

The Silver Age

a novel

The Silver Age: a novel

First edition

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“Memory has a spottiness, as if the film was sprinkled with developer instead of immersed in it.”

—John Updike

“Under the iron bridge we kissed, and although I ended up with sore lips, it just wasn’t like the old days.”

—The Smiths

Some of the kids Stephan had known growing up lived with their moms in concrete mid-rise apartment buildings overlooking the expressway, but his own parents' marriage was as solid as the family's yellow-brick foursquare in a historic part of downtown. His father was regarded as the second-best chartered accountant in the area, his private practice catering prosperously to aging local WASPs, while his mother was a kindergarten teacher at a small public elementary school, universally beloved. They were comfortably middle class, as were their extended families (certain black-sheep hippie uncles aside), and Stephan had the luxury of working only sporadically as a teenager. He undertook such stints primarily to fund the purchase of a new skateboard, guitar or camera lens when his parents weren't in the mood to pony up on his behalf.

In the fall when the skies grew flat and grey, and the long Canadian winter loomed, Stephan would walk in his faded red Vans down to the waterfront, which he considered to be

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the town's main redeeming feature (he hated his home town, self-righteously deeming it hopelessly provincial, conservative and bland). Polluted though it was, Lake Ontario, on which the town fronted, had a purity that dry-land suburbia could never approach, and a ferocity that Stephan found alluring. In stormy weather, the lake's high waves would hammer down on the breakwalls along the shore, sending up sprays that glazed tree branches in dark sheaths, which were baked by the cold and wind into clear ice by the time December rolled around.

* * * * *

On a gusty November afternoon in the early 1990s, Stephan strapped his camera, a vintage Pentax K1000, over his shoulder and made his way down to the waterfront. Starting in when he arrived with some shots along the shoreline, he made pictures of waves the colour of matted steel breaking on the stony beach, where bits of driftwood lay here and there on the smooth grey stones. After a few minutes, he moved on to the yacht club, where the sailboats of local popsicle-stick magnates stood on rickety stilts in the parking lots, their decks swathed in Smurf-blue tarpaulins that pooled with rainwater.

A little while after that, he came to the town pier, an arm of grey concrete reaching a couple hundred feet out into the lake at a height of about six feet above the water's surface. The pier stood just east of the mouth of the harbour, forming a barrier against the high waves that rolled down the long run of the lake in corduroy-neat rows when the wind came up. On sunny summer days, people would saunter up and down it, sucking on ice-cream or slushies, but nobody was out on it that day. The waves were too wild. From time to time a big

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roller would crest over the windward side of the pier, sending a slab of black water sloshing across the top. It was the kind of day on which someone could vanish.

He raised the camera to his eye and took a few shots from the shore of the concrete pier standing proud and solid amid the frothing waves. At the tip of the pier there was a small unmanned lighthouse, topped with a red beacon to warn away any sailors unlucky or foolish enough to be out in such sketchy weather. He was a young man filled with the bravado of inexperience: the red light called to him. Wouldn't it be cool, he thought, to go out there, take some shots back in towards the shore? The wind seemed to be dying down a little, and he felt a sudden urge in his belly to do something foolish.

He approached the base of the pier, took a couple of tentative steps out onto its concrete surface. The pier felt solid and safe beneath his feet, which gave him confidence. He ventured out a few more steps, his breath quickening. A wave exploded against the side of the pier fifty feet or so ahead, sending up a starburst of spray a good 20 feet across. Then the wind eased off again, just a little, and seizing the moment he ran out towards the lighthouse in a full sprint, dodging around puddles of black water, ducking freezing jets of spray as they leapt around him. His heart thumping in his chest, he let out a whoop of excitement and fear, and ran faster. He was almost there.

Then just as he reached the end of the pier, a big wave bore in on him out of nowhere, seeming to reach out for the soles of his shoes with grasping fingers. There was a single metal step bolted to the lighthouse's concrete base. He hopped up onto it just as a deep trough of dark water sloshed across the surface of the pier a foot or so below his sneakers. Foam shim-

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mered up through the gaps in the grated surface of the step as he climbed up onto the lighthouse's solid concrete base. For a moment he lay prone, catching his breath, as cold spray from the big wave soaked into his jeans. Then he gathered his wits, stood up and looked around.

Before him lay the huge tableau of the lake, tossed by waves that seemed not to roll towards the shore but to leap straight up, as if in fear of one another. On a clear night, you could sometimes catch the faint glimmer of the lights of the remote towns of upstate New York on the far shore. But in conditions like these, visibility was far too limited for that to be possible, and so he turned to the east, where on the near shore a few dozen kilometres away the buildings of the closest big city stood above the waves like emperor penguins huddled together against the cold. They looked tiny from this distance, fragile.

He raised the camera to his eye, slowly exhaled, and snapped the shot.

Chapter 1

He was 26 years old when he first met Jenny Wynne – a fine age for a man, it's been said, the very acme of bachelorhood. It wasn't such a bad moment in history to be young, either. The recession of the early 2000s still lingered, but it would be over any day now, everyone knew, and there remained a sense of opportunity in the air, a sense that the next new thing was just around the corner. It was still possible to make a name for yourself, it seemed to all but the most jaded and inert, if only you were smart enough and ambitious enough and, above all, just a little bit lucky. Of course, looking back, years later, he might have been wrong about the exact timing of that first meeting. It was possible that his 27th birthday had already come and gone. But probably, almost certainly, he was 26.

He'd been working as an assistant to the photographer Helmut Stumpfl for about two years, in the vibrant if unromantic Ontario city just up the lake from the suburb where

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he'd been raised, on the day he first encountered her. Based on the weather, if nothing else, he might have sensed that something was afoot that morning. It was the kind of hyper-ordinary day – sunny with cloudy periods, temperatures moderate – that in retrospect had clearly been ripe for drama: riotous protests, bizarre crimes of passion, locust invasions. Instead, an up-and-coming newspaper lifestyle columnist around his own age, give or take a year, her hair so blonde that it seemed to glow from within, came by the studio to have picture taken by the great Helmut.

She had come eagerly, fifteen minutes early for her nine o'clock appointment, with the beginnings of an entourage in tow – a lone female publicist of some sort who looked to be even younger and greener than her client. When Stephan, who'd been out buying some pastries for the shoot, first laid eyes on her, she was seated in a makeup chair in the studio's impromptu styling area, already in costume, awaiting Helmut's arrival. Stephan's employer was by then already nearly half an hour late, he noted, without surprise. Helmut could be punctual, but only when it suited him.

Jenny Wynne's costume for the shoot that day consisted of an imitation eighteenth-century gown worn with a string of fake pearls at the neck. Mandy Jinks, Helmut's preferred stylist for this sort of session, had shaped Ms. Wynne's golden hair into an enormous pompadour of looping curls. The style was absurd by modern standards, way over the top, but that didn't mean it wasn't gorgeous, as was Jenny Wynne herself. There was still a girlishness, an almost pubescent quality, to her features, offset by eyes that seemed, when they stopped their constant flicking around the room, to record the world with a strange mixture of hunger, fear and preternatural calm.

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When Stephan arrived, Mandy was just stepping out for a break, her main role in the day's drama already competed. She'd be on-hand again during the actual shoot for occasional touch ups, but for the time being Stephan would be left alone in the studio with Jenny and her handler. He gave them a brief, shy hello as he entered the studio, discreetly placing the pastries on the dressing table before quickly moving away. He was still awkward, sometimes, with strangers, and there wasn't time for chit chat in any case. He needed to put the finishing touches on the technical preparations for the shoot, fine-tuning the positioning of various lights to create the lush, luxurious effect that was Helmut's visual signature.

The shot they would be capturing was for Helmut's latest pet project, a series of images of local media types and minor political figures dressed as the protagonists of classic novels – all foreign, mostly British or American, their authors long dead. *Madam Bovary*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Age of Innocence*. The idea was to do an inventory of local “people who mattered,” in Helmut's estimation, and perhaps to gain a little publicity and goodwill in the process. Helmut might not have been the most accomplished or cutting-edge photographer on the local scene, but he seemed to understand its politics as well as anyone. Before coming to the city, Stephan had assumed, like the naïve child of the suburbs he was, that success in the field was a simple matter of talent. Watching his employer in action, however, he had slowly begun to see that there was much more to it than that.

Jenny Wynne, young and untested compared to the other participants, was actually a stand-in that day for a more estab-

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lished and powerful columnist at a better newspaper who'd backed out at the last minute. She, and now Jenny, had been cast as Becky Sharp, the youthful femme fatale from William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. The original choice for the shoot was known for her luxurious mane of black hair, which beautifully matched the descriptions of Becky Sharp's hair in the novel, while Jenny Wynne's yellow tresses, of course, did not. Stephan, who had struggled through the book (the first hundred pages, anyway) during an undergraduate English course, had mentioned this to Helmut, but the latter had let out a single mirthless "ha" before looking Stephan in the eye, his gaze cool.

"Nobody likes a stickler, kid," he said.

As he sized her up from across the room, Stephan could tell that Jenny Wynne was rather ill at ease in the role of Becky Sharp, notorious seductress. She tried to conceal the fact by engaging her publicist in an obviously artificial conversation about the local brunch scene, studded with awkward titters and frequent use of the words "inveterate" and "louche." But even Stephan, in those early years not always the quickest to catch on to social nuances, wasn't fooled. She was clearly out of her depth.

"Beautiful weather we've been having," Jenny Wynne was saying, glancing around, speaking to the whole room, as it were. Her eyes briefly landed on Stephan, seemed to zoom in on him like twin telephoto lenses before darting away across the studio. (It was, to be sure, an impressive, even daunting, space, with its high loft ceiling, exposed brick walls, and expanses of hardwood ornamented here and there with lighting rigs, reflector screens and other tools of the photographer's trade.)

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“Of course I am more of an evening person myself, ha ha.” She smirked up at her sidekick. It was the same expression she’d employed in the author photo that accompanied her newspaper column. It was not ineffective.

“Sooooo....” began the publicist, breaking off as her eyes landed on the box of pastries that Stephan had left for them, procured from an excellent Portuguese bakery up the street.

She moved over to the box, eyeing the pastries with sudden intensity.

“Don’t sweat it Sandra,” Jenny said, game, as the publicist tore into a custard tart. “I’m sure Helmut will be here any minute. We’ll just hang tight and everything will fall right into place. Hopefully sooner rather than later – I’ve got a lunch interview with Jack McDonald, our editor-in-chief, and he’s going to be plenty pissed off I’m late yet again.”

Stephan crouched behind a lighting rig, making some inessential adjustments as he watched her. The set consisted mainly of a painted backdrop, depicting a Rococo-esque scene of aristocratic ladies and gentlemen cavorting amid formal gardens. Originally, Helmut’s idea for the shoot had been to place Jenny Wynne at the centre of a busy group photo. She would be surrounded on all sides by enraptured male models in soldier’s uniforms of the Napoleonic wars, a concept lifted from an old poster for an early film version of *Vanity Fair*. But in the end there hadn’t been money to pay the models’ fees, and so the idea had been scrapped in favour of a simpler and more conventional arrangement: Jenny Wynne seated alone in front of the painted backdrop, fanning herself and making coquettish eyes at the camera.

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One of Stephan's legs was beginning to cramp, but he knew that if he stood up he would call attention to himself, which he was reluctant to do given both his shyness and the subtle note of tension that had begun to seep into the room. On the other hand, to crawl out of view seemed cowardly, and so he stayed where he was, absently massaging a calf as he continued to look on. He had not previously realized how young she was. Of course, he had known on some level she was around his own age, but to see her in the flesh like this drove the point home. It made her seem almost like him, as if they were equals, which clearly wasn't the case. She was the bejewelled princess, up on her gilded throne; he a mere stable boy.

Although he wasn't the target audience per se, he had dipped into her newspaper column on numerous occasions. She was one of a new breed of lifestyle columnist that had first sprung up in the late 1990s, the spawn of television shows like *Sex and the City* and the rise of specialty cable television channels. Her topics of choice – movies, restaurants, cultural trends – were grabby, even if the logic of her arguments was sometimes elusive, and Stephan had lingered more than once over that accompanying author head shot. He recalled one of her recent pieces, a discourse on bikini waxing, and watching her as he mused on this his mind wandered in an inappropriate direction.

He leapt to his feet, startled by his own train of thought. Jenny Wynne perked up.

"Sandra," she said in a stage whisper that echoed throughout the studio. "Maybe we should ask that intern fellow who's been hiding over there if something's gone awry."

The publicist, her mouth stuffed, nodded vigorously and

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gave an enthusiastic thumbs up before reaching for another of the pastries.

“Sure, I can do it,” Jenny said.

Stephan had begun walking towards the equipment room, pretending obliviousness.

“Excuse me, mister intern person?” she called.

He stopped, turned. “Sorry?”

Stephan’s title was in fact “assistant,” not intern, but he thought better of trying to correct her.

“Do you know where Helmut is?”

“You’re his first shoot this morning. I’m sure he’ll be here any minute.”

“I see.”

She paused, taking this in. In fact, Stephan suspected Helmut might be a little while yet. He’d noticed over the years that his employer seemed to make a point of being late from time to time, for certain jobs. It was, Stephan had come to suspect, a way to impress upon his clients, notably the less powerful ones, the privilege of working with the great Helmut, a busy man forever being pulled this way and that by the many supplicants for his attention. It was one of Helmut’s many little tricks, and from what Stephan had seen it worked – despite its potential to create discomfort for the master’s minions during his extended absences.

For a moment, Jenny Wynne seemed confused. She pulled a cellphone out of a tiny brown purse, dashed off a hasty text.

“It’s her first-ever photo session and we’re not really sure how this is supposed to work,” the publicist offered. “We thought there would be more... hand holding.”

She was silenced by a look from Jenny Wynne that might have implied a threat of violence.

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“I’m just going to step into the equipment room to take care of a few things,” Stephan said, edging away. “I’ll be back in a minute if you need anything.”

In the safe haven of the equipment room, Stephan began re-organizing a box of power cables, carefully looping each cable up over his elbow and tightly down between his thumb and forefinger. As he worked he gazed up at the downtown skyline through a side window. It loomed over him, seeming to shimmer a little in the harsh sunlight.

The city was not New York or Paris, he understood – the locals themselves frequently said so, with a strange note of satisfaction in their voices. But its steel and glass towers, lake-side location, and multicultural population lent it an at times daunting energy and vigor, at least in comparison to the rather whitebread suburban realm Stephan had previously known. Certainly people like Jenny Wynne were not particularly common in his home town.

After a few more minutes, an angry murmur arose from the far end of the studio.

“...well, Sandra, you were the one... set this up... taking the slightest interest in fixing the...”

Stephan began to giggle nervously, but restrained his laughter before it gained volume. He could not resist thinking, with uncharacteristic cruelty, that the publicist might in fact be an idiot, and that Jenny Wynne was justified in tearing a strip off her. He emerged from the equipment room just as another kerfuffle was ramping up.

“Well, it’s not nice,” Jenny Wynne exclaimed, as if on cue. She tore the floppy hat from her head and attempted to toss

it, like a Frisbee, across the room. But the hat was so light that it fluttered easily down into a chair, like a butterfly coming in for a landing on a leaf, which defeated the symbolism of the gesture. Her skin was now flushed a healthy, not unattractive, pink.

Stephan fought hard once again to suppress his laughter, managing just barely to maintain his composure. The moment passed, and he relaxed his hold on himself, then thought again of the floppy hat wobbling uncertainly through the air. Before he could stifle it, a loud bark of laughter escaped his lips.

She froze, turned towards him in her chair, her neck revolving slowly, as if she was a character in a horror movie possessed by demons.

“Something seems to be amusing the folks in the peanut gallery,” she called to him. “Maybe you’d like to share your private little joke with us, mister intern person?”

“I’m sorry?” Stephan asked, trying to sound innocent. “Oh, no no, just a sneeze. Allergy season. Sorry.”

She fixed him with a hard stare, her mouth twisted in a furious pout.

“Bless you,” she said.

The situation was rescued at that moment by the appearance of Helmut, who strode casually through the studio’s main doors, nearly an hour late. He was attired in his usual uniform: black turtleneck, black jeans, black-framed glasses and expensive mock-combat boots in a fine Corinthian leather (black). Aside from a silver stud in one ear, his hair provided the only relief from this monochromatic scheme. Luxuriant

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and bone-white, it was inevitably coiffed into a state of meticulous disarray. Indeed, the hair was one of Helmut's obsessions, a kind of talisman. Stephan had seen him primping and teasing it with various gels and pomades in sessions lasting thirty minutes or more before departing for an event. The degree and structure of the messiness needed to be exactly correct; otherwise, Helmut would flatten it all down and start over.

The publicist jumped to her feet, scattering crumbs, and made the introductions. "Jenny Wynne, Helmut Stumpf. Mr. Stumpf, Jenny Wynne. I am Sandra Gertz, publicist. It's a pleasure to be working with you on this project."

Helmut gave the woman a cursory nod, then revolved smoothly away from her, as if the chunky soles of his combat boots contained a system of gimbals, and launched himself at Jenny Wynne.

"Miss Vynne, I am zo zorry zat ve keep you vaiting. Ve are honoured, really honoured, to have you viz us in our humble studio. You look stunning. The camera will love you, hmn?"

The most interesting thing about Helmut's shtick was its 100 per cent success rate. All he had to do was render a few clichés in his Continental accent and it was game over. He could have kept the Queen of England waiting for the better part of an afternoon and would have had her tittering like a school girl five minutes after making his introductions.

Helmut had Jenny Wynne in the palm of his hand, literally and figuratively, as he manoeuvred her over to the set. Her floppy hat by then returned to her head, where it perched placidly, content to forgive and forget. Mandy, who'd slipped back into the studio in Helmut's immediate wake, stepped in for a few last touch ups to Jenny's makeup.

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“Shall we get started zen, hmn?” Helmut was saying. “Stephan, I am going to need the Hasselblad – anything less would be too crude an instrument to capture ze full glory of zis ravishing creature.”

Stephan had the prized camera in hand, but he didn't move.

“Vell?” Helmut was saying. “Ve haven't got all day my young friend. Let's hop to it, chop chop.”

Helmut was striding towards him to claim the beautiful steel camera that, even more than his magical hair, was the source of his power. It felt strong and solid in Stephan's hands, reassuring. He held it out, but as Helmut went to take it from him he hung on for an extra moment.

“I'm sorry, Helmut,” he said, in a voice so low it was almost a whisper. His insides were boiling. “I think I need to go.”

He loosened his grip on the camera, allowing Helmut to take it, ever so gently, into his own hands.

“You need to...”

“I guess I'm quitting,” he said, scratching the back of his neck, eyes on the floor. “I'm really sorry, Helmut.”

Helmut started to speak, but Stephan didn't catch what he had to say, because he was already hurrying away through the studio's front door.

Out on the street, the sun beaming into his eyes as he walked, the reality of what he'd just done began to dawn on him. Helmut, to be sure, wasn't the nicest boss he'd ever had, far from it – he was precise and demanding, yet stingy with compliments and reluctant to share his tricks and secrets. But Helmut had up to now been Stephan's main source of steady income, which had been paying the rent (if barely) as

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Stephan developed himself as a photographer. Not only that, the job had given him access to his employer's darkroom, his developer chemicals, his vast collection of cameras and lenses. If things didn't work out, it would be far from easy to find his way back into a similar setup. None of it mattered. Jenny Wynne had gotten to him, without even lifting a finger. It was the strangest thing, and in the moment he'd had no choice but to do something extreme.

Anyway, it was too late to worry about any of that now.