

THOMAS &amp; DENISE

# NEW YEAR'S EVE

## (ONE)

Thomas feels like he shouldn't be here. Cushions seem to be conspiring underneath him, shifting him inexorably into a fissure at the collapsed center of this couch. He twists at the waist, trying to find a comfortable spot. The whiskey in his plastic cup whirls, threatens to leap the rim. He holds it, watches it: it stills, and he drinks.

It's New Year's Eve and he's at Freya's, watching a cluster of record store people laugh about something. That girl with the sunglasses is there. Lola. Denise. Whatever her name is. When she came in she shot him a tentative wave but he hasn't had the opportunity to go over and talk to her. Instead he's been sitting here, on this unstable couch, drinking. This is his third—his fourth?—and it's only a little after 11.

He could be working—the hotel restaurant is always busy on New Year's Eve. He requested off because he thought he'd spend New Year's Eve with Janine, watching old movies, like they did last year. But Janine already had plans—to spend New Year's Eve with Ingrid, her old lover, who is back from Frankfurt for a week or so. So when Jakob asked him if he wanted to come to Freya's party he said *sure*.

He's pretty sure that Janine and Ingrid doing it. They're probably doing it right now. *Fucking*.

It used to bother him a lot more when Janine slept with other women. He remembers Clark, that whole nightmare. Now it doesn't bother him so much. It hardly bothers him at all.

He sits on the couch and watches Lola. Denise. He should go over and talk to her. She recognized him, obviously.

A guy says something to her; she laughs. The guy is young and handsome.

Maybe one more drink, for courage.

He struggles to rise from the sofa.

Denise listens to Joshua talk and talk. He's telling her about this trip he took to New York last summer, hanging out in Williamsburg at some writer's place. Drinking wine up on the rooftop and taking off their clothes. The story is interesting and funny: it's easy for her to nod and laugh. But a part of her keeps looking for a part of him that's not hidden behind stories of the cool people he knows and the cool things he's done. A part of him that's not guarded, that can be playful, or sad. She can't see that part, but she knows it's there. Everyone has it. They must. Somewhere.

His eyes are on her. They look at her face and every now and again they drift down to examine her body. She has seen this sort of intense gaze before: Toy used to look at her the same way. She knows what it means. She wonders what it would be like to have sex with Joshua. Probably it would not be bad. But she doesn't really want to have sex with anyone right now. She is having difficulty lately remembering what the big fuss is about it, what the *point* of sex is.

She becomes aware of someone standing at her side. It's that guy, Thomas. He looks bad: sallow, and his skin seems coated with a sheen, as though he has been sweating. He holds a drink in one hand and wipes the back of his mouth with the other.

—Hey, she says.

—Lola, he says. There is something in his voice that sounds nasty.

—No, she says.

—Who's Lola? Joshua asks.

—So, Thomas says, loudly. —Good to see you again. He seems unsteady, as though he were trying to move his upper body in tiny circles.

—Yeah, Denise says. —Good to see you, too. Listen, are you feeling all right?

—Oh, yeah, Thomas says, even though he feels feverish and shaky. He looks off, making a show of considering the question. —Yeah, he says finally. —Never felt better. He holds up his plastic cup by way of indication. He

—Oh, Thomas says. —Oh, God.

—Let's get you to a bathroom, Denise says. —I'll be right back, she says to Joshua, who raises his eyebrows. Denise is not certain whether his expression is one of amusement, skepticism, or horror, or some combination of the three.

She steers Thomas to the bathroom, and she stands in the doorway while he gets down on his knees and pukes into the toilet. She pours the rest of his whiskey into the sink and refills the cup with water. When she hears him spit she hands it down to him.

—Drink this, she says. —It's water.

Thomas nods limply, sits on the edge of the tub, and drinks. Denise flushes the toilet.

—I'm sorry, Thomas says. —That's disgusting.

—It happens, Denise says.