *It's time to stop asking questions of other people. It is time to just go into a cocoon and spin your soul*. But when I got back to the city, I neglected this plan in favor of hanging out with my friends every night of the week, just as I had been doing before I'd left for the Continent.

The girl who had given me her condolences was in her midthirties, an American in Paris named Jen. She was a friend of a friend and had, in a friendly way, accepted my request to be put up for the nights I would be there. Her job was doing focus groups for large corporations, including the United States Army, which wanted help with its recruitment advertising. She had some ethical qualms about this but was more concerned with her boyfriend, who had suddenly started ignoring her. This was the central

preoccupation of her life when I arrived, because it was the more emotional.

There are certain people who do not feel like they were raised by wolves, and they are the ones who make the world tick. They are the ones who keep everything functioning so the rest of us can worry about what sort of person we should be. I have read all the books, and I know what they say: *You—but better in every way!* And yet there are so many ways of being better, and these ways can contradict each other!

Yesterday Margaux told me a story that her mother often tells about when she was a baby. It took Margaux a long time to talk, and everyone thought she was a little dumb. Margaux's mother had a friend who was a bit messed up and really into self-help books and all sorts of self-improvement tapes. One day, she had been telling Margaux's mother about a technique in which, whatever problem you came across in your life, you were just supposed to throw up your hands and say, *Who cares?* That night, as Margaux's parents and her slightly older sister were sitting around the dinner table and Margaux was in her high chair, her sister spilled her milk and the glass broke all across the table. Her mother started yelling, and her sister started crying. Then, from over in the high chair, they heard little Margaux going, *Who cares?*

I'm sorry, but I'm really glad she's my best friend. If I had known, when I was a baby, that in America there was a baby who was throwing up her hands and saying, first words out of her mouth, *Who cares?* and that one day she'd be my best friend, I would have relaxed for the next twenty-three years, not a single care in the world.

ACT

1

· chapter 1 ·

SHOLEM PAINTS

WE WERE HAVING brunch together. It was Sunday. I got there first, then Misha and Margaux arrived, then Sholem and his boyfriend, Jon.

A few weeks earlier, the owners had repainted the diner walls from a grease-splattered beige to a thicky pastel blue and had spray-painted giant pictures of scrambled eggs and strips of bacon and pancakes with syrup. It ruined the place somewhat, but the food was cheap, it was never crowded, and they always had a place for us.

I shared a breakfast special and a grilled cheese with Margaux. Jon asked for our fries. I don't remember what we started off talking about, or who was the funniest that day. I remember none of the details of our conversation until the subject turned to ugliness. I said that a few years ago I had looked around at my life and realized that all the ugly people had been weeded out. Sholem said he couldn't enjoy a friendship with someone he wasn't attracted to. Margaux said it was impossible for her to picture an ugly person, and Misha remarked that ugly people tend to stay at home.

These are a few of the sordid fruits that led to the Ugly Painting Competition.

When Sholem was a teenager, he had dreamed of being a theater actor, but his parents didn't want him to go to theater school. They didn't think it was practical, and

encouraged him to go to art school instead. So he went, and his first year there, up late one night painting, as the sun began rising with the morning, a sudden and strong feeling came up inside him that said, *I must be an artist. I must paint for the rest of my life. I will not settle for anything else. No other future is acceptable to me*.

It was an epiphany and a decision both, from which there would be no turning back—the first and most serious vow of his life. So this past spring, he completed his M.F.A. thesis and graduated.

Who came up with the idea for the Ugly Painting Competition? I don't remember, but once I got enthusiastic, suddenly we all were. The idea was that Margaux and Sholem would compete to see who could make the uglier painting. I really hoped it would happen. I was curious to see what the results would be, and secretly I envied them. I wanted to be a painter suddenly. *I* wanted to make an ugly painting—pit mine against theirs and see whose would win. What would my painting look like? How would I proceed? I thought it would be a simple, interesting thing to do. I had spent so much time trying to make the play I was writing—and my life, and my self—into an object of beauty. It was exhausting and all that I knew.

Margaux agreed to the competition right away, but Sholem was reluctant. He didn't see the point. The premise turned him off so much—that one should *intentionally* make something ugly. *Why?* But I egged him on, pleading, and finally he gave in.

As soon as Sholem returned home after brunch, he set about making his entry—so he wouldn't have to think about it anymore, he explained to me later, or have looming before him the prospect of having to make something ugly.

He went straight into his studio, having already decided what he would do. He imagined it would be like this

intellectual exercise that he could sort of approach in a cold fashion. He would just do everything he hated when his students did it. He started the composition smack-dab in the middle of a piece of paper, since paper is uglier than canvas. Then he painted a weird, cartoonish man in profile with fried-egg eyes, and he outlined things instead of shading them, delineating each individual eyelash. Instead of making a nostril, he sort of drew a hole. In the background he painted fluffy white clouds over orange triangular mountains. He made the background a gross pinkish-brownish gray, using mineral sediment dug up from the bottom of the jar in which he washed his brushes. For skin tone he just mixed red and white, and for the shadows he used blue. Though he thought in the end there would be some salvageable qualities to the painting, it just kept getting more and more disgusting until finally he began to feel so awful that he finished it off quickly. Dipping a thick brush in black paint, he wrote at the bottom, really carelessly, *The sun will come out tomorrow*. Then he stepped back and looked at the result, and found it so revolting that he had to get it out of his studio, and left it on the kitchen table to dry.

Sholem went out to get some groceries for dinner, but the entire time he was gone he felt nauseous. Returning home and setting the bags on the counter, he saw the painting lying there and thought, *I cannot see that thing every time I walk into the kitchen*. So he took it to the basement and left it near the washer and dryer.

From there, the day just got worse. Making the painting had set off a train of really depressing and terrible thoughts, so that by the time evening came, he was fully plunged in despair. Jon returned home, and Sholem started following him around the apartment, whining and complaining about everything. Even after Jon had gone into the bathroom and shut the door behind him, Sholem still stood on the other side, moaning about what a failure he

was, saying that nothing good would ever happen to him, indeed that nothing good ever had; his life had been a waste. *It's like you work so hard to train a dog to be good!* he called through the door. *And the dog is your hand! Then one day you're forced to beat all the goodness out of that dog in order to make it cruel. That day was today!*

Jon grunted.

Then Sholem plodded into the living room and sent an email to the group of us, saying, *This project fills me with shame and self-loathing. I just did my ugly painting, and I feel like I raped myself. How's yours, Margaux?*

Margaux, the better artist, wrote back: *i spent all day on my bed island reading the new york times*.

Fifteen years ago, there lived a painter in our town named Eli Langer. When he was twenty-six, an artist-run center presented his first show. The paintings were gorgeous and troubled, very masterful, all done in rich browns and reds. They were moody and shadowy with old men, girls, and plush chairs, windows, and naked laps. A sadness clouded the few faces, which were obscured by darkness and lit only by faint moonlight. The canvases were very large, and they seemed like the work of someone with great assurance and freedom.

After the show had been up for only a week, it was shut down by the police. People claimed that the pictures were child pornography. The canvases were confiscated, and they were sentenced to be destroyed by the court.

The story was reported in newspapers all across the country, and the trial played on TV for an entire year. Prominent artists and intellectuals became involved and spoke publicly and wrote editorials about artistic freedom. In the end, the judge ruled in Eli's favor, partly; the paintings were returned to him, but on the condition that no one ever see them again. He left them in a corner of his

mother's attic, where they remain, covered in soot and mold, today.

After the trial was done, Eli felt exhausted and shaken. Now when he stepped before a canvas, brush in hand, he found that the spirit lay dead in him. He left Toronto for L.A., where he thought he might be able to feel more free, but the images still did not come as they had before.

Crushed with a new insecurity and inhibition, he applied to his now-tiny canvases only hesitant whites, or whites muddled with pink, or a bit of yellow, or the most apologetic blue—so that even if you stepped really close to the paintings, you could barely make out a thing. For the few solo shows he managed to complete in the years following the trial, he created only deeply abstract work, not anything even remotely figurative.

Several times a year, Eli would return to Toronto for a week or so, and would go to art parties and talk about painters and the importance of painting, and would speak confidently about brushstroke and color and line, and would do coke and be sensitive and brutish. On his forearms were tattooed twelve-point letters—the initials of local women artists he had loved, none of whom would speak to him anymore. The male painters embraced him like he was a prodigal son, and word always got around: *Have you seen Eli Langer? Eli's back in town!*

Late last winter, Margaux talked with him for the first time. They sat on an iron bench behind a gallery after an opening, surrounded by snow, warmed by a fire burning in a can.

Margaux worked harder at art and was more skeptical of its effects than any artist I knew. Though she was happier in her studio than anywhere else, I never heard her claim that painting mattered. She hoped it could be meaningful, but had her doubts, so worked doubly hard to make her choice of being a painter as meaningful as it could be. She never talked about galleries or went on about

which brands of paint were best. Sometimes she felt bad and confused that she had not gone into politics—which seemed more straightforwardly useful, and which she thought she was probably well suited for, having something of the dictator inside, or something of the dictator's terrible certainty. Her first feeling every morning was shame about all the things wrong in the world that she wasn't trying to fix. And so it embarrassed her when people remarked on her distinctive brushstrokes, or when people called her work *beautiful*, a word she claimed not to understand.

Then that night, around a fire burning in a can, she and Eli spent several hours talking about color and brushstroke and line. They went on to email for several months, and she was briefly converted into the sort of painter he was—a painter who respected painting in itself. But after two months, her art crush dematerialized.

"He's just another man who wants to teach me something," she said.

. . .

Misha and I had planned to take a walk that afternoon, so I went to the apartment he and Margaux shared. When I arrived, he was in his study, at his computer, worrying over his life by checking his email.

We left together and walked north through the neighborhood. It was one of the few genuinely hot days we'd had that summer. As the sky went dark with dusk, I asked him whether Margaux had begun her ugly painting yet. He said he thought not. I said I was really eager to see the results.

Misha said, "It'll be really good for Sholem. He's so afraid of anything hippie."

"Is making an ugly painting hippie?" I asked him.

"It kind of is," he said. "There's, like, experimentation to no clearly valuable end. It's certainly more hippie than

making a painting that you know is going to be good."

"Why should Sholem make a painting that he doesn't know is going to be good?"

"I don't know," he said. "But I do think Sholem has a fear of being bad, or of doing the wrong thing. He seems really afraid to take a wrong step at any moment, in any direction. And if what you're afraid of is to take a wrong step at any moment in any direction, that can be limiting. It's *good* for an artist to try things. It's *good* for an artist to be ridiculous. Sholem *should* be a hippie, because with him there's always a tremendous amount of caution."

"What's wrong with caution?"

"Well, there's a misunderstanding, isn't there? Isn't that what was happening over brunch? Sholem was saying that freedom, for him, is having the technical facility to be able to execute whatever he wants, just whatever image he has in his mind. But that's not freedom! That's control, or power. Whereas I think Margaux understands freedom to be the freedom to take risks, the freedom to do something bad or to appear foolish. To not recognize that difference is a pretty big thing."

I said nothing, feeling tense. I wanted to defend Sholem, but I wasn't sure how.

"It's like with improv," Misha said. "True improv is about surprising yourself—but most people won't improvise truthfully. They're afraid. What they do is pull from their bag of tricks. They take what they already know how to do and apply it to the present situation. But that's cheating! And cheating's bad for an artist. It's bad in life—but it's really bad in art."

We had circled ten blocks and the sun had gone down as we were talking. The houses and trees were now painted a dark, dusky blue. Misha said he had a phone meeting, so we started back toward his apartment. His work life was strange and I didn't quite understand it, but neither did he, and it sometimes perplexed and saddened him. There

seemed to be no structure or cohesion to it at all. He did only the things he was good at, and the things that gave him pleasure. Sometimes he taught improv classes to nonactors, sometimes he tried to keep nightclubs out of the Portuguese neighborhood where we lived, sometimes he hosted shows. There was no name you could give to it all. In the short biography he had submitted to Harvard—for what would become a dense, leather-bound volume for distribution at his fifteen-year college reunion—his classmates wrote lengthy entries about their worldly success, their children, and their spouses. Misha's entry had simply stated:

> Does anyone else feel really weird about having gone to Harvard, given the life they're living now? I live in a two-bedroom apartment above a bikini store in Toronto with my girlfriend, Margaux.
>
> "Good night," I said.
> "Good night."

Several years ago, when I was engaged to be married but afraid to go through with it—afraid that I would end up divorced like my parents, and not wanting to make a big mistake—I had gone to Misha with my concerns. We were drinking at a party and left to take a walk through the night, our feet brushing gently through the lightly fallen snow.

As we walked, I told Misha my fears. Then, after listening for a long while, he finally said, "The only thing I ever understood is that everyone should make the big mistakes."

So I took what he said to heart and got married. Three years later I was divorced.

· chapter 2 ·

AT THE POINT WHERE CONVICTION MEETS THE ROUGH TEXTURE OF LIFE

IN THE YEARS leading up to my marriage, my first thought every morning was about wanting to marry.

One night, in a bar on a boat that was permanently docked at the harbor, I sat beside an old sailor. He had been watching me steadily as I drank. Then we started discussing children; he'd never had any, and I said I thought I would not, as I was certain my kid would be a bad kid. He said, bewildered, "How could anything not good come from *you*?"

I felt so moved then—shivering at the thought of a divine love that accepts us all, in our entirety. The bar around us became rich and saturated with color, as if all the molecules in the air were bursting their seams—each one insisting on its perfection too.

Then the moment was gone. I saw him as just an old man staring at a girl—seeing her but seeing nothing. He didn't know my insides. There was something wrong inside me, something ugly, which I didn't want anyone to see, which would contaminate everything I would ever do. I knew the only way to repair this badness was devotion in love—the promise of my love to a man. Commitment looked so beautiful to me, like everything I wanted to be: consistent, wise, loving, and true. I wanted to be an ideal, and believed marrying would make me into the upright, good-inside person I hoped to show the world. Maybe it would correct my flightiness, confusion, and selfishness,

which I despised, and which ever revealed my lack of unity inside.

So I thought about marriage day and night. And I went straight for it, like a cripple goes for a cane.

Several months before our wedding, my fiancé and I were strolling together in an elegant park when off in the distance we noticed a bride and a groom standing before a congregation, tall and upright like two figures on a cake. The audience was sitting on folding chairs in the afternoon sun, and we went over giddily to eavesdrop, crouching behind some false rocks, trying to be serious but giggling anyway. I could not see the groom's face—he was turned away—but the bride was facing me. The vows were being exchanged, and the minister was speaking quietly. Then I saw and heard the lovely bride grow choked up with emotion as she repeated the words *for richer or for poorer*. A tear ran down her cheek, and she had to stop and collect herself before she finished what she was saying.

As my fiancé and I walked away, I said that I thought it was a pretty vain, stupid, materialistic part to get choked up on—but we admitted that we did not know her financial history.

On the day of our wedding, my fiancé and I stood in a bay window before an audience of a dozen people—family and close friends—repeating our marriage vows as the secular minister spoke them.

Then something happened. As I said the words *for richer or for poorer*, that bride came up in me. Tears welled in my eyes, just as they had welled up in hers. My voice cracked with the same emotion that had cracked her voice, but I felt none of it. It was a copy, a possession, canned. That bride inhabited me at the exact moment I should have been most present. It was like I was not there at all—it was not me.

In the months and years of our marriage that followed, I recoiled, disgusted, whenever I recalled this scene—which was supposed to be among the most beautiful of my life. Some people look back on their wedding day as a reminder of their love, but I felt ever uncertain, thinking back upon it, about whether my marriage could truly be called *mine*.

I had lived with one man before my husband: my high school boyfriend—the first man I truly loved. We thought we would be together forever, or if we separated, that we would return to one another in the end.

Before we moved in together, we lived down the hall from each other on the second floor of a crummy rooming house in tiny, separate rooms. He sat at his desk and wrote plays, while I sat at my desk and wrote plays too. One evening, spying outside my door, he heard me talking on the phone with a friend about how I had a crush on a photographer in New York and thought it would be exciting to be with him. The photographer had invited me to live with him there as his girlfriend and assistant. He had taken some flattering pictures of me before leaving his home in Toronto, and I still thought about him a bit, sometimes.

My boyfriend, feeling hurt and jealous and betrayed, that night stole my computer from my room as I was sleeping and wrote on it till dawn, then returned it to my desk before I woke.

When I got up the next morning, I found, there on the screen, an outline for a play about my life—how it would unfold, decade by decade. Reading it compulsively as the sun came up in the window behind me, I grew incredibly scared. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I absorbed the terrible picture he had painted of my life: vivid and vile and filled with everything his heart and mind knew would hurt me best.

In the story, my desire to be with the photographer in New York started me on a path of chasing one fruitless prospect after the next, always dissatisfied, heading farther and farther away from the good, picking up men and dropping them. While my boyfriend rose in prestige and power, a loving family growing around him, I marched on toward my shriveled, horrible, perversion of an end, my everlasting seeking leaving me ever more loveless and alone. In the final scene I kneeled in a dumpster—a used-up whore, toothless, with a pussy as sour as sour milk—weakly giving a Nazi a blow job, the final bit of love I could squeeze from the world. I asked the Nazi, the last bubble of hope in my heart floating up, *Are you mine?* to which he replied, *Sure, baby*, then turned around and, using his hand, cruelly stuck my nose in his hairy ass and shat. The end.

I tried to forget his play, but I could not, and the more I pressed it away, the more it seared itself into my heart. It lodged inside me like a seed that I was already watching take root and grow into my life. The conviction in its every line haunted me. I was sure he could see my insides, as he was the first man who had loved me. I was determined to act in such a way as to erase the fate of the play, to bury far from my heart the rotting seed he had discovered—or planted—there.

What power a girl can have over a boy, to make him write such things! And what power a boy can have over a girl, to make her believe he has seen her fate. We don’t know the effects we have on each other, but we have them.

Every other Wednesday during my marriage, our apartment was filled with smoke from the cigarettes of all our friends. They drank in our rooms and made out on the fire escape. In the beginning, it felt like something truly important was