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The University of Southern Mississippi

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

by

Robert John Bartholomew

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2011

ABSTRACT

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

by Robert John Bartholomew

December 2011

This collection of short stories treats of the following diverse themes: the redemptive possibilities for seemingly despicable characters; the ways in which circumstances and the social environment affect characters' sexualities and personal relationships; the lengths to which characters are willing to go to get what they want, which want is often the desire to make contact with others; the struggle between characters' narcissism and their need to come to terms with a new self image, a self image which is often at odds with the one they wish for themselves; and the beauty of vulnerability. Additionally, one of the chief goals of many of these stories is to show the incredible beauty of eccentricity—and not just of any eccentricity, but of a seemingly pernicious, dangerous eccentricity; these stories treat of such characters generously and attempt to redeem these villains of the everyday world.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my dissertation director, Steven Barthelme, and my committee members, Dr. Angela Ball, Dr. Charles Sumner, Dr. Martina Sciolino, and Dr. Kay Harris, for their advice and for putting up with my neuroses. I would particularly like to thank Steven Barthelme for his frank, constructive feedback on the following stories. You have been invaluable in helping me see my fiction more clearly; additionally, your feedback seems not only to make my stories better, but retains all the while their original intent, essence.

I would also like to thank Frederick Barthelme for his criticism and support, for always being "on the clock," for understanding my stories when no one else understood them.

Finally, I must express gratitude to my classmates at the Center for Writers, particularly Colter Cruthirds and Billy Middleton.

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INTRODUCTION

The theory of craft underpinning this collection is the belief that the most important job of any fiction is the job of entertaining. My goal in writing the following stories was to entertain, and to do so by covering new and interesting territory.

Consider the first story in this collection, “We Were Bald.” This story takes the reader places he has never been—or rarely been—and reveals things other fictions ignore: for example, the sexuality of young women who have been damaged by both cancer and chemo, and the protagonists’ struggle with a collision between their own narcissism and the brutal necessity of coming to terms with a new self-image. Along the way, both girls begin to see their friendship as a magical respite from their suffering. The story features unusual and seldom-explored reactions to suffering. For example, June—the darker of the two characters—reveals that in order to remind herself of her own attractiveness, she slept with a friend who is afflicted with cerebral palsy; and Kelly—the more hopeful of the two—details what it is like to learn of a cancer diagnosis:

When I first got the diagnosis, it was like my brain was made of rocks, individual rocks fit tightly together, unable to move. The rocks were dry and they wanted to rotate, but they couldn’t—like stuck gears. It was painful to have my head so full of rocks, with the weight of rocks pressing on the brain that wasn’t there. You know the feeling in your head after sex, when you’re deliciously light-headed? It’s the opposite of that.

Then later, Kelly explains the way the world looks after the reality of the diagnosis begins to sink in: “When you’re diagnosed with cancer, everything changes—the world looks surreal, like it does after a loved one dies. It’s as though a giant hand has shaken

the world, and everything floats slowly back to earth, settling at a slightly different angle. But when you measure everything, it's exactly as it was." This way of looking at a terminal disease, of processing one's own mortality, seeks to avoid sentimentality, aiming rather to pinpoint the character's precise orientation to her plight. When I interrogate my own responses to personal tragedy, I do find the expected emotions/thoughts (fear, sadness, etc.), but there is usually something else at work that surprises me: sometimes the world looks momentarily off kilter, or everyday objects look somehow alien—it is this perception that I wish to report, explore. This feels to me like new and interesting territory.

As with all my stories, "We Were Bald" experiments with what some of my classmates call the "hyperreal." I like to take a moment, an image and slow it down, give to that image a sense of the magical while also using its rendering to illuminate my characters' feelings. Consider the following passage in which Kelly describes the hospital grounds as she looks out the window of her room:

As June folded my gown, I looked out the window. It was a sunny winter day and I stood in the cold light in my underwear; the chill air from the glass made my skin translucent and ugly. Outside everything was white and the white sun reflected off the whiteness and the dazzling day was all reflection and stillness and a blue bird descended from the dazzling blue of the sky and landed on the white snow of the window ledge without denting the snow, and I felt myself light, light like a jelly fish descending through water, its translucent whiteness in and of the ocean's translucent blue. I wanted to live forever.

The above passage is an example of the "hyperreal"—what June is watching is not reported in "real time"; rather, the scene has been slowed down, allowing me to both render the beauty of the scene, and provide the reader with a sense of June's state of mind, which state is that of someone pausing to admire something beautiful while simultaneously aware of her inescapable condition—these two very different awarenesses lead to a sort of epiphanic moment in which June realizes—in the loftiness of that instant—that she wants to live forever. The language serves this end as well—it provides the lift, the electricity the reader needs to experience what June is experiencing. The language reaches this register through alliteration, repetition, unusually long sentences punctuated by conjunctions. Here, I am trying to offer the reader something thrilling—new territory, delivered in an appropriate—and I hope "shiny"—vehicle.

Consider also "Easy Does It": a male protagonist screams during sex, which screaming heightens his sense of himself, his sense of his own beauty. His narcissism leads him to seduce a fat woman who, in many ways, turns the tables and actually wrests control of the relationship from him. He becomes the one we feel sorry for—if we do not already—and his prey appears to be the stronger of the two. Along the way the almost-despicable protagonist shows his charm, his vulnerability, and it is this very vulnerability that is beautiful. While much of the story covers subject matter infrequently found in contemporary literary fiction, this as well as others of my stories appeals to the *different* by showing the beauty of eccentricity—and not just of any eccentricity, but of a seemingly pernicious, dangerous eccentricity. These stories treat of such characters generously and redeem these villains of the everyday world.

A narcissist dead-set on making love to a paraplegic in a wheelchair seems like new and interesting ground. Perhaps such a character might easily be written off as villainous; however, for many people, sex is about more than physical gratification or the wielding of power. It is sometimes used—as in "Easy Does It"—to bolster self-esteem, or cover for insecurity. Related to this is a man's use of sex to feel beautiful. Thus someone wishing to have a sexual encounter with a paraplegic may wish to accomplish all of these things; or he may simply want to do what the character in "Girlish" wants to do: play the role of protector/savior. Granted, these are not new psychological insights, but my stories look closely and unabashedly at these conditions, and show how such seemingly despicable motivations can be harbored by otherwise charming characters. And I hope at the end of these stories, such characters appear beautiful precisely *because* they are damaged.

Thus these stories offer the reader clearly delineated character traits, and an exploration of the thoughts leading the characters to action; in fact, the stories go almost too far in reporting the truth of the characters. The truths reported are often difficult to accept, but are, nonetheless, truths common to the human experience. For example, in a story I wrote during my first workshop at USM, I explore a character who is surprised by how little affected she is by her mother's attempted suicide. Here, Sherry reacts to a phone call from her father, in which call he gives her the bad news: "Sherry's knees slammed into the cupboards. She stood for some seconds awkwardly half-fallen. She was shocked, scared, but also aware that her posture was insincere, that the news had affected her less than it should, that she was acting a little." This excerpt reveals what I believe is common to many people: their consciousness plays out on two different

planes—on one plane exists their reaction to some outside stimuli; on the other, they are aware of themselves reacting to that stimuli, and often this awareness is an awareness of their own posturing, of their performance of the role expected of them—and usually, their actual depth of feeling/reaction is not as deep as they thought it would be, or as intense as they would like it to be. Such a dual-planed consciousness sometimes brings about negative thoughts about the self: "Why do I not feel sadder? Is there something wrong with me? Do I lack something?"

Other examples of this dual-planed awareness appear in several of the stories in this collection. For example, early in "We Were Bald," June studies a man in the hospital's common room: "I looked at his dishabille abjectly. When he looked my way, I'd slowly turn my head, mimicking the sensual movement of a geisha. As I turned away, I saw myself turning away." This is an example of the dual-planed consciousness described above, but it also represents a slightly different manifestation of this phenomenon: here is an exploration of a person's desire to live in the third-person, to see herself as a character on stage. This is different from the kind of awareness exhibited by Sherry (see above) through which she is more or less monitoring herself—Kelly, instead of simply monitoring herself, is in awe of herself, is seeing herself as spectacle, as momentarily exalted, majestic.

Some of my characters do interesting things in order to add to the richness of their lives, so as to appreciate this richness after-the-fact. For example, the protagonist of "Coffee" meets a young woman on a train and speculates about how an encounter with her might add to the richness of his life: "She was annoying, but attractive and witty—and John was lonely. It would be nice to make a friend in this unexpected way. Plus, he

could look at photos of the two of them, tell others. Sure, the possibility of sex hung in the air, but he really just wanted something to think about in the third person." Here, John envisions looking at photos of the two of them and in doing so creates a sort of fiction, a story in which he has a special role. The protagonist of "Easy Does It" perhaps explains this phenomenon best when he considers how a romantic encounter with a coworker might alter his perception of his life, and of himself: "It would be a social experiment, a way to add to the texture of his life so that in 30 or 40 years he could look back and feel that he had *lived*. He thought of his life as a sort of AIDS quilt, a material thing made of squares, each square representing something intense and poignant."

In sum, this collection of short stories includes the following as its major themes, themes I hope I have covered in novel ways: the redemptive possibilities for seemingly despicable characters; the ways in which circumstances and the social environment affect characters' sexualities and personal relationships; the lengths to which characters are willing to go to get what they want; the struggle between characters' narcissism and their need to come to terms with a new self image, a self image often at odds with the one they wish for themselves; and the beauty of both vulnerability and eccentricity.

I close this introduction with a general discussion of form and content; this brief discussion seems especially apropos since part of my strategy as an entertainer is to invoke language that thrills the reader, sentence-level writing that not only adds a special shine to the unusual content of these stories, but also is a part of the very content itself. I see the art object—in this case, the work of fiction—as an organic whole, as something delicately balanced with its pieces harmonious; when the art object is successful, the pieces that constitute it are in perfect relation to one another: the form works with the

content and is, in a sense, the content itself. The following passage from my story "Trees" reveals my effort to create this perfect coincidence of form and content:

I like pretty girls on sunny days, on sunny evenings, when the evening leans into my apartment, leans upon and through my windowpanes, leans longer and longer and longer across the floor, and I like seeing girls on the streets in the sun-dusted air, I like when they look at me—oh look at me!—and the feeling I get from this and from sunny evenings and from the sun on their sunny skin is feeling itself, not the source of feeling but feeling itself [...].

In this passage I use several elements of form—repetition, alliteration, and multiple clauses strung together by conjunctions—to deliver the substance. The narrator is discussing his thoughts about pretty girls, and how the image of a pretty girl affects him. The passage begins with the narrator telling us he likes pretty girls on sunny days, particularly in the evening when the sun is setting and the sunlight appears stretched across the floor. The light of the evening is inextricably bound to his love of seeing beautiful women, and the repetition of the words "sunny" and the tacit references to light underscore this marriage. Seeing a pretty woman under these conditions of light provides him with a certain experience, and it is this experience he is attempting to deliver to the reader. By crafting one long sentence regularly punctuated by "and," and by using alliteration that depends upon the repetition of words beginning with *l*, the narrator evokes a lyrical quality, a certain transcendental music, awaking in the reader—if he is successful—a feeling of that transcendence, a feeling of the same transcendence as the

feeling he gets when he sees a pretty girl on a sunny day. In this sense, the form is the content. In all my stories, wherever possible, I try to achieve this symbiosis.

WE WERE BALD

I met June a year ago at Brinwood, the cancer place. We had leukemia, then chemo. We were both in the final weeks of chemo when we met.

It was in the common room that I saw June for the first time. She sat down to watch what I was watching on TV. And I watched her watch TV but she didn't notice.

We were bald and sick but she looked much fresher than me. Hers was a beautiful incongruity—pointed ears, red lips against blue-pale skin, and a little boy body heavy with innocence. I liked looking at her because it made me feel I could be fresh again too. When you have cancer, you are everywhere you go, everyone you meet.

The weeks passed and we sat together whenever we were both in the common room, which was at least once a day, sometimes twice. We smiled hello, but rarely talked.

Once, I looked over at her and said "Katie." She looked at me like she didn't know what I was referring to. I decided to make a game of it, so a few days later I said, "is my name. It's like a chain letter, but oral."

She laughed and we talked briefly. She was also a graduate student—I was in Art; she was in Business.

The common room was usually half full and I liked to look at the other patients—I was drawn to flesh revealed through openings in hospital gowns. Even innocuous body parts took on greater interest when peeking out from behind the flimsy material—knees, shoulders, upper back. There was an old guy who sat with his feet propped against a chair's edge—he sat like he was at the gynecologist's. His gown would dip between his legs close to the groin, exposing his upper thighs. I looked at his dishabille abjectly.

When he looked my way, I'd slowly turn my head, mimicking the sensual movement of a geisha. As I turned away, I saw myself turning away.

*

Brinwood is in Western New York, surrounded by hills and pines and snow. Here winter lords over the earth nine months a year—and in summer the suppler trees remain slouched under the absent weight of snow. A depressing stage for convalescence, where in April you're so desperate for a splash of color, you daily search the low brush for a hint of gold or green or jade. And eventually spring comes, and so beautifully—the colors rise slowly from the earth like a dense liquid, green trickles into green, and finally the trees explode. Then, winter seems a romantic notion—and you miss it.

You don't go to Brinwood because you have cancer; you go because you have cancer and either you, or your parents, have money—there you have access to the latest treatments. Even so, both June and I received the same drugs we'd have gotten at a lesser hospital. The only benefit to my family was the idea we were doing “everything possible.” I wasn't angry about any of this—at least if something went wrong, I was already in the best place.

When you're diagnosed with cancer, everything changes—the world looks surreal, like it does after a loved one dies. It's as though a giant hand has shaken the world, and everything floats slowly back to earth, settling at a slightly different angle. But when you measure everything, it's exactly as it was.

And something wonderful happens, too.

Once, shortly after my diagnosis, my dad and I were fishing in Lake Erie on a warm fall day. We were the only ones fishing, but there were scores of young people in the lake swimming and lounging and mock fighting. After we'd been fishing off the pier

for a while, storm clouds moved in from the west. By the time Dad and I packed our tackle and walked the length of the pier, the day had lost its dazzle. When we stepped from the pier, I turned around in time to see a flash of light over the water. Everyone struggled from the lake, moving in frustrated jerks against the water that held them back. I was landed and they were coming to be with me, and then raindrops everywhere fell in the half-sun, coming so fast they looked like silver filings suspended in air. And then everyone was landed and looking back triumphantly at the rain they hadn't escaped, my face lost among all the wet ones.

*

Several days after we met, I was too sick to leave my room and June came by and sat on the edge of the bed. We both looked up at the TV like we did in the common room. I wondered if the only reason we were friends was because we were the only college girls at Brinwood—everyone else looked like they *should* have cancer.

June spoke first. "I asked around about you. Some old guy said you tried to talk to him once, that you used the word 'dishabille'."

"I felt beautiful talking to him," I said, my face reddening.

We sat silent for several minutes looking at, but not seeing, the TV.

I got queasy watching the screen and threw up. June jumped off the bed to avoid getting hit. My barf got all over the side of the bed and the floor. June whipped a tissue from the night stand and held it out to me with her arm perfectly locked. She looked up and away, queenly. I wiped my mouth with the useless tissue.

"It's not even two-ply," I said.

"I'll get someone," June said, and squeaked out of the room in her hospital gown and Doc Martens.

June returned to the room with an orderly who had black hair and a dirty blond goatee; he was carrying a gray bag. One of his eyes was turned in and his mouth was open wide enough to show his tongue, which was pinned to the top of his mouth.

According to his nametag, he was "Laura." He sprinkled sawdust on the side of the bed and floor.

"Laura," June said in a teasing way, "you're cute. When you hold hands, do you like to interlock fingers, or do you prefer to hold hands the way you might with a young child?"

When he continued his work without responding, June spoke again. "You seem so serious with your sawdust. Can't we get some mood music in here?"

Laura stood erect, the bag hanging like a purse from his arm. "Sometimes," he said with a nasal voice, "I pretend it's confetti, and dance in circles while I hold the bag above my head, letting it swirl around me."

He demonstrated, dancing a girly dance in tight, girly circles, his free arm moving in semi-circles from groin to head, head to groin, his hand dancing jerkily at the end of his arm. He looked like a dancer from the 1920s.

His foot smudged the edge of the vomit and I said, "Watch out."

June clapped as Laura wiped the bottom of his shoe with a tissue from the nightstand. He dropped the tissue into his gray bag and made his hand into a claw, inspecting the nails; then he smiled at June and said, "Hold hands?"

The next day when June came to my room she brought the dust ruffle from her bed, neatly folded, in case I lost control again. She held it in her hands while we pretended to watch TV. I noticed that she was dressed in street clothes this time--a purple jumper with huge pockets, black leggings, and Doc Martens.

When I started to gag, she threw the wadded up dust ruffle at my mouth. I flinched backward and barfed at the same time, getting vomit all over my gown.

“I didn’t mean to!” June said.

She brushed my hair from my face as I lay there embarrassed and still queasy. “Can I help you change—or do you want Laura to do it?”

June closed the door and returned to help me out of bed. We stood next to the window and she helped me undress. It took the two of us because I needed someone to hold up the bottom edge of the gown so vomit wouldn’t run onto the floor.

As June folded my gown, I looked out the window. It was a sunny winter day and I stood in the cold light in my underwear; the chill air from the glass made my skin translucent and ugly. Outside everything was white and the white sun reflected off the whiteness and the dazzling day was all reflection and stillness and a blue bird descended from the dazzling blue of the sky and landed on the white snow of the window ledge without denting the snow, and I felt myself light, light like a jelly fish descending through water, its translucent whiteness in and of the ocean’s translucent blue. I wanted to live forever.

June touched me on the shoulder and I turned from the window. When she pulled her hand away she looked at her fingers as though some of my skin had rubbed off on hers.

“Your skin looks like mine when I’m at the doctor’s office,” June said. “It’s so cold and you realize how ugly you are. But you know you’re not uglier than anybody else.” She set the neatly folded gown on the radiator. “You look pretty good for a bald chick.”

I was relieved. “I actually think the same about you. You look so anemic, but healthy.”

“Come here,” June said. She sat on the bed and drew me to her, pulling lightly on my fingers. Her booted feet were on the bed frame, her legs open. I stood between her legs, very close, wondering if she had meant for me to come so close.

She didn’t say anything for a while and I looked at her face, trying to imagine her with hair. She still lightly held my fingers, my fingers lightly held.

“Touch my face,” she said. “Then look at your fingers.”

I did. The pads of my fingers were shiny.

“Olive Oil. Try some?” She let go of my fingers and pulled from her pocket a small glass bottle filled with yellow liquid. “Extra Virgin. But it doesn’t absorb, so only use a little on the surface.” She pulled out the cork, put her finger over the hole, and turned the bottle upside-down. Once the bottle was upright again, she removed her shiny finger and lightly brushed it against my forehead, cheeks, chin. “Now spread it across.”

I did.

She took my hand and walked me to the bathroom, where we stood in front of the mirror. My skin looked better—not like my grandma’s skin, skin that shined from too much Vaseline. You couldn’t tell that oil had been applied to my skin—the aliveness seemed to come from *within*.

“Do we look like prudes, or sluts?” June said to my image in the mirror.

“It could go either way. Which do you prefer?”

“I can see both. I like to be objectified like a slut. When I have sex, I like to imagine the guy can’t get enough of me and that’s why he’s invading me; I sometimes say to myself, ‘I’m getting fucked.’ It’s like he wants me so bad, like he wants to devour

my sexiness, relieve himself of the impression I make on him. Have you ever seen a baby or an animal that was so cute that you had to scream to relieve yourself of the intense feeling of cuteness? It's like that."

"I like the idea of a man being attracted to me," I said. "It reminds me there's beauty in the world, that I own some of it."

She was holding my hand; we were still facing the mirror. I wondered if she was thinking about our hands. I tightened my grip to see what she would do; she gently brushed my palm with her pinky.

The door to the room opened and a very pale, slightly masculine woman appeared at the bathroom doorway. Her lips were bright red and appeared unnatural against her white face. I'd never seen this nurse before.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"It's funny, but I sort of feel sick. Think it could be cancer?"

The nurse smiled warmly and left the room. As the door opened and closed I could hear loud, hollow voices and the sound of wheels.

June looked at me and smiled. "Frankendike," she said.

*

I didn't see June in the common room for several days and worried she might be ill, so I asked around for a room number. When I arrived at 137, June was lying in bed. She told me she wasn't ill, that she'd stayed away from the common room because she wanted us to spend time together in private.

"You could have just asked me," I said.

"It's more romantic this way," she said. I could see the outline of her Doc Martens through the bed sheets.

On the nightstand: a rose in a glass vase. It was another sunny day and the light exploded in the ridges and grooves of the intricate glassware.

During the week since my chemo illness I'd recovered nicely. I actually had more energy now than before I'd begun treatment. I knew the feeling wouldn't last—it was a tease.

"I love this vase," I said. "I love light. Bright white light coming through glass, or reflected in glass, reminds me of Saturday afternoons, of being healthy and not worrying. Like wiggling your toes in soft socks."

June smiled and picked up the vase. She rotated it between her hands, looking contemplative, mischievous, sexy. Sparkles of light bobbed up and down on the rotating glass.

"I can't understand why people use lights during the day," I continued. "It drowns out the natural light and makes the inside look like it's nighttime outside. It's like everyone has a death wish."

"You're on the right track," June said. "Get into bed." She flipped the sheet back and wiggled over to make room for me.

I stepped out of my slippers and got into bed. June grabbed my shoulder and rolled me until I was on my side, facing away from her. Then she pressed her chest against my back, spooning me.

"You're so romantic," June said after a while. I moved my right leg back until it was snugly between her legs.

"Why are you wearing boots?" I asked.

"I don't want anyone to see my feet," she said, her breath warm against my neck.

"I hate the tests, the examinations, the loss of control. It's like when you were first

diagnosed, when you had those blood tests and waited for the fuckers to call, and when they didn't call, YOU called, and they had the fucking results, and what were they waiting for anyway? Rigid, capitalist pigs. Ever try calling a doctor and actually getting him on the phone? The dumb-fuck secretary takes a message and a NURSE calls you back! So I won't let them see my feet. I'm drawing a line in the sand."

June's rant emboldened me and I felt I could play fast and loose. I said, experimentally, "It's like a fucking slumber party around here with the fucking hospital gowns." This didn't make sense, but June laughed politely.

"You're so cute," she said.

"When I first got the diagnosis, it was like my brain was made of rocks, individual rocks fit tightly together, unable to move. The rocks were dry and they wanted to rotate, but they couldn't—like stuck gears. It was painful to have my head so full of rocks, with the weight of rocks pressing on the brain that wasn't there. You know the feeling in your head after sex, when you're deliciously light-headed? It's the opposite of that."

"Different for me," June said. "I panicked, like in the movies. Sliding down walls and stuff. I hate the cancer, and I hate myself for hating the cancer in all the conventional ways. I spend my life going against the grain and then, suddenly, when it counts, I turn into the bimbo from a slice-and-dice."

"The best part about this place is that it's in the middle of nowhere," I said. "There's a hill in back that faces another hill; on a clear day, you can look at the blankness of the other hill and lose yourself in your own sadness. It's deliciously self-indulgent, like when you watch a sad movie and try to make yourself cry—but then you

start laughing because your makeup's running and you think you must look like one of those whores Jack the Ripper killed."

"It's not fucking fair," June said, as though she hadn't heard me. "Right after my diagnosis, I slept with a friend who has cerebral palsy. We fucked five times a week for a month. He has it bad, too—looks like a freak when he walks. You know what? It was one of the best experiences of my life: I'd hold the shit out of his hand when we went out, and then I'd take him back to his place and give him the works. I mean finger up the butt—*everything*. I'd hang on him at parties—I mean *hang*. You should see me with hair—I'm hot!"

"Do you think I have it worse than you?"

"Hard to say at this point. Are you mad?"

"I'm a little concerned," I said. "Do you like people? Actually *like* them?"

"I like *you*. Really. But let's face it, people choose friends for a reason, it's not all based on things-in-common."

We were silent for a while. It was afternoon and the sun reflected off the white sheets that covered our legs. Keeping my body still, I turned my head and looked over my right shoulder: June's eyes were closed, her lips parted, her red lips. I imagined a full head of black hair against her pale skin, darker than dark, long and girlish and lying across her shoulders, across my body, lightly lying on my closed hands, lying lightly on my hands held by her hands.

"You're a hard little bitch," I said softly. I'd scared myself.

She smiled without opening her eyes. She breathed in deeply, in a showy way, and her smile deepened. Outside, the day was dazzling.

"Close your eyes," she said, still smiling, "and turn around."

A few minutes later, June broke the bright silence. "Have you eaten? You look hungry."

*

A bus left every Monday at 8 a.m. for Springville, the nearest town with a commercial district. I'd opted out the previous week and June needed earphones, so we decided to go.

It was snowing and the air smelled hard and clean.

There were at least 15 people on the bus and we were all wearing hats and gloves. The road was bumpy and the wool-covered heads flopped about like buoys.

This was our first trip into public bald, and we'd proclaimed aloud that we wanted to confidently embrace our baldness, whatever that meant. Secretly, I wanted to bare my head to the world precisely because it would be difficult—I wanted to hurry up and get used to it. It would be like jumping into a cold lake, I thought.

"Isn't it annoying?" June said. "I know we're physically sick, but why do I feel retarded? It's like a field trip for disabled kids. Right now, at a grocery store checkout, someone is putting change into a plastic jug so we can take these trips. I should be in the produce aisle, palpating a dark red apple—not dealing with this shit."

"Here's something," I said. "We might be lucky. I read somewhere the universe may be 200 billion light years in diameter. And ours may not be the only universe. Ever hear of string theory? Turns out the atom isn't the smallest unit of life, that particles are actually made of strings, strings so small that, in size, they are to electrons what trees are to our solar system. John Doe dies, and just because people don't see him around town they think he doesn't exist. We know nothing about death—it might be wonderful."

I'd often used this reasoning to prepare myself for the worst, but hadn't really bought it until now. Saying it aloud and watching June's face lighten made me think maybe I was right. I felt like someone else, somewhere else.

"Nobody can argue with that," June said. "But we're guaranteed life is wonderful—you're banking on possibilities."

"You can bet the heavily favored dog and win a little more than your bet, or bet the longer shot and triple your money."

"Only we're not given the safe dog option," June said, smiling. "I'm a safe dog kinda' girl when it comes to these things. Hey, have you ever been? It's really cute when it's a close race—flash bulbs go off as they cross the finish line, and if you're standing close to the fence you feel like a celebrity and everything feels really 1930. I picture myself caught forever in a black and white photo, plastered across a newspaper."

I turned toward the window and looked into the bright wintry gloom—the sky was full of soft light, and birds. We were on the main street of Springville, which was a small, still town with hundred year old buildings. It looked beautiful in the snow and the quietness of the scene made it feel like the bus was standing still and the snow-touched buildings were softly rolling by. And somehow this soft scene reminded me of holiday shopping, how nice everyone looks in the muted lights of the department stores, in high black boots and scarves, their tiny hands flopping softly about in fat cuffs like bells. It struck me that such scenes of life as these would be what I'd miss most if I were dead and could know it. It wasn't the deep stuff I'd regret leaving: relationships (people were such a pain in the ass), my future career (I knew a career became a routine after a while, something you did because you had to be doing *something*), financial security (a chimera if there ever was one); no, it would be the superficial stuff I'd wish to hold onto: the

metallic taste of my fingers after handling money; that really great orgasm I had after I finally met a guy who was patient, who would move mountains to make me come, but who wouldn't be pissed if I didn't; the cozy feeling of cotton pajamas after a hot shower and the sound of the heat clicking on right when you want it most.

The bus pulled into an electronics store parking lot. Most of the patients crossed the street to the grocery store while June and I pushed through the double doors of an outmoded building, beyond which doors scores of TVs flashed along the walls and smaller gadgets hung at odd angles in the center aisles. It was one of those buildings from the 70s that had linoleum floors and low ceilings—it made me suddenly nostalgic for Best Buy, even though in Best Buy I was often nostalgic for rickety, superannuated stores like the one in Springville.

When we got to the earphones aisle, we removed our hats and shook off the snow.

"There's a really cute guy in the next aisle," June said, putting her hat in her pocket. "He's one of those fat people you think is so fat he wouldn't feel you touching his arm. I'd like to be ravaged by that guy, smothered under him."

He was sort of cute in a cuddly way. He looked like the kind of guy you might be embarrassed to bring around your friends, but who would be great to lie across on the couch, your hand on his belly, your head against his shoulder. He'd still be in overalls and work boots and you'd be fresh from the shower in silk pajamas, your latest watercolor on the coffee table.

"Are you serious?" I said.

"Watch this."

June rounded the end of the aisle and approached the fat guy. I held a memory card in front of my face and looked directly at it.

Under any other circumstances I would have been mortified to be anywhere near such social experimentation; but with June, everything seemed possible, the stakes seemed lower somehow, like muted television violence. Or maybe we had nothing to lose, it was hard to tell.

"Hey, guy," June said.

The guy was so absorbed in the digital camera he was playing with that her address went unnoticed.

"I once dated a guy with a very prominent ribcage," June continued. "It was cute. When I was feeling especially fond of him, I'd tell him I was 'ribcaging.' The soft g in the middle of the word makes it—it feels good in the mouth. What will our word be?" By this time, the man was looking at her; his eyes were long top-to-bottom, and he resembled a cartoon dog—I pictured a wooden barrel under his chin. This made me like him, and I hoped June was acting in earnest.

"I don't see this kind of thing too often," the man said in a deep, clear voice. He took glasses out of his jacket and put them on so close to his face the heat from his forehead clouded up the lenses. "Now I really don't see this kind of thing," he said with a smile.

"That's perfect," June said. "That's exactly what I was hoping you'd say."

"Are you from the bus?" the man said, gesturing toward the parking lot. "With that group?"

"Let me stop you right there," June said. "I'm from my mother, have lived a life, a life rich with experiences. I was beautiful once, drove a car when I wanted to get somewhere. I planned my day when I got up, and executed those plans the way anyone else might." June's eyes were moist.

"I'm really sorry," he said. "I don't know how to get out of this hole, so I'm not going to try. Let's leave it here. Besides, we're not even sick of each other yet," he said with a smile. "Most couples leave on rotten terms."

This was a nice gesture, it seemed to me. But June was too far gone: as he walked toward the register, she shouted, "I'm bellying! Hear that? Bellying!"

When the man failed to respond, June grabbed my wrist and pulled me toward Home Appliances. June didn't speak until we'd reach the washers and dryers.

"I'm out of control," she said, awkwardly placing her hand on top of my head. "There are walls everywhere—I can't affect anything. The world is moving on a track, and we're on a track of our own—it feels like nobody else is on it, you know? The scenery isn't any good; the food's bad." June's eyes got real big and she said, "This is cold country, Katie. I want to be at home in Yonkers, listening to Dream Academy."

Suddenly, I felt exposed. "Try not to look at it," I said. "Remember when we came in here and you got the idea to approach that man, and you said that funny thing about ribcaging? That's where we'll leave it. Only a 2-minute rewind." I put my arm around June and we walked toward the doors. "Wow," I said, as we stepped into the cold, "do you think he'll call? I sure hope so. Maybe he has a friend."

June laughed, but seemed to force it. "Wait right here," she said, "I have to get those ear phones."

*

Lake Erie froze, producing clear weather for Western New York. Brinwood organized a family day for its patients: great swaths of lands were cleared of snow and bright yellow tents erected, like the ones at graveside services. Smoking grills were everywhere on this fine Saturday and families mingled under the tents, brought together

by the cold. Families of patients not doing so well gathered in the cafeteria where a buffet glowed sickly under bright lights.

June's family couldn't come because they were on a vacation booked months in advance; mine was represented only by my father because my mother—a nurse—was in the middle of a 48 hour shift. June eagerly accepted an invitation to hang out with me and Dad.

Dad showed up in his overly large fedora, which he wore on all occasions, even in the house. The first few minutes of conversation were awkward as June struggled to get a good look at him—only his chin and mouth were visible, the rest of his face obscured by shadow.

Because Dad took nothing seriously, June warmed up to him quickly—they fed off one another. When she discovered his middle name was August, she playfully pushed against his chest. “No you didn't,” she said.

“I did,” he said from under his hat. “What's more, my great grandmother's initials were F-E-B. Stick that up your ass sideways!”

“Be careful, I just might.”

“Dad,” I said. “June.”

“I wish my parents were this loose,” June said.

“You haven't met my wife—she's really morose. Once, before Katie was born, I was in the bathroom taking a protracted dump. My wife was pissed because she needed to poo, so she relieved herself in a frying pan and left it outside the door.”

“He always tells this story,” I said. “So don't feel special. He chased her with the pan the rest of the afternoon, pushing it in her face, saying, ‘Ham on whole wheat.’”

“What do you want me to call you?” June asked my dad.

“Dad’s fine.”

June looked devastated.

*

“It’s spring,” June said softly, and softly kissed my neck.

After the families had left, we strolled about the grounds. Now, we were standing on the hill I’d told her about; June was behind me, her arms around my waist. It was snowing.

Brinwood made available items residents could check out. In preparation for our walk, I’d checked out a pair of binoculars which I now used to look at the opposite hill. It was covered in bare trees, except for a square, barren patch under snow. A woman walked across the patch. I saw a cheap, tattered scarf dancing between her legs, snow dancing past her face—downward, sideways in the wind, upward in a squall. The fickle snow made the air visible: I could see the air rushing round her face, the soft lift in the air as it moved its hands skyward through her hair. She was heavy-clad, surrounded by fat, bright colors, and her clotted, half-frozen hair wound around her neck and rode aloft. Her hair was delicate in the rush of air, and framed a girlish face.

“An escapee,” June said. “We should befriend her and camp out in the woods until the authorities find us. When their helicopters land our hair will blow wildly and we’ll wave a lot.”

“She’s probably sad and desperate,” I said. “They’ve just had a fight—she finally got fed up with her husband’s speech patterns, how he always rolls his *r*’s. She’s just killed their kids because of it.”

“No,” June said. “He refers to his testicles as ‘that forbidden fruit.’ Then, when they’re around friends, he’ll work it into a sentence: ‘Wow, this wine is great--has a fruity

taste, like that forbidden fruit.' This really hits home because she used to be a nun. So, one day she leaves him a goodbye note that says, 'Thanks for spotting me during my Kegel exercises,' and hits the road."

"Nice! And these people own a really big—but really skinny—Great Dane. Her name is Dora. She's gray. And when she sleeps, she spreads out on the couch and gathers up her legs and paws as though they are not hers, and it's cute how the legs and paws lie next to her on the couch and sleep while she's sleeping."

"Perfect!" June said. "And the couple's too stupid to notice how cute this is."

By this time, the woman had reached the woods on the other side of the barren square and disappeared among the trees.

June stared at the ground despondently. "She's going somewhere. And this somewhere that she's going has people in it, and she'll remain there until she decides to go again. They're all wearing fuzzy sweaters." She looked up from the ground and glared at me.

She slapped me—I saw the slap coming, saw her winding up, but didn't react. A part of me felt I needed the pain, that the reception of this singular pain would be for me alone.

I fell onto the snow not because of the blow's force, but because I wanted to. I sat on the snow with my legs splayed, my head down, my arms like dead weight at my sides—rag doll. It's like when you're a child and you cry over something and the crying leads to more crying, and yes, you're sad, but crying makes you sadder and the sadness that accumulates is somehow a relief from the sadness that produced it, and the successively blooming sadnesses become you, and there's perverse satisfaction in this.

Suddenly, I felt the strength of June's arms as she desperately tried to pull me to my feet. She was sobbing hysterically. Her feet slid around in the snow as she tried to pull me up—she had to keep putting me down, replanting her feet, and lifting anew. I deliberately made my neck limp and my head bobbed like a flower shaken by wind.

Her efforts made me suddenly mad as I began to feel like a victim. I shook her arms off and jumped to my feet. Grabbing her head violently between my hands, I brought her mouth to my mouth and bit her upper lip, getting only a pinch of skin in my disordered rage—it was ludicrous, I knew, but the futility of the violence and the helplessness it produced thrilled me. I pushed her away and watched her. She held her mouth; she bent over and then stood up, bent over and then stood up—like a hen.

As I watched her, I pictured blood dripping from my mouth, even though it wasn't; I pictured my teeth sharper than they were.

June straightened up and stared at me, probably wondering if she should continue fighting. The adrenaline was gone and I was scared and didn't want to fight anymore.

"I'm scared," I said with a slight question in my voice. I slowly bent my knees and pretended to slide down an invisible wall. I made weird faces with my lips as my butt approached the snow. I hoped this burlesque would disarm June.

Without saying anything, she turned around and walked back toward Brinwood. I followed her but didn't begin my walk until she was at least 100 yards away—I wanted to give her a wide berth in case she changed her mind.

*

Several days passed and I didn't see June. A peace offering was needed, a show of good will.

I'd brought my paints and some canvas with me to Brinwood, figuring at the time that I'd be able to work on school work. I pulled from the drawer my canvas and paints and did a picture for June.

The painting was of two old women playing shuffleboard: One woman was standing in front of the scoreboard, pointing at it with an angry look on her face, her mouth open. The other woman was standing in the foreground, only her back visible, her hair black and gray and long; one hand was on her hip, the other rested on top of her upright shuffleboard stick, the handle tip digging into her wrist, her hand drooping like a flower; Doc Martens peeked out from beneath her long floral dress.

I walked through the halls with the painting held out in front of me, the picture facing inward so nobody would bump the wet paint. People looked at me and smiled and I smiled back. I imagined that I passed Laura and that when he saw me he grinned and held his hand in the air, sprinkling confetti as he walked by without walking, floating through the suddenly sunlit hallway.

June was fully dressed and looking out the window. I walked up to her as loudly as possible so she wouldn't get scared—I took high steps like I was in a marching band.

“Cut it out,” she said, without turning around.

“You've made me goofy,” I said to her back.

I held the painting out in front of me, the picture facing outward this time, into the sunlight. I tilted my head to the left slightly, imagining how beautiful I must look in the clear winter afternoon.

June turned around. She looked depressed, but secure in her depression, steeled.

I handed her the painting. She looked at it for several minutes while I watched her. Her eyes didn't move around the canvas, they just stared at one spot, or seemed to. I tried to recall what it was like watching someone read a book, if their eyes moved at all.

“Thank you,” I said.

June walked to the bedside table and set the painting against the wall, behind the glass vase with the rose. Her movements were slow and deliberate, and this made me sad.

“I hope so,” she said.

It seemed we had existed in a bubble, that for a space our troubles were muted—we were like the soldiers in a war movie that look clean and sexy despite rolling around in the mud. Our friendship felt as secure as ever, but things seemed new now—the mud was sticking to our skin and we had to fear the bullets flying overhead.

TREMENDOUS OPPORTUNITY

The saleslady's much older than me, but still very sexy; her hair is dark with a web of gray traced through. She is slender, demure—looks like some night clerk I once saw in a hospital.

She folds clothes behind the cash register. She's carefully tending to chocolate dress slacks. Her pale, freckled fingers pass along the pleats and then curl under the waist as she drapes the slacks over a plastic hanger. Her old face is girlish, and beautifully weary; her bangs shake across her skin when she looks down, or sideways.

I wonder if she has a husband and if they watch the Weather Channel together. I wonder if she brews the coffee in the morning, or if he does. I wonder if they are quiet after sex or if they talk and laugh a lot.

She picks up a pastel blouse with deliberately frayed sleeves. She drops it into a plastic bin; she shakes her bangs madly and taps on the register keys. The machine pops and beeps and a drawer shoots out. She rests her hands in the drawer and closes her eyes; she looks like she's sleep-walking. Her bangs separate and look like pine needles spilling.

I hatch a plan: I'll purchase underwear and have her ring me up.

I leave Women's and walk to the underwear aisle. I see blurred freeze-frames of my reflection as I pass mirrors attached to supports.

The tighty-whities are neatly arranged in rows. I quickly find my size: Medium, 32-34.

As I walk back to Women's, I consider purchasing a larger size instead—Large, or even better, Extra-large. So I go back to the line of reflective packaging and grab some Extra-large briefs. I also pick up a package of really large tube socks—this way she'll see

I have big feet.

But maybe I shouldn't buy white underwear.

When I finally get to her register, she looks at my large, dark purchase and then at my diminutive frame.

"So who are you shopping for today," she asks, waving her white wand.

"Just me. I wanted to do a little shopping before the hurricane hits." My voice is shaky, brittle.

"It's going to be a bad one. We finished boarding our windows this morning."

She slides the wand over the barcode; the register beeps.

I must get to the meaning of "we," and as soon as possible.

"You're lucky you have help. I had to do it myself. Is your husband handy around the house?" I avoid her eyes, fumble with my credit card.

"Oh no, I mean it was me and my son who boarded up the house. My son's the strongest in the family. He plays football for Bama."

I hand her my Visa. She's a white blur and I have trouble tracking her face.

"Do you have a big family?" I must find out whether "family" means "immediate family" or "extended family."

"No. Everyone's old and dropping like flies."

I must know who lives in her house; I must find out without sounding like I'm casing the joint.

"Same with mine. We're a small clan. Of the people in your house, who is the oldest?" I am aware of how strange this must sound.

As I sign the sales slip, she responds: "Oh, I'm in my forties. But that's not old, is it?" She giggles and puts my underwear in a plastic bag.

"No, absolutely not. These days, 40 is young; your life is really only half over."

I wish I hadn't said this.

She curtly thanks me for my purchase. Her locked arm holds the bag in front of my face; she grips the handle using only thumb and forefinger, like she's gripping something very very small, like she's picking up a single grain of sand on the beach.

I walk toward the exit. I'm disappointed; I despair. Tears sting my eyes and I ruffle through my coat for Visine. The drops are cool and exhilarating.

I reach the exit and look back and notice a line forming at her register. A guy in a cowboy hat's checking out; his right hand rests on his belt buckle and he speaks with his head cocked. She's attracted to him and touches his hand briefly. Her face is girlish again and her hair is light, weightless; the air-conditioning lifts a few hairs from her forehead and she looks angelic.

I wonder what he's saying to her. Is his dialogue smoother than mine? He's buying underwear, but they look like Mediums.

I'm depressed. And should someone ask me how I feel, I would say, "I bleed!"

Again I place two drops of Visine in each eye; this time I trap the fluid by keeping my lids closed and looking up. I can't see, but I find my way to the line by carefully tracing the clothes racks with my hands.

I wait in line, my eyes still closed. I take two steps forward every time I hear her say, "Thank you."

Finally, it's my turn. When I feel the counter press against my legs, I open my eyes and glare at her through a teary blur.

Disgusted with social graces, I declare: "Husband: Do you have? Boyfriend: Do you have?" I'm aware of how unlettered I sound; but I must get at this important

information, I must know how I fare.

"What?" She looks alarmed enough to call security. "Do you want to buy something else?"

"I must know the boyfriend situation," I say. "I must know your *deal*."

Her hand races along the counter's underside. I fear she'll call security, so I act normal—I turn from the counter and stalk away, Neanderthalish. On the way to the door I turn around periodically, shake my fist, and yell, "See if I care, you slut!"

THE COMPLEX

I taught an undergraduate English class, a not-so-serious one—the class that everyone laughed about, that everyone signed up for because there was little work attached to it. I made outlandish comments during class because I felt everyone needed to lighten up. There's something about the outlandish ejaculation that suffuses with joy an otherwise bland day. Everyone needs to hear a shrill laugh once in a while, a deep guttural roar, a laugh so wild and unrestrained that it grows exponentially, that threatens at any and every moment to collapse in upon itself in wild sensual glee. Such outlandish comments and diamond-hard laughter should always be accompanied by a hand moving through the air, wrist limp, fingers apart and barely flexed whipping outward and folding back in repeatedly as the arm jerks like a dying snake.

I liked to observe the world and laugh. Observe and laugh. And I liked to move about in the world in such a way as to make others laugh.

Of course, life wasn't just about observing coeds and acting like a goofball during class—it was becoming more and more serious and the stakes were getting higher. I was engaged to Stevie, my girlfriend of two years. We'd recently moved in together and my grandmother was offering to furnish our apartment with some hand-me-downs that she'd been keeping in storage (we'd both been living with our parents for the last several years). Recently, I'd been virtually consumed with the minutiae of trying to find movers to help us transport the furniture on the cheap. My friend Vince recommended two guys that he'd used himself, Wayne and James, and told me they were careful and reliable. Wayne and James were mentally retarded, but functional. I was a little nervous about meeting them as I often experienced anxiety when meeting people of a wholly different material—I was simultaneously attracted and repulsed by such people.

*

I was on the third floor of the Humanities Building, in my office; my window overlooked the courtyard where students talked between classes. I looked out and saw that most of the students sat on benches—some tucked their feet under their butts; others let one or both feet idly scrape the ground. I'd just been on the phone with my grandmother, reassuring her for the seventh time that the movers would arrive *no earlier* than 9 a.m. on Saturday. I needed a break from my labors.

I brought my binoculars to eye level. The strap hung limp, like a hangman's noose. Looking over the scene, I spied a young woman on a bench by herself.

She was boyish, moved her head in a jerky way, and looked up from her book whenever someone passed. She adjusted her hair—the hair was long and fried, like it'd been treated too many times: the ends were like soft blades, unnatural and tired. I wondered if her bathroom sink had burn marks where she set her flat iron. I wondered if there was hair on the floor, behind the toilet, in the hinges of the toilet seat.

Her nose was fat and dipped down dully at the nub; small whiteheads were on and around her nose—some were fully expressed, boldly white and close to breaking; others were still red and looked ready to bloat pale and full.

She sat with one foot under her butt and her high thick-soled combat boot dug deep into her skin. She wore some strange blouse with thin fabric; it was oversized and made her look dumpy. She was fattish, flaccid, smooth-muscled, tired. But her neck was thin on rounded shoulders. When she leaned down, her back folded into an awkward arch and she looked like Humpty Dumpty.

I wondered if she was looking at me. I wondered if she was one of those girls who knew you were looking at her without having to meet your gaze.

A young man stopped abruptly and moved his mouth, gestured with his thumbs; she produced a match and lit it against the cement bench. It was dusk and the man's face glowed when he leaned down upon the flame. Her lips moved and she showed him four fingers; he plucked the cigarette from his lips and flashed four of his own. Were these gang signs? Were they meeting somewhere at four, or had I miscounted? Were they roommates, lovers? Did they share a bathroom? Had he seen the hair? The fact that I cared about these things made me sad. I wanted to be that guy. I wanted to be every guy.

He walked off and she untucked her leg. Both feet were flat upon the ground and she untied both boots and pulled at the tongues, presumably to loosen them. She sat with both feet pointed in, toes meeting. When she sat on the edge of her bed, did she sit this way?

My office door opened and my girlfriend Stevie walked in—she also taught in the English Department. I turned around abruptly, concealing the binoculars behind my back.

"Light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul!" I said.

"You don't even have two first names."

"True, but I have two testicles, perfectly proportioned. Even the doctor's remarked on them. They want me to donate my body to science."

"Really? I thought they'd already determined erectile dysfunction is largely psychological."

I didn't know how to respond so I jerked my hand back and forth through the air. A mincing gesture.

"Let me hear you say it," Stevie said. "Say, 'I *need* people'." She drew out the word "need," peeling her lips back, exposing teeth.

Stevie was weird. She had two very different sides to her personality. She was

both erudite, philosophical and silly, little-girl silly. Most people found her funny because she used the same expressions over and over. For a while she'd been stuck on the phrase "rock bottom," using it even when it wasn't appropriate. For example, once at a Widespread Panic concert a guy bumped into her and his drink sloshed onto her shirt. He said, "sorry;" she said, "rock bottom." She had used it again when we'd stopped at a gas station on the way home from the concert. After pumping gas, I went inside the station and found Stevie at the register. The saleslady was saying, "we're out of 100s, but we have regulars." With exaggerated slowness and with an elongated pause between the words, Stevie said, "Rock bottom." Then, at normal speed, she asked, "Are you sure?"

Stevie looked at me impatiently. "Give me the binoculars," she said.

*

The next day was Friday and I had the day off—my classes were on a Tuesday/Thursday schedule, as were Stevie's. I usually spent Fridays at the apartment, grading papers, cleaning, sorting mail, and watching pretty young girls lie by the complex pool.

Kingswood Park consisted of six buildings that surrounded a pool with a fountain in its center. About half the units overlooked the pool, while the rest faced the parking lot that circled the ring of buildings. We had a pool view and I frittered away countless hours watching young women turn on their lawn chairs, evenly sewing into their honeyed skin the early buds of melanoma.

I'd discovered I could leer quite comfortably if I sat on the bedroom floor and peered through an opening in the mini blinds with my binoculars. There was even room on the window sill for a cup of organic green tea.

On this particular Friday, I watched an attractive young woman who I'd named Lila. I had assigned her this name because it reminded me of the lily; granted I could have named her Lily, except I had known a Lily once who wasn't particularly fond of me. Anyway, I had to squint through the bright June sun to see the paradise of Lila's flesh: the dimpled upper thighs, the protruding bellybutton that made me self-conscious about my erection, and the long narrow feet with red tipped toes. She was lean and full and everywhere apple-sweet.

I wanted to get to know Lila, but knew enough to check the impulse. People are interesting, but only for a short time. Take the girl who works the cash register at the supermarket, for example. At first, she's mysterious and you see only one side of her: her public face. During subsequent trips, you make light conversation while she slides your groceries across the glass plate that seems to have a red laser actually in the glass, or underneath it, or both. Even though you suspect she's typical, you trick yourself into believing her mysteriousness—because at that point you still can trick yourself. You ask her to dinner, she accepts. You see each other regularly and the weeks fly by. Then, several months down the road, you realize, suddenly and startlingly, that she really is like everyone else you've known: she airs out the same four problems over and over again, she looks far less attractive in the morning with a faint residue of yesterday's makeup stretched across her forehead, and she occasionally passes gas in the middle of a deep sleep. The "cash register girl" allure is gone: you know her. And she is painfully pedestrian. It's not surprising that a man can leave his beautiful wife for a dumpy IHOP waitress, or for a random homosexual hookup.

I heard the bedroom door open and turned to see Stevie carrying a hamper.

"I thought you were at the laundromat," I said, startled.

"Give me the binoculars."

*

Later in the day Wayne and James dropped by to give us an estimate. We'd conducted the process backwards: we'd agreed to give them the job; then, we had them come out to give us an estimate (Vince had assured us they were cheap, after all). Hey, we were university people.

Wayne looked remarkably normal, which surprised me. James, on the other hand, had the distorted facial features I'd predicted.

"So," I said as the four of us stood stiffly in the living room, "you've been to my grandmother's; you've seen the layout of the stairs here. What will be the extent of our destitution?"

"He means," Stevie said, "what will it cost? And I'll throw in a pair of binoculars as a tip."

"\$250 max," Wayne said. "No matter the time."

"What if it rains?" I said. "How will you keep the furniture from getting wet?"

"We can walk really fast, even with heavy weight," Wayne said. "Supposed to be hot and sunny though. We want to use the pool afterwards—that's why it's so cheap."

"You don't want to use the pool," I said. "Think about it. People swim in there without bathing first. What if they have poo on their anuses? The water passes over their anuses; then, that same water brushes against your lips as you swim underwater. You're basically kissing shit water."

"Air, too," Wayne said. "People have been farting for eternity. The air you breathe is fart air."

*

On Saturday, Wayne and James arrived from my grandmother's. I was smoking a cigarette on the third floor balcony outside the apartment (Stevie was out shopping for home décor). I thumbed the attachable plastic filter while the two guys shifted and ambled up the three flights of stairs. When they were slumped two feet in front of my face, James announced, "We're here."

For over an hour, the boys went up and down the stairs, sometimes both of them comically holding a small item my grandmother had thrown into the truck at the last minute. On one trip, they mounted the stairs holding a pillbox that used to belong to my grandfather; the boys stood three inches apart, each holding a separate end of the plastic case pretending to be weighed down by its imagined bulk. I stood holding the door, rolling my eyes, but secretly amused.

On another trip, James staggered through the door with an electric can opener balanced on the small of his back; meanwhile, Wayne pretended to be a crossing guard and directed his friend through the living room and into the kitchen. Once James was slumped against the fridge, his knuckles practically brushing the floor, both boys begged me to lift the can opener from his back with exaggerated movements of my own. I played along since it was only the three of us and nothing was at stake.

Wayne was the least "rough" of the two and any communication on my part was directed at him.

"Bed in the bedroom, not in the kitchen, please," I said at one point.

I offered the guys water every fifteen minutes, but they demurred. They looked always on the verge of passing out and I was afraid for their lives. I worried that retarded people might not know that you need to drink water even if you aren't thirsty. Plus, I was hoping that having to stop for refreshments would abate the sweating—watching James's

sweaty bare feet trample the new carpet was killing my soul.

Finally, shortly after noon, Wayne looked up with hand-shaded eyes and relented. They came inside and we stood in the living room drinking bottled water.

James caught me looking through the sliding glass door. He swaggered over like a Wild West hero and asked what I was looking at.

"There's some mighty fine chicks outside," I said, imitating his drawl.

James put his hands to his face, making binoculars with thumb and forefinger. Then, without segue, he threw himself onto the floor and stretched out, rolling onto his back.

"I need a plant for my head right here," he said, laying his palm across his forehead. "Then, I'd be able to sleep under a cool shade-tree."

"You guys leave your bottles here and sip from them whenever you want. Here, I'll get the door."

As they passed through the doorway, I placed the flat of my hand in the center of James's back; his shirt was soaked. He reached awkwardly over his shoulder without turning around and placed his hand over mine. I slipped my hand away and tapped his shoulder in a this-is-awkward-but-I-don't-want-to-be-rude gesture.

I waited by the railing as the men wrestled the couch up the three short flights of stairs. The complex was such that there were two sets of stairs on each floor—one on the south end of each landing and one on the north end.

The men tired on the third flight and had to set the couch on the stairs. They were using the stairs on the north end because there were more trees, partially blocking the sun

I worried the incline would be too steep.

"Why don't we get it to the top and then you guys can rest."

Wayne, who was on the low end, stepped away from the couch and leaned against the railing overlooking the parking lot. James descended the stairs, announcing that he'd check the truck for a dolly.

"Okay," Wayne said, "grab her."

I picked up James's end and felt a strange pulling in my groin at the very moment of exertion.

With my end only two feet off the ground, I announced I couldn't do it. So we set it down again, but this time at an angle. The couch took up the entire stairwell and there was no way for James to ascend the stairs alongside the couch and get in position to retake his end.

"Great! There's no way I can do this. James will have to crawl over the couch."

I stood half-bent with my palms on my kneecaps and wondered if my testicles were still evenly descended, hanging lushly as two perfectly proportioned grapes.

I jumped slightly when I felt a hand on my back. I turned around and saw James—he'd come up the set of stairs on the south side of the building. His face was an inch from my own. I pulled back to regain my personal space and he promptly thrust his neck forward so we were again only an inch apart. He looked like a giraffe chasing a tree limb.

*

Once the guys had each drunk another water, and after I persuaded James to put on a pair of my socks, they sped the couch across the landing and into the apartment. I stood inside and directed them, making sure they didn't get too close to the walls.

As they finished moving the furniture, I watched their love-handles jiggle as they shuffled sideways up and down the stairs.

I couldn't imagine these guys in their marriage beds. The wives were probably bilious creatures, fattish-hoggish broodmares—double-chinned mongoloid types with boxy feet. Home-life must have been a chorus of bad jokes, creepy laughter, and accusations of stupidity followed by more laughter.

But I certainly wasn't going to inquire into their domestic situation. Doing so would be a messy proposition—like the time I went to the License Commissioner's office to prove to Stevie that government employees always wear outdated floral patterns and orthopedic shoes. When I showed her the video I had taken with my cell phone, she pointed out several young women in contemporary black jumpers and thong sandals. Stevie laughed when I pointed out that her “exceptions” were probably sorority girls. It always rubbed me the wrong way when she laughed at my philosophies, and so I spent the rest of the day slamming cupboards and closing doors with exaggerated force.

*

The plan was for the boys to return their rental van. James's wife Kat would be stopping by to follow the boys to U-Haul so they'd have a ride home.

I stood at the curb with Wayne and James while they waited for Kat. I figured it was the least I could do since the van rental would clearly minimize profit. The three of us stood side-by-side; I kept my gaze on the curb beneath my feet.

Three minutes into the wait, James tugged my arm. He was hunched over, looking up at me with a goofy grin that bordered on being sensual.

“There's some mighty fine chicks outside,” he said, pointing.

He gave three sharp nods and directed my attention to the tennis court where Lila was hitting a ball against a green practice board.

We were less than thirty yards from her, and I worried she might see us leering and, more importantly, I was worried she might see me with James. I knew I had to put a little distance between myself and James, so, without first looking where I was going, I sprang to my left—right into a parked car. The quick movement required me to step off the curb onto the surrounding parking lot; because I was stepping to a lower elevation, the lower left portion of my rib cage came down hard on the car's side mirror. It felt like what I'd think getting kicked in the testicles would feel like if my testicles were made of bone. I went down on my hands and knees, and then rolled onto my back. Wayne and James were looking down at me, their faces surreally framed by the sun. Moments later, Lila walked up, her tennis shoes scraping the gravel. The three of them bent over me, their hands on their thighs. Strands of Lila's dirty blond hair rode the breeze and reminded me of the bacterial flagella that I once saw in a ninth grade biology lab.

They led me upstairs: James with his shoulder under my right armpit, Wayne with his right hand firmly gripping my upper arm, and Lila trailing behind, asking about my pain level and whether anyone knew whose car that was.

And so we hobbled up three flights of stairs; Wayne and James seemed to alter their gait to match mine, as if by feigning pain they could relieve my own. Ironically, they weren't much help—their own bogus afflictions prevented them from providing any real support, and so I ended up pretending to be helped while they pretended to help me.

When we entered the apartment, they stretched me out on the couch and took off my shoes. It was at this point I realized I didn't really need all this help; sure, I was in pain, but I could manage on my own—it's not like I had broken a bone. But it was nice, to have a room suddenly full of people concerned about my welfare: Lila was in the kitchen filling a glass of water, James was emptying my freezer of all seven of its ice

packs, and Wayne was receiving the ice packs from James and wrapping them in paper towels.

Once all three of them finished their chores, they came at me en masse. Lila handed me the water while Wayne and James arranged the ice packs across my chest and stomach. I had a slight bruise on my right palm from where I'd fallen in the parking lot and James promptly placed an ice pack over it. I felt like Gulliver getting tended to by the Lilliputians. And no one said anything, and it didn't seem at all strange that Lila—whom nobody really knew—was walking around the apartment, piddling in the kitchen, like she lived there. She even used the bathroom, and I heard her spraying Lysol while the toilet flushed.

At one point Lila asked if I wanted something more substantial than water, maybe tea—and she offered to get my mug from the bedroom when I told her where it was. It was a colossal oversight on my part—I'd forgotten to put away my gear, and had even left my binoculars wedged in the mini blinds. When she returned from the bedroom, I could see her lips struggling to check a smile. I drank the tea and told them as I sipped it that it was still warm.

After about ten minutes, Kat called James's cell and he went downstairs to get her.

Kat was not at all what I'd expected. She was by no means beautiful, but there was a certain mortal beauty about her. Her shoulder length hair was limp and blond, so limp that it seemed plastered to her head. She was flat-chested and had a tomboy's gait, but her skin and the fair features of her face were delicate and soft, soft and slim, and the stark contrast between her fine features and her abrupt adolescent body made her person sexy and beautiful. And I was intrigued by her water-thin skin, by her blue veins

pressing against, and seemingly *through* her flesh. Her face was a map of blue roads, a scatter plot of vein-knots and wide open highways. Her humanness, her vulnerability seemed so close to the surface of her fine and fair skin that I yearned to touch it.

My eyes followed her as she took a seat on the arm of the couch.

I wondered how she and James had met. I wondered if they thought the music on wildlife programs was funny or if the sound of water falling from gutters reminded them of the mall.

As I lay there surrounded by the girl who I'd only ever seen through the lens of my bedroom window, and the two retarded thirty-somethings one of whom had a singularly beautiful wife, it struck me that I was pretty lucky to have these people passing through my life, even if they *were* a damaged set. I felt good knowing they knew where I lived.

It occurred to me that maybe nobody took me seriously, and that was why I still managed to attract decent people. This was good, since I could go on behaving as I always had without alienating anyone or ending up alone.

*

When Stevie got back later that night, I was sitting on the balcony smoking a cigarette and looking at the stars. She opened the sliding door and sat down beside me.

The night was clear and dry and a very slight breeze shook the leaves of a live oak that pressed itself against the building.

"My mind's all fucked up," I said. "Like, I can't figure anything out. How can anyone start with 'Four score and seven years ago'? Not just about complicated stuff—about the little things, too. Why do some women have smelly feet while others don't?"

"Ever gone shrimping?" I said with a goofy grin, aware that my inquiries were dissolving into burlesque. "There's nothing quite like a used body part."

"You can't finish a line of thought, can you?" Stevie said.

"Look, I'm lucky to have you. I know this. Will you remember this, even when I'm douching it up?"

"Doesn't surprise me that you douche. But yeah, I'll remember it."

"How do you put up with me?"

"Well, let me draw a diagram." She laughed, and pretended to get out of her chair. I laughed, too. She was cute.

"What's the role of people in life? I know it's late, but I've been thinking a lot today. Why are people in my life? Do I use them? Do they use me? How do I account for their badness, their goodness, their quirks, their sameness? Is it *me*? Does anybody that used to know me think about me on Christmas morning? Do the people at Wal-Mart think I walk weird?"

"Actually," Stevie said, "I love you because love is the very thing I need. By loving you, by giving it, I feel like I have it to give. Even if it's not *exactly* that way. People do this kind of stuff." For emphasis, she tapped the arm of her chair with a fist. Her hand wasn't closed tightly, her fist looked fragile. "We're all just marking time. We mark more time with some than with others. At the end of the day, ideas are just ideas."

"This building," I said, smiling, getting the hang of this deep-talk stuff, "is here so this oak tree can lean up against it."

"Bingo!"

I leaned toward Stevie, resting my weight on my right elbow. Stevie mimicked me and leaned in, and her blond hair was girlish as her face emerged from shadow and

her hair played in the light from a nearby lamppost. When the breeze came and the tree branches obscured the light, her hair became subdued and darker; the constant play of light and shade on her hair reminded me of the sea and the white crests of waves that dotted the dark surf.

OLDER

I followed her to the parking lot after class for two reasons: 1) I wanted to know why a woman in her 50s would go back to school; 2) I wanted to sleep with her—I was in a long term relationship at the time, but had long ago gotten tired of the sex, of its mechanical nature, of our listlessness. Besides, I wanted to sleep with someone 30 years older than me because I had not done so yet, and because she was unlikely to know—or to meet—my girlfriend. It seemed the kind of sexual relationship I could compartmentalize.

“Girl!” I shouted, running down a short flight of stairs to meet her on the ground floor. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“What?” She said this with a blank face, looking neither curious nor offended.

“You’re like that Rodney Dangerfield movie where the old guy goes back to school. But younger.”

“Nice save,” she said, holding the metal emergency door open to let me out first. I stepped out into the sunshine and turned around to hold the door for her.

“That’s a huge compliment,” I said. “Most women usually get a bunch of bullshit about the law degree I don’t have. We’re off to a great start—next thing you know, I’ll be telling you my real name.”

Blank, again.

We continued walking toward the parking lot, side-by-side.

“Which is Duane,” I said.

“Marcy.” She took a pack of Camels from her purse. She shook the pack until one cigarette jutted out.

“I’m going to start talking about my husband,” she said, and looked at me admonishingly.

“Perfect. Because this whole thing will be a lot easier if we get that stuff sorted out early.” As I said this, I waved my hands in the air in a circular motion, back and forth. “Since we’re both in relationships, it can be a no-strings affair. Something seedy, but sexy, like in the movies.”

“Isn’t the man usually better looking?” she said, smiling for the first time and then drawing on her cigarette. She rested her arm limply over her purse and blew smoke rings in the air.

“*Manhattan. Annie Hall.* But you probably noticed in those movies the girl wasn’t a chain-smoking skank.” I said this last part quickly. I showed her the palms of my hands and said, “I’m just teasing. You know I’m just teasing, right? Teasing?”

“No thanks. I’m not happy or anything, but I’m not interested. Why complicate things?”

“It doesn’t have to complicate anything,” I said, comically swirling my hands in front of her face as we stepped onto the parking lot. I wondered if she noticed the clarity of my nails. “Everything’s temporary anyway. Like, there’s a strange feeling when I’ve known someone a short time and meet her family; I feel welcome, but not *too* welcome, and I feel like I’m just passing through, that nobody expects me to be around much longer than a few weeks. That’s what *this* is, but we’re taking the high road because we’re calling it out right at the beginning.”

She squinted and cupped her hand over her brow. “I won’t have an affair with you. But, if you like, we can hold hands and walk around the parking lot.”

“Are you being sarcastic?”

“It’ll be fun,” she said and took my hand—the full five finger clasp.

“Someone might see us, they might think you’re my mother—but younger.”

“Nice save.”

She began walking and when I tried to release my hand, she tightened her grip. At first it must have looked like she was dragging me along, but after a few steps I relented and matched her pace.

“How does this make you feel?” she asked. Her head was down, and she looked to be walking with purpose.

“It reminds me of Disney World.”

We walked the perimeter of the lot. Many of the cars looked new and shiny and I wondered which was hers, whether her passenger’s seat was adjusted for long legs, whether she kept cigarettes in her glove compartment or just air fresheners.

A gust of wind blew a sandwich wrapper at us and we stopped abruptly to let it pass.

DELICIOUS

Once the rest of the students had packed their things and left the room, the sylph asked for extra help with a story she was writing. We walked to my office, about 20 feet from the classroom and at the end of the hall. It was to be our first conference. I'd sensed the girl was a little libertine, and so I was just as excited as she was about our meeting.

“What would you think,” I asked her as we stepped into my office, “if I told you I was thinking of changing my name, that I want to make my first name and surname identical, one to the other? How would that feel in the mouth?”

She'd taken workshops with me before, so she was used to my carefree approach to conversation.

“What did you have in mind?” she asked, sitting down and crossing her sandaled feet at the ankles. I sat in my recliner and flung my feet up on the desk.

“Something with alliteration, with lots of *el* and *sh* sounds.”

“Chanel Chanel,” she offered. She kept her eyebrows raised, waiting for my approval.

“Delicious. I wish I could manipulate words after I utter them. For example, I wish I could make them do physical things—like, say a word and then make it press upon the other's tongue, and I'd like to feel what the word feels when it does this, as though I'd taken my own finger and pressed upon the tongue, all wet and warm and tender.” I took my feet off the desk and leaned toward her, my chin cupped in my hands, my elbows now on the desk.

“Like a tongue depressor!”

“Yes, but maybe she could collapse her lips around it like one does at the dentist’s when they put that suction tube in your mouth, how the lips collapse and a little drool seeps from the corners of the mouth. So intimate, yes?”

“Here’s a better one,” she said, warming to her libertinage. On the edge of her chair and leaning toward me slightly she continued: “After a rectal exam, when the doctor withdraws her finger and you feel the jelly on your rectum when you climb down from the exam table, and you’re disappointed the doctor has left you alone to wipe—you *want* her to watch. Better yet, you want her to watch while she pretends not to watch.”

I sat back and put my hands together with only the fingertips touching.

“What about the exam room?” I asked. “Warm, or cold.”

“Cold. You want to feel the cold air on your bare skin because it reminds you that you’re naked.”

“This is good.”

It was a gorgeous afternoon outside and the sunlight was a quiet gold on the wood paneling of my office. I could hear the air conditioning blowing from the ceiling vents and as it blew it lifted her hair strand by strand.

“I have this idea about you,” I said, wanting to get her to open up a little. “You have hardwood floors at home and you walk on them barefoot all summer, and when you walk you walk hard, you thump, you charge from one room to the other, heels first. And you have cats, and by the end of the day the soles of your feet are black and you have a cat hair or two between your toes. Yes?”

She looked down at her feet; she arched her left foot, pointing the toes. “No. Dogs. What are your floors like, Chanel Chanel?”

“Hardwood. I like the creaking sound—it reminds me of literature. And I have rugs all over the house, the kind kids nap on in elementary school, the kind you always picture when someone says ‘magic carpet ride’.”

She smiled sweetly, and just at that moment I decided I wanted to live forever, or for as long as women are beautiful.

“Can I put my finger in your mouth?” I asked. “And press your tongue?” I leaned forward and gave her what I thought to be a supplicating look—all innocence and summer.

“Okay.” She looked nervous, but not enough to make *me* nervous.

“But I want you to resist with your lips—make me force my finger through your closed lips. But if I have too much trouble, let me through.”

“How do you want to do this?”

“Here, let’s clear off that bookshelf on the wall and you can lie in there on your side, facing out. Lie like you’re sleeping, with your hands tucked under your chin.”

Neither of us spoke while we transferred the books to my desk. When we finished with the books, she stood in front of the appointed shelf and looked over her shoulder at me.

“Can you help me up,” she said, kicking off her sandals.

“Sure.” I walked toward her until my belly was flush with her back. “I like the word ‘belly,’” I said. “It feels so full and lush in the mouth. Try it.”

“Belly,” she said, giggling. I hooked my chin over her shoulder and put my face in her neck. She was stiff like a statue. Her body odor was ever so slight, and sweet.

“*Delicious*,” I said.

“Delicious,” she said.

“*Girlish*,” I said.

“*Girlish*,” she said.

My belly was so firm against her back; my face was so firm against her neck.

“*Digital*,” I said.

“*Digital*,” she said.

“Can you shit standing up?” I asked.

“Not with my legs so close together. I’d have to spread my legs apart.”

“Here, I’ll lift you by the waist.”

I put my hands around her waist and lifted her. Using her hands, she crawled into the shelf and assumed the fetal position. She adjusted her long black hair so that it was in front of her shoulders. I took her wrists and tucked her hands under her chin.

“*Delicious*,” I said.

“*Delicious*,” she said. “Chanel Chanel, you dork.” She smiled.

I cut off her smile by pressing against her closed lips with my index finger. She resisted until my fingernail started cutting into her skin, at which point my finger stiffly broke through her dry lips and entered the warm tenderness of her mouth. When the full length of my finger was inside her, I pressed down on her tongue, hoping to stimulate her gag reflex.

“Is gagging sexy?” I asked. “Making people gag?”

“It’s vulnerable like the rectal exam,” she mumbled, her mouth opening and her tongue pressing up against my finger. Of course, her speech was garbled. I liked it this way.

“Do mine,” I said and untucked one of her hands for her. She promptly put her finger deep in my mouth and stimulated my gag reflex. My gagging caused my mouth to open, but as soon as the dry heave passed, I collapsed my lips around her finger again.

We remained this way for several minutes, each sucking the other’s finger.

“This is nice,” I mumbled around her finger, moving closer. I put my free hand on her head and stroked her hair as though she were a child.

I took her finger from my mouth and dried it on her forehead, slowly. Then, she took my finger from her mouth and held it like a microphone. “We have to make this unweird by admitting it’s weird,” she said. “Okay?”

“Sure.”

“I see you sometimes when you get into your car after workshop. The passenger’s seat is really far back, too far for a woman. Sometimes you put boxes there. I think you’re very alone and lonely and I flirt with you because I think you need it. By the way, how’s my writing?”

“Dreadful.” I smiled, removed my finger from her fist, and put my hand to my nose so I could smell her saliva. I was a little disappointed that it smelled like everyone else’s saliva. “But your pieces are short, so that redeems you. It’s no secret I’m single, but I have women. Have had.”

“What about friends?”

“I have people I talk to regularly. People think I’m charming. In a figurative sense, I rock them back and forth.”

“Yes,” she said, “but you think you’re invisible. You’re so conspicuous.”

I put my hand on her shoulder and jostled her gently.

“I’m going to tell all my friends, Chanel Chanel,” she said, laughing.

I removed my hands from her shoulder and walked to the tall, floor-to-ceiling window. “Come here,” I said, “to the window.”

She frowned, hesitant. When I didn’t elaborate, she jumped down from the shelf and walked to where I was standing.

“Okay,” I continued, putting a hand on her shoulder to reassure her, “let’s try something. I’m going to face the window and put my palms against the glass. You’re going to come up behind me and put your belly against my back, the palms of your hands against the backs of my hands. Once we’re in this position, I’ll give further instructions.”

I turned toward the window and placed my hands flat against the glass. The glass was warm and soothing. Exhilarating. I pressed harder, trying to get as much of the warmth as possible.

She came up behind me and stood on her toes to reach my hands.

The feeling was delicious, her body and my body pressed together, her hands on my hands; it seemed for the moment that we could never be apart.

The light coming in the window was hot and my face warmed in an intense blush.

“Are you blushing?” I said.

“No.”

“There’s still time, right?”

“I suppose so.”

“Here,” I said, “put your cheek against my cheek.”

And so she did.

“Now are you blushing?” I said.

“No.”

“I want you to blush. I know that it may not happen right now, on command. But promise me that someday we’ll blush at the same time. Or that it’s likely to happen someday when we’re not trying too hard.”

“Sure.”

“I’m going to slide down the window now,” I said. “And I want you to stay with me. My hands are going to remain against the glass—keep pressing. We’re going to squeak to the floor together.”

And so we slowly slid down the glass; my skin squeaked loudly as she pressed my hands firmly against the glass. When we came to a squatting position, I stood up and she rolled forward on the balls of her feet and pressed her forehead against the window. I squatted behind her and held her around the waist, my lips against her neck.

I held her, just held her like that.

TREES

A live oak leaned against my apartment building, and it thrilled me. I sometimes sat on the balcony with my feet propped on the railing, watching the wind blow the leaves white-then-green. The leaves rattled in the wind. I liked, too, that the tree was flush with the building while I was inside that building, while I slept. I liked that my apartment had wall-to-wall carpeting, that my bed had a dust-ruffle, that my walls had tapestries, that everywhere there was fabric. I wished the other apartments to be different from mine.

*

I kept a bowl of water on a table; I passed by it between the stages of my lunch and dipped my raisin-sticky fingers in it and pulling my hand out I wiggled quickly back and forth my wet fingers and watched the drops of crystal water shake through the air. This made me feel like I had a lot of money.

The table was wood, tall, and stood near the front door; in fact, the table edge was flush with the steel door, on the other side of which was a breezeway shared by three other apartments. My neighbors often shut their doors with incredible force. Sometimes the force shook my table and the water sloshed over the edge of the bowl (I filled it to the brim). I didn't like having to clean up, but placing the bowl so close to the door allowed me to determine whether I should get mad. If the force was great enough to move the water over the lip, then anger was justified. In fact, I was enraged by the image of water glistening on the table, on the floor. And sometimes it felt so good to be angry; or perhaps I just liked the idea of being alone and angry in an apartment.

A brief description of the inhabitants of the 3rd floor is in order.

A cute young couple lived directly across from me: they looked to be in their mid 20s. The woman drove a blue import with a Mississippi State bumper sticker. The man drove a red Jeep Cherokee, a 90s model, also with Mississippi State regalia (I like to say the word "regalia" aloud, throwing my head back and drawing out the *gal* sound; this word feels full and lush in the mouth and quite satisfies). The regalia-laden Jeep was often out of commission, parked in the handicap spot with two flat tires and a crushed headlight, or some other combination of tire and light damage. The man reminded me of myself: smallish, baby-faced, but probably ribald; the woman was slender and wore too much makeup, but she had that gym-body I like. She always wore sandals, even in cold weather, and so we'll call her "Sandals." Together, they are Ribald and Sandals.

The unit to the right of Ribald and Sandals was occupied by a young woman in her early 20s. She drove a white SUV with Texas plates. I rarely saw her: she was one of those people who somehow went about her business without ever being detected outside her residence. Once in a while I'd see one or two older men on her doorstep, taking off their shoes. They wore boots, and so it was quite a procedure. If I was walking through the breezeway when this happened, I'd slow down as I passed, trying to look through the partially opened door. On the rare occasions that I spied her inside, she was always walking back and forth across the living room, never sitting, never just standing. She kept her blinds open at night and once, walking back from the laundry room, I noticed she had a stuffed deer's head on the living room wall. We'll call her Texas. Tex.

Finally, in the unit to my left and directly across from Tex, lived a guy about my age—early 30s. He had brown hair, pale skin, freckles. He was almost never home. In fact, it seemed he left for weeks at a time. Probably a traveling salesman. He doesn't deserve a name.

*

I needed to nip the door-slamming problem in the bud, and to do so informally and without the aid of management seemed the appropriate first step. So I posted a note on everyone's door. And in order to avoid sounding like I was picking on anyone in particular, I suggested the note might not apply to them, that the guilty party might be someone else. Here's what I wrote:

Dear Neighbor:

Because I don't know the exact origin of this problem, I'm writing a note to everyone in the building—so if you're not the guilty party, please disregard this note.

The problem I'd like to address is this: lately, it seems a great many people have been slamming their front doors on the way in and out of their apartments. On several occasions, I have been shaken from a sound sleep by the thunderous, crushing blow of a door impacting its frame. I suspect that whoever is doing this, probably only locks the lower lock of his door and then closes it smartly because he is unable, after locking the knob, to turn the knob and glide the door gently into place. It seems to me said problem can be altogether avoided by the following procedure: 1) open the door and step into the breezeway; 2) turn around; face your apartment; 3) reach out and clasp the doorknob; 4) turn the knob and slowly pull it toward you—do this very slowly, so slowly that you think you'll be late for school, work—use only your arm for this movement (putting your back into it may result in the use of too much force); 5) as the door approaches the frame, be sure that it moves at a steady rate, which rate should be SLOW, as mentioned; in other words, don't get excited when you see the door's journey coming to an end and suddenly smash it against the weather-stripping; 6) ease the door into place; this is best accomplished by bracing your free hand against the frame and leaning into the frame

with the full weight of your body so that you aren't tempted to jerk the door closed; 7) gradually release the door knob so the bolt doesn't go clickety-clack; 8) lock deadbolt. If more than one person lives at your residence, be sure to leave this note on the counter so that upon returning from work/school they might look upon it, and realize the error of their ways. Other uses for this note: put on fridge; frame, then put on wall (over mantel, if you have one); fold into a square and use for a coaster; or, if this complaint doesn't apply to you because you already use the finely wrought procedure above, you might use it to line the litter box. (I hope that if you have cats, they're fat.)

Don't let the levity above distract you from the very serious nature of this note.

Very Truly Yours,

John Samuel

I soaked three copies in tea and let them dry on a clothesline I'd strung across my balcony. Later that night I taped them to the neighbors' doors, worrying all the while the tape might pull off the paint when it was removed.

*

It worked. Sure, every now and then someone would get carried away and slam the front door, but for the most part things were quiet. But to be honest, I wasn't completely satisfied: I'd been hoping someone would mention my note, compliment my wit. And I gave the neighbors plenty of opportunities in the weeks following; I spent a lot of time in the breezeway, hoping to run into them: I'd shake out my welcome mat, sweep the concrete stairwell, pretend to adjust the apartment number on my front door; I even bought a cactus and put it outside my door so I'd have something to fidget with. Once, when I was watering the cactus, Sandals opened her front door. I looked back over my shoulder and smiled awkwardly.

"I used to have one of those," she said. "You can over-water 'em."

Instead of waiting for a response, she headed for the stairs, flip flops slapping against her feet. I charged after her.

I arrived at the top of the stairs as she was traversing the 2nd floor landing. I gestured toward her with the watering can and some water shot through the head.

"I just bought it. You never know if the people at the store took care of it. That's why I refuse to buy a used car."

"Couple times a month during the winter," she said. "Max."

"Name's John, actually. John Samuel. You probably recognize my name from some literature left on your door. Not just *your* door, *all* the doors!" I swept my free hand through the air in a grand gesture.

She arrived at the ground level and started walking toward her car. "Nice to meet you," she said sweetly, looking over her shoulder but continuing toward the parking lot.

It felt like we were on stage and that I should slide down the railing belting show tunes. The moment was ripe for opera. I jogged down the stairs and stood on the walkway; she was almost at her car.

"*Regalia!*" I shouted, pointing at a distant cloud. I held this pointing posture for several seconds beyond the sound of her car door slamming.

"I'll give you \$20 for your socks," I whispered, turning toward the stairs with my watering can loose in my fragile fist. I walked up the stairs with this fragile fist—I liked the deliciousness of feeling victimized, dejected, girlish.

*

When I got back to my apartment, I noticed my sister Becky had left several text messages on my phone, each one demanding I call immediately.

"It's Mom," she said. "She took a bottle of Ambien. Dad found her with her eyes rolled back in her head, only the whites showing." There was a nervous glee in Becky's voice, the joy of being the first with the worst. "He couldn't wake her up. There are empty bourbon bottles all over the house. We're at the hospital now."

"Wow. This is unbelievable," I said, trying to make myself feel something. "I'd probably just be in the way if I came up." They lived in Buffalo, and it was always me that had to travel—they refused to come to Mobile, or anywhere in Alabama. It's so lonely always being the single guy that has to do the driving, without a steady job for an excuse. When you're a 32-year-old graduate student, you get treated like you don't have any *real* responsibility.

Our mom had been trying to kill herself for quite some time; luckily, she wasn't very good at it. The first time she tried, she'd cut her left wrist—however, she didn't go very deep and she was approaching it from the wrong angle anyway. Afterward, Dad told her repeatedly that you're supposed to go *down*, not across. I hadn't come up for that event either. Too much drama, and too much handholding and speaking in hushed tones, probably.

"I'll see what I can do," I said.

*

The next day, I went to the drugstore for dryer sheets to hang above my door (wasps were nesting above the frame). In the "Home" aisle I saw a plastic tree about a foot high, on a shelf behind one of those glass domes you shake to watch the snow swirl; the tree caught my eye because it looked like the trees outside my apartment, but this tree was plastic and looked hollow and I was fascinated by hollow plastic; it also reminded me of the Masters of the Universe castle I had when I was a boy. To my left was a nerdy

20-something with a ponytail and freckled cheeks. She saw me eyeing the tree and thought it was the dome I was ogling.

"Do you love these?" she said, walking over and picking up the dome.

"About as much as Brancusi's Rooster," I said. "Isn't that what they used to say about Barbara Streisand? Who was that that said her face looked like Brancusi's Rooster cast in liverwurst?"

"Don't know that one."

I pressed hard against my cheeks with my open hands. I felt like a fish.

"I like the tree. Trees," I said, still mashing my face.

She laughed, silent at first but shrill during the inhalation that followed the silent laugh.

"Your laugh is odd," I said. "I'm now prepared for amazing things to happen, and it'll be your fault if they don't."

She laughed again.

I grabbed the plastic tree from the shelf and held it in front of my chest, my hands gracefully passing over it as if I were hawking prizes on a game show.

"You need this," I said. "It looks like the tree outside my apartment. It's cozy to be surrounded by leaves. I should use the word *bestow*, but as you can see I'm checking my impulses." I smiled.

"This is different," she said. "Usually guys just ask for my number after 'Hey, how's it going'." She said this last part with a low, male voice and an exaggerated opening and closing of the mouth.

"See, now you're bringing things *down*. Bounce along life's surface! You're so nitty-gritty, so *here*. Drop a Kleenex from four feet off the ground and see what happens: doesn't drop like a stone, does it?"

"Not something I normally do, Mr. Wizard. But I suspect it *floats* down."

"And goes kind of circular, back-and-forth," I said, moving my hands through the air in a swirling motion, the plastic tree in my right hand clutched between thumb and forefinger.

She laughed. We smiled at each other a moment, my hands frozen in mid-swirl.

"Bestow your number on me and I might call," she said.

"Okay, but if I don't answer leave a message. My mom lives up north, so I spend a lot of time on the phone, talking her out of the doldrums."

"Maybe you should take your act up there, cheer her up. But get your ass back here and take me out for an expensive dinner."

*

I like pretty girls on sunny days, on sunny evenings, when the evening leans into my apartment, leans upon and through my windowpanes, leans longer and longer and longer across the floor, and I like seeing girls on the streets in the sun-dusted air, I like when they look at me—oh look at me!—and the feeling I get from this and from sunny evenings and from the sun on their sunny skin is feeling itself, not the source of feeling but feeling itself, and this image of sun on sunny, honeyed skin that is the feeling means nothing, is nothing deeper than this, only a feeling, like when you look at power lines shaking in a sunny wind and they flash a metallic flash and you wonder how they can be made of rubber: this means nothing, and you wish to not go beyond it, to not rise above it. When you see this pretty girl, you are just a man and a woman passing on a street, in

some small, insignificant place in the world; I mean, it has significance, but not to you, not at that moment particularly—it's just a place that you happen to occupy in a moment between moments, a place that some pretty girl also occupies, a pretty girl who gives you a long sidelong glance as your life moves one way, and hers moves another.

Sometimes, smiling at a pretty girl does lead somewhere.

When I was in my late 20s, I'd slept with a former student of mine. I'd run into her at Home Depot and we exchanged phone numbers, went out to dinner a couple times, and eventually scheduled a home-date.

The home-date began with a movie—of course—and wine—of course—and we kissed after I asked if it would be okay to kiss her. And when I kissed her I felt the faint brush of hair from her upper lip, such as it was on this thin-lipped girl, and I recoiled and looked in her eyes and smiled at her look of concern as I pretended to be pulling away for the express purpose of a smile. And when I stuck my tongue into her mouth and touched with my tongue her cool saliva, I recoiled again with a smile on my face. When I finally stilled my gag reflex, I managed to heat her up enough to move things to the bedroom where I divested her of her clothes. I even used the word "divest." I said, "I would now like to divest you of your clothes," and I pointed at the ceiling very purposefully while she laughed and pulled my hands toward her blouse. I took off her blouse and knelt down and slid her sandals from her feet, but very slowly of course, and she giggled as I hummed the theme song from *Chariots of Fire*. I stood up and took her hands and we danced about the room, she in her underwear and bra, our hands twirling in the evening light, and our shadows were long against the floor and I had the same beautiful feeling I get when I drink coffee at noon on an empty Saturday—the blank void of a day to be filled with whims and whimsy. And we danced to the bed and finished divesting each

other of our clothes and she was hot and I was hot and we chased each other across the bed, I with a condom on my penis trying repeatedly to plunge the thing into her: I'd take a few thrusts and she'd start retreating and of course my penis would pop out. This retreating was done on her butt, by walking with her arms. She always had to be moving it seemed, and these movements were violent—we'd strike foreheads and sometimes noses or sometimes her fucking forehead would hit my fucking nose. Several times I screamed, "Stop that! Right now! Stop that! Please! Not my nose!" (I had to think about Kate Beckinsale to keep my erection.) Of course she'd say "Sorry," but moments later I was struck again in some new and infuriating way. And this is how it was—she made circles on the bed as I chased her with my member. When I finally talked her into "normal intercourse like regular people do," we reached our crises and I fell back upon the bed in the darkness of the room. She fell beside me and her long hair fell after her and she was beautiful as her hair reached toward the ceiling as her head dropped toward the bed. And then I thought of how beautiful it was to see a pretty girl on the street on a sunny summer day: two people enjoying a moment, at a crossroads for a split second, suspended in motion in a sidelong glance, two lives moving in opposite directions, two clear windows facing one another in the bright sun of a sunny day.

Beauty is everywhere, especially on the surface of things.

*

Drugstore Girl was right: I needed to see my mom; obligations and meaning were forcing themselves into my life and I had to answer the bell—and of course I'd need a good deed to report when Drugstore Girl finally called for that expensive dinner. However, if I had to degrade my life, snuff out its sunshine, I would do so on *my* terms.

I drew a line in the sand: I told Mom if she came down and stayed with me for several days, I'd come up during the Mardi Gras holiday. And at the moment I made the commitment, I was sincere. Besides, I could tell her I was swamped with schoolwork—she'd have to understand, since not finishing school would require me to ask for money.

In an act of towering callousness, she arrived late on a Sunday night. She knew my regime: if you're going to ask someone to pick you up at the airport, make it as easy on them as possible. She arrived in Mobile near 1am (flight was originally due at 11:34pm, but was delayed *of course*—if it had been due at 3pm, it would have been on time!).

"You'll prefer the couch," I said as we walked through the door; I gracefully picked up the bowl of water and walked it to the sink.

"*Prefer's* a stretch."

"It's better for your back. My bed's just *so* soft, it's like lying on a cloud, if clouds were solid. Plus, the neighbors slam the doors despite my note, and you sleep soundly. I have my cocoon all set up back there."

Mom had been depressed for five years. Her depression had begun immediately after three months of chemotherapy for a Stage II breast cancer; the doctors had never said anything about depression as a possible side effect.

Mom couldn't be left alone. Sometimes when she was alone for more than a couple hours she would have anxiety attacks—she'd cry hysterically, theatrically, and call anyone likely to answer the phone. Once, when I'd accidentally kept my phone on, Mom called and threatened to cut her wrists because the hurt would take her mind off "the worse hurt." Sometimes, when Mom cried, I pretended there was a hell and that my mother was going there, and once there her screams would be far worse than these—and

then I'd get mad at the world for believing in a God that could subject my mother to such anguish, make her cry so.

Her intellect had suffered as well—you'd never know she'd completed a film degree at RISD. Four years ago, while trying to get gas, she couldn't figure out how to line up the tank with the gas pump. She drove in circles around the pump always ending up with the same misalignment—finally, in a new effort she drove in a figure eight, passing each pump on the lot, occasionally aligning pump and tank, but forgetting which side of the car contained the fuel door.

Sure, I loved her on some level (although I never really felt it in my heart), but she required so much maintenance. The early-going of my trips to Buffalo required the greatest energy expenditure on my part: such visits began with Mom assessing everyone's physical changes, beginning with her own. She was so consumed with appearances that she once forced me to film her rotating in a circle so she could see her new hairdo "as others see it." I agreed to do it only because there was no way out. It was pathetic: I filmed while Mom rotated in a circle bobbing up and down like a chicken.

The holidays were especially bad—during such times, she was more consumed with appearance than normal. She would always insist on a family holiday photo—and the photo was supposed to look natural; yet, she'd arrange everyone (Dad, Becky, me) on the stairs, single file, each with a hand on the banister, grinning at the camera. Becky once said, "This is so stupid. Like anybody really goes up the stairs this way." Mom countered with, "Not the way you're doing it. Relax, don't be so phony. Here, tilt your left shoulder toward the camera; don't lock your arms—you look like you're saluting Hitler, for goodness sakes."

So here we were, standing in front of my couch, looking at the three suitcases she brought, one of which was dedicated solely to cosmetics.

"It's late," I said, "but this luggage looks new."

"Your dad bought it for me Xmas. Don't you remember all the joking about wrapping suitcases?"

"I can't understand why people give suitcases. It's something you use once a year."

"It's a nice set—makes me want to travel more. Like when you get a new pen all you want to do is write."

"Thanks for the warning."

*

The next morning we ate organic steel cut oats at the dining room table. It was a sunny morning and the light reflected off the strip of silver around the top of our Noritake bowls. Mom and I can always find common ground in an affection for Bed Bath and Beyond—we can spend hours looking at china and flatware.

"You like these bowls?" I said and put my spoon down on the vinyl placemat and wiped my hands on a napkin.

"I'd like them a lot more if I could've slept last night. All night—slam, slam, slam! What's wrong with these people? It's like they get a running start before closing their doors. I think you should write another note and copy it to management. Here." She walked to the kitchen counter and picked up my legal pad and a pen. "What's this?" she said, staring at the pad. "I'm an Armenian Shepherd with a cleft pallet who enjoys French kissing and soixante-neuf?"

"I was drafting a personal ad. Got frustrated and started fucking around."

She sat down. "Let's sketch a new note for your neighbors. And you shouldn't meet people through the personals—the world's full of weirdoes."

"Let's draw a diagram!" I said. The idea seemed novel, and I got a slight shiver up my leg. "Like with a guy in bed, Z's coming out of his head, and in the next frame he reaches under the mattress for his Glock!"

"They might take that as a threat. Let's keep it above board. But a picture's good. Something like those Viagra commercials—remember the one with Bob Dole? The image isn't literal, but you get a feeling from watching him and his wife beachcombing—the same feeling you're likely to have after sex—a sense of calm."

She seemed especially lucid.

"How about a place-setting: elegant dishes and spoons basking in Saturday light?" I offered.

"Too complicated. It's a pencil sketch. A canoe in a calm lake, a person lying down in it, bare feet crossed at the ankles and propped on the stern."

"I like the calm lake. Two people, though—lying down. Feet not on the stern, but placed delicately to the side of one another's heads. Each holding the other's feet, but delicately—the hands can't be firmly holding the feet—the fingertips have to rest there lightly, like fairies' wings."

"And we'll write 'This could be us' underneath!"

"Bingo," I said, and shot her my index finger, thumb cocked like a gun's hammer.

*

That afternoon, we photocopied the note on my printer and posted it on the neighbors' doors. Then, we sat inside and waited for them to come home from work. I pictured Sandals standing in her doorway, door open, hand on the doorknob, other hand

holding the picture up to her face, half-smiling, then, moving only her head, looking toward my door with eyes warmly aglow in the breezeway lights.

"The young lady you were telling me about, Sandals," Mom said, as we sat on the couch thumbing through L.L. Bean Catalogs, "maybe she's a better option than trolling the personals."

"She lives with Ribald. But I doubt he's ribald enough to lend me her services. And I don't like people who wear sandals in cold weather—their feet look ashen in the cold, and that's not hot."

We heard someone fumbling with keys in the breezeway—probably Ribald, who always made a production of entering the apartment. The jingling noise stopped and we heard no other noise (he must have been reading the note).

A loud knocking on my door caused me to jump a little; Mom looked excited, attentive.

"I guess they want to talk about the note," Mom said, running to the door and looking through the peephole. "This is great!"

"Is it?" Ribald shouted from the breezeway. "Is this you?"

"No, it's not me. It's somebody else!" Mom shouted back. "Of course it's me. Who else would it be?"

I nudged Mom out of the way and opened the door. Ribald was smoking a cigarette.

"This sketch," he said, waving the paper at me. "You're the guy who left that crazy letter, right?"

"The humorous one? That's right. We need to rein in the door-slamming, but I hope you enjoyed it." I was scared.

"Yeah. We'll try. It's habit. We're having a little party later tonight—why don't you join us? Since you can't sleep worth a damn, you might as well come over for a beer." He smiled.

"Really? I don't want to undermine the seriousness of the note, but that'd be nice."

*

When we showed up at the party, I noticed Tex was there, too. I was disappointed—I'd hoped to be the only resident acquainted with these two libertines across the hall. Tex's presence gave the party an "everybody's invited" feel, like in second grade when we had to make Valentine's cards for *every* classmate. The apartment was crowded with people, and I couldn't tell whether the others were also residents of the complex.

"You should talk to Tex," Mom said. We were standing near the sliding glass door, on the other side of which was Ribald leaning over the railing, smoking a cigarette.

"I'm uncomfortable," I said, looking around at the other guests. "I thought this would be low stakes. I can't operate like this. I like the wide open country: the store, the parking lot, school."

Mom walked over to Tex, who was sitting on a loveseat by herself. She whispered into the girl's ear, and then, taking her by the hand, led her over to me. Tex looked like she felt sorry for my mother, who suddenly looked desperate and old. I was scared, and sad. I felt sad to be at a party with my mom, who was trying to match-make for me—and what's worse, with the best of intentions.

"Your mom tells me you live across the way," Tex said, extending her hand. She was only 21 or so, but seemed particularly mature.

"I've seen your people taking off their footwear in the breezeway." I shook her hand. "But what about their pants? I mean, if they've been wearing the same underwear for consecutive days, the germs might soak through to the actual pants." I said this with a grin so she'd know I was teasing.

"Pants, too. Haven't you seen a guy outside my door scrubbing his rectum with a toothbrush?"

I liked this girl.

"Did you like our sketch?" Mom asked. She put her arm around me—I was embarrassed.

"Are you guys a team?"

"It suddenly seems that way," I said, looking at Mom. "We're like parasites, or one of us is like a parasite and the other's the host. I think the word's 'symbiotic'." I formed pincers with my two index fingers and pretended to attack Tex's nose. She drew her head away and laughed.

*

Later that night Mom and I sat in chairs on the balcony, our feet propped on the railing. We each had a beer in one hand and I was sloshing the contents of my can over the lip as I gestured toward the live oak.

"I love that tree," I said. "It's so protective of me. I mean, look at it—its every movement is paternal somehow. I actually bought a replica the other day—met a girl in the process. A weird one, but she never called me. Granted, it hasn't been very long."

"Build some rapport with that Tex. But I know you—you won't. You're afraid to get to know anyone on a deep level because you're afraid you'll run out of *material*. People don't need to be entertained every second, you know?"

"But it's fun. That's the sort of love we're likely to have—any of us. *If* we're lucky."

"You're not wrong."

"When I look at my past relationships, I cherish the fun—not the 'love' or the serious problems overcome. Like with Karen, we had a pet name for sex: we called it shirts-to-orgasms. We'd say, 'how about some S-to-O?' Because you know, sex always begins with removing your shirt. That was fun, that pet name. Better than the sex."

"Do you really want to be sitting around Christmas morning twenty years from now staring at the walls of your one bedroom apartment? You'll still be putting silly notes on people's doors, but they'll be different people. People move out of apartments—they don't stay in them."

"Yeah, but then you sacrifice the fun—all that serious shit kicks in. We've done alright this trip, you and I, right?"

Her arm was lying limply over the edge of the armrest and the fingertips hovered just above the concrete. I took her hand, and we sat that way for a bit with our hands between the chairs. She was silent.

"I don't look like a supermodel anymore, do I?" she said. Some of her makeup had worn off; in the dingy porch light, she looked like a Marvel Comics villain.

"Nope."

"You know what's beautiful about you?" I continued, feeling bad. "When you're well, you *see* things. Like, when I look at a chair, I see a chair. But when you look at a chair, you see some place someone's been." This might not have been true, but it made her smile slightly.

"It's true what they tell you," she said, in a slightly different vein. "Once you're a cancer patient, you're always a cancer patient. Even after remission, you're always waiting for bad blood work. Whenever you feel tired, you wonder if it's in your bones. Suddenly, it can happen to you."

"I hate that. Life's so dreary, isn't it? Full of stink and shit. I want to compose notes for the neighbors, and live forever. I want it to be a game I cannot lose."

A grasshopper alighted on the railing, between our feet. Mom rose from her chair and gracefully cupped it in her hands, closing them at the thumbs to prevent the bug's escape.

"I'm surprised you touch bugs. I haven't seen that before."

"See, I'm not *just* depressed. Come around once in a while." And she very carefully set the grasshopper on my head, slowly parting her hands and hovering above it with her palms until she was sure it would remain. I looked up without moving my head and saw the ends of its wings hanging over my forehead. The grasshopper seemed somehow a great gift, a charm. I felt my hair moving and saw the grasshopper rocking back and forth in the night, the moon glinting off its metallic body. It moved its wings out and away from its body and seemed to be contemplating flight, and in that moment of contemplation just before its taking off I felt a swift delight.

THE FATHER

The boy, the girl, and their father sat at the round kitchen table, in front of the bay window. It was late afternoon but dark outside because of storm clouds and winter. The lights were off and the father's hands moved slowly in the gloom, lifting the top of a cigar box and taking out a small dense object wound tightly in cloth, so tightly the blackness of the object shone through the pores. The boy and the girl were motionless as the father dropped the object onto the table with a click and put the box under his chair.

"You'll never be happier than you are right now," the father intoned. He was sitting with his back to the window and the faint light coming through it made his little face darker than the rest of the room. "You know that delicious feeling you have after a hot bath, right when you put on your pajamas? How cozy the fabric feels against your skin?"

The brother looked at his sister who was still looking at the object.

"I won't experience that again for *four months*," the father continued in a straight line. "Prisons are run on a tight schedule—when you shower, what you wear, who you live with. Your life is not your own. I'll probably have to wear scrubs, like a four-month sleepover at a fucking hospital! People will see me naked!"

"But mom'll bring us to visit," the boy said. "And we won't see you naked."

"She will, and I'll be there in my fucking *pajamas* and you'll be in *real clothes*! Who do they think they *are*!" The father shot up from his chair and, like a swimmer desperate to get ashore, thrashed at the chain hanging from the ceiling fan, first with his left hand, then his right, then his left, until the chain wound itself so completely around one of the blades that there was nothing left to hit.

By the time the father sat back down, the children were almost at the stairs, giggling and fighting over who'd get the "good controller."

The father grabbed the object from the table and ran after them, finally catching up just as the children got to the top of the stairs which led into a playroom whose ceiling was the apex of the roof. The twins were ten years old and just now getting interested in video games. The father ran ahead of them and stood in front of the TV with his feet apart, hands on hips.

"Aren't you curious about the object?"

"Yeah, and then can we play Sonic?" the boy said.

The father extended his left hand and bid the girl unfurl his fingers. "Open my hand, one finger at a time. Slowly."

She took his four closed fingers in her hands and pried them open all at once.

"Entirely too fast, but go ahead and unwrap it."

The girl did as instructed. It was a miniature stapler—but metal—like the kind students keep in book bags.

Several months ago the father had been caught playing with himself during a student-teacher conference. While he was explaining how his student could make her thesis clearer, he very slowly unzipped his fly and stuck a miniature stapler into the opening of his underwear. His student had been unawares until he had trouble speaking and his face became very red. When she rushed to the other side of the desk to help him, she discovered his problem.

"Your inheritance. I won't be treated well in jail. Keep it forever and be reminded of how *mean* and *base* and *petty* and *reactionary* the justice system is," the father said, jerking his head forward and down with the delivery of each word.

The girl crouched slowly, and carefully set the stapler down, holding her open hand over it a moment to be sure it didn't tip over on the carpet. Then, she and her brother rushed toward the TV.

As the children sat on the floor and waited for the game to load, the girl looked over her shoulder at her father. He stood with his open hands in front of him, palms up, as if he were a boy showing an older person something he'd found, some unlikely thing.

EASY DOES IT

Vince taught communications at a high school in the hills south of Pittsburgh, in an outlying town ending in *-burgh*. There were many burghs around Pittsburgh, but this one was beautiful and in winter had a cold glacial charm that made leaving work akin to entering a dream world, and this dream world, at this moment, was pitched wildly on a hillside of trees and ice and half-frozen lakes in the fast moving winter-dusk of a far-faint afternoon.

Vince sat in his empty classroom waiting for the parking lot to clear. His room was a perfectly square, perfectly windowless, cinder block affair. The fluorescent light buzzed and rattled and he was eager to get outside. His hands were folded on his desk and he looked at a yellow Post-It note. A haiku was written there:

Why do you fly in
Where the chimney meets the sky?
Fly away pest, fly!

It was written by Indiana Houston—one of the English teachers—and she had intended the poem as a sort of flirtatious joke: earlier in the week he had explained to her that flies had taken over his chimney and were now coming into the living room. A day later, when he walked by the main office, she folded her arms tightly against her chest, and bumped repeatedly into the glass with a startled, wide-eyed grin. She was goofy and charming, but fat—with the kind of fat that is hard and permanent-looking.

He had ignored her advances because he didn't like the idea of dating a fat school teacher. Nevertheless, he sat at his desk and toyed with the idea of accepting her tacit offer. She was clearly vulnerable and dating her would thus be a very easy, relaxed affair. Since he wasn't really interested, he wouldn't have to try too hard.

Outside work, his life was a regular rotation of late night television, Internet surfing, and Pepperidge Farms. His job was difficult, and so he organized the rest of his life to be as easy as possible, even if it was rather empty. And dating Indiana would be an easy addition to the void; she'd fit in nicely with all of the other things he didn't have to care about.

It was interesting on a sexual level, too. He imagined her options were rather limited and that she'd jump at the chance to sleep with him—she'd slobber all over him and he'd feel beautiful. He might even be able to use his favorite line, a line he often trotted out when he had nothing to lose—nothing of value, anyway: “This is a tremendous opportunity for you.” Of course, he wouldn't say this to anyone; if in a position of having to try too hard, he would censor himself and play it safe (which never seemed to work, on second thought); but here, with Indiana, he could unravel every antisocial, self-aggrandizing aspect of his personality. He could allow his personality to devolve into an unchecked horror show.

It wouldn't be a permanent situation, of course. It would be a social experiment, a way to add to the texture of his life so that in 30 or 40 years he could look back and feel that he had *lived*. He thought of his life as a sort of AIDS quilt, a material thing made of squares, each square representing something intense and poignant.

This wouldn't be his first intense and poignant square; he'd fashioned others, such as a prostitute who he had talked to for several hours before sucking her toes while she relieved him with her hands, and the bisexual experience he'd had once with a friend, and the affair he'd had with a married woman 25 years his senior. His life wasn't overrun with these experiences, but they served to punctuate the boredom and make his life worthy of reflection.

Indiana seemed so empty and desperate, and he had plans to fill her quite above the brim. He knew he wouldn't enjoy actually living this role, but he rather liked the idea of himself in it.

He took a sheet of paper from his desk and wrote a note in thick black permanent marker: "We should look at photos of your childhood sometime—in a dry, cozy living room on a soft, plush couch—and you can put your head on my shoulder, and maybe I'll put my head on yours."

This way, Vince wouldn't have to be seen in public with her.

*

Indiana took the bait and they scheduled a home-date for the following weekend. They had made the arrangements on a Tuesday and Vince was disappointed to have to wait so long—Indiana said she already had plans for the upcoming weekend and it was too late to slide things around. Vince almost balked at the idea of her not dropping everything to be with him but decided better of it—he had to keep control of himself and maintain the upper hand.

Vince arrived at her house at 5 p.m. and ran quickly from the car to the door because he didn't want the neighbors to see him.

He was relieved when she answered the door and he ducked into the house without waiting to be invited.

"What's wrong," she asked. "Are you running from somebody?"

"Thought I saw one of my seniors on his bike—didn't want to get into a conversation. Seeing them during the week is more than enough."

"Nobody lives around here. Except for the volleyball coach next door."

"Really?"

She rolled her eyes. “No. Relax.”

With her folded arms tight against her chest she asked him if he’d had any fly problems lately.

“I had someone take care of it.” He inched toward the living room where the curtains were drawn. “But that was a cute haiku you sent,” he said.

“I see you’re attracted to popcorn.” She motioned towards the bowl of popcorn on the coffee table.

She was trying to help him relax and he was grateful. He smiled and she let her goofy grin relax into one more casual.

He backed toward the couch in a squatting position with the smile frozen on his face all the while wondering how close he was getting to the edge of the couch.

Once he was seated, Indiana opened a bottle of white wine that had been standing next to the popcorn and poured them each a glass. White wine is a strange liquid, Vince thought. Even if you’ve seen it a hundred times, you’re always surprised by how fresh and clear it looks. And then he wondered if he was only thinking this because he was nervous.

The interest he’d expressed at looking at the photo albums was only a pretense, but she had taken it rather seriously because she was now opening a glass cabinet and pulling from the shelves albums of various thickness and shape. The movement kicked up dust and she began to cough, her enormous, grotesque belly shaking.

“So how long have you been a schoolteacher?” he asked.

“Fifteen years,” she said, coughing twice between the words. She came at him with the albums and sat down on his left. She opened one of the large ones and placed the back cover on his bony knees.

They looked through her albums for nearly an hour, during which time Vince made insincere comments about her family: “Your cousin looks so intelligent sitting at that desk,” and “You were cute as a toddler.” They consumed a bottle of wine and he was beginning to feel light-headed and dizzy. The buzz also made it easier to believe that this was fun, sexually exciting.

They tired of the albums and their conversation became listless and desultory. Each was waiting for the other to suggest a new activity, and Vince was eager to inject a sexual tone but did not feel he should have to since he was the beautiful one.

When Indiana suggested they turn on the TV, he felt like a kid at home with a girl when his parents were out of town, each trying to find a way to prolong the evening until one of them made a “move” or they finally ran out of time. In his impatience he seized Indiana’s hand and kissed her lips.

They kissed too long: their saliva became clammy and thick and kissing was no longer satisfying. Again Vince felt the subtle pressure—this was devolving into the kind of sexual encounter he’d have with an entitled “pretty girl.” Who did she think she was?

In an attempt to salvage what was left of the evening, he initiated sex.

Vince always screamed during sex because it made him feel sexy. The screams were short, high-pitched, breathy shrieks. This was not entirely performance, for the calling out seemed natural—but he wasn’t sure where the reality of the experience ended and the melodrama began.

Indiana said nothing. After they were done he lay there in lean muscled glory. She offered no compliments nor did she reflect on his awesome release—this, after he had wooed her with compliments during foreplay and covered her substantial body with kisses.

Cunt.

*

For the next several weeks, Vince tried to avoid Indiana—and this was easy since she hadn't called or tried to track him down at work. He was somewhat relieved but at the same time frustrated because this was not what he had anticipated from a woman of her ilk.

After ignoring Indiana for six weeks—during which time she seemed actually to be ignoring *him*—Vince barged into Indiana's classroom on a Friday after school.

"I need to see you in the hall. This can't go on any longer."

"Ludicrous," she said. "I'm coming."

"Actually, let's stay in the classroom. I don't want people to hear." He bumped into her as he turned from the door. She stumbled backward in that annoying way that dumpy people have of regaining their balance. At just that moment, she seemed thoroughly troll-like and despicable.

Vince made a bee line: "I've never been truly satisfied—sexually. I don't enjoy intercourse. I hate that lustful look women get—it's disgusting, it disgusts me. How can anyone enjoy sex that much? It's like they don't care about my body, my beauty—they're concerned with themselves. They receive *entirely!* Sex is an act done to them; the man is the doer!" Vince's voice cracked on *doer*, pubescent and desperate sounding. "The irony is, women aren't as beautiful as they think. The vagina looks like a bullet hole that was never allowed to heal properly."

Indiana stood smirking, or smiling, or holding a look halfway between the two.

One of Indiana's students pressed her face against the door's square glass window. "Have a good weekend, Miss Houston!" Her hair was strawberry blond and she was all

musical and apple-sweet; desperately, Vince searched for a sentence in which he might place the word *bosom*.

"Zounds," Vince muttered. It was something he remembered from a Sheridan play, and it seemed rather majestic filler.

"How about we get a hotel?" Indiana said. She curled her lips inward and raised her eyebrows, as if she couldn't believe she'd said that aloud.

Vince jumped on her suggestion as a way out. And the suggestion had the additional charm of not being *his*.

"We could do that," he said, trying not to sound eager. "I need to return a few calls first."

Back in his room, he checked his voicemail and discovered he hadn't missed any important calls—or *any* calls, for that matter. He slipped the rough draft of a personal ad into his desk drawer and then walked to the parking lot.

He suggested they ride together because it was only logical to do so; however, the real, unspoken allure lay in the transgressive nature of being dropped off in a high school parking lot at 2 a.m.

Worried she'd change her mind he reached for the keys in her purse—he did this with a look of mock desperation to prove he wasn't really desperate: he pushed his tongue from his mouth as far as it would go, breathed heavily like a dog, clawed through lipstick and tissue, and finally held the keys high in the cold sun like a zealot wielding the Holy Grail. He stuffed the keys into her palm and manually closed her fingers around them. They got in the car and she pulled away from the curb before he could fasten his seatbelt.

The hotel was nice, clean, a little garish in a too-plush way, and cheap. They paid for a double and Vince wondered what the desk clerk would say when they checked out a few hours later.

Once inside the room, with the "Do Not Disturb" sign placed on the outside of the door, Vince removed his coat and an opened envelope fell to the floor. Indiana picked it up.

"What's this?" she asked.

"It's just a birthday card from my mother."

"I usually throw them away. More paper."

"I get that. But this one plays music. I mean, I'm not hanging onto it because it plays music—it just makes me sad to throw it out because I keep picturing it playing in a garbage dump somewhere with nobody around to hear it."

She handed him the envelope. He removed the card and they stood side by side and listened to the tinny music. The card had a picture of the night's sky, replete with stars and with a half-moon at its center. The moon had a grin and seemed to be looking at the stars, communicating with the stars in some way. The colors were cheerful and cool and deep. Indiana leaned into him just a little. The room was quiet and she lightly grazed the paper with her soft hands, her slightly twitching finger. The room was so quiet and the card felt like a third person in the room. They stood in the room, in the quiet room, in the room in which the rush of the outside world was barely a whisper. She again reached out into the quiet of the room, touching the paper.

"I thought the moon was raised. It looks almost 3-D," she said.

"Yeah. I thought there was something wrong with my eyes when I first got it. Sometimes it looks 3-D and sometimes it doesn't."

They'd created a slow, private space, it seemed to him. He felt relaxed, like he could do no wrong, like he was respected, validated. For the moment, they were connected. This was a nice space.

He sat down on the edge of the bed. She sat next to him. Space and time were still quiet and slow.

"You're a star," she said, again touching the card. "You're this star right here. This little one, near the lower tip of the moon and just behind it—with one of its points truncated. The pathetic, pretty one."

He turned his head so she couldn't see his face; his cheeks were aflame.

"What's your deal?" she asked. "Why do you hate yourself so much?"

"I don't. I just try not to fall in love with things that can be taken away. And I want to feel beautiful. Where's the magic in life?"

"Kind of lonely, isn't it? Don't you get kind of sad always adjusting the scenery?"

He looked vacantly at the floor and spoke as if he were someone else, somewhere else. "People live their lives looking for something, as though their lives were on a track leading toward some shining moment. But it's really just the reverse: childhood is the watershed moment—from there it's down hill."

He was aware of how this sounded, how it felt to say.

"But look at these other stars, all these lonely stars," she said as she leaned forward, nodding at the card he was absently holding in his hands, which were in his lap.

"They all look more or less alike, don't they?"

Vince tossed the card onto the floor and placed his hand flat against Indiana's chest; he let it rest there a moment, without pushing. He looked down at his hand; she looked down at his hand. She fell back and pulled him with her.

*

After they were done, Indiana dozed off and Vince lounged with his hands under his head. The room had a pair of French doors opaquely obscured by a sheer curtain. They'd opened the French doors before getting into bed because they'd wanted to have sex under the heavy down comforter, and because there was something sexy about the chill of exposed faces, necks, arms, shoulders. Now, the curtain waved in and out of the room as the breeze came and went, and when the breeze came the curtain nearly reached the support rod and then fell back down again, the middling body of the fabric descending faster than the edges—but not too fast, and slow like a dense fragrance, reaching the doorway and dipping through just a little, the end of the curtain sliding in below it. He couldn't decide which he liked better—the rise or the fall—but decided that both seemed for his pleasure alone and he felt like he owned the night, or at least like the night was there for him and if he weren't there in that moment the night and the room would be somehow different.

GIRLISH

She was trailer trash, wore high tops, had a mullet, snapped her gum. Her glasses were the kind poor people wear, with large retro frames and smeared lenses—the type you'd find in a drugstore. I never wanted to be seen in public with her, but was willing to date her clandestinely. I wanted to date her because I knew I *could*.

I was on my way to work and saw her walking along the road with one foot on the pavement and the other in the grass. Her sneakers crunched the gravel, her glasses swung between thumb and forefinger. Her hair was long and her face girlish.

Actually, this last part isn't true at all—I just like the word *girlish*. It feels so full and lush in the mouth, and I feel like a dandy when I say it. And as to the matter of her face—it was merely average, but available.

I slowed as I passed her but realized she could probably see my brake lights, so I accelerated abruptly and the jeep lurched forward.

It was January and I had yet to take down the Christmas tree attached to my spare tire. One of the longer limbs caught on a mailbox and ripped the lid open. I wondered if it was her mailbox. I drove away quickly, afraid to glance into my rearview mirror.

I lived in a nice subdivision where all the neighbors were young professionals. But just beyond the brick wall was a trailer park; in fact, all the roads leading to the main boulevards were littered with trailers. On my way to work, I always passed low-class people, usually on foot, shifting down the road—presumably on their way to a retail or gas attendant job. I occasionally saw a very large man in a bright blue Wal-Mart uniform ambling in the direction of the main roads; it seemed almost too far to walk—Wal-Mart was at least 6 miles away.

I was feeling goofy when I entered the office, so I wiggled my fingers at my

receptionist and let out a loud squeal. My head rolled in a semicircle and I stuck my tongue out of the corner of my mouth. Once beyond her desk, I turned around and crouched low near her cheek—"Oh girl!" I shouted. She spun around on her swivel chair and watched me lurch into the supply room. I felt like a celebrity.

I put my briefcase on the top shelf, making sure the combination was scrambled. I pulled a box of latex gloves from the bottom shelf and closed the door behind me. The supply room was dark; a small flashlight in the guise of a pen provided enough light for me to don a pair of gloves. Suddenly the overhead light came on and the receptionist opened the door.

"What the hell are you doing?" she said.

"Happy. It's been a good morning. The weather's nice, slept well last night, love the new house."

"Bullshit. You're chasing that girl again."

The receptionist was an old friend—she'd been with me since I'd opened my dental practice six years earlier. She was cute, and her physical charms had allowed me to expedite her job application.

"And when are you going to get rid of that fucking Christmas tree?"

"Awesome tree. I'll take it down next week—promise."

Admittedly, it was a dumb idea. Shortly before Christmas, while driving to the grocery store, some of the lights had gone out on the tree. When I arrived at the store, I got out to inspect. It was raining and it looked like water had ruined some of the bulbs. Luckily, I had a box of spares in the glove compartment. I got nipped several times—brief harmless shocks to the fingers—while replacing the damaged bulbs. Several teenagers stood at a distance under an umbrella laughing as I jerked my hands back with

every jolt. But I suppose it was worth the trouble, since having a tree is a great way to celebrate Christmas, and having it attached to the Jeep makes it easy to dispose of after the holidays: simply back up to a wooded lot and cut it loose.

Millie shut the door without turning off the overhead light. I popped the door open.

"I like it dark for inventory—makes it seem more mysterious. Like to pretend I'm peddling illegal goods."

I like being weird. But even more than that, I like the idea of myself being weird.

The day passed in myriad saliva strings hanging down from patients' chins. By five, I felt like a nanny—having wiped drool from so many faces, and chalky toothpaste goo from so many dry lips. One patient in particular—a large man with neck fat—looked like a blow fish as I pushed his mouth into weird contortions. I even had a few patients slobber on their shirts as they tried to spit into poorly positioned trays. I secretly liked my nanny's duties—I liked the maternal feeling of cleaning up after someone else's inadequacies. I wondered what it would be like to put my thumb in patients' mouths, watching them simultaneously press their eyes and lips closed in a contented smile.

*

On Saturday, I had some early morning duties with the Refugee Resettlement Program. I was a volunteer there—I was responsible for tutoring refugees in the "language and customs of America." I had signed up three weeks before as a way of meeting women—I figured they'd be vulnerable and needy and that the chance of rejection was low. When I applied for a position, there were several single women from Libya that needed significant tutoring; I lobbied hard to become their tutor but was presented various obstacles: first, I had to sign a contract saying I wouldn't have sexual

contact with any of the refugees (it was like they could read my mind—I felt so naked); second, the director tried hard to convince me I'd be better suited to tutor a single father who'd recently arrived from Morocco (he had three boys). I could tell they were wary of hooking up a male volunteer with a female refugee. I was pissed, but figured I had to do something for the Program before I could bow out—otherwise, I'd look like a predator. So I committed to 3 weeks, 4 hours every Saturday.

On my last Saturday of "male bonding," Gregoire was late, but it didn't matter since I couldn't scold him in any meaningful way. So I glared at him instead. I guess glaring is a sign of respect in Morocco—he returned my glare with a smile; his white teeth shone bright against dusky lips.

Halfway through the session (conducted in a small, poorly ventilated room) I excused myself, saying I needed to use the bathroom. Instead, I lurked in the hallways looking for cute female employees—poorly paid workers looking to "trade up," looking for a sugar-daddy. I was disappointed—the offices were filled with fattish women in oversized sweaters, waddling to and from fax machines in white Velcro tennis shoes.

On my way home—a few blocks from my house—I saw the large man in the bright blue Wal-Mart shirt. He walked hunched over—the rolls of neck fat made it difficult for him to look away from his feet. I'd seen him before, at least a dozen times since Thanksgiving, always charting the same course through the streets leading from the trailer park outside my subdivision to the business district along Main Street. Whenever I saw him I felt pity, genuine pity. I'd pledged to myself that I'd offer him a ride sometime—this made me feel better about being complacent.

As I passed him I pressed the brake; the jeep stopped more quickly than I'd anticipated and the Christmas tree first lurched away from the back window, then

snapped forward, crushing its stiff limbs against the glass.

"Need a ride?" I asked, rolling down the window.

"Me? Just on to work, that's all. I can walk—do it all the time." He stopped, turning to face the jeep; he looked like he was hoping I'd insist.

"Get in. I have to head back to the main strip anyway—forgot something at the store."

The man shifted through the open door: he put one foot on the floor mat, then grabbed the car frame with both hands and swung in, stuffing his butt into the seat. He shut the door so hard my ears popped.

The man was so large I felt like I was sitting on his lap. He was one of those really fat people who you think wouldn't feel you touching their arm.

"Man, I sure appreciate."

"I've seen you walking the roads. A little cold to be on foot, huh?"

"No car. Haven't had one in years. It's rough these days. Trailer's all I got." The man was poor; that much should have been obvious from his size—the poor are always fat.

"Daughter's gotta walk too. Shame—she's better than that. Works at Wal-Mart, too; doesn't wear her uniform until she gets there—embarrassed." The man was surprisingly jolly, talked with a sort of cheery resignation.

"What kind of job you do?" he continued.

I was afraid to say "dentist," so I said, "I work in an office, deal with clients all day—that sort of thing." Wanting to change the topic before he could cross-examine me, I charged ahead: "Yeah, I've seen others along these roads. There's a cute girl who I see on my way to work in the mornings...sneakers, mullet."

"Daughter." The man sounded like he had a mouth full of gum. "Mine—one and only. A bonnie lass." I tried not to laugh. Funny thing was, I had heard this expression before, but didn't know what it meant—it sounded English. He was probably trying to seem sophisticated; he didn't want me to think badly of him. I know my presence can be overwhelming, intimidating. I've been told my nose is aquiline, and that I look 'financial' from the side. I try to make this work to my advantage from time to time—once, when interviewing a potential hygienist, I sat facing the wall so that she could see only my profile. I wanted to get off on the right foot and show that I meant business.

The man was so large and so near. I suddenly had a horrible vision of him in sandals, his feet smothering the rubber foot bed.

I wondered whether my upper-class standing would help me secure his daughter. First, I needed to uncover the extent of their destitution.

"Been doing the Wal-Mart gig long?"

"Forever. Before that it was Save-A-Lot; before Save-A-Lot, Kmart. Love the work, though. Short walk from the trailer."

I couldn't believe he "loved" the work; I'd shoot myself if I had to corral carts and wave to customers. This was good; they were probably looking for a savior, for a knight on a white horse. I wanted to reach down and pull them both up, and set them on their feet again. If a quality relationship was to be the end result, so be it.

*

I didn't have a clear objective, but I knew I'd gain something by lurking outside their trailer. So in addition to taking the fat man to work, I'd also agreed to transport him home—all so I could figure out which trailer was theirs. Later that night, when we pulled up in front of a beige and yellow single-wide, he announced that his daughter was out

with friends and peeled his formless mass from my leather seat. I was a little surprised that he didn't invite me in for all my effort—we could have traded life stories and drank fortified wine from a shared sack.

So the next night, I walked the two miles to the Blackburns' trailer with my objective more clearly plotted: I wanted to get a good look at their furniture, wanted to figure out just how needy they were.

Skulking through the dark, I noticed something that had escaped me when I was there the first time: the trailer park was divided into two sections, old and new. Luckily, they lived in the old section.

Standing in the cool January air, I pressed my face against the glass. Father and daughter were sitting on a ratty hand-me-down sofa watching *The Simpsons*. This was good news.

I circled the trailer, looking in each window. The bathroom had a yellow, unpadded toilet seat, a cheap plug-in air freshener, and a tube of generic toothpaste wedged behind the sink. The bedrooms had cheap looking furniture—pine, probably—and the carpet was apartment-brown—always a tell-tale sign of poverty.

*

Several days later, I saw my mark walking along the road; much to my chagrin, she was carrying a thick book in her right hand. It looked to be Dostoevsky, but I couldn't be sure. I figured she was on her way to work and needed a ride.

"Need a ride," I said, rolling down the window. My tie got caught between the frame and the glass and I had to pull it out with both hands; my face reddened.

"Sure." This was going to be easy, like shooting fish in a barrel.

Her entry was more graceful than her dad's. She sat ridiculously erect, like she

was perched on the edge of her chair during the question and answer session of a beauty pageant. Fyodor sat on her lap, covered by her rough hands.

"Dad told me about you. Said you thought I was cute. Said you gave him a ride the other day."

Trying not to use any big words, I said, "Yeah. Great guy. I did mention you." I was suddenly embarrassed to let her know I liked her—she might wonder why someone like *me* would be attracted to someone like *her*. This might cause her to think less of me.

We both fell silent and I struggled for something to say. I had to ask her out; I had to think of something glitzy I could invite her to.

I delayed my decision-making by asking about the book. "What's that for?" I asked, gesturing toward her lap.

"Break."

She shifted her feet every time we came to a stop sign or red light.

"There's a wine tasting down at the Grand Colonial Hotel—Saturday night. Does this sound like something you'd be interested in?" I asked abruptly. I was used to business communication, and had a hard time with small talk. I could only really ask direct questions and give direct answers—superficial and flighty chit-chat was beneath my dignity. However, I knew that I hadn't properly warmed her up.

"Wine tasting?" Her lips sounded like they'd never before considered such an important libation—but I didn't dare say "libation" aloud. Or "victual."

It was time to impart knowledge. "It's an opportunity to test different wines—they'll have some from France, Italy, and other European *locales*. I highly recommend it."

"You just stand around and drink wine?"

"Indeed." Not a big word, but impressive nonetheless. "You get to spit," I said, thinking this might appeal to her.

"I work so many hours. I just don't know. I work Saturday nights a lot."

She ought to have jumped at the chance.

I tried getting to the heart of the problem. "You prefer beer, don't you?"

"Yeah. But it's not just that."

I appreciated her frankness—this is one of the poor's more charming traits.

"That's true. But we could have some fun, being so different and all."

"Sorry, guy. Can't do it."

"I'll tell you what, I'll give you my number and you can think about it."

"This is my stop. Right here." Wal-Mart loomed big and blue. I wondered if she knew she was being exploited.

I eased the jeep curbside and she got out before it came to a complete stop. I hopped out after her and stood by the car while she ran for the door. Her mullet bounced up and down, left and right. It sort of wagged, like a dog's tail.

"You silly little creature," I yelled, knowing she couldn't hear me. "Fine! Go find some redneck—stay mired in poverty! You're afraid of success—that's it! Afraid of being anything other than what you are!"

My rosacea was acting up—I could feel it blooming on my neck.

*

The next day, I spent nearly an hour doing inventory. The receptionist knocked on the door several times to see if I was all right.

Standing in the supply closet, flexing my fingers inside a latex glove, I contemplated turning to Jesus, wondered if Christian girls were different—more

appreciative, perhaps.

There was a church around the corner from my house—a large one. The church had so many members that I could meet dozens of women and still remain anonymous.

A couple weeks later, after work, I set off for Malaga Street Church, where they were having a singles dance. When I pushed through the heavy wood doors, I saw among those who'd already taken seats my lowly Wal-Mart friend—the one who'd committed herself to the dregs of poverty, forever and ever, amen. She was talking to a thick bodied southerner in a canvas button-down. His hair was mashed flat on one side; his lower lip protruded with meaning—like it had a mind of its own (a mind to escape the bloated face that claimed it). I walked over, shuffling sideways, making sure they saw my profile first, then my face full-on, in its aquiline glory—unmitigated, unadulterated, victorious.

I flared my nostrils and looked down at them.

"You guys new here? I haven't seen you on Sundays past." I liked the tone of "Sundays past"—it sounded vaguely like something from Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. And Dickens also had a financial *aspect*.

Her mullet receded from view as she turned to face me full-on.

"Funny thing is, we come every week. Seems you're the stranger."

"Well you're not looking hard enough." I turned and walked off, feeling like I'd acted a fool.

Today was the singles dance—so why was she here with someone? How stupid to bring a date to a singles dance. Uncouth.

But I had to redeem myself; the evening had to end with my vindication.

The dance was cheesy and featured a disco ball, a bare wood floor where the altar

usually stood, and old folks (with dates). I felt like I'd stepped into a Dunkin Donuts in Ocala, Florida.

I'd expected something like the ball scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, where dancers mill about, hold masks in front of their faces, ask for dances by extending white-gloved hands. Instead, it was Andy Griffith types, pounding the floor with heavy boots.

After a few cups of punch, I cut between my mark and her date. My penny loafers disguised my approach.

"We must," I said.

"Only if we must." Her acceptance surprised me—I'd expected the couple to glare at me, then glide away.

We danced for awhile, both of us quietly searching for something to say.

"Look at me," she said after a couple minutes.

"I am."

"Look me straight on. You're always looking to the side, like you're watching me out of the corner of your eye."

"How's this?" I faced her, but turned my chin up and away.

"Straight on. God you're so annoying."

"So what's with the date? I thought this was a singles dance?"

"He's my brother. He's an engineer—works for the State."

"That's a four year degree, isn't it?"

"Yeah, and dentistry's eight years of school. Get over yourself."

I reflexively turned my head to the side; I felt her hand against my face as she realigned it with her own.

"Get over yourself, hear that?" She stepped on my foot with her thick soled

boots; I looked away and winced. Her cold, retail-calloused hands promptly returned my face to its prescribed position.

"Nine years," I said.

"Ever try meeting people? Actually meeting people?"

"I'm always around people. This may surprise you, but I have friends—people I talk to regularly."

The disco ball sent stars along the floor, between our faces, between our hands. A sparkle appeared in my palm; she cupped her hand against mine and the light bobbed for a moment before settling on her shoulder.

"Yeah, but you can't connect with anyone. When you look at women, you see only yourself."

She was well-spoken, all things considered.

"And you ought to come to church for the right reasons."

"Nobody really believes in God. If you hold any Christian at gunpoint and offer to send them to Heaven forthwith, their eyes will water, and their noses run." Should I have said "post-haste," instead?

"I think organized religion is pretty convoluted—but you can come here to find God."

Did she say "convoluted"?

I didn't know how to react.

She realigned my face again. "And stop being such an ass."

*

The clients at the Independent Living Center were so vulnerable and so cold. The women were all the same—thin, buried under thick winter clothes even in summer, with

a spaced-out look in their eyes. The men, too, shared certain traits with one another—thick, jolly, shifty. I had come looking for vulnerable women—women who'd accept me for who I was and not ask any questions.

So there I was one Tuesday afternoon, waiting for my new client George—paralyzed George, all arms and stomach and black Velcro straps. He was cute—I don't usually enjoy that large group of weak-willed people known as "the fat," but George had an excuse. Anyway, his arms were large and he swung them in an awkward way, in a way that made me want to talk baby-talk and lay my head down next to his arms. He was a gentle sweet-talking southerner with a fetish for clichés—but when he used a cliché he'd always say it as though nobody had ever heard it before, like he was its author. This is a trait of the low-class: recycling clichés. But it was an endearing trait in George, because he was fat in a cute way.

Before he arrived, Beth the secretary told me I'd be helping him prepare for the GED. She gave me a big book and escorted me to one of the empty classrooms.

When George first barreled through the doors he was trailed by a skinny black woman in scrubs who was in turn trailed by a short, fat, middle-aged, dikey-looking broad with legs by Steinway. Sow.

Shaking hands with George would have been awkward since he didn't have full control of his extremities, so I tapped him on the arm.

When we worked math problems, he wrote by manipulating a pencil with his lips—I had to keep tissues on me in case he needed assistance (there's nothing worse than handling a slick pencil). His handicap was complete; I still cannot get over how incompetent he was: to be unable to deal with the world, to be so defenseless and useless. Such a maladjusted, broken individual.

He thought I "hung the moon"; he thought me "the cat's meow."

One day, several weeks after that first meeting, he mentioned his niece Carla, who'd occasionally brought him in, with whom I'd exchanged one or two pleasantries, nothing more. She was short, thin, 29, and sort of a redneck (smoked cigarettes, I mean). Her slightly rounded jowls suggested she'd be fat by 40, but she wasn't quite there yet, and was therefore worthy of my conversation. But we'd only had brief words, and so I was surprised when "Uncle George" mentioned that she was developing a crush on me, that she thought I was "cute."

"Carla would like to go out with you," he said.

I was sitting in what I thought would be an intimidating position—legs crossed close to the groin. So this is how rednecks match-make? I uncrossed my legs and crossed my arms and said, "Sounds great."

He gave me her number—they lived together, she was his caretaker—and I called her a few days later.

Our conversation was desultory—she was clearly ADD and couldn't settle on a topic. We managed to touch upon religion (she was Wiccan), marriage (she'd been married once), and work (she "did computers" for a local vending company, which means "data entry"). Before we hung up, we'd arranged to meet for lunch that Saturday.

*

I thought long and hard about mixing business and pleasure; I concluded that volunteer work didn't really count as "business" since I wasn't drawing a salary. Besides, I deserved to get something out of this since I'd put in so much time with George.

It was a long lunch. When we'd finally paid our tab, Carla asked if I wanted to go back to her place. I thought the request strange since we hadn't really flirted or touched at

any time during lunch. And so we went to her place and had matter-of-fact sex, just like on TV where the kissing leads to touching, the touching to undressing, the foreplay to intercourse. She was unusually casual about the whole affair, never once self-conscious, never once objecting to my advances.

And this is how it was: we didn't have anything in common so every time we saw each other we talked about the one link, George. When she'd mention Wicca, I'd get pissed. When I mentioned my own beliefs, she'd space out and seem not to hear me. Nonetheless, there was a mutual attraction and we were each secretly using the other for sex, though neither of us would say it aloud. The dinners and movies were just precursors to skin on skin, saliva on skin. It was perfect. The only drawback was having to find new ways of talking about George.

*

Carla drove a huge redneck van—one of those General Motors affairs without windows. The interior had been gutted to make room for George's wheelchair.

Carla drove fast, took turns on two wheels, had a crazy gleam in her eye when she drove the interstate, would hit the steering wheel when she got behind an old couple. She really loved George, talked about him all the time—but she was always so careless when transporting him. I resented her for this.

Once, we decided to get dinner from McDonald's and take it to the park. After hitting the drive-thru we made our way down Carriage Street toward the city park. Halfway to our destination, Carla screamed "this'll do" and jerked the van into an empty lot. We took the turn on two wheels and I screamed back, "Jesus Christ!" The lot was a ridiculous place to eat, a parking lot with no businesses attached to it—grass grew up from the concrete.

"What happened to the park idea," I asked.

"This'll be fine. Relax, don't be anal. Let's just pop-a-squat by that lilac bush."

"You mean that plant with the old tire around it?"

"Yes sir! The Wiccan's believe in getting close to nature!" Her voice was suddenly shrill.

The lot was really close to the road, in plain view of travelers. We sat on the curb and arranged our food on our laps, with our fries combined and scattered on a napkin between us. We were silent as we ate; somewhere, a motorcycle accelerated in successively obnoxious bursts.

Across from us was a white church with a startlingly black roof. The evening sunlight looked so sad in the clear, cold air. And the way it fell on the white of the church made me feel so lonely.

"You okay?" Carla said.

"Yeah. I was just thinking about how lonely the world looks in winter, when it's sunny. How moments like these remind me of Christmas, and of all the Christmases I showed up at my parents' house alone."

I felt like someone else, somewhere else.

"You know this is just about sex, right?" she said. She bent forward and fingered some loose gravel at her feet. She looked worried.

"Is there any wiggle room on that?"

"Maybe." She tossed a large chunk of gravel at a manhole cover in the middle of the road.

We sat opposite the church for almost two hours. We talked about her parents, my parents, past relationships, death. The conversation was diverse and easy in a way it

hadn't been before. After the sun went down, we lay on our backs and looked at the stars.

"I don't know how long I'll know you," I said. "But if I die when you still know me, I want you to promise me something. That if I die a boring death, you'll tell people I got killed saving a drowning dog in a frozen lake. Make that two adolescent girls."

"Maybe." She laughed. Her laugh was thin and quick in the cold, dry air.

SARAH'S CASE

Everyone has self-esteem issues. Most people focus on deficits, worrying they might not be good enough. My self-esteem issues are a little different—I know I'm good enough. *My* focus is on surplus—I wonder just how much better I am than everybody else. And why don't people agree?

I always test my new guy's admiration early on. I want him to say, "I've *never* been with anyone as sexy as you," and so saying he slides his hands under my butt and pulls my vagina toward him. I have really long hair in this fantasy—so long that part of it lies flat on the bed as he picks me up by my pelvis, his hungry tongue warmly exploring my folds. Sometimes when my new guy is on the couch, I'll sit at one end and throw my long legs over his lap. Once, my new guy (it was our second date) sat there with his fucking arms folded, just staring at my legs. I screamed at him; jumping up, I said, "I knew this would happen! I always have to call first! You sat there like an idiot when the bill came! Who do you think you are? You have a *belly!*" He looked shocked, like this was no way to hold court. He said, "It's getting late."

All these guys I meet are the same way. They're passionless, tepid. I've grown to hate the word "tepid." When I answer an ad, I always use this word: "I'm sick of tepid guys. I want to be seduced. I want to be taken care of." They reply with shit like "Everyone wants that, honey," and "Me too! Let's meet." I've had to be very bold about asking for what I want; I now say things like "I accept there aren't any good men in this town, so I'm willing to settle. Your job: Take care of me, enjoy my body, realize how special it is." The ones that take the bait always play the same game: They stumble through the evening with their hands in their pockets, waiting for me to ask *them*

questions. I thought guys all wanted sex! I thought they were actually *attracted* to women!

I've been masturbating a lot lately: Once a week, at least. When I masturbate, I don't think about my guy's body (none of them have good bodies anyway)—I think about having stuff done to *my body*. It might be as simple as intercourse from behind, or up against a wall; or, it might be as complicated as having my clothes removed after I return to my apartment with my guy, his thick stubby fingers undoing my blouse, belt, bra. He keeps his clothes on, of course. And I lay on the bed and he licks *every inch* of my body with his tongue: my crack, ears, feet, eye sockets. I haven't been able to satisfy this fantasy—the closest I've come is having a guy lick 47% of my body. The worst part is I had to initiate it! I had to *ask*!

Useless fucks!

This has been my life for ten years. Yesterday, I did something about it. I asked my new guy to come back to my place. I initiated everything because I knew it was useless to wait around. When we were in bed and I was going down on him, I popped his dick out of my mouth and lurched toward his feet. I took his big toe in my mouth and bit hard—not as hard as I could've, but hard enough to cause exquisite pain. He screamed really loudly and jerked his foot away and his still-erect penis waved back and forth like a ship's mast on the high seas. Jerking his foot away caused a layer of skin to peel off the toe and I could feel and taste the delicious metal of his blood in my mouth. He shouted, "What the *fuck*! Are you crazy?" He was standing up now and his penis was actively deflating, pumping down, as if controlled by hydraulics. I wanted to remove his testicles and put them in a fruit bowl. I said, "Were you thinking about *yourself* when I was blowing you? Get the fuck out of here, you tepid piece of shit!" He ran outside naked,

covering his groin with his boots as he hurried across the parking lot. I stepped onto the balcony and screamed down at him: “You’re a fucking homosexual! You’re not attracted to women—you like the idea of them being attracted to *you*! Self-absorbed piece of shit!”

So cathartic, so delicious. It wasn’t *exactly* what I wanted, but it would do.

COFFEE

The week following his 60th birthday, John Santo boarded a train at Stuttgart, Germany. He was traveling alone. It was evening—the cold slapped the window that pressed his cheek. The train jerked along and the side of his head lightly bobbed against the glass; the comforting rhythm made him feel childish, as if on a school bus, bound for the emptiness of school. In his head the haze of childhood, images indistinct, and then distinct—images of a time when wax on green leaves was glass: he was shooting pellets at balloons suspended between the branches of a magnolia tree, his dad sitting beside him urging him to slow down, aim; then he was shooting storage shed windows, wanting to see what would happen knowing what would happen.

A young woman sat facing him. He looked at her reflection in the glass; the large evergreen trees slid across her forehead and the high, tight mountains framed her and her black hair was coal spilling down the mountainsides. John looked at her directly now; her polished forehead had two early wrinkles.

“Traveling alone?” he said in German.

“To see my Dad in Munich. But I recognize a cousin of mine on the next car—so no. We don’t know each other but I’ve seen her in family photos.”

John put his head against the glass and looked at her likeness. She was more mythological this way, more real.

Minutes passed and they were in a field. The young woman put her feet on the seat next to him, her jeans tucked into her black suede boots.

“You have a sense of the end as a distant thing,” John said still looking in the glass. “Time stretches out and you’re thinking how you’ll occupy it. Do you know what’s real?”

“Your wife dead?”

“Yes, but that’s not why I’m talking this way.”

“You look like a guy whose wife was killed in a crash. Plane or car, take your pick.” She brought her bent knees together then let them drift apart. “You’re pissed because I’m young and my life’s clean. So clean.” She brushed imaginary sand from her palms, smirked.

“You’re very charming. She died of cancer five years ago. I’m devastated—can you tell?” He spoke in a lazy, offhand way, portrayed carelessness. He felt like Oscar Wilde sprawled across a divan.

“I should temper what I said: you look professorial.”

“Accountant, but well read.” Their reflections overlapped. Her reflected head snapped from side to side, trying to see his face, his actual face, and the world beyond their faces was distant trees, a black pool, a quiet, red house.

“I don’t buy it,” she said.

“If I was going to lie, I’d say rocket scientist, or astronaut.”

“I need you to be devastated.”

John wasn’t usually open but her boldness lowered the stakes. He leaned away from the window and rested his head on his fist. He was looking at a person now. She had great skin, very pale, creamy, and he wondered if she ate organic.

“I remember the sense of freedom. Not the freedom of a 21-year-old. But suddenly my days were empty and I could take coffee at 9 a.m., or noon. Which I could have done before, but I’d have to account for the change.”

“Twenty-six. But I get what you’re saying. Freedom is not being observed.” She rested her wrists on her kneecaps; her hands drooped forward like flowers.

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” he said. “Next thing, you’ll be asking for my number. Hardest thing about this freedom is fending off the college girls.” Maybe they could be friends for the ride. John sat up straight, smiled an empty smile. His eyes felt dead.

“*Twenty-six*. I saw you watching me in the glass earlier. I think it’s the other way around.” She smiled and moved her purse from the seat to her lap, reached in with both hands, dug toward the bottom, like a squirrel digging in dirt. Her knees opened and closed rhythmically, back and forth, as if moved by wind.

It wouldn’t go anywhere, John thought. He slouched against the window and watched her reflection. She pulled a cell phone from the purse, held it in both hands, texted with both thumbs.

There were a million stories about older men and younger women—their weird connection couldn’t grow because there was precedent for it to grow.

“John Santo,” he said turning from the distant mountains.

“Gabriele. Gabby.” She put her feet on the floor but remained engaged with her phone.

“You were alright until you pulled that phone out. I was thinking you were different, an old soul, until you started updating your Facebook status. ‘This guy’s got mad skills,’ you’re writing.”

Her thumbs stopped moving and she looked at him as if for the first time.

“The problem with your set,” he said, “is that you can only be witty in short bursts—50 word max. Too much texting.”

“If you’re keeping score, I’d say I was up a few points. Check your log. Oops, more points for me.” She went back to texting.

“We’ll be there in an hour,” he said. “Got plans? This is your reward.” A bounce shot.

“Traveling alone?” Her sudden break from texting gave her an air of eagerness.

“It’s better this way—nobody to negotiate with, don’t have to do touristy stuff. But I can make an exception now my trip’s half over. We’ll have to discuss the texting of course.” She was annoying, but attractive and witty—and John was lonely. It would be nice to make a friend in this unexpected way. Plus, he could look at photos of the two of them, tell others. Sure, the possibility of sex hung in the air, but he really just wanted something to think about in the third person.

“No to all. But enjoy your vacation.” She smiled a fake, toothy smile.

“I’m usually more cautious than this. All your fault,” he said, looking down.

*

An hour later the train arrived in Munich. Gabby jumped up and pulled a duffle bag from under her seat. She carefully put the shoulder strap over her right shoulder so as not to wrinkle her jacket, smoothing with her hand the area around it.

“My car’s at the station,” she said. “Need a ride?”

“If you could take me to the heart of things, where the shops, cafes, and quaint hotels are. I just need to get where I can access everything on foot.”

“It’s only a few blocks away. Come on.”

John gripped his carry-on by the handle, not using the shoulder strap. He didn’t want to be twins.

He followed Gabby to the parking lot. She walked fast as if she wanted to get this over with.

“Look, you offered,” he said and stutter-stepped to close the gap. The cold air was painful, his speech shook.

She turned around abruptly and he almost walked into her. “I don’t want the guilt. I’d spend the next few days worrying about the old guy from the train, how you maybe got mugged or twisted an ankle and had to support yourself against an alley wall, wincing in pain, your shriveled head shriveled and small in your trench coat.”

“Am I such a sad case?”

“You were totally macking on me on the train.”

“That was before I knew you were a jerk.”

She continued to her car and he followed her because it seemed the natural thing to do. Theirs was a weird dynamic, but it was a dynamic.

She opened the passenger’s side door, motioned him in with a quick jerk of her hand. “Watch your trench coat.” He got in and she slammed the door. He felt like a kid punished for throwing a scene in the mall: Mom’s taking me home, he thought.

“I don’t wanna take a tubby,” he said when she got in.

She didn’t start the car right away like he thought she would. Instead, she just sat there with her hands hanging from the lower part of the steering wheel. He sat with his bag on his lap, his hands under his thighs for warmth.

“It’s quicker with the engine running,” he said. “Just aim the car where you want to go.” With his hand karate-chop style, John did a fishtail gesture in front of his nose.

Gabby leaned forward and ran a finger across the windshield. She’d formed a few letters before he realized she was writing in the condensation. JERK, the glass said.

WEIRD, he wrote on his side.

“I really think we’re building something here,” he said in a flat tone. “I’m prepared for amazing things to happen. Want to talk about it?”

She leaned forward and put her head in her hands. He couldn’t see her face. Was she crying?

“Lifetime Network, a moment of truth movie,” he said in a voice-over voice.

Her back hunched and she looked like a wounded animal. He felt bad, like he’d slugged the weakest kid at school. So he tried humor, recited a line from a cheesy romantic comedy: “You make me feel good about myself.” His voice was hopeful, expectant.

“Being sad is a good thing,” she said. She put her hands in her lap and turned her body toward him, her right leg bent across the seat, foot suspended above the floor. “It would be sad to have nobody to be sad about. Being sad is a privilege.”

“You’ll lose somebody eventually.” He smiled and tapped her knee. “Don’t worry.”

“How much longer’s your trip?” she said officiously, eyebrows raised.

*

The ride to the-center-of-things was awkward, silent.

A half hour later they turned down a busy street. Cars were moving slow, stalking empty spaces.

“There’s a cafe ahead,” she said. “You’ll feel at the center of things there. Amazing things will happen, and there’ll be pungent smells, charming wood floors, city people in slick clothes. And I’ll go home and fight with dad, then to my room to watch music videos on YouTube: ‘Life in a Northern Town’ by Dream Academy, over and over again.”

He smiled, not knowing if this was the right way to read her revelation.

Ahead, a car pulled away from the curb and Gabby took the empty space.

"I'm going to tell you something," she said. "It's low stakes, right? I'll never see you again; I'll only think of you many years from now when I'm on a plane and the person next to me tries to make conversation. That's not what I have to tell you; it's this: I have HIV and my dad's pissed. Can you believe? *Pissed*. Too much information? I thought so." She let her hands drop into her lap; they lay palms up, fingertips touching. She looked like a bird with broken legs.

They were silent a few minutes. She lowered the window; the car cooled, as if someone had flicked a switch.

"Did you just find this out?" He squinted at her. He suddenly cared about this cold, desperate girl, this loose cannon. Hers was a pristinely beautiful fragility--he wanted to feel her life throb under his fingertips. And he could tell people about this, about his "broken bird."

"Two weeks ago. That Dream Academy song's really sad when he says, '...and the train rolled out of sight.'"

"I'm a great cook," John offered. "I could cook for the two of you. It would help the dust settle to have a third party there."

"I don't want you cooking—it gives up too much control. I want to select from a menu."

"Pungent smells and city people, right here," he said and tapped the window.

*

"I look at YouTube, too," he said, the coffee steam between them.

"You'll have to do better than that—*everybody* uses YouTube." She took a bite of her lemon pound cake. He was disappointed she'd ordered pound cake--that's what he got at Starbuck's back home.

"I can do that: I look at trailers of a French film: *La Grande Bouffe*. I've seen the film--several years ago. It was a happy time. I'd just gotten word from the dermatologist the mole they'd biopsied was benign. I'd been really worried, calling their office daily asking if the results were in. At one point the dermatologist got on the phone and said, 'I really wouldn't worry about this. I probably shouldn't have removed it.' It's a long, boring movie, but watching it reminds me of the good news."

"This is the part where I tell you my situation is worse. There is no good news. Dad thinks I'm a whore."

"And he will, for quite awhile. But parents always forgive their kids. Did you ever see that interview with Jeffrey Dahmer's parents?"

"You're not helping," she laughed. A small piece of cake fell from her mouth. She didn't notice.

"It's on YouTube!" he shouted.

"Down, Mr. Santa!" she shouted and, with the palm of her hand, made a pumping motion toward the floor.

She inclined her head toward him, suddenly serious. "You probably think I'm desperate, that my options are limited now. I bet lots of guys would tap my ass."

"I wouldn't doubt it. There's competition for everything these days. I actually won't get tested for HIV, and I've had two partners within the last few years. I'm afraid of doing what I did to the dermatologist."

"That's *exactly* how I was. I was planning to wait until an old boyfriend called me to tell me he had the disease. *Then* I'd get checked. That way, I wouldn't have to sit around wringing my hands."

"I did get tested in the 80s, after an affair. Marcy wanted me to do it. I wasn't really worried, but after they drew the blood, I thought, 'I could have it. They could call me and say it's positive. Suddenly, the impossible seemed possible.'"

She looked down, seemed to nod her head, only slightly, almost imperceptibly. He wanted to touch her nose, quickly, lightly.

John looked to his left, out the window. The room was in the glass, very clearly: the waiters, customers, thin, black tables, canvas coffee bags against a wall.

"Why'd you decide to get tested?" he said, turning back to her. She was looking at him.

"I finally went to the OBGYN for the first time. It's included in a variety of blood work. I tried to convince them not to run the test, but they talked me into it. I could feel my heart sink with fear and suddenly I heard myself say, 'Yes.' I knew I'd made a mistake."

"Look at the bright side: It could always be worse."

She looked down at the table, rubbed her chin, then looked up. "That's the most pessimistic thing I've ever heard." She was half-smiling, a smirk.

He looked to his right, scanned the small, wood-paneled room, careful to avoid her eyes. She was a blur in his peripheral vision.

"People are hard to figure," she said, sighed. "I always answer the phone with a slight question in my voice, even when I know who it is."

His face felt flushed, the skin dry and cracked. He was slightly sad, a cool gray sadness. A sense of something at bay, but coming closer.

John looked at his hands folded on the table, then at her left hand, tightly clutching her mug handle, knuckles white, almost jaundiced. Without looking up he tapped one of her knuckles, quickly, and let his hand fall next to hers, let it rest on the table. He didn't look up, just kept looking at the small shaft of wood between their hands. He was embarrassed but felt he'd had to touch her in some way, that the touching was an answer to a question she hadn't asked.

Very slowly he raised his finger, and let it rest on her knuckle.