In front of the boardinghouse Tinker was standing beside a Mercedes coupé as silver as mercury. If all the girls at Mrs. Martingale's saved a year’s pay, we couldn’t have afforded one.

Fran Pacelli, the five-foot-nine City College dropout from North Jersey who lived down the hall, whistled like a hard hat appreciating the hem of a skirt. Eve and I went down the steps.

Tinker was obviously in a good mood. He gave Eve a kiss on the cheek and a You look terrific. When he turned to me, he smiled and gave my hand a squeeze. He didn’t offer me the kiss or the compliment, but Eve was watching and she could tell that she was the one he’d been short-changed.

He opened the passenger side door.
—It's a tight fit in back, I'm afraid.
—I’ll take it, I said.
—That’s mighty big of you, said Eve.

Beginning to sense that something was amiss, Tinker looked at Eve with a hint of concern. He put one hand on the car door and with the other gestured like a gentleman for her to get in. She didn’t seem to notice. She was too busy looking at the car, sizing it up from hood to heel. Not like Fran had; more like a professional.
—I’ll drive, she said, holding out her hand for the keys.
Tinker wasn’t ready for that one.
—Do you know how to drive? he asked.
—Do I know how to drive? she said like a Southern belle. Why, I been drivin’ my daddy’s tractor since I was nyin’ years old.

She tugged the keys out of his hand and walked around the hood. As Tinker climbed in the passenger seat looking a little unsure, Eve made herself comfortable.
—Where to, Mac? she asked, putting the key in the ignition.
—Fifty-second Street.
Eve turned on the engine and ripped into reverse. She backed away from the curb at twenty miles an hour and screeched to a halt.
—Eve! Tinker said.

She looked at him and smiled sweetly, sympathetically. Then she put it in gear and roared across Seventeenth Street.

Within seconds it was clear that she was filled with the spirit of the Lord. When she swerved onto Sixth Avenue, Tinker almost grabbed the wheel. But as we zigzagged through traffic, she drove in one fluid motion, accelerating and decelerating in imperceptible increments like a shark cutting through water, timing each light to the second. So we both sat back, quiet and wide-eyed—like others who put themselves in the hands of a higher power.

Only as we turned onto Fifty-second Street did I realize that he was taking us to the ‘21’ Club.

In a sense, Eve had cornered him into it. Nice, nicer, nicest—what was he supposed to say?

But just as Eve had wanted to impress Tinker by showing off the quasi-Russian demimonde that we semi-frequented, Tinker probably wanted to impress us by offering a glimpse of his New York. And from the look of things, he had a good shot at succeeding, whatever Eve’s mood. In front of the restaurant, the exhaust of idling limousines spiraled from tailpipes like genes from a bottle. A valet in a top hat and topcoat opened the door of the car and another one opened the door to the restaurant, revealing a lobby full of Manhattanites waiting hip to hip.

At first glance, ‘21’ didn’t seem particularly elegant. The dark walls were decorated with framed drawings that could have been ripped from an illustrated weekly. The tabletops were scuffed and the silverware chunky like at a chophouse or a university dining hall. But there was no mistaking the elegance of the clientele. The men wore tailored suits and accented their breast pockets with untouched handkerchiefs. The women wore silk dresses in royal colors and chokers of pearls.

When we came before the coat-check girl, ever so slightly Eve turned her shoulders toward Tinker. Without missing a trick, he swung the coat off her back like a matador swinging his cape.

Eve was the youngest person in the restaurant not bussing a tray, and she was ready to make the most of it. Her last-minute dress was a red silk number with a scooped neckline, and she had apparently traded up to her best support bra—because the tops of her breasts could be seen from fifty feet in a fog. She had been careful not to spoil the impression with jewelry. In a small red lacquered box, she kept a pair
of graduation-day diamonds. On her ears, the studs provided a nice little sparkle that complemented her dimples when she smiled. But she knew better than to wear them into a place like this—where one had nothing to gain from formality and everything to lose by comparison.

The maître d’, an Austrian who had plenty of reason to be harried and wasn’t, welcomed Tinker by name.

—Mr. Grey. We’ve been expecting you. Please. Right this way.
He said the word Please as if it was a sentence unto itself.

He led us to a table on the main floor. It was the only empty one in the room and it was set for three. As if he could read minds, the maître d’ pulled the middle chair out and motioned for Eve to have a seat.

—Please, he said again.

Once we were seated, he held a hand in the air and three menus materialized like giant playing cards in the hands of a magician. He delivered them with ceremony.

—Enjoy.

The menu was the largest I had ever seen. It was almost a foot and a half high. I opened it expecting a cavalcade of choices, but there were only ten. Lobster tail. Beef Wellington. Prime rib. The items were handwritten in the generous script of a wedding invitation. There were no prices, at least not on my menu. I peeked at Eve, but she wouldn’t peek back. She scanned her menu coolly and then laid it down.

—Let’s have a round of martinis, she said.

—Capital! said Tinker.

He raised a hand and a white-jacketed waiter appeared where the maître d’ had been. He had all the fast-talking charm of a country club con artist.

—Good evening, Mr. Grey. Good evening, ladies. If I may be so bold, you’re the best-looking table in the place. Surely, you’re not ready to order? The weather is horrendous. May I bring an aperitif?
—Actually, Casper, we were just talking about having some martinis.
—Of course you were. Let me take these out of your way.

Casper tucked the menus under an elbow and within minutes, the drinks arrived.

Or rather, three empty glasses arrived. Each had a trio of olives skewered on a pin that was propped on the rim of the glass like an ear on the hull of a rowboat. Casper placed a napkin on top of a silver shaker and rattled it good. Then he carefully began to pour. First, he filled my glass to the brim. The liquor was so cold and pure it gave the impression of being more translucent than water. Next he filled Eve’s glass. When he began filling Tinker’s, the flow of alcohol from the shaker slowed noticeably. And then trickled. For a moment it seemed as if there wasn’t going to be enough. But the gin kept trickling and the surface kept rising until with the very last drop Tinker’s martini reached the brim. It was the sort of precision that gave one confidence.

—Friends, Casper observed, are the envy of the angels.

Before any of us noticed that the silver shaker was gone, Casper had produced a small scaffold topped with a plate of oysters.

—Compliments of the house, he said, and disappeared.

Eve clinked her water glass with a fork as if she was about to make a toast to the whole restaurant.

—A confession, she said.

Tinker and I looked up in anticipation.

—I was jealous today.

—Eve . . .

She put her hand up to silence me.

—Let me finish. When I learned that the two of you had your little coffee, cream & sugar—I admit it—I was green. And not a little bit peeved. In fact, I fully intended to spoil the evening to teach you both a lesson. But Casper is perfectly right: Friendship is the mostest.

She held up her drink and squinted.

—to getting out of ruts.

Within minutes, Eve was her perfect self: relaxed, buoyant, bright; inexplicable.

The couples at the tables around us were engaged in conversations they’d been having for years—about their jobs and their children and their summer houses—conversations that may have been rote but that reinforced their sense of shared expectations and experience. Shrewdly, Tinker swept that aside and launched a conversation more suitable to our situation—one grounded in the hypothetical.
What were you afraid of when you were a kid? he asked.
I said cats.
Tinker said heights.
Eve: Old age.

And just like that, we were off. In a way, it became a chummy sort of competition in which each of us tried to land the perfect answers—those that were surprising, diverting, revealing, but true. And Eve, ever underestimateable, proved the runaway champ.

What did you always want that your parents never gave you?
Me: Spending money.
Tinker: A tree house.
Eve: A good licking.

If you could be anyone for a day, who would you be?
Me: Mata Hari.
Tinker: Natty Bumppo.
Eve: Darryl Zamuck.

If you could relive one year in your life, which one would it be?
Me: When I was eight and we lived above a bakery.
Tinker: When I was thirteen and my brother and I hiked the Adirondacks.
Eve: The upcoming one.

The oysters were consumed and the shells whisked away. Casper appeared with another round of martinis and then poured an extra one for the table.
—What shall we drink to this time? I asked.
—To being less shy, Tinker said.
Eve and I echoed the toast and raised the liquor to our lips.
—To being less shy? someone queried.
Standing with a hand on the back of my chair was a tall, elegant woman in her early fifties.

—That seems a nice ambition, she said. But better that one should aspire to returning one’s phone calls first.
—I’m sorry, Tinker said a little embarrassed. I meant to call this afternoon.
She smiled winningly and waved a forgiving hand.
—Come on, Teddy. I’m only teasing. I can see that you’ve had the best of distractions.
She held her hand out to me.
—I’m Anne Grandyn—Tinker’s godmother.
Tinker stood. He gestured to the two of us.
—This is Katherine Kontent and—
But Eve was already on her feet.
—Evelyn Ross, she said. It’s so nice to meet you.
Mrs. Grandyn worked her way around the table to shake Eve’s hand, insisting that she sit, and then continued on to Tinker. Barely marked by age, she had short blond hair and the refined features of a ballerina who had grown too tall for the ballet. She was wearing a black sleeveless dress that celebrated the slenderness of her arms. She wasn’t wearing a choker of pearls, but she was wearing earrings—emerald studs the size of gumdrops. The stones were uncontestably glorious and happened to match the color of her eyes. From the way she carried herself, you could just tell that she swam with them. Coming out of the water, she would pick up a towel and dry her hair, not wondering for a moment whether the stones were in her ears or at the bottom of the sea.

Reaching Tinker, she offered her cheek and he gave her an awkward peck. When he sat down again she put a maternal hand on his shoulder.
—Katherine, Evelyn, mark my words. It’s the same with godsons and nephews. When they first come to New York, you see them plenty. Like when the hamper’s full or the pantry’s bare. But once they get on their feet, if you want to invite them for tea, you have to hire a Pinkerton.
Eve and I laughed. Tinker mustered a sheepish grin. The appearance of his godmother was making him look sixteen.
—What a wonderful coincidence running into you here, Evelyn said.