



*The Last  
Lemonade  
Stand on  
The Block*

*Stories*

*Jaime Clarke*

# The Last Lemonade Stand on the Block

STORIES

Jaime Clarke

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For Amy Hempel

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# Preface

*THE LAST LEMONADE STAND ON THE BLOCK* WAS A TITLE BEFORE it was a manuscript, of any kind, born at the moment when I realized what all the adults had been keeping from me—namely, how things really are, and everyone’s complicity. The title represents that epiphany. A couple of failed novel attempts followed, and then virtually every word I wrote afterward circled the theme.

Rereading this early work brought a level of suspense in that I often had no idea where the stories were headed, as if they’d been written by someone else, which, of course, they were. They’re presented here in the order in which they were written (as best I can remember) between 1994 and 2005, first as a student in the creative writing program at the University of Arizona, then in the MFA program at Bennington College, and after that in the offices of Harold Ober Associates, the literary agency in New York where I worked, both during lunch, when I covered the phones for the receptionist, and also after work, when the office was quiet.

There’s a curious break in the timeline in 1999, right after I learned that my first novel, *We’re So Famous*, based on the short story, had been accepted for publication. I didn’t attempt another story for years, until after my second novel, *Scavengers*, failed to sell, at which point I returned to the laboratory I knew best, drafting new stories, but also sifting through the stories presented here, finding the spark for my Charlie Martens trilogy—*Vernon Downs*, *World Gone Water*, and

*Garden Lakes*—in my first published story, “A Complete Gentleman.” I spent the next decade or so with Charlie, whom I mistook at first to be an alter ego but soon came to recognize was a talisman, a reminder to be better. All of these stories are reminders too, it could be said.

A final story, “Carl, Inc.,” published in 2011, imagines a character bearing a strong similarity to Charlie because, well, it was conceived as the fourth novel but found its form otherwise, and with a character outside of Charlie’s proximity.

I recall the thrill of starting and finishing a story, then another, wondering if I was doing it correctly. I know now from the long journey that there is no real progression in a writer’s work. Every time you begin a new manuscript, you are starting over. With each story, the Writer is trying on language, seeing what works, sometimes stretching phrases too far, overusing words like a favorite shirt worn until it’s too fragile to wear again.

You can see in these stories the struggle the Young Writer is having trying to tell the story he wants to tell. He’s sure he has something to say, but he’s also having trouble expressing it in the most artful and effective way. In keeping with the promise of the title, the Young Writer seeks to illuminate truths as he discovers them, so that while many of these stories are unpolished, they are a true record of his transition from the curated world into the wilderness of living deliberately.

The physical act of retyping these stories was an exercise in restraint. So often I wanted to show the Young Writer the way, like a parent desperate to impart all his learned wisdom to a child; but that would have been a terrible shortcut and one that did a disservice to the struggles of the Young Writer. Choices were made, some more curious than others, and I respected them. That said, it was difficult to square the strange sensation of reading along and thinking, *This is okay*, with the horror of running into a grammatical cul-de-sac, or a recycled phrase, or an obvious missed opportunity to expand and deepen the narrative. The stories herewith have been lightly copyedited for clarity but are otherwise presented as

originally written. All throughout, the reader can sense the tension the Young Writer feels in saying something plainly but artfully, without transgressing into literary ornamentation, as well as learning when to tell and when to insinuate, to trust the reader to put it all together.

One surprise in reading these stories again was that they are, from the very beginning, the work of a moralist. Nick Carraway's line from *The Great Gatsby*, about wanting the world to stand at a moral attention forever, had obviously massaged its way into my brain and then was tattooed on my heart. Or at the very least it was a rallying cry, the flag I wanted to plant on every battlefield.

Another surprise was how early I checked out of the world of men, wanting to expose my own gender for all its malfeasance and bad intentions. Consciously or not, that decision was clearly made from the start, and may even be the wellspring for most, if not all, of my fiction. As the stories progress, I'm trying both to work it out for myself, the world of male toxicity, but also to expose it, like a journalist, and relay my own horror as I stumble through the terrain.

In the end, what this collection of stories represents is the endless questions and the self-implication inherent in the answers: Why is life so hard? Why are people so terrible at it? And worse, why are the same people who are capable of kindness sometimes so horrible? Why is selfishness our default behavior?

But mostly what you'll find in these stories is a young man discovering the world, and completely objecting all along the way.

—Jaime Clarke





# A Complete Gentleman

## Jane

IF YOU ASK ME ABOUT JANE, I'LL TELL YOU THAT SHE IS A FINE woman. It is true that, well, in the catalog of women in my life she would come under *P* for “plain,” but she is tender and we go together pretty good. Besides, I do not make aesthetic judgments.

The thing I like most about Jane is that she looks best without makeup. Once, on one of our first dates, she had put on this bright red lipstick, and the whole night I tried not to stare at it; it looked like she was smiling even when she wasn't, and by the end of the night I was self-conscious about it. I think she sensed I didn't like it, or maybe she was uncomfortable with it too. She has never worn lipstick again.

We keep each other at arm's length most of the time, and that is really for the best. She knows it too. I guess one could say our relationship is not complicated with love. We are into each other totally, though. I never think about anyone but her, and she always tells me I'm the one for her. It wouldn't be fair if it weren't that way, and it is the only real promise we've made.

It wasn't always like that, though. At first we were both friends of each other's love interest. When those relationships deteriorated, Jane and I picked up what worked from each and merged, creating our present utopian relationship, which provides for her whatever she wants when and how she wants it, the sort of relationship a

woman like Jane deserves and the kind I like to initiate.

If I could change one thing about her, though, I wouldn't make her such a big Christian. I don't have a problem with religion per se, but sometimes she can really confuse the issue. Besides, like I've told her over and over again, there is no religion in Utopia.

But she thinks I am the Antichrist. "You're the devil," she is always saying. If she says it too often, I start to get a pinched feeling in my head and I have to yell at her to stop. I won't yell at her in front of our friends, though, and I never take it out on her in bed.

Jane is moving to California but I want her to stay. I'm convinced I can get her to stay. I make a point to say "California is not Utopia" at least once a day, just slipping it into a conversation casually. She raises her eyebrows and shrugs in a way that lets me know she is on the fence. I'm convinced I can get her to stay.

"What's in California?" I ask her.

"You could come with me," she answers.

"But I don't want to move to California."

"Caleb, you could easily come."

"But I don't want to," I repeat myself, and this signals Jane that I don't want to discuss it.

So I'm in the mood for a good time, and Jane and I are getting ready to go out for the usual—dinner and whatever. She sees that I am on the verge of what could almost pass as euphoria, and I see that look on her face that lets me know it won't be smooth sailing.

And sure enough, on the way to dinner she gets me uptight by demanding to know the name of the restaurant. When I don't tell her, when I say that I want it to be a surprise, she pursues the question about what kind of food this restaurant serves with an irrationality that becomes so frightening I finally do tell her, and though I'm disappointed about the deletion of the only mystery the evening holds, I'm glad this has happened, that the glitch is out of the system, and I can now breathe easy through dinner.

Sometimes I think I'd like to marry Jane, but I know that our relationship couldn't survive the rules and constraints of a formal

institution like marriage. Still, she carries herself in such a way that someone across the room looking at her would think she'd make a good wife. Someday someone should marry Jane, and I'm pretty sure someday someone will.

Depending on Jane's mood after dinner, we will either go for ice cream or go straight back to my apartment. In a way, I hope we do go for the ice cream, because I like to watch Jane coo like a little girl between licks of her mint chocolate chip. Not only is it an amazing transformation, but it always signals the start of at least an hour of foreplay that lasts all the way from the ice cream parlor to my bed.

Dinner clearly makes Jane pensive, and I can sense that she won't want mint chocolate chip and that indeed the whole rest of the night may be in jeopardy.

"I'm going to California," she says, as if trying to cheer herself up.

"I'll go with you," I say, and wait for her reaction. The skin under her eyes tightens, confirming my suspicion that she doesn't really want me to.

"I thought you wanted to stay here." She tries to act like she hasn't been caught off guard.

"I could stay or I could go," I tell her.

"Well, I'm going," she says, realizing I am toying with her. My coyness cheers her up, and again I am sure I can convince her to stay.

## **Aztecka**

My work schedule (Wednesday–Saturday) allows me a lot of free time, which I usually spend with Jane. I think working in a bar is the best job anyone could have. Of course I had to lie about my past to get the job, but I'm a good employee, and Geoff, the bar manager, trusts me to watch out for the place.

Aztecka used to be called the Ivory Bar, and every once in a while I'll see an ultra-yuppie couple appear in the doorway, turn

their noses up at the industrialites who crowd Aztecka every night, and walk away dejected, wondering what happened to their mahogany and green plush carpet.

The best part of working in a bar, of course, is meeting women. The worst part is seeing what people do to one another. I swear, sometimes even I'm surprised at how vicious men and woman can be. Take last Friday night, for instance: The bar is hopping, and Miles, the relief bartender, is thirty minutes late. So I'm making two or three drinks at once while having two or three more orders shouted at me, and suddenly I hear this *whack*, and then it seems like everyone freezes, and I see these two, this guy and his girlfriend (I guess), and the girl is holding the side of her face and she's begging him not to leave her there, and that's when I notice another girl waiting off to the side, impatiently, and the first girl is in tears, blubbering, and then I hear the guy say, "If you won't do it, she will." I look over at the girl to see if she really will, and our gazes lock and I can't make myself look away. The girlfriend's pleading becomes pathetic and she starts convulsing; her voice crescendoes and everyone is listening, but the guy doesn't realize it and smacks her across the face again. I flinch and reach for the wooden bat we keep under the bar, but it's not there, and I remember breaking it the week before playing bottle baseball with Miles after-hours. I start in the direction of the guy, and he sees me out of the corner of his eye and faces me, scowling. The showdown. I reach under the bar, go for the invisible bat, and he sees this and grabs the girl-in-waiting and cuts through the crowd to the door.

There's a hum and then the bar is at 140 decibels, the noise swallowing the girlfriend, who is left standing in the corner holding her face. People are screaming for their drinks, but I ignore them and call out to the girl. I wave a guy off his stool and motion for her to come sit at the bar.

"Are you okay?" I ask. Clearly embarrassed, she just nods. "What was that all about?"

"Can I have a drink?" she asks.

“Sure. What do you want?”

“Just water.”

I hand her a glass of water, and she takes a sip and sets it back down on the bar. “Want to talk about it?” I ask, feeling like I can really help her, but she just shakes her head and asks me to call her a cab.

When the cab arrives, I search the bar for her, and just as I’m about to shrug my shoulders to the cabdriver, she emerges from the bathroom. I wave, trying to get her attention, but she isn’t looking; instead she turns her back and makes her way to the back room, where the pool tables are. I signal the cabby to stay where he is and I go after her.

I find her leaning against one of the pool tables, and when I walk up to her, she gets a strange look on her face like she wonders who I am. Instantly I notice that her boyfriend is back, and he comes up to me: “What do you want?”

“Your cab is here,” I say to the girl.

“I don’t need it,” she says.

“The driver’s waiting out front,” I tell her, trying to persuade her to leave her asshole boyfriend and go home, where she’ll be safe.

“Look, I already said I didn’t want it. Are you deaf?” She scowls at me, and now her boyfriend moves in closer and I consider throwing him out, but I begin to feel a shift in loyalties on the girl’s part and I turn and start to walk away. A hand grabs my arm and I whirl around, ready to deck the asshole, but it’s the girl and she asks me: “Do you know where we can score some smack?”

It becomes apparent then and there that she is merely self-destructing and that, cab or no cab, I can’t do anything to stop it.

### **Essay #1: Affection**

The highest emotion one human being can have for another. There is no greater feeling than showing affection and having that affection reciprocated.

Affection is a paradise in and of itself.

It is possible to feel different degrees of affection, depending on the nature of one's relationship to the other person. Without a doubt, the most gratifying form of affection exists in a realm of physical and sexual freedom. A realm without judgments.

Most people live in a world of constraint, where affection is merely reciprocated, like a game. I do something nice for you, you do something nice for me. While this existence is placating, there is no real emotion, only *prescribed* emotion.

Free from constraints, however, a person is allowed to indulge in the kind of affection a relationship can create. A person is allowed to give as much affection as he wants; and more importantly, he is allowed to take as much affection as he needs. Each is totally satisfied.

Take Karine, for instance. A good example. She'd existed for so long on the crumbs of affection the various men in her life had thrown her that when she happened into La Onda that night, she was starving. Even though I didn't even know her, I put myself at her mercy. I pretended that I had the utmost affection for her (I'm sure I would've developed a sense of affection for her, given time) and gave her all the affection I possibly could, replenishing her. It was just that she was so shocked that she didn't know how to react; she wasn't used to the wonderful feeling of unbridled affection. She just couldn't . . . maybe that's a bad example.

## Sunday

As the result of a bet I lost concerning how long I could pleasure Jane in bed (although I was just seven minutes shy of the promised thirty minutes, which, Jane assured me, was only average), I have to go to church with her every Sunday this month.

"If you can prove you're omnipotent, you don't have to go," she teased. But of course I am not.

I think part of the slander against going to church is the fact

that it starts too damn early. As I sit next to Jane, I consider this and conclude that this is probably by design, as most people are more susceptible, or should I say more easily influenced, in a half-catatonic state.

Jane being the Catholic she is, we sit in one of the back pews. The priests march in in an impressive parade, dressed in black-and-red garb, some holding long staffs with banners that could've been made during the Crusades; and the head priest, the *pontifex maximus*, the one leading the way, bows prayerfully from side to side.

The entourage comes to a halt in front of the congregation, and the priests assemble in an indeterminate order behind a long counter on a stage at the front. I look over at Jane, but she knows I am going to say something snide and ignores me.

The magic act begins with a white powder erupting in a bowl on the table, and I crane my neck to get a better glimpse. One of the elderly priests on the left of the *pontifex maximus*, dangling a charm on the end of a gold chain, begins swinging the chain back and forth, the audience mesmerized. Some sort of liquid (water?) is poured into the bowl, and now suddenly all of the priests are busy with their hands, and in my mind I superimpose the title *Cooking with Catholics* over the whole scene. I lean over to share this with Jane, but she leans away from me.

After an inordinate amount of standing and sitting, singing and muttering, standing and sitting, I feel the end is near. An anxiety comes over me as I anticipate the benediction, much like the anxiety a smoker in a business meeting feels when he senses he will finally get to step outside for a cigarette, when there is an unquiet silence and the very front pew stands and files out. I groan to myself and fold my hands on the pew in front of me and rest my head in the empty triangle they form. The shuffle of feet and the murmuring of the Eucharist become a drone in my ears, and I close my eyes, wondering what I would pray about if I prayed.

Images of people I know sift through my head, and I imagine



each of them praying and wonder what they pray about. I imagine Jane on her knees, at the foot of her bed, and I wonder if she prays for me in some way. What could she pray for me? Does she pray that we'll get married? Or does she only pray for things for herself, like her family's wellness, or the right decision about California?

Without warning, an image of Jane and her next boyfriend praying together, in a circle, heads down, hands together, appears in my mind. The suddenness of seeing them quickens my pulse and I feel a bitter irritability creep through me. The image is static, like a giant poster plastered on the wall of my brain, and the thought occurs to me that Jane probably will pray for me, given her good, religious nature. I'll bet she asks (privately) the Lord to watch over me and protect me from evil. This thought stays with me until we are out in the parking lot, and as we climb into Jane's car, I say, "Fuck church."

"You're the devil," Jane says, and smiles.

## **My First Time**

I like hair. All kinds: brown, black, red, blond, long, short, curly, wavy, straight—whatever. And skin. I can't get the feel of it out of my dreams.

Even if I close my eyes, it is hard for me to imagine a life without girls. I think it is all I have ever known. When other guys were showing their prowess at basketball on the playground at recess, me and Steven Howfield were starting clubs and trying to get girls to join: Saturday Afternoon Club (weekly picnics designed to be romantic, like on TV); Very Secret Society (initiation included kissing both Steven and me on the lips for ten seconds—we promised not to tell anyone, hence the name); Daisy Chain Gang (the main function of this club was to play out a bizarre game Steven and I concocted, the rules of which I have forgotten); and the Millionaire's Club (we tried to convince cute girls that we were going to be lawyers and that we'd make a lot of money). Once Dawn Campbell and I stayed

out on the playground after the bell, hiding in the corner where the gymnasium joined the administration building, and we kissed until Ms. Fischer, our third-grade teacher, realized we were missing and came looking for us. We had to stay after school with our heads down on our desks until our parents came for us. I peeked over my hairless arm several times, but Dawn would not look.

And at her birthday party I was the only boy and my parents hesitated before leaving me. I was glad when they left. If you can imagine what it was like to be the only boy at Dawn Campbell's tenth birthday party—they locked me in a closet full of dirty laundry, and Dawn opened the door and yelled "Here!" and threw her older sister's bra at me. She slammed the door and all the girls giggled. I had never smelled anything more wonderful than that bra. I pressed the cool fabric against my forehead and inhaled.

I enjoyed this sort of attention from girls, and in a bid for some from the first *woman* I really liked, I babysat for my piano teacher, Ms. Thomas (divorced), as a favor. She gave piano lessons out of her house, and I was her favorite student. She would sit next to the bench and point along to the music with her slender fingers as I tried to keep up. She smoked a lot, but once you were in her house for a while, you didn't hardly notice it.

Anyway, one night I babysat her two kids, Harry, eight, and Sidney, six. I put them to bed at nine, like she told me, and I knew she wouldn't be home before one, so I had plenty of time to myself. I normally don't like to snoop around because I am impatient and don't know what to look for, but something was clearly drawing me to Ms. Thomas's bedroom, and after I put Harry and Sidney to bed, I turned to the left instead of to the right and closed her bedroom door behind me.

The dark was cool, and after my eyes adjusted, I could make out her dresser and her bed. I remember the room was a mess, clothes thrown everywhere. I stood motionless, breathing in the peculiar scents the room held. Then I moved over to the dresser. I opened the top drawer and pulled out one of Ms. Thomas's lace bras. It was cool

to my touch, like Dawn's older sister's bra, but somehow this bra was different. The silk and lace sent an electric charge through me, and without even thinking about it, I unzipped my pants and put the left cup over my erection, letting it hang like a lace flag in a stifled wind.

I'm not sure what made me commit the act. I'm not sure even where the idea came from except that suddenly I was on my knees at the foot of her bed, the bra with my cock wrapped inside wedged between the mattress and the box spring, and I began moving back and forth, like I'd seen on cable movies. It felt awkward at first, a little rough even, but then it smoothed out and felt all right. I was really moving; a couple of times it slipped out and I had to readjust the setup. Right when it started to feel the best, I began to sweat. I moved a little faster and then something went wrong. I wanted to scream. I stopped moving but something was happening and it felt like someone was taking a knife to me. Finally it stopped, and I pulled everything out and felt the hot goo puddled in the left cup. Frightened, I buried the bra in the dirty clothes and got out of the room as quietly as I could

## **Dr. Hatch**

Dr. Hatch wanted me to call all the people I'd hurt and ask them for forgiveness. It's part of the program, he said, like the essays. The child molesters called their sons and daughters, and the husbands called their wives and said they were sorry. Didn't I want to call Karine? I couldn't make him understand: I didn't hurt anyone.

## **Monday**

I know Jane can't leave me. She can't replace me, and I'm glad because, frankly, I don't want to replace her. We've got a good thing, and not everyone can keep a perfect balance like we do.

"Are you coming with me or not?" she demands.

"Why does it matter where you live?" I ask. "I don't want to live

in California.”

“Well, I do,” she says.

“Why can’t we just keep on here?”

“I’m tired of being here.”

Then I say: “Look, I want you to stay.”

She starts to melt, and I feel a little guilty for employing such tactics, but the truth is I do want her to stay; but I know it’s only because I want to sustain what we have and that someday our relationship will ebb and float away.

“I can’t imagine staying here,” she says, her voice softening.

“What you imagine somewhere else is exactly what will happen here,” I say.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that if you’re going to run, make sure you’re running *to* and not away.”

“I’m not running away from anything,” she shoots back.

“What are you running to, then?” I ask.

“I’m not running . . . period.” Her voice grows louder. “I’m simply just *tired* of here.” The emphasis on “tired” also insinuates that she is tired of me, too, but I pretend like I’m oblivious and I just sit there and smirk.

“Why do you have to be so confrontational all the time?” I ask, knowing what this will do to her.

“Me? You’re the one that’s confrontational.”

“And defensive, too. You’re always defensive about something.”

I am pouring gas over the fire.

“You are probably the most *impossibly*”—she angrily spits the words out at me—“most *fucking* *impossibly* . . . *stupid* fuck—”

“Stupid? Is that the best you can do?”

Jane lunges for me, at first in anger, but soon we are both on the floor of my living room, laughing so hard we have to hold ourselves.

“You really are stupid,” Jane says, still laughing. “You know that, right?”

“Yeah, I know. So are you.” I kiss her on the forehead. We lie

there silent for a minute and then I tell her, "I hope you stay." It comes out sounding like an apology, and in a lot of ways, it is.

## Go West

Once when I was young (which feels like an eon ago), shortly after my mother left him, my father and I took a trip by car to a cabin he owned up on the northern rim of the Grand Canyon. As we ascended out of the valley, I remember thinking how beautiful the desert was. The red rock formations and the cacti and the vast sky that opened up in front of me. But I also remember feeling afraid. I stared at a cactus a ways in the distance and thought, *I could get hurt out there*; or at an endless brown field, every acre a carbon copy of the rest: *Everything here is dead*.

Halfway to the cabin, in Sedona, I went into the gift store of the restaurant where we'd stopped and looked around while my father finished eating.

"Don't dawdle," he warned, and even though I was careful not to linger looking at any one thing for too long, I wasn't surprised when I returned to our table and my father was gone. Without panicking, I walked out to the parking lot, and after confirming that my father had left me, I headed back toward Phoenix on foot, looking over my shoulder now and then to see if the approaching car was my father.

Not less than a mile out of town a white pickup truck pulled over. "Where you goin'?" the guy, a rancher, asked.

"Phoenix."

"This is your lucky day," he told me.

"Great." I hopped in the truck, which smelled of dust and sweat, and we raced down the highway. He asked me the typical hitchhiker questions, and I made up a story about how I'd just graduated from college and was seeing America via my thumb. He liked this story and launched into one of his own about how the youth of America isn't as patriotic as in his day and how more people should get a feel

for the land, to cultivate an appreciation for what nourishes and sustains them, and I nodded my head all the way back to Phoenix.

## **Essay #2: An Ideal Day Sometime in the Near Future**

This is an ideal day sometime in the near future:

I meet a girl who can appreciate me for what I can offer and we spend a lot of time together. But we don't get trapped into love. We just like being together and we realize that it isn't forever, that eventually we'll move on, but that we'll always remember what we had with each other.

And after that girl and I are over, I meet another girl who can appreciate me for what I can offer, etc.

## **Tuesday**

Tuesdays, Jane volunteers at a nursery for abandoned children, and Tuesdays put Jane in a good mood. We both always look forward to Tuesday nights, and this Tuesday night seems especially good because afterward, our backs against the crumpled sheets, we solidify the Utopian Love Code:

"If a man makes promises to a woman and does not keep his promises, another man shall fulfill the obligation," I start. "If a man has stolen another man's woman, and if that woman is unhappy, that woman shall remain with the man; however, if the woman is said to be happy, she shall be returned to the man from whom she was stolen."

This makes Jane giggle, and she adds: "If a man has put a spell upon a woman, and has not justified himself, the man shall plunge into the holy river, and if the holy river overcomes him, his intentions are bad; but if the holy river bears him out and shows him innocent, his intentions are good and he may proceed with his sorcery."

"If a fire breaks out in a woman's heart and a man extinguishes

the fire, he shall be set fire himself.”

“If a man has married a wife and has not made her feelings and her property part of a whole, she is no wife.”

“If a woman’s reputation is besmirched by another male without just cause, he shall throw himself into the holy river for the sake of the purity of Utopia.”

Jane props herself up on her elbow and adds: “A woman’s feelings cannot be hurt, taken for granted, abused, or ridiculed.”

I frown at this and tell her that the rule about besmirched reputations covers this, and she just stares at me and then rolls away, and I guess we’ve pretty much covered the basic tenets, but I review them silently for oversights.

## Karine

Here’s what happened: I met Karine at La Onda, the bar where I worked in Boca Raton. She hung around the bar most of the night, talking to me while I worked. At first I thought she was merely friendly, or lonely; either way, as the night got on, I could tell that she was hanging around for me.

And I felt sorry for her. There’s so much misery on the day-to-day level, she certainly didn’t deserve to be frustrated in a place like La Onda, a place vibrating with sexual excitement. I felt like she deserved to be happy.

“My shift’s about over,” I said to her. “You want to get out of here?”

“What do you have in mind?” she asked.

I took her empty glass and wiped the bar in front of her. “Nothing in particular,” I answered, and I didn’t. I told her she could come upstairs and wait while I changed, and she said sure, she could do that.

After showering, I came out into my front room and there she was, sitting on my couch, looking around. “I hate to wait,” was all she said, but it was the way she said it that let me know she didn’t

actually want to go anywhere, that what she really wanted was for me to give her one good time in the vacuum of the dreariness of her life.

The surge of power came over me, and I sat next to her on the couch. She seemed even more pathetic when I got up close to her, but instead of feeling sorry for her, I reached out and stroked her arm. She flinched but didn't make a move to resist, so I leaned over and kissed her hard on the lips. I could taste the alcohol on her breath, but it didn't gag me, and she put her hand on the back of my neck and forced her tongue all the way into my mouth.

We sat like that for a while, until I moved to untuck her shirt. She helped me by wriggling a little, and I lifted it off over her head. Soon we were both naked and on the floor. I crawled on top and started kissing her madly, really getting into it, until she pushed me away. "Do you want to stop?" I asked, and she just looked at me. "We'll stop if you want to," I told her, but she didn't say a word, and I put my hand back down between her legs and she started moaning again.

Just when we started to get back to where we were, I could feel her hesitate once more, and as much as I wanted to give her what she needed, I couldn't spend a lifetime doing it, so I moved inside her. Her whole body tensed up and I was gentle. She tried to fight it, but by then it was apparent to me what she needed and I felt she wanted me to take control, to convince her of what she wanted. When we were through, she was in a hurry to leave, and I didn't get a chance to hold and cuddle her. I thought maybe she didn't like that part of it.

## **I Die Alone**

The end of Utopia comes in a poorly lit room, a wooden chair at the foot of the hospital-style bed. Outside the window the city carries on, ceaselessly, one day the same as the next. Jane is long gone, along with all the other women who have come, gone, gotten



married, had semihappy lives, and lived in relative harmony. There is no one left.

I am sitting up in the chair, smoking a cigarette for the first time in my life, desperate for pleasure. I look down at my worn body, my skin a chemise that has been left out in the sun. I want to get up and look out the window and see the life on the street below, but I don't have the strength. I look over at the telephone on the nightstand next to the bed and my mind is blank.

I wonder what I had for dinner the night before.

As I start to reminisce about the old days, a light tickle comes across the bridge of my nose, but my eyes are too old and dry to tear. I draw on the cigarette and gag, and it occurs to me that if I die, it could be days before anyone notices. Who would find me? Probably the landlady, after the third of the month.

But even with this portrait in my head, even though I see it at least once a day, I am helplessly propelling toward it at a speed unstoppable by me alone.

## Wednesday

Wednesday I come home and Jane is on my couch, naked, watching TV. I notice her immediately, but she does not look up at me. I sense she is being coy, but then I notice she has been crying. I sit down next to her and she pulls her feet up, so that her heels are in her crotch.

"What's the matter?" I ask.

"Nothing." She looks over my shoulder at the TV.

"Tell me what's wrong." I rub her knees tenderly. "What is it?"

"Nothing." She sniffs quietly, dramatically.

"Something must be wrong."

"I can't decide what to do," she blurts out.

"About what?" I'm massaging her full leg now.

"About anything" She starts to cry again.

"Like what?" Now I'm beginning to be agitated.

"I just can't decide about . . . California or here . . . or you or . . ."  
Her voice trails off.

"What do you think you should do?" I ask, genuinely trying to help but feeling a bit vulnerable by my own question.

"It's just that I know"—sniff—"that I'll"—sniff—"meet someone like you in California and—"

"What does that mean?" I pull away from her.

"That my life"—sniff—"will be the same . . . wherever I go."

"That's probably true," I say coldly, hurt by her supposition that she can replace me.

"I'm fucked up." She really starts to sob, and I think it's just a ploy because she knows she has upset me, and I go for it, putting my arms around her.

"It's okay." I try to calm her. "You're not fucked up. You're going to be fine."

"You really think so?" she asks, pressing her wet cheek against my neck.

"Sure." I pat the back of her head, and right then I hate her more than I've hated anyone in a long time. The way she smells makes me crazed and I jump up off the couch.

"What's wrong?" She looks up.

"Nothing."

"No really." She stands up, fully naked in front of me.

"I just wish you'd make up your mind about us." I try not to look at her.

"I know. I'm sorry," she says. "I just don't know what I want."

"Well, you better decide." I make myself cry and this moves her to put her arms around me. I struggle out of her grip and stand there with my head down. When I look up at her, a tear sliding down my face, she is looking away, at the TV, crying too.

## **I Take Jane on a Hot-Air Balloon Ride**

Here's the key to any relationship: surprise. Surprise breaks the

repetition that is the death knell of all contemporary unions. That's why for Jane's birthday I surprised her with a sunrise hot-air balloon ride/champagne brunch.

There is nothing more magnificent than watching the sun rise over the desert (except maybe the sun setting over the desert). Jane loved it. We stood hand in hand and looked out at the eastern horizon, spellbound. Looking down, we watched the shadow over the desert floor slowly pull back, revealing the harsh landscape, wakening the wildlife.

Our pilot poured the champagne and we ate fresh fruit with our fingers, ignoring the handsome pastry display. "Happy birthday." I kissed Jane on her cheek.

"Thank you." She smiled.

We didn't hardly speak the rest of the ride. I could tell she was totally enraptured, and this made me feel good. It's a good feeling to treat people the way they deserve to be treated.

### **Essay #3: Prison**

Sundays: Baked chicken, vegetable greens, peaches.

Mondays: Baked chicken, vegetable greens, peaches.

Tuesdays: Baked chicken, vegetable greens, peaches.

Wednesdays: Baked chicken, vegetable greens, peaches.

Thursdays: Baked chicken, vegetable greens, hey peaches.

Fridays: Fucked chicken, green, hey peaches.

Saturdays: Fucked chicken, green, hey hey peaches.

### **Thursday**

Jane and I have a game that we sometimes play where I leave and come back. I go to the corner store while Jane tucks herself into bed, and when I come back, I pull a ski mask over my face and crawl through the front apartment window. The place is pitch-dark and I feel my way around the living room to the bedroom. The door badly

needs oil, but Jane pretends like she doesn't hear it squeak.

I leave the door open and pounce on the bed, startling her awake. I press my hand over her mouth and her eyes get wide, a terrified expression comes across her face, and I say: "I've seen you . . . I've been watching you." Sometimes Jane works up tears, and the wetness on my fingers really makes me violent.

"I'll bet you've got a pretty pussy," I say, and pull the sheets back. Instinctively she clamps her knees together and folds them up to her chest, but I slip one hand between them, breaking them apart, and then wedge myself in while unzipping my pants. "Show me your pretty pussy," I say. "Here pretty, pretty, pretty."

I pin her arms on her chest and put all my weight on top of her so she can't flail her arms (sometimes she gets loose and starts hitting me) while I kick out of my pants and boxers. "Shush now," I say to quiet her sobbing, and I pretend that if she's quiet, I'll pull my hand back. At this point she begins to whimper, and this is usually when I stick it in her. "Oh, yeeeeees," I moan. "You have a pret-ty pus-sy, pret-ty pus-sy," I sing as I hump on her to the rhythm.

After I come, I pull out and roll off her. She gasps for air when the vacuum of my hand is gone, and we both grab for each other's hand. We lie still for a moment, not saying anything, and then Jane mounts me until she comes too.

#### **Essay #4: Free Topic—Impropriety**

It has only recently occurred to me that I open more doors than are opened for me. I am keeping count. Previously, I would hold doors instinctively, a natural reflex. And I believed that this was a form of common courtesy, that it was all about fellowship and kindness. But of course it has to be about much more; and I'm sensing a tension between men and women.

I learned this as I listened to a woman, a peer, someone I don't really know, but someone I have probably held the door for, vehemently arguing that holding doors is an "undue exertion of

influence by men over women.” And there were others who chimed in, talking in cool, clinical terms about things like equality and empowerment, agreeing. I could not fathom the implications of this conversation. Was common courtesy really an exertion of influence, a favor to be repaid, a debt? Does this then mean that a smile or a look can suggest possibilities, make promises, imply?

There is a clear inequality between the sexes. *I am not a caveman.* I have been privy to the secret conversations of men, the in-between comments, the raised eyebrows that telepathically communicate low whistles. There is nothing in these conversations and behaviors that makes me think these things will ever change.

But I understand why things need to change. I am on the side of progress. To prove this to myself, I laughed out loud at a pair of city workers who slowed down as they drove past a young woman on the street, yelling “Hey, baby” to her, and bravely sped up before she could respond. I laughed out loud at this, laughed at their pathetic existence. And as they passed me, the one in the passenger seat nodded to me as if we had an understanding. He thought I was smiling, approving of his behavior.

But I’m not sure I wasn’t. I mean, I saw her first, before the truck came rolling down the street, before the catcall. I looked up and there she was in front of me. I did not say, “Hey, baby,” either out loud or to myself, but I did make note of her appearance. That’s all: I simply registered whether or not I liked how she was dressed.

But I know not to tell a woman that she looks nice, even though I am thinking that she does. I’ve learned my lesson on this one. *I shouldn’t even be thinking it*, I know. Because I know that by evaluating her appearance, I am objectifying her, making her an art piece in a museum of other women; and everyone knows that the objectification of women is the cornerstone of pornography, and all this leads to the fact that I am considering her, rating her, telling her that I am willing to have sex with her. And I know that if a woman tells me that I look nice, that she likes my new haircut, that she likes

the color of my eyes, she is really, subtly, telling me that she would like to sleep with me.

And I'm learning not to look directly at women I don't know, either. I understand that this is an invasion of their right to walk down the street unmolested. By looking at them, by trying to catch their attention with a smile or a look, I am frightening them, making them feel uncomfortable, demanding something in return. Like a smile. Or a hello. I understand this completely.

I mean I really understand this. I understand that living among an enormously anonymous population can bring out the worst in people. It is very easy to hurt someone. People, women, have cause to be afraid. But most people are kind and treat people with the kindness and respect they deserve. There are aberrations, of course, but it seems these anomalies loom large over our lives, casting a shadow of fear and doubt over and among us. But I'm sure that these people are sorry for what they've done and that they never really intended to hurt anyone.

## **Friday**

Cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt. Bitch cunt. It's fuckin' hilarious how women always say "I want you to tell me what you're thinking about," and then they fuckin' up and pull out of your life without so much as a "HAD A GOOD TIME!" or "THANKS FOR THE COCK!" Jesus, why?

## **Essay #5: A Nightmarish Day**

Here is the worst possible scenario in my life:

I fall in love, get married, live in bliss until I have children, get a job with regular hours, watch my children grow up, lose interest in my wife, cheat on her with prostitutes who don't satisfy me, lose interest in life altogether, kill myself.

## Friday Night

I call in sick at Aztecka and then call back ten minutes later and quit. Later I'm dressed up, leaning against the bar, and Geoff is so pissed off at me he pretends not to hear my drink order. I wave down Miles, and he brings me a vodka but doesn't take my money, and this gesture of kindness almost reduces me to tears.

It isn't long before I spot another one, lonely and alone, the table in the corner, but there is a revulsion within me, remnants of my loyalties to Jane, a revulsion I've felt many times before, the final pull of the last one's personality and the arrival of the next. The vodka clears the slate and I saunter through the crowd to her table and I can tell that she wants me to give her one good time in the vacuum of her life, and when I smile, she invites me to sit down, and I do.

# Urbana

YOU ARE IN THE FRONT SEAT OF THE CAR, ON THE WAY BACK FROM the airport, listening to your uncle's joke: "What do you call three Mexicans, an Oriental, and a bunch of blacks on your lawn?" He looks at you and you shrug and he says: "A sprinkler: spic-spic-spic-chink!-nigger-nigger-nigger-nigger." Your uncle laughs and fear takes over your body, the same fear you felt last summer when you made it as far as the airport without having to call home, begging to come home, your parents telling you it won't be so bad, and then your uncle found you at the airport, your real fear of him, you pretended not to be home when he knocked to take you back to the airport two weeks later, the day you were supposed to go with the pool guy, Brent—where was it you agreed to go?—and you think so this is how summer in Phoenix begins.

Your uncle is still laughing, making sprinkler noises, and he tells you his lady friend, the latest, teaches at the community college and she is going to let you in her class without paying, Psychology 101, that it'll look like you paid—if anyone asks, you paid—and though you didn't realize you were going to be in school, your parents probably set it up, you don't say anything and he makes the sprinkler noise again as he pulls into the parking lot of the apartment complex he manages, four stout gray buildings, two on each side, the newly filled pool shimmering between them.

Your uncle helps you and your bags to the unit you'll stay in,



opposite and below last summer's, again away from your uncle's apartment, and again: bed, television, table, phone. He hands you the keys, mail and lock, asks you not to repeat the sprinkler joke to your dad, his brother, the preacher's son, and long after he's gone, you're still holding the keys, badges of your new awareness for safety, the result of those fourteen days last summer, the ritual of twice getting up to see if the door was locked, the windows too, the door again, and everyone in Montana calling you paranoid and laughing and once more on the windows and there was a shotgun under your bed as well as your father's; and your mother's brother, the other uncle, lives down the road anyway but not here, not in the city, hundreds of miles from cool, quiet nights, but you brought the shotgun this time, and you check to make sure it's loaded before you slide it under the bed, lie down to check your reach, move it a little closer to the edge, put the keys in your pocket.

Paula's words, call when you get there, come to you suddenly and you pick up the phone, dial the number, and when you hear her voice, you are transported back to the summer you'd rather be having, a summer filled with late nights and lazy days on the lake, a summer you have heard about but never lived, always recounted for your benefit in the fall.

"Oh, Daniel, I miss you already," Paula says. "Phoenix is so far away."

"I miss you too," you tell her. "God, I hate it here."

"I know, but it's just this summer and then we'll be together forever in Missoula," she reminds you.

"My parents still want me to start college here," you say.

"Daniel, you still haven't told them?"

"After the summer, I promise." You've been waiting for the exact right moment.

"I love you," Paula says and you say it back and she says it again and then you tell her you love her more and she tells you she loves you more and you love her more and she loves you most and you love her mostest and finally you are both so sad you have to say good-bye

and hang up.

Two steps toward the TV and the phone rings, your parents, making sure you're safe, sure that you are, glad about the psychology class, asking about "your city friend Brent," whom they have an unfounded admiration for, whom they have endowed with all the virtuous biblical qualities, whom they seem to know better than you, and you're sorry you made up your friendship with him.

The phone call from your parents leaves you edgy and you turn on the TV, the news, a reminder that you are no longer at home: fourteen-year-old executes eleven-year-old, fatal car wreck just outside a high school, two girls dead in a murder-suicide pact, nine-year-old rapes seven-year-old at recess, body in a trunk at the airport, warm front moving in, basketball team victory, see you at ten.

And at ten: two more murders, another fatal collision, and the accidental release of a stalker, "when you have thousands and thousands moving through the system, something like this is bound to occur." You are riveted by this account and especially when the newscaster warns: "He may be seeking revenge on the woman who testified against him in a domestic dispute." You shake your head and you just can't believe it but there's more, someone killing the homeless downtown, randomly, a kind of serial killer striking at night only, and even though you are miles away from downtown, you check the locks one more time.

The morning bus ride ends across the street from the community college and you join the stream of people in the crosswalk. In the hall, before you can reach your class, it's Brent, coming the other way, and you hope he doesn't recognize you and then you hear: "Hey, hey, hey. Psych 101?"

"Yeah." You nod and offer your hand and he looks at it, looks at you, and shakes it as the bell rings.

"Your uncle is a dick," he says as the door closes behind you and

instinctively you want to disagree, but you can't and you both take seats in the back and it's the first day of class, syllabus, rules, grading scale, attendance policy, hi my name is Daniel, I'm from Montana and I hope to enroll at the University of Montana next year. You look up at Ms. Somerhalter and she nods to you in a knowing way and you wish you hadn't said the part about the University of Montana, sure that it will get back to your parents.

"Big party tonight," Brent tells you in the hall, a Summer School Sucks blowout, lots of chicks, free, over in Glen Park. "I'll call you around eight." Brent would give you a ride home, but he has to go straight to work, the army surplus store down on Central Avenue, and he waves and crosses the street in front of a procession of cars led by some guy riding his bike out in the flow of traffic. The guy could easily move over, you think, several honks try to get him to do so, it's like the guy is deaf, and even though you are on the sidewalk, not involved directly, a bystander, you become irate, this guy's not a team player, and when he passes you, you lean into the street and shout, "Move the fuck over," but it's like the guy is deaf and he keeps on moving, in the middle of the road, rude and inconsiderate.

You walk quickly to your bus stop, slowly beginning to calm, surprised by the sudden rush of rage, your breathing finally back to normal so that on the bus the whole incident is just a translucent image on the edge of your mind until the bus hisses into the next stop. You're rereading the advertisements above, something's going on, everyone is on the bus, what are we waiting for? You stand to give your seat to someone older, out of courtesy, the bus driver tapping his fingers on the steering wheel, everyone looking forward, out the front window, and not to your surprise it's the deaf grand marshal from earlier, trying to lock his bike on the bus's bike rack, a constant clicking, a constant murmur, a couple "shits" and "goddamns." "Someone help him," someone says, talking to the bus driver, who pretends not to hear, a newspaper fans a sweaty face, feet tap, loud headphones in someone's ear, the bus driver honks the horn, someone says "fuck" and there's a loud click, the guy jumps

up the stairs, pays his fare, and everyone stares as he moseys to the back of the bus, grabs the rail across from you, stands on the steps of the rear exit, the bus jerks forward and he looks at you and you look at him and he smiles like he knows you, like you're one of his friends, and at your stop you make a move to exit, a full step in his direction, but he isn't paying attention and you say, "Move the fuck over," and he does and you exit.

You try and call Paula when you get home but her mom tells you she's out and this makes you burn with jealousy and you fume about it while cleaning the pool with the chemicals and brushes left on your patio by your uncle. The clear pool water reminds you of the lake back home, where Paula probably is, all bathing suit and brown skin, along with your other friends, every day a continuation of the day before, camping trips and the fresh smell of morning, Sunday softball league and the late nights at Paula's, good night to her parents, you and Paula in the light of the television, working each other up but stopping short, wanting to save it for when it counts, a thousand kisses under her yellow porch light, you home by one or two, up again early and down to the lake, where Paula probably is now, maybe making a toast to you in your absence as the sun starts to pull away, fading purple, blue, black.

The door next to yours opens and your neighbor, apparently some sort of deliveryman, ROGER in big black letters over the left pocket, about fifty, appears, nods, and you nod back and he turns the corner and you empty the pool filter.

Brent fails to call but instead shows up after eight with his coworker from the army surplus store, Andy, hey what's up dude, and you're off to the party, wind suffocating you, cramped in the back of the open Jeep, stereo up all the way, Brent and Andy shouting a conversation, your leg falling asleep, two hard right turns and you jump out, the blood suddenly, painfully, back in your leg and the front of the house is completely dark but when the door opens, you

feel the party thump you on the chest and people you've never met, complete strangers, high-five you and pat you on the back.

The first thing you really notice is the expensive furniture and how sparsely it litters the house, how it leaves gaping empty spaces intermittently filled and abandoned by groups of people holding plastic cups of liquor. Brent points out the tower of cups on the kitchen counter and slips three off the top, tossing one to you and you follow him outside and Andy follows you and seconds later the three of you are a group, moving from empty space to empty space.

For the first few minutes you're not having a good time, the beer is cheap, then you decide you will have fun, that it's a party and Paula wasn't home so why should you be and casually you break away from Brent and Andy, you silently drift away, swept up in a passing crowd who adopt you as one of their own, and before you can look back, you are discussing psychology with a girl who recognizes you from class, who even after one day of class remembers you, and you think this is pretty remarkable and you say so to the girl and she smiles and says: "You walked in late."

This girl, Natalie, Talie for short, talks about religion—what she plans to major in—telling you the major tenets of the most popular ones and you drink this in, nod, sip your beer, and she keeps going and going until you think you might want to convert, and you make this joke to her and she gives a little laugh but wants you to ask her something more, wants to know what your religion is, and you tell her Presbyterian and somehow this is odd to her. She's Mormon, isn't really though, only her parents practice it, oh and her little brother, too young to think for himself, and you nod, sip your beer, agree that that is a tragedy, and you ask her what she is exactly and she says, "I'm a deist," which she tells you is a general belief in God, and you think that's a pretty safe bet but don't say so.

Brent and Andy are suddenly on you, introducing themselves to Talie, and they want to know what you're talking about and she rewinds, starts in with them, and this disappoints you a little, but it's an honest answer to what isn't really an honest question and

you fade out, refill your cup outside, feeling a little light now, and somehow you are talking with Brent and you ask where's Andy and he says: "Talking to that fucking whacked-out chick," and adds, "She's in our class." You say oh really and survey the backyard, the sky.

Four consecutive trips outside and you are finally able to loosen up, finally able to quit wondering about Paula, and you're talking with someone (Jerry? Gary?) who is cross-legged on the lawn, strumming a guitar, when Brent finds you again and says, "You gotta see this," and everyone else hears this too and the backyard empties and you can't believe it when you look in the bedroom, a circle around the bed, some standing, most kneeling, reaching over and touching Talie, who is lying naked on the bed, and someone behind you hoots and when you whip around, he looks at you, pushes you aside, spilling your beer, and Brent looks over and smiles, raising his eyebrows. The women clear out, are disgusted, don't try to help, and Talie is so drunk she is drooling on the bedspread and someone says be careful and you think: people can really disappoint you.

The next day, dehydrated and sweaty, you look around but Talie is not in class and neither is Brent and though you don't care, couldn't care less, something rubs you raw inside. It's Thursday before Talie finally shows up, Brent too, and everything is normal. Talie acts like nothing has happened, and you think maybe nothing really has but the image of her naked, touched, laughing, makes you uncomfortable and the days roll by slowly, dragging, pulling you along, you are more than homesick, you are repulsed by where you are, how you got there, and why, and now the mornings are despair and the afternoons are depression and you take on physical symptoms—chills, headaches, fevers, nervous shakes—and everyone in your class adds to the severity of your condition with their idiotic theories on human behavior, creating an increasing sense of burden that even desperate midnight phone calls to Paula can't ease.

Adding to your uneasiness, more homeless are being murdered, at least one every two days, so many that it has become a regular feature on the evening news, plus a seeming increase in rapes and robberies, a shooting in a parking lot last night, person or persons being sought for questioning in connection with a hit-and-run, victim's identity being withheld, the family being contacted, and you don't go out after dark at all, not even with Brent; and if the doorbell rings, you don't answer it, you pretend you aren't home, and after a month of going straight to class and coming straight home, finally unable to sit through discussions with people who seem completely alien to you, who seem so annoying and frivolous that you begin to wonder why they are, what is their merit, and you stare at them while they spew their personal experience in excruciatingly inane detail about things you never wanted to know, making things up, you think, at times even lying—after a month you withdraw from Psychology 101, quietly, not saying anything to Brent or Talie or Ms. Somerhalter. The suddenness of being released from this hell, the realization that you are now free from all inconveniences, cheers you some and you decide to walk rather than risk the irritation of the bus, you want to extend this good feeling, but as you walk in the direction of your apartment complex, everything moves in fast forward, people can't see you, cars move at deadly speeds, smears of color and blasts of sound come at you, missing but coming close, and you turn and run back to campus and anxiously wait for the next bus.

A full week passes before Brent calls, what happened to you dude; and your uncle doesn't come by even though you're pretty sure he knows and you call your parents to test the water but they ask how class is going and you play it up and they go for it and only ask that you cut down the number of calls to Paula, your uncle is sending them the bill for long distance. You make this promise but when you hang up, the urge to call Paula is so great you dial her up immediately.

"I'm picking you up," she says, telling you that her family vacation has been changed from Florida to California and that she

asked her parents and they said they would stop on the way back and pick you up. You tell her this is great, you can't wait to see her, but the feeling of disaster quivers inside you, the thought of having her here, in this environment, and when you hang up, you are full of dread.

You didn't hear a thing, nothing, and this is what interests you most as your neighbor, ROGER, is carried out by the paramedics, your uncle in the doorway, answering questions for the police, looking over at you, he makes a gun with his fingers, points it to his head and shoots, and all you can do is nod. An officer carries out a shotgun, like the one under your bed, looks at you as he passes, and you avert your gaze, wonder if you should try to peek inside, curious about where and in what position, not wondering why, really, it seems obvious enough, and the officer who has been talking to your uncle asks you for a statement and you say you didn't hear a thing, nothing.

The days following ROGER's suicide bring a calming effect, a safety valve for the cloud of violence accumulating directly around you, you're feeling like you've dodged the bullet; but the image of roger in the moment before he pulled the trigger is haunting and during the day you take bus trips downtown, walk around, window-shop, browse the bookstores, read magazines at the stand, take in matinees, killing time, sometimes riding to the university to just sit and watch everyone walk by, fantasize about you and Paula at U of M, a fantasy that seems more and more fantastic as it develops in your mind and soon this becomes your routine, you on your bench by the fountain, searching for the lost image of you and Paula together forever, and by late July even this is mind-numbingly boring.

Brent knocks on your door, wants to shake you out and see if you're alive, and you pretend like you aren't home, but he's not going



for it and you have to let him in. "Been partying with that chick Talie," he says and nods in a satisfied way. You cringe at the mention of her name.

At first you refuse to go with Brent, but the more you protest, make excuses, the more Brent insists and you finally give in when you realize, when he basically tells you, that he doesn't have any other friends, well except for Andy, but he'll be there too and sometimes he isn't that great and besides it's been a while since we've hung out and you say okay okay.

The night begins at the army surplus store, picking Andy up from work, you think this isn't so bad, try to enjoy yourself, relax a little, tell the sprinkler joke, and then Brent tells one and Andy does too and Brent pulls into an apartment complex and when you ask who lives here, he says nobody and looks at Andy and smiles and Andy smiles back and you figure out it's probably where Talie lives; there's some sort of party and your mood rapidly dissolves.

You jump out, landing in a defensive stance, angry, making a move toward Brent, Andy moves past you, to the rear, pulls out two black duffel bags, and you say to Brent what the fuck is going on and he tries to sidestep you with a smile, a smirk and a nod, but you block him, asking again what the fuck is going on, and he tells you to chill out, relax, this is a piece of cake but we need your help, and when he lays it all out, how he and Andy put flyers on the doorknobs a week ago, that whichever doors still have flyers on them are unoccupied, the tenants gone on vacation, or wherever, their apartment prime for the picking, you tell Brent no way, you tell him he is a fucking lowlife scumbag and that no way are you part of this shit. He tries to calm you down, it's guaranteed he says, yeah Andy agrees, but you make it clear you will not participate and when you spin around to leave, Brent grabs your shoulder, almost knocking you down and instinctively, automatically, without even thinking, you punch him square in the face, a stunned look coming over him, and to your amazement there is no great smacking sound, Brent doesn't spin around and hit the floor but merely backs up,

touches his nose, his face, and the first time you've hit somebody fills you with so much power that you lunge at Brent and beat him until he is rolling on the ground, hiding his face up against the tires of his Jeep, Andy trying to pull you away, and you shrug him off, running away, frenzied.

You are somewhere downtown when your pulse slows to normal, somewhere you haven't been before and a little frightened by the darkened streets. Your first thought is to call your uncle, but the reality of this idea overshadows its possibility, even in the wake of the realization that where you are lost is the south side. You focus on a balloon of white light ahead, a blinking neon sign, ALL-NITE, and when you step into its glow, your fear subsides.

All the waitresses, over forty and tired-looking, passively smoke at a booth up front. You tell them you just need to use the restroom and they all look up at you and someone nods the way and you push the door open with your whole body. The mirror reflects your sweaty face, your flushed skin, and you wet your fingers and slide them through your hair. You see your bloodied knuckles, the dried rivulets on the backs of your hands, and as you wash them off, you remember Brent on the ground, wailing, not so tough, hands to his face, and laugh out loud.

Back at the counter you are told what street this is, discuss the possibility of a bus, the scarcity of cabs, the reality of having to jog home, some five miles, and set out to find the quickest, most brightly lit way, but when you are a block from the restaurant, the darkness is so black you immediately turn around and make for the safety of the white light.

You ask a waitress to call you a cab, give it a try, tip her a dollar, but she can't get anyone to come, no one in their right mind would pick someone up at this time of night in this neighborhood, she says. Call the police you tell her, tipping her five bucks, tell them you have someone who is lost, and she makes the call, tells you to wait out front, but you ask if you can sit at a booth and she says you have to order something and you do, a mug of hot chocolate.

You play with the salt and pepper shakers, sliding them into each other, wondering if the police are really coming, when you see someone homeless stagger by. You remember the news, how they are prey, look to see if he is being followed, move to go after him, calling hey hey wait up.

The guy seems apprehensive so you put up your hands to show you are harmless. "You shouldn't be wandering around," you tell him, "there's someone trying to kill you." This alarms him and he looks around wildly, searching for his attacker.

"No, someone is killing . . .," you don't know if you should say bums nor not, ". . . people like you."

He sighs, seems to grunt, and asks, "Can you spare any change?"

"Don't you get it? You could be killed," you say.

"Why don't you just give me some money," he says and this angers you, the man clearly doesn't care about his own safety, he should be in a shelter or with a friend or . . . wherever it is he goes.

"Go! Get!" you scream, waving your arms, a look of fear in his eyes, and he disappears into the dark as a patrol car glides up.

"What's going on here?" the policeman wants to know.

"Nothing." You shrug your shoulders.

"You call for the police?" he asks and you nod and after asking about your bloody knuckles, he asks your address and drives you home.

July becomes August and Paula's calls are daily countdowns to her arrival. Your parents call too, anxious to have you home again, the sum total of these calls is that you are missed and yet your anxiety grows. Your uncle comes around, knows about the psychology class, and you shout through the door, ask him to come back later. Your final days are a routine, a rhythm of showers, meals, television, sleep. You don't leave your apartment, the trash piling up by the door, your laundry too, the air stale from your breath, the television schedule so familiar to you that you don't bother to turn

the TV on, lie in bed, watch the patterns of sunlight on your wall.

The realization that you will be going home soon, that you aren't going to be here forever, confuses you, makes you unsure, and you hunt for the scrap of paper with the number of the hotel where Paula is staying. You dial, room 486 please, hold, wait for reassurance, for something to hold on to until Paula can get here and take you back to where you belong, but you're too late, I'm sorry they've checked out, you slam the phone down and punch some buttons on your radio, an old song reminds you of Paula, stare at the radio for a moment, frozen, remember Paula, how fantastically you love her. What will she say when she sees you now? You try to turn the radio up, you want to feel the song go through you, but the volume knob makes static and you let go of it, too late, the song fades in and out, frantically you raise the antenna, the song crawls further inside the radio. You toss the radio against the wall, pick it up, put it in the sink, fuck fuck fuck fuck, douse it with pool chemicals from the patio, strike a match and wait for it to melt, frustrated by its refusal to do so, embed it in newspaper, more chemicals, strike a match. A black smoke rises from the sink, choking you, and you turn on the faucet, the smoldering plastic hisses. You dial Paula's number again, no answer, hang up. You pour yourself a full glass of water and gulp it down, your throat burning, your body shaking. You feel your legs start to give and grab the kitchen counter for support, holding yourself up. There's some buzzing noise somewhere above your head, swat the air, trying to kill it, realize that your smoke detector is going off. You grab your rifle from under the bed, aim, hold it up, breathe, lower the rifle, hold it like a bat, and start swinging, punching three holes in the wall before hitting it even once, which pisses you off more, and you batter the plastic alarm case until it falls to the floor. You pick it up, toss it in the air, and take a swing at it, missing completely. You throw it up again, miss, take a swing at it where it lies on the floor, send it flying down the hall and right into the window, which doesn't break. You are sweating through your clothes and begin

peeling them off. You start the shower, your head dazed, and sit down on the toilet, try to catch your breath.

You dare yourself to go outside, during the day, just out for a stroll, but what's the point you think, it doesn't matter if you do or don't, but you can't. Your apartment has become so familiar to you it's comfortable and the thought of leaving, even for a short time, for a stroll, is unbearable. You know what's out there, past the barrier, on the other side. You know that it's ugly, that it's hateful and repugnant. And you know you fit right in. You wonder what Paula is expecting, whatever it is, it isn't waiting for her here and you hate your uncle, your family, you.

The call comes twenty miles out, you don't sound that close you say, and she asks how do you get to where you are, honey? You give her the directions and she asks if you are packed and you tell her yes and see you soon and hang up and stuff your dirty clothes in your suitcase, drawing the zipper tight. You reach under the bed for your shotgun and set it next to your suitcase, by the door.

Twenty miles takes an hour and a half but feels like ten minutes and dreamlike, you watch out the window as Paula leads her parents through the complex, checking off the numbers of each apartment, counting their way down to yours, and when they knock, you peer through the peephole at them.

"Daniel," Paula calls out.

You hold your breath.

"Daniel." Paula pounds again and you grip the knob, debating. I can't let her see me like this you think. It will be over forever if she sees me now, and Paula's mom says something on the other side of the door and you haven't even considered them; you knew they would be there but you forgot to consider them and their conception of you and what if they see you now?

The stench reaches you and you take your hand off the knob.

"Come in," you yell and Paula tries the knob.

"It's locked, Daniel."

"Try it again," you say.

"Daniel." Paula pounds again and you grip the knob, debating, pulling the door open suddenly, they jump back and Paula smiles as her mother and father turn away from the stench that reaches them instantly.

"Come in," you say and Paula hugs you as her parents cautiously wade to the couch, looking around, surveying your apartment, their faces screwed up, but Paula only sees you and out of her embrace you guide her to the couch, next to her parents, and you step back, put your chin in your hand, and they all three seem confused, what are you doing Paula asks and you stand there, silent. The image of you riding all the way back to Montana with these people, all the way back to a place that seems foreign to you now, a place you cannot even imagine exists, overpowers you and you step back, offended by their grotesque bodies, even Paula, and you look at the mother and she looks worried, always looks worried, and these three people are more depressing and disappointing than a hundred summers away from home. Why did you have to come you say to Paula and she is confused, her father stands up, demands to know what this is all about and you show him, reaching for your shotgun, yelling at him to sit back down. All eyes are wide as you raise the gun. Why did you have to come you repeat to Paula, a fever rushing through your body, you're sweating everywhere, and Paula starts to cry, what's the matter what are you doing Daniel you're scaring me, and you tell her to be quiet and she stands and reaches out to you, wants another hug, wants to touch you. You feel like you can't, you feel unclean, not really worth what you were worth before, lower the shotgun, momentarily wonder who you are, what you are, who you were, and it all comes back when Paula puts her arms around you. You drop the shotgun, clamp your arms around her and squeeze. Her parents relax and her father picks up your suitcase. Her mother gets up and passes you, seems to roll her eyes at you, which makes the violence well up inside, but Paula senses it and hugs you tighter and you think take me home take me home.



# Pleasure Island

THE WAD OF TOILET PAPER WAS A BAD IDEA. IT'S FUNNY HOW A mere few hours earlier it seemed like the right thing, the remedy to the problem. It's not that it's too much or too obvious—it looks like a full-size cock—it's just that it looks . . . unnatural. Worse still is that I didn't notice until now how bad it looks. (The girl behind the ticket counter seemed impressed by me generally when I told her I was in fact the winner of *Stylish* magazine's Pleasure Island Contest; more so when I felt her staring at the clump of toilet paper I'd positioned between my legs in the crawl-space bathroom on the flight from Phoenix to Tampa, forging myself a realistic penis.)

It has always been a great mystery (as well as a source of embarrassment and shame) to me that my penis, when soft, seems to retract to the point of nonexistence. It's okay when it's hard; it does quite nicely, I'm told. The problem is in its lack of self-esteem, its inability to show some self-respect. When we were boys at Saint Paul's, I asked Warner to take a look at it for me. I'd seen some porn movies, ones with guys whose penises were the same length soft as when hard, a sort of superpenis, which made me feel very inadequate. But I saw one where the girl said to the guy it isn't the length, but the width. She called it a "fatty," and that's what I call it too.

So Warner took a look at it for me, and after a quick inspection he assured me it was normal. Like the ones on the statues in the



history books, he said. Still, I have never been satisfied with that answer. Moreover, I was not very forthcoming with the people from *Stylish* magazine about it. I am worried that I will not be able to pleasure the supermodels and that their disappointment will shadow me the rest of my life.

I try shaking the toilet paper loose, hoping it will slither down my leg so that I can casually reach down and pull it out, but it is caught, or wedged, at a bad angle, and if it weren't for the two other people (are they with the magazine?) on the prop plane, I could just unzip and pull it out. I stare again in disbelief at the absence of a bathroom on this flight and wonder when I'll get the chance to undo what I have done.

The exact destination of Pleasure Island is still unknown to me as I deplane, but the magnificence of the open sky and the distant rushing sound of the waves erase the question from my mind. The people from *Stylish* magazine welcome me, and before I can ask about the supermodels, I am whisked away in an off-road vehicle. The magazine people ask me how my flight was and if I mind posing for a few pictures for readers. I tell them surely not, that they are welcome to photograph yours truly, and I suggest the caption "Luckiest ducky in the world," and they say they'll consider it.

I'm taken to a giant red-and-white tent in a clearing, where I am introduced to the top three supermodels of the world, and although they are not the top three supermodels I was thinking of, nor the top three supermodels in the ad for the contest, they look like three of the top supermodels in the world. Regardless, I am excited to meet them and they seem genuinely thrilled to meet me.

I am asked to strip down to my bathing suit, and we snap some photos of me with the supermodels in various having-a-good-time-don't-you-wish-you-were-me poses. Then it is on to the ancient ruin the magazine people have constructed out of mud and straw. We snap a few more photos; this time I am made up with colored war

paints, and the photographer tells me to look “savage.”

Someone says, “De plane, boss, de plane,” and we all laugh.

I ask the supermodels which of them is which again.

The magazine people want a little bio on me, and I say some things that aren’t true, mainly in an effort to impress my supermodels. Finally most of the people clear out, and except for their personal assistants, I am left alone with my supermodels.

Naturally, I begin to think about what it is we’re all doing here, what we’ve come to experience, and I get nervous and self-conscious. My supermodels are talking easily among themselves, probably discussing the logistics, the where and how. Then the personal assistants get in on it, which embarrasses me a little because I realize they are probably going to get a report, but I tell myself I’ll just have to be especially impressive.

After an uncomfortable period of me standing around listening to my supermodels talk into cellular phones, one of the personal assistants suggests we utilize the mud baths that have been built for our use. I nod that this is a good idea, and the personal assistant shepherds us toward the mud.

The four of us have a mud bath.

I break the ice with a couple of dumb jokes, and my supermodels laugh wildly.

Later, after a luau-style meal prepared by a battery of chefs in the main tent, talk revolves around last year’s winner and what a bore he turned out to be, and this makes me very happy. At some point I excuse myself, and my supermodels all look at me with glazed eyes.

I pretend to go outside for something.

I fondle myself to give my penis a head start.

I reenter the tent, half hard, an obvious bulge below.

I take position in front of my supermodels, who are laid out on chaise lounges, and drop my swimsuit.

There are shrieks and there is indignation and my supermodels react in a way contrary to their obligation, contrary to what was advertised, and they flee from the tent. Their screaming fades with

distance and then there's silence and soon there is the rumble of helicopters.

My arrival at Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix brings the news that Bethany will commit suicide if she doesn't get to the Clinique de Hollywood, so Warner calls Fallon from my house, and the three of us pick up Warner's grandparents' RV and then pick up Fallon and head for Los Angeles.

No one has yet asked me about my visit to Pleasure Island and I am a little peeved about it.

"Bethany is in a lot of pain," Warner tells me at the back table, which jiggles in its metal stand. We are playing gin.

"How bad is it?" I ask.

"The pins in her hip ache all the time." He lowers his voice as he looks up front at Bethany. "She can hardly move some days."

"That's terrible." I wince, showing that I understand the pain.

Warner understands the pain more than anyone, having been in the car with Bethany that night, shuttling her to her appointment, when a pickup came across the median and demolished their car, almost demolishing them. Bethany was lying down in the backseat, preparing for her appointment, not wearing a seat belt. While the airbag and seat belt combo saved Warner from serious injury, Bethany ricocheted off the roof into the windshield and out onto the pavement.

She was in the hospital for seven months.

"How far is this Clinique de Hollywood?" I ask as we leave the Phoenix city limits.

"It's this side of Los Angeles," Warner says. "Gin."

I want to play another hand, but Warner is tired, but not too tired to ask me about my being the winner of *Stylish* magazine's Pleasure Island Contest, and I am happy to inform him that I am the luckiest ducky on the face of the earth.

"You really got to do anything you wanted with them?" he asks.

"Yes indeedy," I assure him.

"Anything?"

"You saw the ad." I offer the proof, taking the ad out of my back pocket.

"A week on a deserted island with the top supermodels in the world at your beck and call," he reads aloud.

"It was everything the ad said it would be," I say.

"So, how'd it go?" Warner asks.

I feel he is referring to the Insignificant One, which isn't very sporting, but I answer with confidence. "It was great." Warner nods, and I wonder if I should ask him about his sister, if she is still a factory for illegitimate children, knowing it is a sore spot with him; but I realize I only want to embarrass him, to make him feel as small as his inquiry makes me feel. I decide that Warner is too much of a good guy and that I am too high class to be so insulting, so I don't bring it up.

The sun burns through the window.

Fallon honks at an econo car to move out of the way.

Bethany goes into the bathroom and closes the door.

Warner wants to know if there is any squeeze cheese left.

I watch the ashtray vibrate on the particleboard tabletop.

Warner begins to emit low rumbling sounds, and I stare out the window at the lush desert floor. I can hear Fallon and Bethany singing to the radio, and I am glad Bethany is not crying. As I begin to feel sorry for her, we hit a rough patch of road and one of Bethany's suitcases falls from the pile just inside the door. I make a move to stand it upright again and pull on the corner of an envelope sticking out of the side pocket. I open it, finding the Buckley Cosmetics ads, which feature Bethany and other models, the last job before the accident, ads no one has ever seen, since the company filed bankruptcy before anyone could, ads Bethany must have brought to show the doctors at the Clinique de Hollywood.

I admire the old Bethany, how perfectly beautiful she was sans the mountain range of scars and the dropping left eye. The picture of Bethany's perfection reminds me of how I am not perfect, and again I wonder why I am cursed.

Bethany comes back and sits next to me, taking the pictures from my hand. As she stares at the top image, I stare at her arm, tracing the swirls of purple scars in a line that disappears under her wrist. "This one is my favorite," she says, handing me the ad with her and Alisha Davis, the one where they are at the beach.

"It's beautiful," I say.

"Do you really think so?" she asks.

"I do," I reassure her. "You look very sexy."

"The photographer told me to look that way," she explains. "He said the sexier I could look, the more people would buy the lipstick."

"I bet it would've sold truckloads," I tell her.

"Do you think I'll ever look this good again?" she asks point-blank.

"I think you still look great," I lie. At this, she starts to cry and I put my arm around her. "We'll be there soon," I say softly.

Warner coughs himself awake.

Fallon changes the radio station.

Bethany sniffs and puts the pictures back in the envelope.

I reach down and roll the head of my penis between my thumb and forefinger, feeling the diminutive hangnail of flesh.

"Wow, where'd it go?" Bethany asks as she roots around in my crotch (at my invitation).

"See, that's just it," I tell her. "I don't know why it does that."

"I could see where that could be . . . um . . . a surprise," she says carefully. "Have you thought about implants?"

"What are they made of?" I inquire.

"I'm not sure," she answers. "But I'll bet the doctors at Clinique de Hollywood know. I'll bet they can help." Her eyes light up and she gives me the sales pitch she must've gotten from her model friend, describing the Clinique de Hollywood and its many wonders. What

they can do to the human body reminds me of the Wonkan Golden Goose.

"I don't know."

"Promise you'll think about it." She makes me swear and I do.

Warner continues to pretend not to overhear our talk, and at the first silence he pretends to notice us for the first time.

"Man, I was beat," is what he says.

"I haven't slept in days." Bethany lights a cigarette, an act she no longer carries off with grace, instead looking like a freak-show employee on break.

"Wow, I recognize that McDonald's," Warner says.

"Don't they all look alike?" Bethany wants to know.

"If the next thing we pass is a sign that says 'Five Miles to the Amazing Thing,' I'm having déjà vu," Warner says.

We pass the sign right as he closes his eyes.

"You've been this way before," Bethany accuses.

Warner opens his eyes. "Never driven this way," he says. "We always come up through San Diego so we can visit my aunt."

"Is it déjà vu or a past-life experience?" I ask. "I mean, if it's déjà vu, that means we were all here, right?"

"You have an aunt in San Diego?" Bethany asks, stuck on this point.

"Yeah, she lives alone. . . ." Warner's voice trails off as he finds something out the window. "Hey, Fallon," he calls out.

"Yeah?" The voice shoots back from the front.

"Pull down the dirt road you're coming up on," Warner says, moving out from behind the particleboard table. Bethany and I watch him walk on sea legs to the front cab.

Bethany smokes quietly and I don't say anything either as the RV swings wide, the sudden loss of pavement under us creating a monotonous rumble. Neither of us expects anything is happening until the RV just stops.

"I think this is where my uncle lives," Warner says generally, passively, adding: "I think."

A line of cars, all sizes and colors, runs along the dirt driveway to the front of the house, which appears smallish and white up ahead, dwarfed by the vastness of empty space on all sides.

"Are you sure?" Fallon asks.

Warner concentrates on the smallish white house, trying to find something to help him recall.

"Wasn't there a mailbox on the way in?" I ask.

Nobody answers.

A hot wind picks up and dies down.

"I have an early-morning appointment at Clinique de Hollywood," Bethany says absently.

"I'm sure this is it," Warner concludes, and automatically starts for the front door. Fallon, Bethany, and I walk behind him, single file.

On our final approach to the front door, it's me who stops everyone, pressing my finger to my lips.

"Oh, honey ... you're gonna be the winner," a man's voice pants out in broken syllables.

There is a collective groan, a chorus of two voices, a man and a woman, whom Warner spots in the front seat of a car parked haphazardly to the left. We all look just as the woman disappears from sight. The man could easily look up and see the four of us standing and staring, but he continues to stare into his lap, and out of embarrassment we are moved to shuffle the final distance to the front door.

Warner begins to have second thoughts.

Fallon asks, "Are you sure?"

Bethany mentions she forgot her cigarettes.

I look back at the man in the car with the woman's head in his lap.

Neither the owner of the house, one Jack Hamper, a rancher of some sort (his hands were soft when we shook), nor his wife, Violeta, an exotic-looking woman who would have been considered elderly if

not for the shine of the skin around her eyes and mouth, recognizes Fallon as their long-lost nephew. A balloon of awkwardness hangs and floats between us, Warner and Bethany and myself watching Fallon's embarrassment with sympathy and pleasure.

"Why don't you kids stay a bit?" Jack invites us in. "Things are going to get started up soon."

I feel Bethany poke me hard in the back, indicating that she does not want to stay, but she is too late, and I still feel the pang on my skin as we are introduced around.

Someone introduced to me as Angie Boulevard reminds me of a supermodel whose name escapes me.

"Hi," I seem to be saying over and over.

A great commotion can be heard in the backyard, and we emerge from the house through sliding glass doors, people looking up to see who has come to join them in whatever event is going to take place on the huge, oval-shaped stage that is at the center of all the folding tables set out, draped in white linen.

I find myself suddenly stranded with a Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Todd, pharmaceutical employees from a neighboring municipality, and I look around for the others, worried that they have left me in some elaborate joke.

The whiteness of the tablecloths and the stage seems to be drawing the heat from the sun, rather than reflecting it. I excuse myself under the pretense of getting something to drink.

I haven't noticed until now how many beautiful women seem to be in the mix, some standing off by themselves, but most in the company of other ranchers with soft hands, flirting in a cold and detached way. I wonder if this is some sort of stag event with hired girls.

"There you are," I say to Bethany, who is talking seriously with Violeta. They both look at me like I am intruding and then turn back to their conversation. "Have you seen Warner or Fallon?"

Bethany pretends not to hear me, but I just stand there until she points down a hallway without looking over at me. I follow her



direction and find the two of them with Jack Hamper, in his study, listening to him list names and dates as he points at a wall of framed photographs. I join the group.

"Erin Lynn, 1978. Kristine Montgomery, 1979. Merris Paige, 1980." Jack Hamper seems impressed with each name and date, pausing to revel in a private memory before going on to the next.

"She looks familiar," Warner says, pointing to a particular photograph.

"That's Violeta, 1969," our host says proudly.

"Yeah, it is," Warner says as he leans his face up to the photo.

When the four of us shoot out of the hallway, Bethany and Violeta are still talking seriously, and the immediate need to get to the Clinique de Hollywood seems lost. Violeta reaches out and touches the veiny scar on Bethany's neck. Bethany closes her eyes and something is said between them and Violeta leads her off.

Jack Hamper notices none of this.

"We'll be getting started in about thirty minutes," he tells us.

"What's starting?" Warner asks.

"The beauty pageant," he says, and waves at someone behind us, who shouts out his name. "Excuse me."

"Beauty pageant?" Fallon looks at Warner and me.

"What did you think those women on the walls were? His relatives?" Warner asks.

We find Bethany and Violeta in the bathroom, Bethany seated at a large table of cosmetics lit by a column of yellow bulbs on either side of the mirror.

"I'm going to be in the pageant," Bethany says excitedly.

This doesn't seem like a good idea to me. "We should really get going," I tell her.

"I called and canceled my appointment," she informs us.

We don't know what to say. We stand and watch Violeta apply powder to Bethany's scarred skin, moving in almost on top of her as she works on the face. The talcum smell from the powder is sweet, and I inhale long and steady, trying to capture some of the powder dust.

Soon there is an interruption and we are joined by Mrs. Thomas Chilton and Mrs. Robert Gray, apparently friends of Violeta's. They talk without acknowledging Fallon or Warner or me.

"Oh, good, good," Mrs. Chilton says.

"You're doing a marvelous job, dear," Mrs. Gray tells Violeta. "I think we have a shot at her."

At this comment I look over at Warner, who just shrugs.

"A shot at what?" Bethany asks, clearly pleased with the amount of attention she is being paid.

"Clarice Jones-Delaney," Mrs. Gray says indignantly. "She's won three years in a row."

Mrs. Chilton asks, "What happened to the Merricks' daughter, Paulette? I thought she was our ace in the hole this year."

"Didn't you hear?" Mrs. Gray asks, a horrified look on her face.

Mrs. Chilton hasn't heard, and we all listen to the story of young Paulette and her desire to beat Clarice Jones-Delaney, a desire that caused her to circumvent the rules of her local tanning salons, which would allow her to tan only half an hour per day. Taking her future as the dethroner of Delaney into her own hands, she rotated from one tanning salon to another, tanning for half an hour at each every day. Two days before the pageant she told her mother to let her date in when he arrived, that she was going for a shower. The date arrived and the water continued to run and the mother finally pounded on the bathroom door, to no answer. The father kicked the door in, and together they saw Paulette's nude brown body facedown in a tub full of water. The paramedics drained the tub, and a horrific stench launched up from the body. "Fried her insides," is what the coroner told them later.

"Oh, that's terrible," Mrs. Chilton says, covering her mouth.

Fallon looks over at me and smirks.

Warner looks over too, wanting to know if that story could possibly be true.

I look at Bethany, who is unfazed by this tale, and who is checking her profile in the mirror.

Warner and Fallon go out to the RV for Bethany's cigarettes, and I stand in the kitchen, looking out the small window above the metal sink, making myself angry over the fact that we are no longer going to Clinique de Hollywood, angry about the chances for a solution to my problem disappearing just like that. I can sense the pageant is about to start; the men are wandering nervously around the backyard, circling and eyeing the best table, the best seat, while pretending to shake one another's hands and slap one another on the back. Simultaneously I notice the women drifting toward the back, over to the side of the house. I can see by the way they whisper to one another and nod with their eyes that they truly hate this yearly ordeal.

I'm thinking about whether or not to get a table before things get started when Angie Boulevard approaches me.

"Hi," I say back.

"You weren't here last time, were you?" she asks. Her long brown hair is blond at the ends, curled naturally around her head. Her eyes are large like horse chestnuts, smooth and glassy when she blinks. Her good looks at her age have no doubt caused other women to call her cheap behind her back.

"No." I shake my head.

"I didn't think so," she says. Is this a flirtation? Does she pick out new men and try to seduce him? She looks like that one supermodel, what *is* her name?

"Are you in the pageant?" I ask.

"Huh-uh," she says, looking out at the empty stage with the same look as the other women. "I mean, I was . . . until five minutes ago."

I don't know what she means.

"I was supposed to be the challenger this year," she says bitterly. "I mean, I was the alternate after Paulette."

"Oh," I say, hoping she hasn't figured out that I am Bethany's friend.

"There's some other bitch now," she says, a severe look coming

over her.

"I'm sure your husband is just as glad you're not in it," I offer.

"I'm not married," she says accusingly. She starts to shake, she's so upset, and I think, *Come on, you're beautiful, like that one supermodel, what's her name, you don't need this.* But I don't say anything, and she walks outside and takes her place among the congregation on the side of the house.

Fallon, Warner, and I end up standing on the patio.

Uncle Jack makes some introductory remarks about seeing everyone again, making a tribute to those who couldn't make it, and those who fell over the course of the year. Then there is a curious remark about last year's vintage, and it doesn't take long to figure out that the previous year's winner, in this case Clarice Jones-Delaney, stomps the grapes for a wine that is drunk at the beginning of the next year's pageant.

"Refill," Fallon says to Mrs. Thomas Chilton, having slammed the first shot and holding the empty Styrofoam cup out. She shakes her head and pours him more.

I say I'll pass and she seems to appreciate this.

The five-gallon glass jugs of the purplish-red fluid are endless, and finally the remainder of the stash is brought out and every table has its own. Uncle Jack makes a grand sweeping gesture and there is a barrage of clapping and then a stereo comes on loud behind us, the speakers pulsing a steady beat.

The sliding glass doors part next to us, and Clarice Jones-Delaney steps out, left foot first, in a white bikini. I recognize her immediately as the woman from the front seat of the car. She wriggles and dances up to the steps at the foot of the stage and then does a little maneuver where her top half becomes frenzied while her lower half doesn't hardly move at all. This sends the crowd into applause.

Someone starts clapping to the music, and soon we are all clapping, and I surprise myself by really getting into it. I dance in place, mimicking the moves Clarice Jones-Delaney makes up

onstage, gyrating when she gyrates, spinning around when she does, shaking my hips side to side to the rhythm.

The men are in a trance, enthralled by what shines before them, and it seems they have all overlooked Clarice Jones-Delaney's flaws, her imperfections. I noticed the inconsistency of her skin when she first appeared, how it bunches up at her neck and around her upper thighs, but then how it is pulled tight around her midsection and around her arms, making them look muscular. It feels liberating to be in such a judgment-free atmosphere.

I think Bethany must be watching all of this from behind us, maybe peeking out the small window above the sink. I think she feels the same liberation I feel, the feeling of being relieved of the heavy stones that you drag around every day, the feeling that people won't quit staring at you and pointing.

"She looks great," Fallon says as Bethany dances in. Clarice Jones-Delaney exits off to the side.

"Wow," Warner says, agreeing.

I am stunned too at the transformation. Bethany's skin is smooth and white, the purple swirls of her scars hidden, so that you could never believe they ever even existed. She dances confidently, moving in an exaggerated sexual way, playing to every face that's upturned. The crowd achieves a loud pitch and maintains it as Bethany grooves along the edge of the stage. The men raise their glasses to her and to one another, and I look over and see the dejection on Clarice Jones-Delaney's face. I also notice the looks of satisfaction radiating from Mrs. Thomas Chilton, Mrs. Robert Gray, and Violeta.

Fallon, Warner, and I beam when Bethany looks at us. I become a cheese machine and give her a thumbs-up.

A fully satisfying moment is realized but suddenly crosses over into an ugly grayness when the men turn to passing the jugs of wine around, spilling more than they drink, chanting for more, more, more. Bethany hits overdrive and seems to go mad, eating up the attention so much that she starts to play to the cry that starts at the outer limits of the circle of tables and works its way to a full chant:

“Take it off, take it off.”

Bethany teases the crowd by touching herself provocatively, and even I am aroused, but I see Bethany’s worried look, her indecision about how far to go, and the chanting men sense her hesitation too, and fear comes over Bethany’s face as the noise level drops.

She picks at the strings of her top behind her back, and the cries of elation are heard again, and the sight of her blotchy skin, highlighted by the white powder that ends where the bathing suit fabric began, shocks the crowd into silence, and I am forced to look away from the horrific image.



# LoveStory

"HOW'D YOU GET MY NUMBER?"

"You gave it to me."

"I did? When?"

"Right before you left."

"I don't remember."

"Actually, you didn't give it to me."

"Then, how'd you get it?"

"I bribed the bartender to let me see your credit card receipt, and I called information."

"Why didn't you just ask me for it?"

"I was afraid you wouldn't give it to me."

"A reasonable fear, I guess."

"So you're not mad?"

"I guess not. Seems odd you wouldn't just ask."

"I don't handle rejection well."

"I see. So why did you want to call me?"

"I don't know. I mean, I just knew that I wanted to call you."

"Did you have the feeling that once I left the bar, you wouldn't see me again?"

"Yeah, you'd you know?"

"Some guy said that to me once."

"He was trying to hit on you."

"So are you."



"No I'm not."

"Why'd you call, then?"

"To do the opposite of hit on you. If I wanted to hit on you, I would've at the bar."

"But I thought you were afraid to hit on me."

"Not afraid to hit on you, just afraid that you would think I was hitting on you."

"What am I supposed to think now?"

"I don't know. I mean, this is different than hitting on you because, you know, this is genuine interest instead of an alcohol-induced come-on."

"What makes you so genuinely interested in me?"

"Aren't you interesting?"

"Will you hang up if I'm not?"

"Probably not."

"If you can't say what made you call me, then I'm going to hang up."

"I don't know your meaning."

"I want you to admit that you found me physically attractive and that's why you called me up."

"That's not the only reason."

"What other reasons could there be? You don't know anything about me."

"I'm hoping there's more to you than your looks."

"That's not the point."

"What's the point?"

"I'm hanging up now."

"Okay, okay. I admit it."

"Say it."

"I only called you because I thought you were physically attractive—"

"There."

"—but I think there's more to you than looks."

"Do you always have to have things your way?"

"Does that turn you off?"

"Let's not start this conversation with sexual innuendos."

"When would be the proper time?"

"Let's save those for later."

"Okay."

"So you know my name, but I don't know yours."

"My name is your name too."

"John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt?"

"Oh, you're witty, too."

"Everyone always tells me Jesse's a boy's name, but I never thought of it as anything but feminine."

"I've never thought about it. There are a lot of unisex names now: Kyle, Jamie, Chris. I think it's a trick of the children of the sixties. To prove a point or something."

"Interesting theory. Are you a social scientist?"

"No, I'm in marketing at Smith Elam Black."

"Never heard of them. What do you market?"

"Everything. Hospitality services, consumer goods. My job is really to follow trends. What do you do?"

"I just graduated with a degree in criminal psychology. I want to work in forensics."

"Wow, sounds interesting. Do you want to help catch the notorious?"

"Something like that."

"Did you just move here?"

"Yeah, how'd you guess?"

"You have New York license plates."

"How far did you follow me?"

"Just out to the parking lot."

"How do I know you didn't follow me all the way home?"

"I didn't."

"Were you going to say something to me at my car?"

"I don't think so."

"Why did you follow me outside, then? That's dangerous

behavior.”

“I wasn’t stalking you, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“So you didn’t follow me home?”

“No.”

“You don’t know where I live?”

“No. Where do you live?”

“I think you already know.”

“I really don’t, and I’m going to hang up if you keep insinuating that I am . . . shady.”

“All right, I believe you. I’m sorry if I sounded rude, but living alone in a new city has made me very uneasy. Plus, I have a suspicious mind.”

“That’s okay.”

“So, describe yourself a little bit.”

“Which features?”

“You’re in marketing, don’t you have a slogan or a slick catchphrase to describe yourself?”

“A single successful male, mid to late twenties, nonsmoker, intellectual, without pets—”

“Seeking single female to share intimate liaisons—”

“Single is not a requirement.”

“You date married women? You really are shady.”

“I was just kidding. You’re not married, are you?”

“The frame of the question suggests the answer. Is that a marketing device?”

“I believe it’s an ETS device, used not only in standardized testing, but in current advertising schemes.”

“I’m not married.”

“Have you ever been engaged?”

“Of course. It’s *de rigueur* in college.”

“What broke it off?”

“I graduated.”

“How did you break it off? What were your words?”

“I said, ‘I’m moving to Arizona.’”

"That's harsh."

"We talked about it before. It wasn't like I just said, 'Hey, I'm taking off.'"

"Oh."

"Have you been engaged?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"It never occurred to me."

"Oh."

"You have a nice voice. Did I say that?"

"Thank you. You do too."

"So tell me something random from your life."

"Is there a difference between random and trivial?"

"It wouldn't be trivial to me."

"I think it's curious the way people collect information about other people, don't you?"

"It's the only way to assimilate the vast number of people into our lives."

"That's true, isn't it? It's funny when you stop and think about how many people are involved in some way with your life; yet it is possible and common to feel lonely often."

"Are you lonely often?"

"Yes. More so since I moved here."

"I've lived here all my life and I'm lonely a lot."

"That's not very encouraging."

"You were going to tell me something random or trivial from your life."

"Oh, yes. Let's see. . . . Ask me a question. It's too hard to think of something out of the blue."

"What do you do when you're alone?"

"I watch TV, read magazines, and draw with a Spirograph."

"You have a Spirograph?"

"From when I was a kid. I found it when I packed my stuff to move out here."

"I loved that thing when I was a kid. I drew a pretty elaborate centerpiece on my mother's light oak dining table. My father tried to polish it out, but you can still feel the indentations."

"I have an Etch A Sketch, too."

"Unbelievable. What else?"

"I never played with Barbie or Ken."

"When did you first kiss a boy?"

"Tongue?"

"No, light peck."

"Cheek or mouth?"

"Either."

"First grade."

"Oh, you little tart."

"Peter Jenkins. I talked him into staying out after the recess bell. Our teacher saw that we were missing and came for us. We had to stay after school until our parents picked us up."

"Seems a little harsh. Was it worth it?"

"Sure."

"Tell me something else."

"You tell me something."

"Ask me a question."

"What did you want to be when you were a kid?"

"A scientist."

"Really? Why not a baseball player or an outlaw?"

"Actually, I wanted to be a sort of outlaw scientist who played center field for the A's."

"Are you what you thought you would be?"

"A scientist?"

"No, generally speaking."

"I think after a while I quit thinking about what I wanted to be."

"Why is that?"

"I think mostly about what I want to do."

"What's that?"

"I'm not comfortable saying."

"Why not?"

"It'll sound corny."

"No it won't."

"Are you a cynic?"

"By nature, yes."

"Then, it'll sound corny."

"Okay, I'm taking off my cynicism."

"Oh, baby."

"Go ahead, tell me."

"Okay, if you laugh, I don't care. . . . I like to be in love."

"With whom?"

"No one or thing in particular. I'm addicted to the feeling of falling in love and being in love."

"I kind of know what you mean."

"You do?"

"It's mainly discovery of something new and interesting."

"That's why I called you."

"I'm glad you did."

"It's funny, I feel like I know a lot about your core by just talking to you on the phone."

"How would you describe me?"

"Single intelligent female, attractive, ambitious, adventurous . . . and the most important and rare of qualities: a nice person."

"Oh, that sounds so bland."

"Why do people hate being labeled as nice?"

"It's like nice equals boring."

"I don't think it does."

"I don't either. I think I am nice. Thanks."

"I can't detect any sinister qualities about you."

"I told you about my suspicious mind."

"Has that ever got you into trouble?"

"A couple of times. I find myself speculating about people based on their habits. I guess that's not so nice."

"What happened?"

"Well, like once, I was temping back in New York for a publishing house, and I'd been reading these mystery books they gave me for free—a person with a suspicious mind shouldn't read mysteries anyway—and I was temping for this VP who had this odd habit of leaving for lunch in one suit and coming back in a completely different one."

"That's weird."

"That's what I thought. I mean, I assumed, obviously, that either he was going home for a nooner or he was having an affair with a woman who had a closet full of Armani."

"What did you do?"

"Well, first I thought about it. If he was having an affair, wouldn't his wife wonder why he wasn't wearing the same suit he'd left the house in?"

"I suppose."

"Unless he was one of those guys who lived in Connecticut and kept an apartment in Soho."

"That could be. Did you follow him?"

"Of course. I eventually quit temping there, but I came back at lunch to follow him. I brought my little thirty-five millimeter camera and everything. I felt like one of the Bloodhound Gang. Do you remember them?"

"Yeah, oh my God, *3-2-1 Contact*, right?"

"Right. Anyway, I followed him through Manhattan in a cab to a building in Soho."

"Ha! I was right."

"Good guess. But he wasn't having an affair."

"How did you know?"

"He was in and out in ten minutes, dressed in a different suit."

"Was the guy just weird, or what?"

"I guess so."

"Did you take his picture?"

"No."

"You never can tell about someone. . . ."

"That's what I learned."

"Do you do anything weird like that, that I should know about?"

"I'm sure I do."

"Do I have to follow you around to find out?"

"Maybe. What about you?"

"I have some odd behaviors."

"Like what?"

"I can't sleep with the door open."

"Me neither."

"I don't answer the door if I'm not expecting someone."

"Good tip."

"I usually don't answer the phone when it rings."

"You screen your calls?"

"I don't own an answering machine."

"What if it's an emergency?"

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"This is good. What else?"

"I don't want to sound like a weirdo."

"You don't. Sounds logical to me."

"That's about it, really."

"C'mon. Tell me something else. Tell me what's the worst thing you've ever done."

"There are so many."

"C'mon."

"Okay. I'll tell you one and that's it."

"Go ahead."

"When I was a teenager, my buddies and I were riding around, cruising—I don't know where the idea came from, it wasn't mine—and we ended up throwing a cup of piss on a guy riding his bike."

"Oh my God. How'd you get a cup of piss?"

"We made it."

"Where?"

"I don't remember. In a parking lot, I guess."



"Did you all go at once?"

"I wish I hadn't told you about this."

"Why? You were just a kid, right? What did the guy do?"

"At first I think he thought it was water, or a soda. I was in the backseat, and I saw him sniff his shirt and then he threw down his bike and flagged down a car."

"He chased you?"

"Yep. I don't know how he got someone to pull over, but it was just like that and we were zipping through the side streets trying to lose him."

"Sounds like he was pissed."

"That's funny."

"Thanks. What else?"

"It seems like you should tell one first."

"If you want me to. It's kind of related."

"How?"

"In the fifth grade my best friend, Jenn Flemming, was staying the night, and she peed her nightgown and I told her to go home."

"That's not so bad."

"I still feel guilty about it."

"I stayed the night at this guy's house once, and he wouldn't quit farting, so I called my dad and had him pick me up."

"That's gross."

"How did we start talking about this?"

"I can't remember. What should we be talking about?"

"I'm wondering when would be the appropriate time to start making sexual innuendos."

"It's a little late for that."

"How can it be too late? You said to wait."

"I know. But now innuendos would be silly and flirtatious, and I know too much about you for flirting to be successful."

"We're not going to flirt?"

"We don't have to. If you want to say something sexual, go ahead and say it."

"Not necessarily sexual, just intimate."

"That's the idea."

"It's funny, I'm making a distinction between the two when there might not be one."

"There is a distinction."

"Sex isn't intimate?"

"That's just wordplay."

"Okay."

"Make an intimate admission."

"Emission?"

"Enough with the wordplay."

"Sorry. Okay, um . . . wait . . . okay . . ."

"Would it be easier to start with a sexual confession?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Did you think about me and masturbate the night you saw me?"

"Um, yes."

"What was your fantasy?"

"I can't remember."

"It was that memorable, huh?"

"It was a general fantasy where you let me do whatever I wanted."

"I see. Now that you know me a little better, what would that fantasy be?"

"It would be softer. I really like to please women."

"By that you mean you aren't selfish?"

"Right. In fact, I don't even matter. I can take care of me later."

"But you don't have to if you please the woman."

"That's my theory too."

"Interesting. Did you have a fantasy about talking to me on the phone tonight?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I'm not going to say."

"Why not?"

"You'll get angry."

"No, I won't. What was it?"

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"I hoped you'd talk dirty while I masturbated."

"Do you masturbate a lot?"

"About average, I'd say."

"Do you enjoy it?"

"It gets me by. What about you?"

"I masturbate a lot."

"Every day?"

"Almost."

"I like knowing that."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure. I guess it legitimately lets me think sexual things about you."

"Help yourself."

"So what would you have said if I'd asked you to talk dirty to me?"

"I wouldn't have done it. I don't like abnormal stuff like that."

"Oh."

"Were you going to tell me something intimate?"

"It doesn't seem that relevant now."

"Why not?"

"You tell me something."

"I like to spend time alone."

"That's an intimate revelation?"

"Maybe not to you."

"I don't like to be alone."

"Oh."

"Wow, it's getting late."

"Do you need to go?"

"No . . . not necessarily. Do you?"

"No."

"No."

"So . . ."

"Yeah, um . . ."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"It's nice just to *be* talking to you."

"Thanks. I feel the same."

"What if you'd hung up on me?"

"My loss."

"Mine too."

"Oh, wait. Can you hold on a minute?"

"Sure."

"Sorry, that was my brother in New York."

"You have a brother? How old is he?"

"Seventeen."

"Does he miss his big sister?"

"Yeah, he's so cute."

"Is he graduating this year?"

"Next."

"Will he go to college?"

"It's not a family tradition."

"There aren't many family traditions in my family either."

"Do you have brothers and sisters?"

"No. I'm an only child."

"That's too bad."

"Depends, I guess."

"So, what were we talking about?"

"I'm not sure. Did I already tell you about what I do?"

"Marketing, right?"

"Yeah."

"You told me."

"You tell me something. I can't think."

"Did I tell you I had a Spirograph when I was a kid?"

"No. Did you?"

“Yeah, I loved that thing—wait, I told you this, because then you told me about your mother’s table.”

“Oh, yeah. Tell me something else.”

“I got one, a suspicious-mind story: I was temping again, for this lingerie factory—it was great because they let me have some silk lingerie that was very expensive—”

“Are you wearing it now?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. Anyway, I was working there, and I’d see all these lingerie models strolling around in the lingerie, all casual, like they were wearing business suits or something. Anyway, I kind of got the idea that these two women were lesbians, and I started following them into the bathroom when they’d go in.”

“Yeah?”

“Anyway, I started going in when they went in—you wouldn’t believe what women do when they’re by themselves—anyway, after a while I knew they wouldn’t do anything with me on their heels, so I tried to judge about when they would take a break. Women are such creatures of habit.”

“Yeah?”

“Anyway, I’d get into a stall and close the door, and day after day these two would come in, chatting about other women they didn’t like, and day after day nothing happened. And then this one day they both went into the same stall and . . .”

“And?”

“What’s that noise?”

“What noise? What happened next?”

“What are you doing? Why do you sound out of breath?”

“I’m not. What happened next?”

“You son of a bitch. I thought I told you I wouldn’t do that.”

“I’m not doing anything. Really.”

“Yes you are. I have a teenage brother, remember.”

“Look, I’m sorry. I stopped, okay? I couldn’t help it. With a story like that, what did you expect?”

“I can’t believe you. Even after I said I wouldn’t do that.”

"What's wrong with it? You should do it too. You're going to do it when you get off the phone."

"Not now, I'm not."

"Go ahead, do it now. Why wait till I'm gone?"

"That's not the point. God, I can't believe you."

"Look, I said I was sorry. If you're not going to be rational—"

"You'll what?"

"Let's not resort to threats, okay?"

"I don't want you to call me again."

"C'mon. I said I was sorry."

"That's not the point."

"Look, there's no harm. It doesn't mean anything."

"It means everything. I don't want you to call me again."

"Are you serious?"

"I don't want you to call me again."

"Yeah, maybe that's a good idea."



# We're So Famous

ME AND STEPHANIE HAVE ALWAYS WANTED TO BE FAMOUS. IN THE fifth grade we lip-synched a Beatles song for our entire class and we loved the attention. Before we dropped out of high school, we were famous as party chicks, known famously as Masterful Johnson. No one in high school could appreciate the irony. We have famous names, too. I'm Paque and she's Daisy.

You've probably heard of us. The guy who discovered us saw us dancing in a bar and told us he liked our moves. We thought he was just some pervo who wanted to take us back to his place in a big car and make us fuck each other and him, too, but he turned out to be a really sweet, sad kind of a guy who just wanted to make us famous.

We started out doing these gigs for his friends. He knew a couple of guys with a recording studio in their house, and we started partying with those guys. One night we were all sitting around, fried out of our gourds, and one of the guys says, "Why don't you guys record a few songs?" Me and Daisy thought that was a pretty good idea, so we recorded eight songs that we just kind of made up on the spot.

Music was something we never practiced, so we found out that night that neither one of us could play an instrument and our voices caused everyone in the room to bring their hands to their ears in a weird, involuntary reflex. But we got the songs down (my favorite was one Daisy wrote called "I'd Kill You If I Thought I Could Get



Away with It,” and I also wrote one with this dude Jeffrey called “Do Fuck Off,” a sort of mellow love song).

One of the dudes who owned the recording equipment made copies for everyone, and me and Daisy played it for a few friends, who told us frankly they didn’t care for it. We were hurt at first, of course, but we never really wanted to be musicians anyway. Only famous.

We went on crashing local events, sometimes going to other cities to hang out and pose with people who knew the people we hung out with last. We’d practically forgotten about our record until we climbed into this limo paid for by these really cool Japanese girls in L.A. When I heard Daisy’s voice, I looked at her, thinking she had broken out in a little ditty; but her lips weren’t moving. Suddenly the Japanese girls cranked the tune, one called “We Love Goo,” a sort of rock anthem that I didn’t particularly like. We all started bobbing our heads, and me and Daisy didn’t say anything about the fact that it was us.

Well, that was only the beginning of our recording career, but it was pretty close to the end, too. Some people from *R\*O\*C\*K* magazine came to our apartment and took pictures of us on our yellow vinyl couch. Before we knew it, we couldn’t go anywhere without seeing that picture, me leaning back on Daisy, our platinum hair all mixing together. They made posters for the bus stops, billboards; I even saw it in a friend’s dorm at school when we went to visit her.

And the magazines. That picture was on every cover in the supermarket, it seemed. There was only one problem. Me and Daisy noticed that the articles in the magazines didn’t mention anything about us being a band. The stories were about us doing all these things we’d never done.

Like we were supposed to have slept with all the guys from Hey!, some gay-ass punk band from New York; and one said we trashed a hotel in Paris and had to pay \$10,000 in damages. The one we liked the best was how we both were in kiddy-porn movies

when we were, like, seven or eight. We cut these out and stuck them under the fruit magnets on our refrigerator.

Now everyone wanted to hang out with us wherever we went. We'd go out to see a movie, and people waiting in line would come up for our autographs. The same thing happened if we were at McDonald's, or at the record store, or if we were just walking back from the grocery store with a sweating gallon of whole milk and a carton of half-and-half (Daisy makes these killer dairy drinks called whiteys).

One day the dude that said he wanted to make us famous invited us over to his condo for dinner to tell us that he was leaving town. Me and Daisy were sad about this, and we asked where was he going. He said he had to go take care of some things and that we were going to be taken care of. That's when he told us about this corporate sponsorship he set up. He said we were never to tell who it was because the company didn't even know they were sponsoring us; he said he set it up through a friend of his who would keep it a secret as long as we would.

We asked him why he was doing all this for us, and he got too drunk and admitted that it started out as a line to try to fuck us, like we first thought, but then he said it was a "great joke," and then he got super drunk and started cackling in our faces in a mean way, and me and Daisy left without saying anything.

At first we started getting these checks in the mail from the corporation, mailed from Dallas. Then these shiny gold plastic credit cards came, engraved with my and Daisy's real names.

Right after we got the credit cards, something really awful happened. Daisy went back to Ohio to visit her parents, who called after they saw our picture in the supermarket, and when Daisy got off the airplane, this girl screamed out her name, and she whipped around and looked just as this rush of teenage girls surrounded her on all sides. She called me that night, sobbing into the phone, telling me she couldn't breathe very well with all those people around her and no matter which way she tried to walk, there they

were, blocking her way. Since then Daisy has not been the same. She gets very quiet when people yell out our name, and she stands close to me when people come up to us in public.

Somehow the story got out that me and Daisy made a movie called *Sprung*. We gave an interview to this movie magazine, and the interviewer was a real dipshit chick who kept calling us Masters and Johnson. I don't know where the idea got into her head that we were actresses.

So agents and then studios started calling about making a sequel to "the wildly popular cult movie." Exactly three weeks after that article appeared, a script for *Sprung II* arrived at our apartment. Me and Daisy had a good time acting out the parts for our friends Anthony and Kurt, a couple of skater guys we met hanging out one night.

Those dicks Anthony and Kurt wanted to act out the love scenes with us, but we told them no way. We noticed that there were a lot of love scenes, or scenes where me and Daisy were naked, and we laughed pretty hard at this. Anthony and Kurt kept trying to talk us into just one scene, and finally me and Daisy told them we had boyfriends so they'd leave.

Sometimes we wish we had boyfriends. It's been difficult for me and Daisy to keep them, though. Most guys get jealous about our fame, always wanting to know where we're going and who we're going with. I dated this guy, Jim, who wouldn't take me to his house because he was afraid his parents would find out he was dating "that disgusting girl." He told me that.

Daisy dated this real sweetheart, Daryll, who used to bring her a present every time he came over. He'd bring her little things he made out of scraps he'd find, and always he'd spell her name on it somewhere. He was heartbroken when he found out Daisy wasn't her real name. He called her a filthy liar and never came back. Daisy cried for a few days, until she cleared all his gifts off her dresser. They're in the bottom drawer now, and sometimes I walk in and Daisy has the drawer open, just staring down at all the little things.

Daisy thought it might be Daryll when the door buzzed. We were surprised when the mailman had us sign for an invitation to the L.A. premiere of *Sprung II*. The studio sent a movie poster for each of us, and these two chicks that looked like me and Daisy were standing there, about eight feet tall, with knives in their hands (my knife had blood dripping from it).

The movie studio flew us in from Phoenix and sent a limo to our hotel. When we got out at the theater, we got mobbed by reporters and people just standing on the street. Daisy ducked back into the limo and just sat in there until everyone went away. Which everyone eventually did.

The movie was pretty dumb, but the girls who played the main chicks were dead ringers for me and Daisy. We noticed that those chicks weren't at the premiere and that's why everyone thought we were them. We didn't meet any of the studio people. On the way out of the theater, this guy rolled up his shirtsleeve and showed me his tattoo of me and Daisy.

For a long time after that, things were pretty quiet. Me and Daisy bought records and listened to them, bought clothes and wore them, bought food and ate it.

Then one day Daisy told me she didn't want to be famous anymore. She said she liked not doing anything, but it was a drag to have everyone staring at you all the time. I told her I agreed, but that there wasn't anything we could really do about it. We were famous and that was that. We couldn't become unfamous.

A doll company sent us a contract along with a check for \$50,000. They wanted to make Paque and Daisy action figures and wanted to get them out for Christmas. I asked Daisy what we should do, and she said we should cash the check and not sign the contract. I tried to read the contract out loud to her, but we had trouble understanding it.

Finally we decided not to do it. Daisy thought it would only add to the problem of people recognizing us on the streets. We didn't cash the check, and it expired.

That Christmas the stores were filled with Paque and Daisy action figures, but they didn't really look like us, so we weren't too worried about it. We even bought a few for our relatives and sent them back home. We tried to buy some other things for Christmas, but the cashier told us our credit cards had been canceled. Me and Daisy wondered what to do, but we knew we couldn't call anyone.

The checks quit coming in the mail too. We didn't really notice until the first of the month, when the rent was due. We waited for the little yellow envelopes to arrive, but all that came was junk mail and late Christmas cards. The situation got worse when we started to run out of food.

So me and Daisy decided to get jobs. I applied for this job as a secretary, and Daisy found an ad for a cashier in a record store. At my interview the guy, Harry, couldn't get over the fact that I was "that girl from Masterful Johnson." He asked me for my autograph.

Daisy came home in tears and told me that the manager brought out old copies of our album and asked her to autograph them while he played *Combat* on an old Atari in his office.

Our landlord gave us a thirty-day notice thirty-one days ago. Daisy has packed all her things in milk crates she stole from behind the grocery store. We've been living off stolen produce and water. We called home for money for plane tickets, but no one seems to believe we really do need money. My parents laughed, and Daisy's parents thought it was a joke too. I wonder what our options are as me and Daisy sit at the kitchen table, Daisy drawing "SOS" in spilled salt with her fingers.

# Renters

THE SUMMER OF MY TWELFTH BIRTHDAY, MY MOTHER CURED MY anemia. As a child, I was robust—Little League, Pop Warner, Cub Scouts—and I'd never so much as broken a leg. But my constant nosebleeds worried my mother, so she left her part-time job in an insurance office and I said good-bye to friends I had spent my lifetime making. Even though I know now what I couldn't have known then, that the aspirin I was consuming daily since my father died was thinning my blood to the point where it ran like water through my veins, I can't say, even now, that I am not still bitter toward her for it.

My mother believed in the healing powers of the desert Southwest. She'd heard about the masses of asthmatics moving to Arizona and rolled down the windows when we crossed the state line from New Mexico, letting the insufferable June heat invade the car. We intended to go all the way into Phoenix nonstop—she had a friend who was going to let us stay in her house while she was away on vacation. Instead my mother was distracted by a mile of housing off the freeway, in a suburb called New Phoenix. The houses were of three varieties: one-story with double garage, two-story with double garage, and two-story with triple garage. All the houses were painted an attractive pink, with white trim, and they called to her.

“Doesn't it look like a giant pink tongue?” she giggled as we

slowed off the freeway.

The house my mother chose was in a development called Laguna Vista, a one-story with a double garage, but the garage had been built into a playroom, so there was no place to hide the car from the unrelenting summer sun.

"It was built without a permit," the owner explained, "by the last renters."

My mother paced the playroom, staring into the corners, looking outside at our fading sedan. A master of getting what she wanted without asking for it, she was playing for cheaper rent, I could tell. We looked at the other rooms, a master with bath, a living room, kitchen, single bedroom, and bath.

"It looks great," she said, returning to the playroom. "I just wish the car didn't have to take such an awful beating."

The owner ended up taking off a hundred dollars.

The house was furnished in the early Saturday mornings, at neighborhood yard sales. We ended up with the Murphys' bleached-oak dining set, the Christensens' coral red sofa and love seat, and the Van Wagners' twin rust recliners, for the playroom. The mattresses on the floor were replaced in time by bed sets paid for with money my mother earned as a secretary in a law firm.

My mother wanted nothing more than to take care of me.

It seemed as if I had just finished unpacking when I found myself packing again, for Medicine Mountain in northern Arizona, near Flagstaff. I'd gone outside and come in for two weeks before any of the kids who played in the grassy drainage ditch at the end of our street noticed me. I was smoothing the gravel lawn in front of our house when a short, chunky, blond-haired kid smelling of coconut suntan lotion whom I'd heard called Charles came up to me and said, "My mom wanted me to ask you to join Scouts."

When I'd moved from Pittsburgh, I'd decided to quite Scouting. It was fun there, but only because all my friends were in it too. So

my immediate reaction was to shake my head, but my mother said, "I think it's a good idea," and that was that.

Charles's dad, Mr. Michaels, was our Den Leader. We had our meetings in their garage, and sometimes his father would let Charles back the car out and park it on the street. The garage was walled in pegboard; silver hooks like ladies' fingers dangled tools and pieces of "inventions" created by Mr. Michaels. Sometimes after our meetings we'd watch Mr. Michaels demonstrate an automatic this or electric that.

Most of Mr. Michaels's inventions were modifications of already existing inventions. He built an automatic butterer for the toaster; he rigged an outdoor lighting system that operated on voice command; he created a better wax for automobiles, one that resisted the collection of bugs. There was one invention that was a Michaels original that summer, and it quickly became a sensation in our neighborhood.

Like other parents, Mr. Michaels was frustrated by our short attention spans. In our meetings we'd be saying a motto and some of us would forget the words, unable to memorize them. Also, in the middle of merit badge work, some of us were known to drop what we were doing if we were distracted.

Mr. Michaels aimed to cure us; with our folding chairs in an arc on the oil-stained cement, he passed to each of us a plastic box the size of a wallet, nine white plastic buttons on its face.

"What is it?" Charles asked.

"Pocket Anticipation," Mr. Michaels explained. "The object is to try and guess where the red light will appear and to press the button at the same time it lights up."

We turned the boxes over in our hands, staring at one another.

"Go ahead, turn them on," he urged us.

We slid the button to on and all nine lights lit up red and faded away. I stared at the keypad, at the smoothness of the plastic. I shook it a little to make the light come on, but it wouldn't. I looked over at the others, their faces in their palms, and as I did, I saw a



flash of red from my machine.

I pressed the button that had glowed, but it was white again and the little machine buzzed.

"You can't take your eyes off it," Mr. Michaels warned, "or you'll miss it."

I spent the night at Charles's house that night and we stayed up without getting it once.

Spending the night at Charles's house was something I loved to do. I loved to stay up late, watching TV, or just hang out on his street. It seemed all the kids in the development lived on Charles's street, and we'd all walk down to the man-made lake around which Laguna Vista was built. Boats were allowed on the lake at low speeds, but not after ten. So we'd walk down the cement incline of the launch area, wading into the warm water up to our knees.

One night me, Luke Johnson, and Charles went to the lake. Some older kids from high school were drinking and listening to the radio. Luke Johnson's older brother was among them, so they left us alone.

There weren't any girls with us, but Luke's brother's friends had a couple, and we got under the trees and watched them. We watched them sipping from shiny silver cans, getting louder and louder until they drowned out the radio.

We talked about girls we knew, compared them to the girls we were watching. I can't remember if we said anything dirty about the girls, but I'm sure we did. Luke said his brother was trying to go with the one in red and he was always trying to do something to impress her. Luke thought it was pretty pathetic.

Everyone was getting loud, and I remember we were nervous that the neighbors would complain. The radio got louder, and we talked about whether or not we should go back to Charles's house. Secretly I wanted to get back before Charles's sister, Olivia, got home; she usually talked on the phone in the kitchen while we

watched TV before she went up to get ready for bed. I loved to hear her talk with her girlfriends after a date. Everything I knew about women then I learned from hearing her midnight conversations.

She was prettier than any girls in Pittsburgh, and I knew she was older, but didn't care. I used to watch our street in hopes of catching a glimpse of her with her other pretty friends. I'd see her in cars, being dropped off from the mall, or wherever she went with her friends during the day and sometimes at night.

She reminded me of what my dad used to call "a real dish." That's what he used to call my mother, before he started coughing all the time and didn't say much of anything. He said, "Mary, you're a real dish, you know that?" and my mother would say, "Quit saying that. It's old-fashioned." She'd pretend to be embarrassed by it, but I knew she loved it, and missed hearing it now.

We'd decided to go when we heard a splash and the echo of laughter. Luke's brother was all the way in the water, along with a couple of the other guys, who jumped out and pulled the girls in with them. There was more screaming and we started laughing at them. Suddenly one of the girls shrieked just as Luke's brother said, "Watch this." As he said it, he grabbed one of the ducks that had been loitering, hoping for something to be thrown its way. The duck made a strangled noise as Luke's brother grabbed it by the neck and forced its head under the water.

"Stop it," one of the girls screamed. "That's not funny."

"Do it, dude. Do it," one of the guys encouraged.

The duck flapped its wings, slapping Luke's brother and spraying them all. One of the guys waded out of the lake and started chasing the ducks that were quacking to be let alone. Finally the girl in red slapped Luke's brother, and the duck bounced back to the surface, righted itself, and scrambled to the shore.

We sneaked away, talking about the things we would never do to impress women. By the time we got home, Olivia was already in bed, the phone hanging still in its cradle in the kitchen.

\*

Right before our trip to Medicine Mountain, our troop had an unpleasant addition: Allen, a Boy Scout, became our Den Chief. At meetings he was helpful and friendly; it was when he was hanging around Charles's house that he treated the rest of us badly. He hung around quite a bit, because of Olivia.

His tactics were obvious, and I resented them. He'd come over and pretend to want to help Charles and me with a merit badge, knowing we'd be too busy, and then he'd say, "Oh, Olivia, I heard you won princess for homecoming," or, "You know, you're one of the most popular girls in school." I thought she was wise to his games, but she was flattered. I couldn't stand it, so I made Charles go outside whenever he came over.

Once, after there was nothing left to watch on TV, Charles and I were concentrating on Pocket Anticipation when we heard a car pull up. It idled for a moment, then seemed to die. We got up and saw Allen's car sitting in the dark in front of the house.

Night insects were fluttering in and out of the open window in Olivia's room, and we reached it just as Allen's car lurched away. An atom bomb of perfume was still exploding in her wake, and the flowered scent gagged Charles. He stood for a moment, thinking, and then closed the window, leaving the latch open so she could sneak back in. The pinks and reds in Olivia's bedroom turned gray and charcoal black as I thought of Allen and Olivia, sneaked off somewhere in the night, him touching her and thinking, *Pretty soon, pretty soon*. Charles flipped out the light and I reached up and locked the window, hoping the feeling of being locked out would resonate with her and she would associate this with her feelings for Allen.

While we loaded Mr. Michaels's van, Allen was inside with Olivia. I pretended to get a glass of water and saw them in the kitchen with their foreheads together. I came back out and told Mr. Michaels

someone was on the phone for him.

"I didn't even hear it ring," he said, and went in through the garage. A second later Allen walked out the same door, interrupted.

"Let's get it all loaded," he said immediately, standing against the van, fingering the ring Olivia always wore on her right middle finger. He slipped the thin gold circle onto his pinky (a violation of the dress code) and flashed it back and forth in front of his eyes.

Mr. Michaels reappeared, yelling for Olivia to come get him if the phone rang.

Charles and I sat in the backseat, each at a window. He immediately pulled out his Pocket Anticipation. I'd lost mine but hadn't said anything to Charles or anyone. Some of the others said theirs had run out of batteries or they'd dropped it and now it didn't work. One had beaten his against his headboard when he couldn't get it, and it didn't work right afterward.

Charles and I took turns with his; I was always that close to getting it right. I had a technique where I'd spread my fingers across the keypad, trying to feel for the electric whisper right before the light would come on. By the time I saw the red, though, it was white under my finger.

I caught Mr. Michaels glancing back in the mirror, watching his son play the game he'd invented. Charles couldn't see anything and was only concentrating on the keys, waiting. Right then I wished my dad were on the trip to summer camp, riding next to Mr. Michaels, turning in his seat to look at me. I knew the others would all have liked my dad as much as they liked Mr. Michaels, and that made me miss him even more.

We passed the newly painted sign announcing Medicine Mountain, and the van filled with loud talk and bodies shifting. Allen turned up the volume in his headphones, annoyed with all the noise, and someone threw an empty paper cup at him, hitting him in the head. He gave me and Charles a threatening look and we

looked out the window.

Medicine Mountain wasn't really a mountain and none of us were surprised by that fact. There were pine trees, though, and the wind was cool as we unloaded our van. Allen was on his knees, wedging his hands in the fold of the seat where he'd sat. "Anyone seen a little ring?" he asked, but everyone just shrugged.

Too excited to sleep, Charles and I searched out the woods behind our cabin. The others were inside, arranging their bunks, or down at the foot of the hill, helping Mr. Michaels and some of the Den Leaders from the other troops unpack.

Our flashlight beams wove around the dark trunks of tress, spiraling up into the pines, shining through to the stars. We found a creek that trickled down to Medicine Lake and followed it up, looking for the source. The woods grew thicker and we began to trip over the ground, knocking into each other.

We came to a clearing and I shut off my flashlight. Charles shut his off too, and we stood and listened. The moon lit up everything. We could see another ridge, and beyond that, a wild place alive at night. Charles pointed his flashlight out and gave a signal. We watched for an answer and imagined we saw one, flashing more messages across the night. I flashed on up to my dad; I wanted him to see me with my friend, doing the things he always wanted me to do. I flashed one to my mother; I wanted her to be happy here, so we could stay.

Charles and I walked back to camp, without our flashlights on, guided only by memory and moonlight.

Up at sunrise, we were out of the cabins the rest of the day, broken up into our separate troops. The second day Mr. Michaels had to help another troop whose leader had to take a sick kid into town, so Allen marched us to the lake for the Water Safety merit badge.

The lake was cold, and Allen watched impatiently as we waded

in an inch at a time. "Hurry up," he called out. "We haven't got all day." He had a whistle around his neck that he blew every minute or so.

A couple of guys started pushing each other, and Charles tackled me from behind. My feet dragged off an incline and we slipped into deep water. Underwater, I could hear Allen's whistle. "C'mon, girls," he was saying when we resurfaced.

We all took turns swimming out and swimming in. We held our breath underwater while Allen clicked the stopwatch. The sun was cold when we stood up out of the water. We did leg kicks, back floats, dog paddles, and breaststrokes. I tried to remember what I'd practiced at the public pool at the park, where I'd gone with my mother and Paul, her new boss at the office.

"It's a miracle," my mother had said as I resurfaced in the shallow end of the public pool. She was referring to my bloodless nose, which shocked her so much she thumbed my upper lip again and again to be sure. All the way to the park, she'd been telling Paul about how much I bled. Paul always looked like he was about to tell you something that would change your life, but when my mother described in detail the bloody sheets, bloody pillowcases, and bloody shirtfronts, Paul looked fearful.

We went to the park twice with Paul, the last time right before I went away to Medicine Mountain. Paul had a big car; it was maroon with thick seats like couches that you bounced on whenever there was a dip in the road or when he turned a corner. My mother sat up front with Paul, and I lay across the backseat, my arms folded, staring up at the diamond pattern on the headliner.

I didn't mind Paul; he wasn't like my dad, though. He didn't laugh much, and he didn't try to make me or my mother laugh. Paul seemed cautious about what he said, how he moved. He seemed to be afraid of other people's calculations about him, and I caught him judging a woman at the pool who maybe would've been better off in a one-piece bathing suit. I was old enough to know certain things about certain things, and I wondered if my mother felt the same

slow burn and fever about Paul that I felt about Olivia. I couldn't feel anything between them, really. I had the idea that she went out with Paul for my sake. In her mind, Paul added that certain touch that deflects people's stares when they see a single mother and her child. For me, Paul was of no real help. I needed to know about romance, about winning over Olivia's heart. I felt to ask Paul for advice would be like looking up the word "love" in the dictionary.

My dad would've been able to give me the advice I needed to win her over—you should've seen the way he used to make my mother laugh out loud—and I tried to contact him from the backseat of Paul's big maroon car. I explained what we were doing, who Paul was, and about my new friends. I told him about Olivia, about how beautiful she was and how much he would've liked her. I asked him for advice and felt his answer. I remembered how it had worked for him with my mother. He'd always told the story about how he walked home from school with her and her friends and about how my mother thought he liked Lisa Saunders. According to him, he never liked Lisa Saunders, but my mother thought he did, and it wasn't until he told my mother he liked her that things changed forever. He said from then on, whenever he really wanted something, he was honest about it.

We arrived at the public pool, a pale rectangle fenced in by chain link. A green cement wading fountain burred at the entrance, and mothers with their infants touched their toes to the water. I didn't see anyone I knew.

I practiced treading water. I couldn't seem to work my legs and arms in the synchronicity needed to stay afloat, and I knew it would be on the Water Safety merit badge test, which I planned on earning at camp. I felt silly out there practicing, kids younger than me making dives and swimming gracefully from one end of the pool to the other, but no one seemed to notice.

I floated on my back when I tired, occasionally flipping over when I thought I was floating too close to the edge. The undersides of palm fronds overhead unspooled like a home movie, the voices

from the people lying out around the pool a soft murmur.

My mother asked me to get something for her to drink from the snack bar, which was outside the fence. "Make sure to let them see you leaving," she said, "so they'll let you back in."

I laid the wet, wrinkled dollars down for her Pepsi and got myself a box of Lemonheads. I was trying to balance the heavy Styrofoam cup in my hand, slowly extending my fingers until the cup stood still and even on the stage of my flat palm, when I saw a girl who looked like Olivia sitting at one of the picnic tables around the wading fountain. Her muscles showed when she raised her hand to wave at someone who I thought was me but turned out to be someone behind me.

"Hey, can I have a Lemonhead?" she asked as I passed her table. I felt her friends, two smaller, younger girls, staring.

"Yeah, sure, just let me set this down," I said, afraid of silence. "What's your name?"

"Sheila," she said.

"I thought it might be Olivia," I said. She looked at me funny but was kind enough to pretend like she hadn't heard. I wanted to crawl inside the open box of Lemonheads.

"I love how after the sugar it's sour," Sheila said, popping the yellow pellets into her mouth.

"Yeah, me too," I said.

"Can my friends have one?"

"Oh, yeah, sure." I doled out a handful to each of them. They all sucked noiselessly on the candy. "I'm David," I said.

"Sit down, David," Sheila said. She didn't slide over when I sat next to her. Her friends decided to go swimming, and Sheila said she'd catch up with them later.

"So, where do you go to school?" she asked. I told her and asked her the same question. Neither of us had heard of the other's school. I grasped for the questions to keep the conversation going but only heard white noise. I was about to excuse myself when Sheila reached for my mother's Pepsi and sipped from the straw. "Hope you don't



mind,” she said, and smiled.

I didn’t and wanted her to drink more, drink it all until she slurped at the bottom. It came to me that this was more than I’d ever said or done with Olivia, and I felt some injustice. I wondered why Olivia had never asked me for anything, and I vowed to volunteer things on a more regular basis.

I was waiting for what Sheila would do next, mentally marking the clues to what I would do with Olivia, when Paul came up from behind me.

“There you are,” he said. “Your mother was worried something happened to you.” He picked the Pepsi up off the picnic table, and Sheila looked up at him. “You better come back to the pool,” he told me. If my father had seen me with Sheila, he would’ve quietly tiptoed back to my mother and told her I was fine.

Sheila said thanks and got up to go join her friends. The wind froze my wet trunks as I marched ahead of Paul, ignoring my mother on the way to the deep end, where the water warmed me back up. I hid down in the water, practicing my treading.

When Paul dropped us off that day, my mother asked him inside. He made some joke about us living out of a box and apologized for it when he saw my mother’s face. I felt some justice then and loved my mother for making him say he was sorry. He said he knew a good place for indoor trees—“They have great Christmas trees”—and he said he’d write it down for her, but my mother said “thanks” in the way people say “thanks” when you hold the door for them. I knew right then, right when she said “thanks,” that we were only living here temporarily, that we’d be gone by Christmas. When my dad was alive, she’d lived for searching out the best Christmas tree.

I think we had an artificial tree that Christmas, in Saint Louis, or San Diego. It was one of the two.

“Okay, I want to see everybody deep,” Allen shouted. “We’ll tread for five minutes.”

The whistle blew and the stopwatch jerked in his hand. We all waved the water in front of us back and forth, cycling our feet underneath us. I tasted the lake on my lips and kicked harder, floating over toward Charles. "How long has it been?" he asked.

"Maybe a minute," I said, gasping.

My arms and legs started to ache, and we all felt Allen staring at us, seeing if anyone was resting on the bottom. My legs hurt so much I couldn't take it. One of the other leaders called out to Allen, asking him a question, and he turned his back on us. I stretched my toes out and felt for the ledge, resting there while I flapped my arms.

The other leader walked away and Allen was back at the water's edge, looking at us and his stopwatch. "Another minute," he said, and I gave a little push, knowing I could make it.

We dried off and ate lunch. Mr. Michaels came back and asked how it went, and Allen made his report. He said we all passed Water Safety.

"Well, everyone except David," he said, pointing at me. "He failed water treading."

I started at him, hating his guts, and he wouldn't look over at me. *No way he saw me resting*, I thought. Luke said "bullshit" under his breath and everyone laughed.

"You can do it again tomorrow," Mr. Michaels told me.

"I think I feel sick," I said. "I'm going to throw up if I don't go lie down."

I was excused from the rest of the day. I fell asleep in my bunk, waking only when the others came back, telling me how they'd kept saying "bullshit" under their breath and Allen had kept saying, "What did you say?" I laughed with my friends.

I faked illness the rest of the camp, coming out of my cabin only for meals and to meet up with others at the end of the day, down at the lake. The camp nurse, a smallish, brown-haired woman, came over from the health lodge to check on me, initially wanting to

send me home. I convinced her that all I needed was some aspirin. She gave me a couple of sample packets with two tablets each. I chewed the tablets without water, spreading the medicine across my gums and along the roof of my mouth. The pills dried my mouth, and the familiar cocoon sensation the aspirin had created for me back in Pittsburgh kept me happy while the others were away. If Mr. Michaels came around, I doubled over in pain; if Allen came around, I faked sleep.

I didn't care anymore about getting the Water Safety merit badge, and I must still hold the record for the fewest merit badges earned at Medicine Mountain: none. I told Mr. Michaels not to worry, that my mother wouldn't be mad. He said it was a shame I'd gotten so sick.

The last day I got a head start on packing, right after lunch. The rest of the cabin was pretty dirty, guys' stuff here and there. Allen's bunk was the messiest—he never picked up anything. I started rummaging through his stuff, not because I thought there was buried treasure in his heaped clothes or unmade bed. I felt like I was getting even with him, looking through the drawers in his nightstand.

He had the usual things—*People* magazine, tapes for his Walkman, a Pocket Anticipation, earplugs, tissues, and other loose stuff. I started to close the drawer, when an upside-down photo caught my eye. I scraped it to the corner of the drawer and flipped it over. It was Olivia's school picture. I'd seen one in Charles's room. But the one I'd seen didn't have her breasts drawn on in blue pen. I imagined Allen drawing it, laughing with his friends about it, and ripped up the picture.

*What would Olivia think if she knew about this?* is what I thought. I wondered how Olivia would react if she found the picture in a drawer; she couldn't have imagined what would be done to it when she'd palmed it to Allen, probably with a kiss.

I picked up the jigsaw pieces of her and her blue breasts. I asked the nurse to bring me some first aid tape and sat happily on my bunk, taping Olivia back together, chewing on my last two aspirin.

\*

We milled around the lake after our last barbecue, deciding whether or not to go for a swim. Everyone was tired and ready to go home, but wanted to have fun before going back to New Phoenix to chores or summer jobs. Mr. Michaels greased up the last whole watermelon in the camp with Vaseline. It was a game we'd seen some of the other troops playing, and Mr. Michaels was proud to say he'd heard of it at Scout-O-Rama. He threw it into the lake, and we all scrambled in, trying to wrap our arms around it.

We practically drowned one another jumping on the slicked fruit; someone's leg grazed my forehead. Luke Johnson had it but threw it out when he saw the rest of us coming at him. We tried to wipe our hands in one another's wet hair. We dived into the dark water and tried to come up under whoever had the watermelon, to try and knock it loose.

"Bring it here," Allen said, coming into the water. He had the tub of petroleum jelly in his hand, and several dripping Scouts held the wet, beaten fruit while he smoothed it with a greased hand.

"Who wants to throw it?" one of the wet faces asked.

"I'll throw it," Allen said. He bent his knees and pitched it granny-style way out into the dark lake. We waited for the splash, which was more of a hollow plunk. We raced into the cool water.

Allen scrambled in after us. There was no way I was going to let him be the first one to it, and I tried to run underwater to beat him. He dived in front of me, splashing water in all of our eyes, and came up with it. He laughed and pointed at me, at the rest of us.

"Let's see who's a man," Allen said, standing up and heaving the watermelon into the deep water. It looked like it came down right on top of the sun, which was going under the lake. We looked at one another, and Allen laughed some more.

"Let's go," I said, and Charles and Luke and the others followed me off the underwater ledge.

Allen was swimming out in front. "C'mon, c'mon. Come and get it."

A couple of boys turned back, but I led the rest into the middle of the lake, toward Allen. He looked like he was still able to stand, but I noticed him treading water when I pulled closer.

"You gonna get it?" Allen yelled to me. "Can you reach it?"

The watermelon was floating around him, and he smacked it, pushing it farther away. Charles and Luke were right behind me, and I felt the power of many in my hands. I imagined Olivia watching, cheering me on. Allen looked back at the watermelon and I lunged at him, forcing him under.

Allen's wake sent the watermelon sailing into the dark horizon. I held Allen by the hair, afraid to let him up.

"You're dead," Allen gasped after I finally let go. He reached out for me, but Charles jumped on his shoulders.

"Fucker," he said, and rode Allen back down. We treaded patiently, waiting for him to resurface, each us wanting to be the first to get him when he came up. I spread my arms across the water, pedaling softly.

"Watch this," I said, demonstrating my technique to keep the still surface of the water unbroken.

# Ex-Urbana

DANIEL PEERED OUT PAULA'S BEDROOM WINDOW, SURVEYING THE neighbors' backyard. "When did they move in?"

"While you were in Phoenix," she said. They were lying on the black-and-purple paisley comforter she'd made herself last winter, unable to unlock their arms and legs after Daniel's long summer away. "I guess a couple of weeks ago."

"Have you talked to them?" he wanted to know.

"My mom says they're real friendly," she said, snuggling closer to Daniel. She raked through his black hair and then smoothed it again with her fingertips. "There's about a zillion kids. My mom says she hasn't seen the same kid twice."

Daniel thought he saw something move in one of the windows across the yard.

"Besides," Paula said, "I don't talk to gooks."

A breeze blew a musty stink into the room.

"God, what's that smell?" Daniel asked, holding his nose.

"They're cooking," Paula said. She closed the window.

"I heard your little sister talking about frog legs," Daniel said, uneasy.

"She ate with them," Paula said. "Can you believe it?"

"She's only eight," Daniel said.

"Still," Paula said. They both heard Paula's sister, Tammy, come through the kitchen downstairs.

"What time is it?" Daniel asked, their reunion interrupted by the thought of her father, whom they both couldn't wait to get away from when they went to college next year. Daniel liked to avoid him, if possible. When he met Paula's father for the first time, at dinner, he'd volunteered to go into the kitchen for the forgotten bowl of corn and heard her father ask, "Where did you pick up this white nigger?" Her mother tried to quiet him, a frightful shushing blowing through the room, but Daniel didn't care. He knew what people like Paula's father thought about people like him. Sometimes he thought it too.

Daniel kissed Paula again, hard, sucking all her air through his mouth. "Call me tonight," Paula said as he bounced off the bed.

"Does your dad still go into the basement after eight?" he asked.

"Every night," she said.

"I'll call then," he said, and smiled. He let himself out through the kitchen, then hopped the wooden gate in back, landing in the graveled alley, knocking over an oil pan someone, probably Paula's father, had left propped against the gate. The ground underneath it was black and brown, and the hot smell of old oil reminded Daniel of his uncle's place in Phoenix. He could see the four stout gray buildings, the pool shimmering between them. The fumes from the ground reminded him of late in the evening, when the traffic had stopped for the night and all the buildings radiated the day's heat. He'd hated the nights the most, staying inside his apartment, across from and above his uncle's, sealing himself in with the air-conditioning.

Daniel kicked dirt onto the oil stain and dragged his feet down the alley, past the wholesale bread store, where he and Paula sometimes walked to get twenty-five-cent cupcakes, down past the tire storage place, past where the narrow WPA sidewalk rose up over an erupting tree root and then gave way to dirt. The sun started its descent, and cool air blew in from Canada, bringing the night on its wings.

Daniel lived with his grandfather in a double-wide trailer in

Wagon Wheel Park. His parents had moved into the park before they died when Amtrak 406 fell from its tracks six years ago, when Daniel was eleven. He'd gotten along fine with his grandfather until a year ago, when his grandfather started behaving oddly. For instance, he'd get up early and watch Japanese cooking shows, repeating the sounds the chef made while mixing, whisking, or pureeing. He worried about his grandfather; he worried he'd be alone if something happened to him, so he tried not to be out very late, if he could help it.

He found his grandfather where he'd left him, in the yellow-and-brown plaid armchair in front of the TV, his small, dark frame hardly distinguishable in the puny light of the television.

"Hi, Gramps," he said, making sure the door was locked.

"Hi, Danny," his grandfather said. "I ate without you." It's what he always said. He ate his dinner, a pork chop Hungry-Man with salted sliced tomato, every day at three, usually before Daniel got home from school. If he was woken in the night, he might get up and make himself another meal, falling asleep at the table while he waited for the microwave.

Daniel cleared away the rusted TV tray and took a banana into his room, where he checked the locks on the windows, shaking them back and forth to make sure they'd caught.

"It was hot," was what Daniel told them. It seemed enough, and fulfilled their expectations of what summer in Phoenix was like, which kept them content. As long as things were as they seemed, he knew, people were generally satisfied.

What he didn't tell them was what it was really like. There was no way to convey at the dinner table how terrible it had been. They could grasp the concept of his uncle, he knew. They'd never met him, but Daniel knew how they imagined his familial line. Paula, too, but she made sure her family said words like "unfortunate" and "unlucky."



Daniel wanted to tell what had happened, especially to Paula, but he knew how they would react, not so much the sister and mother, but her father—oh, boy. He knew exactly what her father would say: “It serves you right” or “You’re damn lucky those niggers didn’t kill you.”

Paula would be mad, too, if he told her. He’d constantly warned her to look out for what seemed out of place, something he hadn’t managed to do.

“Pong says I have funny feet,” Tammy said, examining her foot under the table.

“What the fuck is a Pong?” her father asked. His saucer-shaped brown hair seemed to spill down from the top of his head as he frowned.

“It’s the neighbor girl,” her mom explained, apologetic.

“I thought I told you to stay away from them,” her father said, looking at Tammy but speaking directly to us all.

“I can go over there,” Tammy said, trying to keep a brave note in her voice.

Daniel asked Paula to pass the milk.

“It’s nothing but trouble,” her father started. “There’s one down at work now too.” Paula’s father worked at the aluminum plant outside of Kalispell, where all his friends worked too. “They’re worse than niggers,” he said. “At least you can understand niggers.”

“I don’t think my feet look funny,” Tammy said to herself.

“Your feet look fine,” her father said, settling something. “Don’t listen to foolishness.”

After dinner Daniel and Paula drove down to the Super Slushee, where their friends would sometimes hang out, in Paula’s father’s cinnamon-red truck. The lights from the storefront windows shone into the street, and Daniel started to feel like he was really home again as Paula drove through them. He’d felt misplaced since returning from the desert, and was having trouble erasing the claustrophobic feeling he’d brought back from Phoenix. Paula’s voice, the singsongy inflections he’d grown tired of before he left,

made him feel more content than he'd ever been.

The Super Slushee was quiet this evening, but he recognized their friend Pete right away, sitting at a picnic table on the side of the blue-and-white building, his feet bridged to the seat of the table next to him. Someone Daniel didn't recognize, a bulky, dark-haired boy with giant features, sat across from him. They both looked up as the truck's headlights swung around and darkened.

"Hey, Danny boy," Pete said without getting up. Daniel felt the other boy staring at him. "What's up, city slicker?"

"How are ya?" Daniel said, real happy to see him.

"Hey, Paula," the boy said, moving to look around Daniel.

"Hey, Jason," Paula said, sitting next to Pete.

"This is Jason," Pete said, pointing at him when he said it. Daniel said hey and shook his hand. His features didn't look so gigantic, Daniel guessed. He sat down uneasily next to Jason, glad that he was the one across from Paula. Not being suspicious, he didn't think anything was behind Paula knowing Jason, but it surprised him, and he wanted to get back into the truck so he could ask her about it—all he needed to hear was the explanation—but he didn't want to expose his jealousy in front of this stranger, in the event that Jason had ideas about Paula. And he didn't want to make it look like Paula was the kind of girl a new boy could easily have ideas about. So he tried to let it drop.

"Where are you from?" Daniel asked Jason.

"California," Jason said, like it was a country he was proud to be a citizen of.

"Run out or ran out?" Daniel asked, finally getting a chance to say what he'd been wanting to say for over a year now, since the emigration of Californians began. It made him angry that strangers could move into neighborhoods where the same families—families he knew—had lived their whole lives. If nothing else, it seemed disrespectful. At its worst, it seemed to Daniel to be greedy, to want to snatch up everything beautiful and own it.

"Jason's just visiting for the summer," Paula said.

Daniel shot Paula a look he hoped no one else could see. "Oh."

Talk turned to what would happen when summer ended, and Jason started a story about his school in California, and Daniel had the unsettling feeling he got when someone took him to a movie he'd never heard of, trapped in the darkness, forced to listen.

Daniel'd met Paula's grandmother before, last summer, when she'd come from Spokane to visit. When he saw her again, she looked a lot older, and it gave him the feeling of being part of the family, being able to recognize change in that way.

"Hello, Daniel." Paula's grandmother hugged him. She smelled fresh, and her yellowing hair felt soft against his neck. The last time she was there, he'd told her he hoped he'd still be around when she visited again. "I'm sure you will," was what she'd said. This time she asked, "When are you going to marry my granddaughter?"

"Mother," Paula's mom said, reprimanding her. Paula came down the stairs, and the four of them sat in the living room, Paula next to Daniel on the sofa, Paula's mother and grandmother taking the two armchairs beside the fireplace.

Soon the facts had been checked: Paula's father still worked at the aluminum plant, Paula was starting her senior year, Tammy would be starting third grade, Paula's mother was still thinking about going back to college, after the kids had grown.

"Are you planning on going to college?" Paula's grandmother asked Daniel. It was something he and Paula had been planning in secret.

"I think so," Daniel answered.

"Paula," her grandmother said. "What about you?"

"Probably in Missoula," she said.

There was a sudden noise at the front door, and then it opened, Tammy and a tiny Vietnamese girl spilling into the room.

"Shut the door, please," her mother said. Tammy swung the door hard so that the window vibrated, and she began laughing. The

other girl laughed too, more of a giggle. The two ran up the stairs.

"Who was that?" her grandmother asked, curious.

"That's the neighbor girl, Pong," her mother explained.

Paula's grandmother thought for a moment, then nodded. "We have some in our neighborhood too. From Seattle."

"They're nice people," Paula's mother said, glancing at Paula, a look that told her not to repeat what she'd said.

A boom from upstairs was followed by a shriek, and Pong leaped down the stairs, two at a time, Tammy running behind her, guiding herself with the black railing. Pong ran for the couch, and Daniel and Paula parted, thinking she was going to crash into them. At the last moment she veered and ran around the grandmother's chair, hiding behind it.

"She's so delightful," the grandmother said nervously. She turned to see where Pong was, but Pong sprang out just as she turned, their heads colliding, cracking against each other. Daniel and Paula jumped up as it happened, and Paula's mother shouted out. Pong fell to the floor, dazed, and Paula's grandmother slumped back in the chair, blood tracking down from the cut above her left eye.

Daniel told Tammy to take her friend home. Pong was unhurt and started laughing again when she and Tammy got outside. Paula went for a warm washcloth while her mother kept saying, "It doesn't look too bad." Paula's mother smeared the blood away with the wet washcloth, and Daniel could see the awful bruise already purpling under the skin.

"Your uncle's been trying to get a hold of you," Daniel's grandfather said. "He's called twice already."

"I'll give him a call later," Daniel said, panicked, wondering what he could possibly want. He tried to act unalarmed in front of Paula.

"Hey, Gramps," Paula said, kissing the old man on the forehead.

He smiled and Daniel could tell how much his grandfather liked Paula. The thought of leaving him and going away to college horrified Daniel, so he sat down to enjoy the three of them together while he could.

Daniel told him what had happened at Paula's.

"Why can't those people leave us alone?" his grandfather sighed. "Isn't it obvious that they're not wanted in the middle of Montana, for crying out loud?"

"It was an accident," Daniel said. The image of little Pong running and laughing had stayed with him, and he was sure if his grandfather could've seen how cute she was, he'd change his mind—at least in this case.

"With them, everything's an accident," his grandfather said. "Just like the Jews."

Daniel hadn't told Paula that his grandfather had been in the war, that he'd come to Montana from Germany, to get away from what he'd been forced to do. He talked about it sometimes with Daniel, telling cautionary tales of excessive violence and abuses of power. Always his theme was how Hitler was popular and well liked before anyone knew what he was up to. "It was just another order from the Führer," he said. His grandfather was sorry that he'd helped kill, but Daniel could sense the deep racism still in his voice, even if his grandfather couldn't.

"What did you watch today?" Daniel asked, hoping to direct the conversation from his grandfather's past.

"Jews and queers run everything," his grandfather continued. "It makes regular people sorry to be alive sometimes."

Daniel watched Paula, who was watching his grandfather, and noticed the look of pity in her face. He wondered what she felt sorry about. It wasn't what he felt sorry about, he was sure of that.

"Don't let them get you down, Gramps," Paula said, suddenly smiling. "They can't take anything from you."

His grandfather smiled, as if realizing that what she had said was true. As far as where he was and what he did every day,

nothing anyone did mattered. What went on outside was of little consequence.

"You have to be careful outside," his grandfather said, and nodded. He turned to Daniel, and Daniel tried to look away. "Did you tell Paula about the Injuns?"

He hadn't, and didn't intend to.

"What Injuns?" Paula asked, turning to Daniel.

"Go on," his grandfather encouraged. "Tell her."

"When I was ten, my friend and I got attacked by some Indians near the mall," Daniel said plainly, reducing it to an everyday occurrence.

"What did they do?" Paula asked, shocked.

"They chased me and my friend—they wanted the go-kart I'd built with my father—until we ditched it," he said.

"How old were they?" Paula wanted to know.

"Teenagers," he said. He'd left out the detail about how the Indians had taken off their belts and whipped him and his friend with them. The feel of the metal buckle against his cheek came to him still.

"The fuckin' Indians are another one that must go," Paula said gravely. "They walk around like we owe them something."

Daniel caught himself silently agreeing and hoped she wouldn't say any more.

The phone made Daniel jump and he went to it, afraid it might be his uncle on the other end, asking questions he didn't have answers to.

"Well, are you going to get it?" his grandfather asked, annoyed.

Daniel picked up the phone; it was Paula's father.

"He wants you to come home," he said, hanging up. "I'll walk you."

The stairs going down to the basement were under the staircase going up to the bedrooms. Daniel knew the dim light of

the descending steps—he'd made many trips down when he first started dating Paula—but each time he pounded down them, he felt like he'd turn the corner and find everything he'd ever known to be untrue. It made him nervous too, turning down the short hall to Paula's father's room in the basement. The thin wood paneling amplified the sounds coming from the rest of the house, turning footsteps and conversation into thunder and lightning. This time he didn't want to go down, but Paula asked him to, to make sure her father was not having a psychotic fit.

The hall opened out into Paula's father's room, a den of sorts, where the sounds did not follow. A brown leather recliner stood in one corner of the carpeted room, a small metal end table crouched at its feet like a watchdog. Another corner had an old metal desk wedged into it, the desktop bare and smooth. The walls were bare too, except for an eight-by-ten frame of Paula's family, which hung perfectly straight on the wall. Daniel sat on the sofa under the picture.

"Paula's upstairs," Daniel said. Paula's father crossed his legs and put down a magazine he was reading.

"Did you hear about what happened?" her father asked.

"I was here," Daniel said.

"I wish I would've been," her father growled.

"It was an accident," Daniel told him. He regretted saying it right away and hoped Paula would come down soon.

"That's how it always is with them," her father said. "That's their excuse."

"Is her grandmother going to be all right?" Daniel asked. He wanted to distract her father from saying any more, but the way he waved off the question let Daniel know what exactly was on his mind.

"I don't mind new neighbors," her father began. "I don't even mind that they're not white. I just want whoever it is to show some decency around my property and my family." He uncrossed his legs and stretched them out in front of him in a pose of relaxation.

It didn't make Daniel relax.

"That thing today," Paula's father continued, "sure, I know it was an accident." His face relaxed now too, and Daniel thought he was going to smile. "But this kind of thing leads to the kind of accidents that can tear neighborhoods apart. This neighborhood has been peaceful since we moved here when Paula was little, and I intend to see that it stays that way."

Daniel shifted on the sofa. He wanted to walk away from the room, walk away from everything that had ever been said in it, and walk away from those who'd said it. He hoped Paula would come down and rescue him soon, but then felt like crying when he realized she would just agree with what her father was saying. His voice was bad enough, but to hear her saying these things reminded him of how they all seemed stuck, doing what they did and saying what they said.

"Were there a lot of spics in Arizona?" Paula's father asked suddenly.

It was not the shift in conversation Daniel'd hoped for. "Yeah," he answered. "They were everywhere."

"Cockroaches," her father said.

Daniel'd said the same thing to his uncle, who called them much worse. He hoped his uncle would quit calling, imagined he would if Daniel could just avoid him for the next week or so. The feeling that he hadn't left behind the heat and nastiness of the desert in Phoenix was increasing daily, and he didn't want to be transported back through the telephone.

"I want you to help me send a message," Paula's father said, getting up from the recliner. His head seemed to touch the cement ceiling. The water heater kicked in, and Daniel noticed a map of Kalispell taped to the wall behind it, certain areas of town highlighted yellow, pink, or blue.

"What kind of message?" Daniel asked.

"Have you smelled the air lately?" her father asked. He went to the desk and pulled out a new brown paper bag, the top neatly



folded down. "These ought to send the message," he said, producing a grenade-size yellow ball with a huge black wick. The outside was glazed like the rind of a lemon. Daniel recognized the stink bomb from some his friends had lit in the bathroom at school.

"Where'd you get those?" Daniel asked.

"These fuckers ought to choke every one of those gooks," her father said. He tossed the stink bomb to Daniel, who missed it. A crack appeared in its side, but Daniel covered it with his thumb. "Can you come over tomorrow night?" her father asked.

Daniel rolled the yellow grenade in his hand. He was about to say sure, he'd go along, knowing he wouldn't show, making an excuse for himself, when he heard Paula on the stairs. He tossed the stink bomb back to her father, who hurried the paper bag into the drawer.

"What are you guys doing?" she asked, smiling.

Daniel knew then he didn't have a choice, that if he wanted to be with Paula forever, he would have to somehow get in good with her father, which meant going along with his plan. If he didn't, he knew where the stink bombs would fall next.

The smell outside wasn't as harsh as it had been when he first smelled it, he thought. Daniel breathed deep through his nose and let the salty smell cloud inside him. The lights from Paula's neighbors' house had dimmed, and her neighborhood stood quiet, unaware of what was seething in the basement of the brick house behind the lilac bushes.

A dark, starless sky hung over the trailer park as Daniel maneuvered through the tiny streets. As he turned the corner at the last trailer, he saw two men knocking on the door of his trailer. The men were short but looked old, and Daniel didn't recognize them. He stayed back, hidden in the darkness, hoping they would move on. He couldn't tell if they were salesmen or not, but it seemed too late to be selling anything, and the men loitered long after they'd knocked. One of the men, the dark-haired one, tried to peer in the kitchen window, where Daniel could see the light from the TV.

He prayed his grandfather wouldn't open the door. He picked up a large, smooth rock just in case.

The men knocked again, this time both of them and louder, but no one answered. Fear choked Daniel, so that he stood welded to the corner of the mobile home. He wondered how much longer they would wait. The thought that they were somehow looking for him and were intent on waiting until he came home made him dizzy, and he picked up another rock so that he had one in each hand.

The two men looked at each other and started to move on, away from Daniel. When they'd gone out of sight, Daniel slumped against the metal of the trailer. The rocks felt warm in his sweaty hands and he squeezed them hard, angry that he'd been afraid and then angry that the strangers had come to his trailer. He threw the rocks as hard as he could, first one and then the other, accidentally hitting the side of a trailer across the street. A porch light came on and Daniel scurried into his trailer, where his grandfather was deep asleep in the room. Daniel locked the door and turned off the TV, in case the two men returned.

The next few days were an exercise in anxiety control. Daniel avoided Paula's house during dinner and after. He only called after eight o'clock and usually coaxed Paula into coming over to his house.

"My dad wants you to come to dinner," Paula said Thursday night. "He asked about you. That's a good sign, isn't it?" Her face told how much she worried over what her father thought of Daniel, and he read it like a fortune: *Your future depends on it.*

At the last minute Daniel came up with a great excuse not to show, but he knew future excuses wouldn't be so great, so he arrived at Paula's house for dinner just as the chicken and potatoes were being served.

Paula's dad looked up and smiled when Daniel entered. After giving a nervous excuse for being late, he sat next to Paula and tried to hide behind the shield of her brown hair. When she leaned

forward to eat from her plate, he could feel her father staring in his direction, trying to catch his attention to confirm their conspiracy.

Daniel volunteered to do the dishes, rinsing and drying as Paula's mother sank soapy dishes and silverware into his side of the sink. He wanted to ask her opinion, to see if she had any advice or to read her feelings toward their neighbors. Instead she talked about school, asking him what classes he had, matching them up to classes Paula was taking and comparing them. It was the usual mindless chatter he could count on her for, and he felt sorry for himself standing next to her at the sink.

He felt sorry for her, too. Her small, tight voice always made him feel sorry for her, but now she spoke quickly, her words drifting around him, creating a panic that would not subside.

"Why don't you girls go get one of those ice cream cakes from Baskin-Robbins?" Paula's father said later, putting his plan into motion. Daniel heard this from the kitchen, where he and Paula were deciding whether or not to see a movie.

"Mmm," Paula said. "I love those."

"We're going to get the ice cream," her mother said.

Daniel wanted to go too but didn't even try to get out the front door behind Paula, her mom, and Tammy.

"Let's do this quick, son," her father said as soon as his truck pulled out of the driveway. Daniel waved, both saying good-bye and flagging them for help.

Paula's father disappeared into the basement and then reappeared with the brown bag in his hand. He motioned for Daniel to follow him through the kitchen and into the backyard.

"Just over the fence?" Daniel asked as her father handed him two stink bombs.

"The fence is low in the alley," her father said, whispering. Daniel felt like he was seven again, playing war with his friends on the battlefield they'd built from chairs and bikes, except that he was playing with an adult, which was less fun and more horrifying.

The smell coming from the neighbors' house seemed to collect

in the alley. Daniel covered his nose with his arm. "Do you think they're cooking?" he asked. Suddenly he was very curious about the source of the smell. He hoped a discussion would stall them long enough for a real distraction to come along.

"Who knows?" her father said, and shrugged, fishing in his pockets, finally producing a blue disposable lighter. "How's your arm?" He smiled.

*I could throw away from the house, Daniel thought. I could pretend to throw it hard and have it land over by the swing set, opposite and back from the house.* Paula's father lit the first one and the fuse hissed, burning slowly. Daniel stepped back and let it sail high over the fence. The stink bomb pitched straight up and then began to fall back toward them. It landed ten feet in front of them, the fuse smoldering in the grass.

"I'll throw the next one," her father growled. He landed it on the back porch, where it bounced down the cement steps and wobbled back and forth on the walkway. "When it goes, we'll light the rest and throw them one right after another," her father instructed. "They won't be able to see us through the smoke."

The stink bomb popped and a yellow smoke carried up toward the house. Paula's father lit the next three one at a time, tossing them in the same general area where the first one fell. Someone appeared at the back door and screamed and then was gone in the wall of smoke. Daniel could hear voices on the porch, first just a few, then many.

Paula's father laughed. "Light that one and then get the other one," he said, pointing at the one lying in the grass in front of them. Daniel lit the one in his hand and threw it as hard as he could, hoping to throw it over the house, past the front yard, and into the street.

"Meet me back in the house," her father said. He socked Daniel in the arm and laughed again. "This'll show 'em."

Daniel felt her father waiting to make sure Daniel'd retrieve the first stink bomb, so he climbed over the fence. When he looked

back, her father was gone. The smell from inside the yard was rancid, and Daniel gagged. He started breathing through his mouth. His eyes watered as he bent down to pick up the stink bomb. He tossed it, unlit, into the bushes.

"Hey," a voice said.

Daniel froze.

The voice sounded like Paula's father's, and he was afraid he'd seen Daniel throw the stink bomb away. But the voice belonged to a tall, thin Vietnamese boy who looked eighteen or nineteen. The boy came through the smoke, toward Daniel, who wanted to run but knew the boy could probably catch him.

He could hit the boy, he knew, and buy time to get over the fence. Or he could say it wasn't him, that it was the neighbor guy, but he imagined the boy's revenge carried out on Paula, so he didn't speak at all.

"Why are you doing this?" the boy asked. Fear made his voice shake. The boy's parents called out to him from the porch, but Daniel couldn't understand his name.

The phone rang inside the house, in all the houses, it seemed. He didn't have an answer for the boy. He couldn't say why he was doing it, just like he couldn't say why he'd freaked out on the two black guys who came to his door in Phoenix. All they'd wanted to do was sell him something, just like everyone else. He'd invited them into his apartment to show himself he wasn't a racist. He pretended they were friends of his, until he became afraid of them, sitting on his couch, looking around. *They could kill me, right here*, he thought. The thought grew in his mind until he grabbed a golf club and started toward them with it. The black guys didn't seem afraid, only bewildered. They threatened him from outside of his locked door, eventually fading into the noise of the city.

Later, after his uncle had taken him out for a good-bye dinner, he found his apartment window broken, the furniture smashed, the words WHITE TRASH NIGGER spray-painted in orange all over the walls. Daniel had made no effort to repaint the walls before leaving

Phoenix at the end of the summer.

The boy took a step and Daniel turned and ran, feeling a phantom hand on his back as he made the fence, which shuddered under his weight.

The smoke had drifted into the alley, and the headlights lit up the yellow ghosts as they rose into the air. Paula covered her mouth, and her sister and mother did too.

“What’s all this?” Paula asked, jumping out of the truck. The pink box with the ice cream cake inside sagged in the middle. Daniel could still hear the neighbors’ voices but couldn’t make out what they were saying. The voices got higher and louder in pitch, drifting into the stratosphere.

“Your dad’s inside,” he told Paula, as if it were the answer to her question. Paula handed him the ice cream cake and took her little sister inside, her mother trailing. Daniel stayed on the porch, listening to the commotion in the yard next door. He breathed in the rotten air and felt the ice cream in his hands run out of the corner of the box, dripping onto the porch. He didn’t want to go inside, where the air was clean and quiet. Paula’s father would be downstairs for the night, but he’d be back up another time. Daniel jumped off the porch and kicked open the gate at the side of the house. He paused on the sidewalk in front of Paula’s neighbors’ house. All the lights were on, and he thought on any other day he might go up to the door and knock. Instead he placed the melting ice cream cake on the lawn, right as he imagined Paula asking where he was, and headed off in a different direction, toward his house.



# What You'll Find When the Tide Comes In

KATIE'S MOTHER KEPT HER CART EVENLY PACED AHEAD OF MRS. Willis's. Just as Katie and Mrs. Willis turned into aisle twelve, Katie's mother, brother, and father turned out of it, into the chips and soda aisle. Every once in a while her father would drop back to check on them, never taking his eyes off his son, Katie's brother, Kevin, who was eight and who was never far from his father's sight.

Katie was glad when her mother purposely strode ahead of her and Mrs. Willis, as if to say canned vegetables were for widowed neighbor ladies who didn't have anyone to cook for. Her mother thought like that, she knew.

Mrs. Willis picked her groceries slowly, considering each item carefully. The cart filled gradually; some items were added, while others were subtracted. Katie hung on the side, her fingers hooked in the metal grating. She pushed the cart when they were ready to move to another section and liked to swing wide out of an aisle, seeing how close she could come to the next shelf of food. Mrs. Willis might ask her to be careful, if she was close enough behind to see her stunt driving.

Inevitably, Katie's mother would completely disappear ahead of them. Her father would stroll by casually, checking their progress, and report back to her mother.

They'd catch up with her mother at the lottery counter, she knew. Her mother would be folding lottery tickets into the space



behind her driver's license in her old brown wallet. Her father would be on her brother's heels, looking down from behind him, making sure he didn't hurt himself the way he did when he was four, pulling a boiling pot of bean and bacon soup down on his head. Katie remembered when he came home from the hospital, a miniature mummy lying in his bed, motionless. She remembered her father that night, the only time he yelled, calling her mother names Katie felt she deserved, names Katie would sometimes use if she wanted to get a reaction from her mother.

"Always pick three, Carol," Mrs. Willis told her mother. "There's always a three."

"Oh?" her mother said, and smirked, a lottery expert. If there was one science her mother understood, it was the theory of gravity and weight that brought the colored balls spinning out of the vortex and sliding neatly, face out, into the clear plastic chute. "Would you be surprised to learn the three has a one in twenty-three appearance ratio?"

Mrs. Willis didn't understand what she meant.

"Did you get the numbers?" Katie's father asked, Kevin crabbed forward on his shoulders.

"We're going to win for sure," her mother said, patting her wallet. She made a nest in her purse and tucked the wallet down in it.

Katie's father didn't care about winning the lottery but pretended to be excited when the local weatherman asked whichever citizen had volunteered to press the red button to release the balls. Katie didn't care about it either, mainly because Mrs. Willis said it was a fool's dream. Still, her mother would slap the yellow Formica counter confidently if the lottery rolled over, or groan if the jackpot dropped back down to a measly \$1 million.

"What would you do with the money?" Mrs. Willis asked on the ride back from the grocery store.

"Well, I'd move," Katie's mother said, a little rude.

"Of course you would," Mrs. Willis said. "But what else?"

"We'd get a new car," Katie's father said. Her father loved to work on cars, his and others'. She'd overheard other adults say, "Frank knows his cars." More than once.

"Would you give any away?" Mrs. Willis asked casually, not a test, but more in an interested tone.

"I'd give my sister some," Katie's mother said. "She has to scrape to get by."

Katie thought it would be nice to give some to her friend Berniece, who'd just moved to Baltimore a month earlier.

"Can we give some to Berniece?" she asked, figuring on maybe just enough to buy a plane they could use to fly back and forth between Baltimore and Seattle on.

"Berniece's dad got a big job, honey," her mother said, looking at her father. "They don't need any money."

"Everybody needs money, right, Mom?" Kevin said from between them in the front seat.

"Everybody needs money," she repeated, agreeing.

The hour and a half Mr. Quartullo spent meeting with the bank executives every afternoon allowed Frank to pick up his children from school. At first the other kids had stared, like they did on his block when he made the corner of their street in the big white limo. "It shows how poor we really are," his wife complained, but the kids loved it. By now, however, even the other kids' parents were used to the limo idling in the school parking lot. Frank worried that the limo would cause other kids to tease Katie and Kevin, but there wasn't time to go back for his car and fetch Mr. Quartullo by four o'clock.

He liked to arrive four or five minutes before the bell rang, so he could be there if anyone tried to pick on Kevin. He and his wife had taken Kevin to a specialist when he was five, but the specialist allayed them of their worst fears. In fact, no one suspected Kevin was less than normal unless his wife made her usual comment: "He's

a little slow.” Frank begged her to treat Kevin like she treated Katie.

Kevin would normally play with the television set in the backseat while Katie recounted their day at school. This time, though, they were both excited about something.

“What is it, Kev?” Frank asked.

“They got a sea otter,” Kevin said, clapping his hands.

“Who does?”

“His teacher told them they found a wounded sea otter in Puget Sound,” Katie explained. “They’re nursing it at the Seattle Aquarium. Some kids in his class have been to see it.”

“Can we go see it, Dad?” Kevin asked.

“Sure,” Frank said. “We can go this weekend.”

“Let’s go now!” Kevin said.

Frank knew he had only an hour, then there was the odometer to consider, the aquarium over ten miles each direction, but Kevin’s excitement drilled him all the way through, so he said, “Let’s go, then.”

Frank made all the lights, and the freeway traffic was light. Katie and Kevin tried to guess how big the sea otter was. He pulled up to the entrance, and everyone looked when the kids came bounding out of the backseat.

The aquarium was swarmed with kids. Frank recognized the little boy who got picked up in the red station wagon and the two little girls who got a ride home with the attractive red-haired woman, whom he hoped was somehow around. Katie saw a girl from her class and ran over to talk to her. Signs pointed the way to the sea otter, and Kevin ran up to the wall-size tank when he saw it.

“What happened to him?” Kevin asked.

“He probably had an accident,” Frank said. He assumed like everyone else that it was poachers, but couldn’t think of a way to explain poaching. An accident was easy enough to understand.

The light coming through the water was blue, painting the faces of everyone standing in front of the tank blue too. The sea otter hung in the background, nervously dancing from corner to corner,

favoring its right foot. It was bigger than Frank thought it would be, almost five feet long from nose to tail, its dark fur black around its scared eyes.

Everyone was silent, waiting for the sea otter to do something that would let them know it was okay. The adults filled the back corners of the room, hovering behind their children, who were pointing at the clams and mussels being dropped in by a worker in an orange jumpsuit.

Frank watched Kevin watch the clams and mussels rain down on the sea otter. He pressed his palm against the glass, and the boy next to him did too. Kevin said something to the boy and Frank leaned in to hear, but the whispering in the room was too loud, drowning out whatever Kevin was saying.

"We have to go now, Kevin," Frank said.

The two boys were laughing together.

"Okay, bye," Kevin said to the boy.

They emerged from the darkness just as Katie appeared.

"Hold on, Dad. I just want to look," she said.

"I want one more look too," Kevin said.

Frank glanced at his watch. He needed a good twenty-five minutes to get back to the bank. "Okay, but hurry," he said.

Out past the other tanks, the afternoon sun angled down toward the ocean. Frank imagined the creatures around him living in the darkness under the sun and felt safe with them, inside the liquid walls.

"Dad, what's the otter's name?" Kevin asked.

"I don't know," he answered. "Does it have a name?"

"It's Lucky," Katie said.

"That's not its name," Kevin protested.

"It should be," Katie said.

"That boy said a whale bit the otter's leg," Kevin said, wanting his father to verify the fact.

"It's possible," Frank guessed, torn between letting Kevin's imagination run with the idea and worrying that the thought would

scare him so that he wouldn't be able to sleep.

"It was probably a poacher," Katie said. "A poacher probably almost got him."

"What's a poacher?" Kevin asked, again looking at his father for an answer.

"It's someone who hunts," Frank said, proud of his vague answer.

"I'm going to be a poacher," Kevin said, taking aim at a tank with an invisible rifle. He pulled the trigger just as the fish scattered.

"You'd kill Lucky?" Frank asked, hoping to make his point.

Kevin thought for a minute, then made a little run ahead, jumping and turning to face Frank and Katie. "I wouldn't kill otters," he said. "I'd kill otter poachers. A poacher's poacher, right, Dad?"

"Right," Frank laughed. He dropped them off at home and told Carol he'd be back at the usual time. Speeding down the freeway, he thought about the sea otter at the aquarium and wondered if he should get a small tank for their house. They couldn't afford it, Carol would say. Maybe a fishbowl, then, Frank decided. A fishbowl would give them all something to look at.

Carol saw Joyce about once a month. She actually saw her more than that—they belonged to the same book club, where they'd met—but once a month she'd have Joyce over to her house, instead of having Frank drop her off at Joyce's house, a sprawling adobe structure with a pool and a guest house.

"Your furniture is so big," Joyce had said the first time she came over, and Carol had never forgotten it. She'd spent the day before cleaning and arranging the worn couch and chair in various drawing room positions. She stared at the yellow-and-white pattern until it came into present fashion.

Frank didn't like Joyce; he didn't like anything Carol liked. He wouldn't read the books she'd read, wouldn't go out with her and Joyce and Joyce's husband. Carol knew it was jealousy, all the way

around, but if he wasn't interested in improvement, well, she knew in the back of her mind what that meant. She couldn't wait to be improved.

Joyce handed Carol a copy of the next book for their group.

"The imagery was fantastic," Joyce said, taking the chair.

"I love the title," Carol said, putting the book on the end table. She'd begged Frank to buy a coffee table—she knew where to get a great one for a hundred dollars—but he'd said, "Maybe for your birthday," and dropped it. The empty space at their feet screamed poverty to Carol.

"You'll love it," Joyce said.

Carol hated the way Joyce read the books ahead, giving her review before Carol had even cracked the cover. At first she suspected Joyce was skimming the books, or knew someone who'd read them; it burned Carol to think maybe Joyce's husband might be the one, giving Joyce the characters and plot so she could sound smart. Carol was too embarrassed to admit she could never finish the books, always waiting to hear how they ended at the discussion group.

Carol offered coffee; she'd been experimenting with the exotic flavorings in the coffee and tea aisle at the grocery store and hoped Joyce would be impressed with her latest find: orange-almond mocha.

"I can't," Joyce said. "I'm taking medication for my heart."

Carol hadn't heard anything about this. What could be wrong with perfect little Joyce?

The front door swung open, the doorknob fitting into the round groove worn into the wall from the constant running in and out. Katie and Kevin put their books in the empty space where the coffee table would be and ran into the kitchen. "Did you hear about the sea otter, Mom?" Kevin called excitedly from the kitchen.

"What on earth is he talking about now?" Carol said, pretending to be amused by her children, but secretly upset at their intrusion. Her anger increased when she saw Frank in the doorway in his work

costume. If she didn't know him, she'd think Joyce's chauffeur was here to pick her up.

"They've got an otter at the aquarium," he said. "I took the kids to see it."

"Aren't you working today?" Carol asked, implying he wasn't, and hadn't worked in a thousand years.

"I'm just dropping them off," Frank said. "Hi, Joyce."

"Hi, Frank," Joyce said, picking the new book up off the end table to examine it.

"I'll be home later," Frank said, turning in the doorway. Carol was silent, waiting for Frank's words to clear out. The kids' talking crowded the silence, and Carol and Joyce sat quietly on her big furniture.

"Why do you constantly embarrass me in front of my friends?" Carol asked. Frank closed the front door behind him. He was excited about the surprise he'd brought for her and said "What?" in answer to her question. "I was having a nice time with Joyce and you had to come oafing onto the scene."

"I just wanted to say hello, that's all," Frank said, not hurt by her words. He threw his cap onto the couch.

"Is dinner ready?" Katie asked, poking her head in the front door.

"Not yet, honey," Frank said. "In a while."

"We'll be at Mrs. Willis's," she said, slamming the door.

"And another thing," Carol said, snatching the cap up almost as it hit the cushions. "When are we going to get new furniture? We've had that couch since it was new."

"It's still good," Frank said. "You picked it out."

"I picked it out *ten years ago*," Carol said, spittle collecting in the corners of her mouth. "Everything we own is old."

"If you want a new couch, we'll get a new couch," Frank said,

forgetting for a minute about his surprise.

"We can't afford a new couch," Carol said, not appreciating Frank's teasing her. "And you know it."

"I'm sure I could get a couch from somewhere," he said.

"I'm talking about going to the store and picking one out and having it delivered," she said quietly, sitting in the chair. "Like normal people do. I'm tired of getting everything secondhand."

They sat like that, everything around them becoming that much older, that much more worn out. Frank remembered his surprise.

"Mr. Quartullo invited us to a party at his house this Saturday night," Frank said, like he was reading it off a card. "Do you want to go?"

Carol sat up in her chair, excited. "What's the party for?"

"It's just a party. You know, like the one I worked last month."

Carol's expression fell. "Are you working this one too?"

"No. He invited us as *guests*," Frank said. "He doesn't need a car that night."

Carol wanted to call Joyce up and couldn't wait to tell her.

"I'll have to have something to wear," Carol mused.

"We have a little money," Frank said. "Why not buy a new dress?"

Carol leaped from the chair and kissed him. "You don't mind?"

Frank tasted his wife's thick lipstick on his lips. He knew a party would make up for other things, and he'd tried to get them invited many times before. He didn't care anything about Mr. Quartullo's parties, but he knew Carol did, and he felt guilty for giving her so little compared with what he'd promised when they were married.

"We'll need a sitter," Frank said.

Carol was imagining herself in a glamorous dress among others in glamorous dresses. She knew Frank would wear the same black suit he wore to everything, but she didn't care.

"Mrs. Willis will probably do it," she said absently.

"I'm sure she will," Frank said.



Carol busied herself in the kitchen, happily frying the floured chicken in the electric skillet, the sizzling in the pan sounding like applause in her ears.

Katie petted Scout, Mrs. Willis's Labrador puppy. The dog was wild from excitement, running in and out of Katie's and Kevin's legs.

"Kevin dear," Mrs. Willis said, "would you like to take Scout out in the backyard?"

Kevin clapped his hands against his leg, leading the dog out the back door.

"That dog's more than I can handle," Mrs. Willis sighed, sitting at the kitchen table with Katie. "But my daughter didn't want me to be lonely."

"Do you get lonely?" Katie asked. She always liked to hear Mrs. Willis's stories about how Mr. Willis had saved lives, pulling people from burning houses and cars. Katie couldn't understand how one day he'd gone in and done what he did every day but hadn't walked out. It didn't seem possible to her that someone trying to help someone would be punished for doing it. "That's what you get for trying to be a hero," her mother had said when Katie told her. "You're better off minding your own business."

"I get lonely," Mrs. Willis answered. "People always get lonely."

"What can you do?" Katie asked.

"You can't do anything," Mrs. Willis said. "You only worry about things you can change."

"When I'm lonely, I play with Berniece," Katie said.

"I thought Berniece moved," Mrs. Willis said.

They both could hear Scout and Kevin barking back and forth in the backyard.

"She did," Katie said, putting her head in her arms on the table. "But I still pretend like she's here. That's what I do until she comes back."

Mrs. Willis smiled. She worried about the girl, especially because her mother seemed absent, but she knew what kind of trouble she'd cause by trying to tell her Berniece was gone for good. It was important to know what forever meant, she thought. "I pretend Mr. Willis is here too sometimes," she said. "But I know he isn't really."

"Do you think he might come back?" Katie asked. "What if he's really alive and he lost his memory and he wakes up one day—"

"He's not coming back," Mrs. Willis said softly. "I know he's not coming back and that's okay." Mrs. Willis reached over and squeezed Katie's arm. "But I carry him around with me wherever I go."

"I carry Berniece around too," Katie said.

They heard a splash from the backyard. Mrs. Willis got up and yelled out the window, cracked open above the deep kitchen sink. "Don't let him fall in the pool, Kevin. He can't swim yet." She turned to Katie. "I knew I should've deflated it after the grandkids left."

Katie thought of something she wanted to ask. "What happens when you're not nice to someone?"

"It hurts their feelings," Mrs. Willis said, sitting back down. "Hasn't anyone ever said something that hurt your feelings?"

"I guess," Katie said. She looked at her folded arms. "It doesn't mean that the person doesn't like them, does it?"

Mrs. Willis smiled. "Of course not. Sometimes people are mean and don't realize it."

"But it would be bad if you were mean on purpose, right?"

"You shouldn't be mean to anyone," Mrs. Willis said. "Even if they're mean to you first."

"I think some people are mean," Katie said.

Mrs. Willis wondered if she was talking about her mother. "Who?"

"Just some people." Katie shrugged. "I don't know."

"Some people *are* mean," Mrs. Willis said. "But you're not one

of them.”

Katie’s dad knocked on the door.

“Hi, Mrs. Willis,” her dad said. “Katie, it’s time for dinner.” He searched the room and asked, a little alarmed, “Where’s Kevin?”

“He’s out back with the dog,” Mrs. Willis said. “They’re playing tag.”

Suddenly there was a splash, followed by yelping, and Kevin screamed.

“Katie, I told you to watch him,” her dad yelled, sprinting for the backyard. Katie and Mrs. Willis got up from the table and went to the kitchen window.

“Look, Dad, Scout swims like the otter,” Kevin said. The sopping dog was pawing at the sides of the plastic pool, trying to get out. Kevin raced around as the dog moved from side to side, pushing the dog back in with his feet.

“Kevin, stop it,” Frank yelled. He reached Kevin just as Kevin lost his balance and fell on the side of the pool, draining the water onto the lawn. Scout jumped over Kevin, who started to cry.

“Poor Scout,” Mrs. Willis said, bending down to pet the shaken dog. “He was just playing.”

Katie saw her dad pick Kevin up with both arms. He carried him through the gate and back to their house. “I gotta go,” she said. “I don’t want to make my mom mad.”

Mrs. Willis was still trying to calm the dog, who stood shaking at her feet.

Carol didn’t want to be dragged to the shore the morning of her big party, but she felt guilty for spanking Kevin for nothing, for dropping his sandwich on the floor. She was really mad at Frank for not washing the car; she could just see herself pulling up to Mr. Quartullo’s mansion gates in their dirty, broken-down car, so she decided to go along with Frank and the kids to watch the sea otter rereleased into the ocean.

Frank had heard about it on the radio but still wasn't prepared for what they saw when they arrived at the shoreline. A local high school marching band stood in uniform, the hum and squeak from their tuning and warming up attracting the seagulls above. The people from the aquarium had set up a red-and-white-striped tent, where workers in navy-blue shirts hovered around a long yellow cylinder, behind which a dark figure rolled and twitched.

"Is that the otter?" Kevin asked, pressing ahead.

"That's mean," Katie said.

"That's how they move them," Carol said, craning her neck.

"I can't see," Kevin whined.

"Do you want to sit on my shoulders?" Frank asked.

"I want to get closer," Kevin said.

Frank spotted a pier where some schoolchildren had gathered with their parents. "Let's move over there." Carol rolled her eyes and huffed, dragging behind as they skirted around the people edging closer to the water.

The band came to life and an explosion of red balloons appeared, floating up in a bunch until the wind from the ocean forced them apart. Shaded eyes followed their flight.

Frank reached the pier with Kevin, looking back for Katie and Carol. He spotted them talking to Joyce and her husband, whom he must not have seen as he dashed past. Kevin pulled him toward the end, away from the clump of people on the pier.

The mayor squawked through a portable PA system, but they were too far away to hear the words. His voice rose and then the ocean interrupted it, the tide rolling suddenly onto the beach, cresting at the feet of the front row of people, who scattered to avoid the water.

Kevin danced to the edge of the pier. "Will the otter swim by here?"

"I hope so," Frank said. He had an uneasy feeling about the otter swimming in the other direction, creating disappointment on the end of their pier.

Frank watched Kevin take two steps toward the edge and pulled him back, where he stood for a minute, patient, then he wound up again, drifting toward the end of the pier. Frank felt the crowd quiet, and the wind came in low and fast from the water.

"Look, Kevin," he said. The blue-shirted workers from the aquarium lifted the yellow tube a few inches off the ground, shuttling it with difficulty into the water. Kevin took a step away from his father.

"Are they going to let it go now?" he asked.

"Watch," Frank said, the power of control over the whole event in his voice.

The lid was hoisted, and the crowd murmured as the contents of the tube emptied into the water. The applause disoriented the otter, which rolled over in the surf before getting up on its feet. Startled by the smiling crowd, the otter turned toward the ocean and waddled into the deep water, its brown body turning deep black under the surface.

Frank felt the noise from the crowd swell around him as the otter rocketed by the pier. All the children screamed and pointed, not wanting their parents to miss it.

"There it goes, Dad," Kevin shrieked, turning with the others to follow it. Frank glanced up, for Kevin's benefit, but looked back down quickly, nervous that he'd find Kevin gone.

Katie appeared at the end of the dock, Carol trailing behind, still waving to Joyce. "Did we all see it?" Carol asked, ready to go. Frank knew she hadn't seen it and had probably been gabbing with Joyce through the whole thing.

"Look, it's still out there," Kevin said, excited. He pointed out the head that bobbed to the surface every ten feet or so.

Carol rocked on her heels, bored. Frank silently pleaded for a few more minutes.

The band began to disperse, the clank of their instruments reaching the end of the pier. The tent was collapsed and people headed for their cars.

"Let's go," Carol said, turning for land. Katie followed her.

Frank touched his son's shoulders. "Let's go, Kev." They walked off the pier, past a small group of kids who were still watching.

The one in the red baseball cap and khaki shorts was the one who screamed first.

The others screamed too. Frank turned and saw the otter in the jaws of a shark, being whipped back and forth. The otter's squeals were loud and then soft, loud and soft, as if someone were tuning a CB radio.

Carol and Katie stopped and turned around. Kevin ran to the pier, not sure of what was happening. When he saw the otter, he started to scream, and Frank couldn't reach him in time to stop the sound from spreading across the ocean. The last whispers of the dying otter overtook him, carried in on the carcinogenic wind.

"I think he's asleep," Frank said to Mrs. Willis. "He should be down for the night." He'd given the boy half a tablet of a sleeping pill. He didn't want Kevin to wake up and find him gone.

The ride home had shaken Frank. Kevin sobbed in the front seat, between him and Carol. From the backseat, Katie tried to explain what had happened.

"Sharks have to eat too," she said matter-of-factly. "We're all in the food chain somewhere."

Obviously something from school, Frank thought. But it was the level of understanding that he'd always hoped for Kevin, and even though Kevin was not as old as Katie, he felt like Kevin would never have the comprehension level needed to live on his own in the world. This brought a great sense of failure to Frank, and he tried to get Carol to share some of the responsibility, but she stared out the window, inattentive to their devastated son, imagining herself arriving at the gates of Mr. Quartullo's mansion outside of Seattle.

Later, Carol sat staring out the window, leaning forward in her seat so as not to wrinkle her new dress, trying to fade Frank and his

black suit out of her field of vision. She hoped to walk in in front of him, knowing her tight red dress, pearls, and black heels would blind everyone to Frank's worn suit jacket and scuffed shoes.

"You could've at least polished your shoes," she said, her voice full of bitterness.

"I forgot," Frank said quietly. He wanted to get there quickly, to give Carol the whole night to play out her fantasies of being wealthy and among the powerful. He knew it would go a long way into their future, and sped along out of the city.

"Slow down," Carol commanded. "You're driving like an idiot."

Frank eased off the accelerator, stung by her name-calling. He was still upset about the day's events and felt some larger conspiracy at work. Yesterday he'd imagined today as a golden time when his whole family would have the best day they'd had in months, thanks to him. It wasn't thanks he wanted, but he didn't imagine the evening beginning with Carol calling him an idiot.

"That dress is beautiful," he remarked. "And I like the necklace."

"It does go well, doesn't it?" Carol asked, rolling the pearls against her skin. "I mean, you really do like it, don't you?"

"You look great," Frank said, meaning it.

"I just want to impress your boss, honey," she said.

Frank appreciated the lie; it was all he required from her. He tried to remember the last true thing she'd said, but he couldn't sort out what was false from everything else about her and realized how little there would be if he could.

"Look out for—" Carol started, gripping the dashboard, the purse in her lap flying up and smacking the windshield as they collided with the red car that lurched out of the darkness without its headlights on.

Frank could hear the radio from the red car blaring, and the metal of his car gave a final creak before everything froze. Carol slipped back against her seat, her dress riding up on her thigh in a way that convinced Frank of the conspiracy against him.

"Are you okay?" Frank asked.

"I think so," Carol whispered, ruined.

The passenger door of the other car opened just as the headlights switched on and off, and two teenagers spilled out, dazed, the flash of yellow light charging the crumpled metal, so that it glowed in the punitive moonlight.

Katie had her favorite red pen poised, ready for the numbers. Mrs. Willis had gone into Kevin's bedroom when something had woken him up. Katie decided she'd stay up until her parents got home, no matter what Mrs. Willis might say.

The news came back from commercial and there was the weatherman, his hair feathered back and matted down, as usual. Katie'd watched the numbers with her mom so often they both knew every suit the weatherman had in his closet. Tonight it was the purple-and-yellow paisley tie with the dark suit. Blues and blacks were hard to distinguish on their TV.

The first number dropped and it matched the one on her mother's ticket. The second dropped. A match. The third and fourth numbers matched too, and Katie moved right up to the screen. There seemed to be a moment of suspension, where everything was broken down into red and green, and the room grew loud with Kevin's sobbing. Katie turned the volume up, and the last ball grumbled out of the hurricane of numbered balls, spinning away from the vortex, down the tube, plunking down next to the other five numbers.

It matched.

"We won!" Katie shrieked. For a moment Kevin's sobs were silenced.

"What did you say, dear?" Mrs. Willis said from Kevin's room.

The front door opened and her parents entered slowly into the room. Mrs. Willis came down the hall and said, "Oh dear, what happened?"

"We've had an accident," Frank said wearily. "We've been in an accident."



"Are you hurt?" Mrs. Willis asked. She reached out for Carol's purse. "Do you need to go to the hospital?"

"We've been to the hospital," Carol said.

Kevin appeared in the hallway.

"Mom, we won!" Katie said, excited. "We won the lottery!"

Katie felt the shock waves in her bones, and her mother stood up stiff. "What are you talking about?"

"Your numbers match," Katie said, handing the ticket with little red check marks to her mother. "We won three point one million dollars."

"Let me see that," Frank said, unconvinced but afraid of the implications of winning that much money. Carol seemed as fresh as when she'd stepped from the shower three hours earlier. It was as if they still had a whole car, an invitation to a party, and a new red dress and pearls. It felt to Frank like everything was new again. His heart fell when he saw Kevin alone in the hallway, his face red and wet.

"That's wonderful," Mrs. Willis said, hugging Katie. "Isn't that wonderful?"

"I can't believe it," Carol kept saying. "I just can't believe it."

"Mom, we're rich," Katie said, words she'd been waiting to say since she was old enough to talk. "We're rich! We're rich!"

"We're rich," her mother laughed. "I can't believe we're rich." She put her arms around Mrs. Willis and Katie and began jumping up and down. Frank and Kevin watched the ceremonial dance from the hallway. Kevin looked up at his father and smiled. "We're rich," he said. "What does that mean?"

"We're rich, we're rich, we're rich," Katie and her mother chanted. Mrs. Willis had ceased jumping up and down. She was sitting on the couch, massaging her knee.

"I'm going to call and double-check the numbers," her mother said, skipping into the kitchen.

"I'm happy for you," Mrs. Willis said. "It couldn't happen to anyone nicer."

Frank took Kevin back to his room, explaining what it meant to be rich. "It's when you can get anything you want, anytime."

Their voices faded down the hall, and Katie skipped back and forth in the living room. "No more big furniture," she told Mrs. Willis. She stopped skipping, as if someone had shut her down. She went over and sat next to Mrs. Willis. "This means we'll be moving away."

"Yes, it probably does," Mrs. Willis agreed. She stopped rubbing her knee.

"I won't see you anymore," Katie said.

"Maybe you'll move someplace close by," Mrs. Willis said.

"Berniece moved and she moved far away," Katie said.

"If you move far away, I'll still think of you," Mrs. Willis said.

Katie felt like she would cry when her mother shuffled back into the living room. "We're not rich," she said, accusation in her voice. "You copied the last number wrong."

Mrs. Willis sat still. Katie said, "I'm sorry, Mom." Her mother stood before the couch, the bruises on her arms from the accident starting to color. She picked her purse up off the end table, and Katie saw the long rip in the shoulder of her dress.

"That means we're not moving away," Katie said to Mrs. Willis. "I'm glad."

"I'm glad too," Mrs. Willis said, stroking Katie's hair.

"Fuck you," her mother said to Mrs. Willis. "Fuck you you're glad we're not moving. I can't stand this place one fucking minute more." Her mother started crying, spitting out words Katie thought only her father knew. "Get the fuck out," she said to Mrs. Willis, grabbing her arm and lifting her off the couch.

"Carol—" Mrs. Willis started to protest.

"Mom, don't." Katie began to cry. "Stop it."

"I hate this fucking place." She pushed Mrs. Willis toward the front door. Katie's screams brought her father running down the hall, Kevin right behind him. Her father pulled her mother off Mrs. Willis, and Mrs. Willis fell to the floor with a thud. Her mother was

still crying, and her father put his arms around her. She shook so hard they both almost lost their balance. Katie put her arms around Mrs. Willis. "Are you okay?" Mrs. Willis didn't answer, and Katie asked again, searching the faces in the room. "Are you okay?"

# This, Too, Stars You

TO HEAR THE PAPERS TELL IT, SEAN FEAR IS IN HIDING. THE PAPERS say Sean is suicidal, that a string of call girls working under the cover of night is the only thing keeping him among the living. But everyone knows the papers always write around—or near—the facts, and the fact is Sean is a major movie star, and major movie stars rate higher than the president in importance. That's Gina's favorite line.

What the papers don't mention is the armed security guard at the gate to Sean's Mulholland Drive house.

"Jesus," Gina says, shifting in the back of the idling cab. She massages her bloated stomach, our unborn little girl. We're having trouble agreeing on a name. Last week the choices were Lori, Judy, Susan, or Maple. Before we boarded the plane in Phoenix, I suggested Gina. Sure, I was trying to be funny, but I was trying to be endearing, too. Naming our child is not our only problem.

"Look at that," I say, pointing out two more guards near the front of the house. The bay windows overlooking L.A. are curtained, the palm trees lining the driveway still. "Is Heidi here?" I ask.

"You asked me that on the plane," Gina says.

"I know. What did you tell me? I forgot," I say. The question seems more relevant now, is all.

"I told you yes."

"But the *engagement* is off, right?" I say, trying to redeem myself. Appearing to pay attention is half of anything.

Gina nods, shifting again, impatiently wanting the cabdriver, who is listening for something he could sell to the papers, to stop the cab. Anything he could learn from me and Gina would be tame compared with what has been said since someone sold a tape of Sean and an unknown minor to the news.

I pay the cabdriver, who thanks me in Spanish and drives away. The left taillight is out and the right one blinks lazily as the cabdriver gets one last look.

"Are you going to carry my bags?" Gina asks, still pissed about my recent announcement that I am going to quit my sales job where I litter the world with sporting goods. Littering is what Gina calls it.

She demanded to know why I was quitting, but I told her, "Hey, babe, relax, I got a master plan." She doesn't like talk like that, my Hollywood talk, but I know she's just upset about what has happened to her brother.

I was the one who suggested we visit, trying to be a nice guy.

The guards posted outside the front door seem to know who we are, the taller one nodding in a way that suggests he's seen me before, and it gives me the heebie-jeebies.

Sean opens the front door.

"Michael," Gina says, relief in her voice.

"Hi, sis," he says, his dark eyes lighting up under his white baseball cap. As they hug, Sean makes a theatrical move to avoid Gina's bulging stomach. You love the theatrical moves.

"Hey, Sean," I say. We shake hands. Gina has asked me to call him Michael, especially now, but I've only ever known him as Sean. When he was Gina's brother Michael, he was off in California, becoming Sean Fear. Michael is the skinny, dark-haired teenager in Gina's family album at home; Sean is blond, tan, and fit. Besides, once you start calling someone Sean, you can't just start calling him Michael. "How's Heidi?" I ask.

"She's inside," he says, helping with our bags.

The air conditioner in the long hall blows air down from the ceiling vents, cold. The sudden change in temperature makes me

shiver. We leave the bags next to the expensive teak and marble thing under the mirror. I run my fingers along the inside of a bisected rock up on a shelf until the voices in the front room tell me I'm lagging behind.

Heidi is sprawled out on the brown leather sofa, her head all the way back like a murder victim. She tries to come to life when she sees us but can only manage a smile and a weak salute with her thin arm. The sun outside sneaks in around the dark curtains, white and hot.

"I need to rest a little," Gina says, leaning against the smooth wall.

"This way," Sean says.

The air-conditioning vent in the bedroom is closed, and I open it, the chilled air pushing its way around the room, chasing the hot air back on itself until the whole room is cold. Gina settles comfortably on the bed, her body swallowing most of its surface.

"Do you need anything?" I ask. I'd be glad to get her anything she needs.

"No," she answers. The room grows colder.

"I'll just be in the kitchen," I say. "If you need anything—"

"Okay," she says, closing her eyes.

I survey the landscape before I go, watching her enormous belly rise up and grow, every day the baby becoming that much older, too old now for the abortion I suggested anyway, so why can't she forget I even mentioned it? It was just an option, one so far removed from reality as to be the words coming from the television, but words she can't forget. If I could get them back, I'd erase them from my vocabulary.

I close the door, and Sean is asking Heidi if she needs anything. Heidi hears but doesn't answer.

"She's still upset," Sean tells me when we're alone in the kitchen. "I don't blame her."

"At least she's here," I say. "You're lucky to have her, I mean."

"She *is* great," Sean admits. "Do you want anything?"

I do but say I don't.

Sean pours himself a glass of grapefruit juice, and I tell him I'll have one too. We sit at the kitchen table, and the shine from the clean tile coupled with the low hum of the stainless steel refrigerator gives the impression of time travel.

Sean sighs and then smiles, seeing I am uncomfortable, not knowing if I want to talk about his problems or not. I don't really, there's nothing to say, I'm a little uneasy about him, not used to seeing him without his movie star smile. Looking at him, all I can see is the tape, him and the girl, silhouettes on hotel sheets, maybe the Ritz-Carlton, the two this way and that, up and under, in and out. On the tape all you hear him say is, "That's good, that's good."

Before I saw the tape, I imagined Sean dazzling women in bed; I liked to think about Heidi especially. His quick, short movements on the tape erased that image, and Gina momentarily stopped talking about him all the time. It's the one thing you get tired of, hearing how great Sean is.

"How's the baby coming along?" he asks.

"Three more months," I say. He seems ready for the next subject, his mind scanning for a common bond.

"Gina still working?" he asks.

I nod, not wanting to tell him that she quit her court reporting job, not because of the pregnancy but because the stress of his ordeal was too much for her concentration. This small lie forces itself from my lips before I really consider it, before I figure out Gina will probably mention that she quit her job.

The grapefruit juice tastes like acid in my mouth.

Heidi calls his name and he stands up, automatic, going for the cupboard. He tilts a brown plastic bottle, producing a blue tablet. "She needs this," he says, apologetic. He's gone and then he's back again before I can think of anything to say.

Later there's a knock at the door, and Heidi turns from the kitchen cupboard and is gone, out for the night with her friends. In

what I guess is a move to be closer to her, Sean casually fits himself into the mold Heidi left in the leather couch.

Gina wakes when I lie down next to her, but the silence between us puts her back to sleep. Outside, the sun begins to fade. I listen to the silence in the house, no phone ringing, no television, no upstairs/downstairs neighbors thumping or screaming—nothing. Gina begins to snore, and I turn on my side to watch her sleep.

I'm lucky to have her, is the way I look at it. It's her nature to be kind to people, to want to help them. That's how she found me. I came into the hospital after trying to squeeze my car through the front door of McCabe's, my favorite bar. I was so nervous about the policeman who had tailed the ambulance to the emergency room (speeding, no insurance, no registration, no seat belt) that I thought it best to try and hide the fact that I was drunk. I knew I needed a credible ally.

"Listen," I said to Gina, a candy striper. I saw she was about to stick me with God knows what, and I was terrified it would react violently with the alcohol looping through my veins, so I thought she should know: "I've been drinking."

She smiled a smooth butterscotch smile.

"It's a secret," I said, winking.

"Okay," she said, winking back, and right before I passed out, I felt a powerful collusion between us, me and Gina against the law. When I woke, I found Gina had admitted me to the hospital. "The officer is going to come back in the morning," she said. "Get a good night's sleep."

I wonder if she remembers how she protected me, if she ever gets the feeling still. I put my hand on her stomach and she opens her eyes. "Hello," I say.

"Hi," she says. "Where's Michael?"

"He's in the front room," I say.

She puts a hand against her cheek. "I don't feel so good," she says.

I put the back of my hand to her forehead, feeling the heat.



"I was just thinking about the hospital," I tell her.

"What about it?" she asks.

"About how you saved my life," I say, reminding her.

"I didn't save your life," she says. Her face tightens and I draw back my hand. She doesn't say anything but gets up and goes into the bathroom, checks her face in the mirror and heads for the front room.

I remind myself it means everything to try. That you don't always win when you try is a bitter pill, but I've learned to accept certain defeats against the victories that come now and then.

My latest victory is getting Gina pregnant. Monthly visits to the gynecologist pointed to me as the prime suspect in the crime of infertility. The militaristic precautions I took with women in college seem laughable now.

But this victory—like all my victories—came on the heels of defeat. The night before we found out we were pregnant, we'd gone to the grocery store together, as always, and when we got to the checkout line, our groceries for the week already bagged and in the waiting cart, my check required a manager's signature. I explained to Gina about the small problem we'd had a few weeks earlier while the line behind us grew.

The manager was forever in coming, and I was embarrassed as people started to leave our line for register 12, opened up by the delay. "If he'd just come and sign it," I said. "I cleared this up last week." The checkout girl, a high schooler with short brown hair, just smiled. "I cleared it up last week," I said to Gina, who wouldn't look me in the eyes. She left me with the checkout girl, walking straight out to our car.

Finally the manager did come, the same manager I'd cleared this matter up with the week before, and I thanked him for taking so long. Seconds after, I pushed our cart to the parking lot, where Gina didn't help me load the groceries. The grocery store was the last in a short run of defeats, coming after the disconnection of our phone and the near repossession of Gina's car.

"I'm going to sleep," Gina says, coming back in from the front room. "Michael wants to know if you'll pick up some stuff for dinner."

"Sure," I say. I want to kiss her good night on her lips but settle for the flaming skin of her cheek.

Sean is inside the garage with the garage door closed. His body shrinks in the yellow light, and he tells me, "Don't let anyone give you shit," pointing at the plates on his charcoal convertible Mercedes: fear.

He hands me a folded slip of paper, the list, and a set of keys, which sink like gold into my hands.

"Be right back," I say. He waves and steps back into the house when I click open the garage door.

I creep down Sunset Boulevard, hoping to attract attention. I pick up the car phone and pretend to talk to my agent, or an adoring fan who somehow got my cell number. I pass a wall-like billboard for Sean's new movie. The movie is doing better than it might have, is one way to look at it.

I cradle the phone with my shoulder as I turn a corner, imaging what that looks like to the average pedestrian, when the phone shrieks in my ear. My shoulder drops and the phone lands in my lap, where it rings again. Not sure if I should answer it or not, I reason it might be Sean, so I punch the send button.

"Hello?"

A sharp crackling comes across the wire. "You can't hide what you did," the man's voice on the other end says. I'm slow to process the information, and before I can say anything, the line goes dead. I coolly insert the handset back in its cradle, but my heart is trying to beat itself free of my chest. The voice sounded like Sean's. I dial Sean's number—I'll ask him something about the groceries when he answers—but the recording reminds me that he's changed his number.

Somehow the grocery store Sean described is not where he said it would be, or I turned left when I should've turned right. Instead I'm at a place called Out of Water, a club where the valet parks the Mercedes for me, seeing the license plates.

The bouncer, a blond mountain of white muscle, removes the velvet rope, and a very sexy woman says something I can't hear over the pulsing club music and diverts me from the main room down a dark, velvet hallway choked with herbal incense.

In the tiny back room where the hallway spills out, I expect to see movie stars with hookers, but instead there is only a bar without a mirror behind it. The bartender, a short, unmuscular type, welcomes me. A man and woman at the bar turn and, not recognizing me, turn away. The booths along the far wall are red and empty, and after ordering a 7UP, not what I really want, I sit in the corner.

It would be easy to do something embarrassing here, I think. That's the main trouble I cause from drinking. Whenever Gina and I go out, she always gets that look, the *Are you going to embarrass us tonight?* look. I always promise not to and try to alleviate her fears by acting regal at the parties she takes me to, parties thrown by the lawyers and the doctors she knows, introducing me to people with infinitely more pull in this world than I will ever have.

The reoccurring theme of me not measuring up upsets me so that I can't finish the 7UP, and I set the glass on the bar. The bartender, who is reaching under the bar for something, doesn't see me, and I'm surprised at how much the absence of acknowledgment sears me.

On the street in front of the club, traffic is congested. Cars move tentatively through the late-night rush hour, trying to negotiate among crowds of careless jaywalkers. The valet brings Sean's car, the radio already on, and as I climb into the driver's seat, someone asks: "How do you know Sean?"

A woman as beautiful as any movie star comes up alongside the passenger's door.

"I'm sorry?"

"This is Sean's car," she says. "Who are you?"

"A friend," I say. "Who are you?"

"Darlene," she says, smiles. "Can you give me a ride home?"

"Where do you live?" I ask, wondering if I could find my way back after dropping her off.

"I live at Highland Gardens," she tells me. "Franklin Avenue near Outpost."

I nod, pretending to know where it is. "Where is Outpost?"

"I live right below Sean's house," she says, climbing in. Her nearness makes me accidentally rev the car, and the valet looks over at us.

The scene: me and Darlene cruising a convertible Mercedes down Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood. Wide shot of other vehicles slowing to look in, some honking as they pass. Cut to interior of car. Night. Present. Darlene picks through Sean's CDs with her slender hands, her thick hair flowing majestically over her bare shoulders. Not finding anything, she turns up the radio instead.

"How do you know Sean?" I ask. I'd love to get more dirt, to keep piling it on.

"I worked on his last movie," she answers. "I catered it." She waits a beat and then says, "You never said who you were."

"Jake," I say. Giving Darlene a fake name thrills me but isn't enough of an erasure to make any real difference. I've imagined this scenario before, but the fantasy was edgeless, and the certain realities of cruising through Hollywood in a Mercedes with a beautiful woman doesn't inject the joy I always imagined it would.

Breaking from the traffic, I speed down an empty stretch of road to accelerate the feeling of the wind whipping around us.

"And how do *you* know Sean?"

I think what to say. Finishing the lie seems impossible, so I blow it by telling her I'm married to his sister.

"Left the wife at home?" Her tone is that familiar mock I know so well.

"Up at the house," I tell her. "She's pregnant."

"And you're riding around in Sean's car picking up strange women?" she asks, laughs.

"I'm supposed to be picking up dinner," I say.

"It's after nine," she says, pointing to the luminous numbers between the gauges.

"Yeah," I say. I feel failure generally.

"You must be excited about having children," she says.

I haven't thought of it that way but agree with her.

"I want to have kids," she says, adding: "Someday."

"Why?" I blurt out. The desperate tone of the question is too revealing, and I'd love to get that one back too. But it seems a good question, seeing Darlene's great lifestyle: single, beautiful, Californian.

She has to think before answering: "Security." The word drifts in and out of the car, hanging around uncomfortably until I come to a stop sign and it floats away.

"So much can happen," I say. "A lot can go wrong."

"A lot can go wrong when you're single, too," she tells me. "And you don't have anyone to help you out."

I think about the last time I helped Gina out and realize it wasn't so long ago, last week when she was trying to decide whether or not to work after the baby was born. It didn't matter to me, I said. When she was sure I wasn't just saying it, she decided not to. "We don't need it," I said. This she didn't believe, but she didn't know about our new fortune, the money in the bank from selling the tape of her brother I found in a box forgotten in the storage shed I was forced to rent to house some of Sean's excess shit. The one you should want to get back, you don't. This victory is a double victory, the genius of the caper and the money to boot. It wasn't all about the money, though. I'll admit it helps things out to see the great Sean Fear squirm a little. A triple victory.

"Do you have a name picked out?" Darlene asks.

I tell her we're having trouble with that one.

"I've always liked Madeline," she says.

Gina and I discarded Madeline early on, but I don't tell Darlene that.

"What do you think about—" I start, but the car phone rings and I freeze up. It rings twice, and Darlene asks, "Aren't you going to get that?"

"I don't think it's for me," I say.

"Maybe it's Sean wondering where you are," she says.

"Sean knows where I am," I say, and the ringing stops.

"Here," Darlene says, pointing.

I pull in the circular driveway.

"Thanks for the ride," Darlene says. "Tell Sean to hang in there. In this town you're never out for long." She waves and is gone through the lit lobby. From the driveway of the Highland Gardens Apartments I can see the darkness where Sean's house sits, the houses above and below twinkling with yellow light.

I notice a pair of sunglasses in the passenger seat, and though I'm not sure they're Darlene's, I want to ask her what she thinks of the name that suddenly pops into my mind.

The brown linoleum in the lobby squeaks under my feet and the air smells old and metallic. The night clerk tells me Darlene's apartment is beyond the pool, on the second floor. The light from the pool illuminates the pink apartments, and I get the feeling I'm standing in the palm of a giant, outstretched hand. I realize I've forgotten the number the night clerk told me, and I'm about to turn back when I hear voices from the darkened corner of the pool area. Squinting, I can make out two figures on a chaise lounge.

Darlene suddenly appears on the second-floor balcony above the pool, and I hurry toward the stairs, not wanting to interrupt the two poolside lovers, who are moving so hard and fast the legs of the chaise lounge are scraping the cool-decking. Darlene disappears from sight, and I peek at the two by the pool again and am caught in Heidi's gaze, her ditzed-out expression as blank as a sheet of tinfoil reflecting the moonlight back into the black sky. She appears

to be reaching out to me, her arm stretching up but then suddenly dropping to her side, her head rotating and then obscured by the body on top of her.

I tuck the sunglasses into my pocket and rush through the lobby, not hearing the night clerk's question. All I can see is Heidi shipwrecked on the cement beach.

Sean is waiting for me in the kitchen, a look of concern coming over his face when he sees me. "What happened?" he asks. "Didn't the car phone ring?"

I measure the look on his face, and the seizure I'm about to have subsides when I sense he doesn't know anything. "I got lost," I tell him, which can always be true. I make up a story of wrong turns and he is relieved. "Where's Heidi?" I ask.

Unconcerned, without missing a beat, he says, "She's staying with her friend."

"Are these yours?" I ask, nervously producing the sunglasses.

"I've been looking for these," he says, slipping the dark glasses on. He looks over his shoulder, as if trying the glasses on for the first time.

"I'm going to check on Gina," I say.

"So you didn't get the groceries?" he asks, disappointed.

"Um, no," I say. "Sorry."

"Don't worry about it," he says, his tired face trying for a smile. He goes to the refrigerator, and the double doors make a kissing sound when he swings them open. I leave him there in the kitchen, arms spread, hanging on to the refrigerator doors, staring into the light reflected in the lenses of his sunglasses.

# Wagering

NOW THAT I AM IN MY LAST SEMESTER AT THE CULINARY INSTITUTE, a correspondence school I applied and was accepted to on a dare from my boyfriend, Stan, Edna lets me practice at her place on my nights off from the Stop and Go. Thursday and Friday nights at Edna's are getting a sort of reputation in the neighborhood, and people holler from their car windows when they see me walking down the street. "What's on the menu, Stacey?" they ask. It doesn't much seem to matter what kind of food I prepare, though. The folks at Edna's are just happy someone else is doing the cooking. Still, I like to give them a little flambé now and then to make it worth their while to come out and support me.

Once I graduate, Stan and I are moving to Canyon City so I can get a job at a solid restaurant, one that everybody's heard of. We've traced our getaway on the map, Stan drawing a bony finger along Route 66, away from Porter and into the colored circles of Canyon City. "Easy as that," he says.

The hardest part about cooking at Edna's is working the table-long grill behind the counter as if it were a real stove. I usually have to scrape it first with this tool Edna keeps that is really for scraping the paint off the side of a house. Sometimes I pour a little grease from the deep-fat fryer onto the grill and clean it with the lavalike brick Edna keeps underneath. I'm always amazed when the silver starts to gleam from under the blackened surface.



Tonight I'm preparing my extra-credit dish: penne with vodka and tomato cream sauce. I'm making extra to take to Stan. Normally, Stan would come in, but since Sherri, our manager, found out Stan and I are together, she put us on opposite shifts. She says next week she's going to move one of us to days and one of us is going to work nights and weekends. "I haven't decided which," she said.

Stan and I are thinking about quitting, even though neither of us dares dream it. I need the money and he needs a job so his mom won't kick him out. Most people at the Stop and Go take a look at Stan and think, *Just another small-town loser*, but everyone who counts him as their friend knows he is loyal and kind, traits that are harder and harder to come by and, as for me, all you need in this world.

"I can't have too much salt," Mrs. Williams says from behind me.

"Are there eggs in it?" Mr. Bernhard asks. "I can't eat eggs."

"Let her cook," someone says from a far booth.

The crowding at the counter makes me feel famous, and my hands fly in front of me.

"What's on the menu tonight?" a small, nervous voice asks, a voice I recognize right away. Distracted, I look over my shoulder at my old man, dressed in the same blue-and-green flannel he's been wearing since Saturday, the last time I had a chance to do laundry.

I smile at him.

"Randy's here too," he says. He takes a position on a stool, two hands on the counter to help him ease onto the thick red cushion.

"How are you, Ed?" Mr. Bernhard asks.

My old man starts in about something he's been watching on TV, and I return to the pasta, which by now is overboiled.

When I turn around with the penne, Randy is right there next to the old man.

"Surprise," he says. He leans over to kiss me, and the whole place suddenly smells like whiskey.

My older brother, Randy, is pretty great. He's quick to laugh,

and you feel like smiling when you talk to him. A terrible thing happened to him when he graduated from high school, the pressure being on him to go to college and play baseball—to make it all the way to the majors—so much pressure that he started drinking and had to drop out. He tells people he's back to help my old man since our mother split—gone into Canyon City, swallowed up just like that—but everyone in Porter knows why he's back, and they know the only thing my old man and Randy help themselves to is the bottle.

I serve everyone a taste on pie plates, and even the sounds of lips smacking and a general hum of approval don't ease my nerves. I walk to the other end of the counter to ask Mr. and Mrs. Weaver their honest opinion just as Randy falls off his stool, cutting a spoon in the crowd behind him. The old man starts howling and I run down to see if he's all right, and everyone stops eating and just stares, me behind the counter, my old man howling with his red face, and my brother on the floor, reaching for the one empty stool at the counter.

The fluorescent light inside the Stop and Go gives away that I've been crying, and in between bites Stan asks me what's wrong. When I tell Stan about my old man and Randy, I'm surprised at how it comes out sounding like a weather report. I don't feel like crying again, and Stan knows he doesn't have to comfort me, but he hooks his thin arm around me and gives me a squeeze. Stan's arm has the strength of a body builder, and when I'm draped in it, the world shrinks until I can fit it in my hand.

Stan's got a muscle car, and after his shift we go cruising. There's a spot cleared out in the trees just outside of Porter where we can see the stars and where no one can find us.

"Let's just stay here tonight," Stan says.

I'm watching a cluster of lights flicker on and off in the distance, hypnotizing myself until I feel like I'm floating out of my body and into the trees, away from my house on Rosewood Lane.

"Can you see us in an apartment in the city?" I ask.

"Yeah, baby," Stan says. "I can see it."

My head fits perfectly between Stan's neck and shoulder, and he rests his head on mine.

"I brought this," Stan says, producing a bottle of Boone's Farm Strawberry Hill. "I took it from work."

"You're going to get fired someday, you know that? You'll ruin everything," I tell him. Stan looks at me and smiles, erasing the thought of what would happen to me without him.

The Strawberry Hill tastes like liquid cotton candy, and we pass it back and forth until all that remains is a warm swallow. Stan tilts the bottle and I can see the moon through the clear glass. He puts his hands on my face, pulling me near him, kissing me, and I drink the last of the liquor from his mouth.

Lights I imagine are the Canyon City skyline cut through the darkness to where we sit, throwing a spotlight on me and Stan.

I recognized Emily, a nurse at our local hospital, by her voice on the phone. Edna had closed for the night and I was practicing for my crepes exam in the morning.

"I couldn't reach anyone else," Emily apologizes when I arrive at the hospital, seeing the dirty apron still around my neck.

My old man is sitting in the chair at the foot of the hospital bed, his right arm heavy with the plaster cast, held tight against his sunken chest by the sling over his shoulder. His eyes are raised to the TV set.

"Where's Randy?" I ask.

"He dropped me off," my old man says. "But he had to go."

"I don't want to know," I say. "Can we just leave?"

In the car my old man doesn't say anything.

An emerald city of beer bottles stands next to the recliner, spreading along the carpet in front of the couch. The wood-handled bottle opener is pitched point first into the coffee table.

"I'll clean it up," my old man says, but he's barely able to ease himself into the recliner, where his night began.

He can sleep there, for all I care. I toss the plastic bottle of painkillers in his general direction, and they fall into his lap like a baby's rattle.

Randy's door is closed and locked, but he's not inside. I knock several times anyway. Anger turns to pity inside me, and I could use an easy laugh to stop the onslaught of my feeling sorry for myself.

Randy still isn't home in the morning. My old man is stretched out asleep on the couch, so I hurry through the house, getting what I need for my exam. He wakes when I open the front door.

"Off early?" he asks, covering his eyes from the morning light.

"I have to take my test," I tell him.

He shifts his dead arm and groans. Breathless from pain, he says, "I hope you score a hundred."

"When's Randy coming home?" I ask, closing the front door.

"He isn't home?" My old man doesn't sound surprised, but I can tell he doesn't know where Randy is.

"I'll make you some breakfast," I say through my teeth.

"I've got breakfast right here," he says, popping the lid off his pill bottle.

I pick through the contents of our refrigerator and am shocked that I'm able to make anything, let alone an egg and turkey and tomato omelet. Pleased with the stuffed golden pillow of egg, I deliver it to the coffee table.

"Thanks, honey," my old man says, diving into the omelet.

The door creaks open and Randy slithers in with a brown bag in his hand, grease blossoming from the bottom.

"Have some doughnuts," he says.

I don't ask him where he's been—at this point it doesn't matter—but instead take the bag from him. "Thanks," I say, hurrying out the door. "I'm going to be late."

The doughnuts are sweet and I chew them deliberately on the bus, white powder sifting down my shirt and onto my pants.

Mrs. Walters, the Culinary Institute proctor, stays after to give me a makeup test, but I can't prepare anything right, and the harder I try, the worse I do.

"What is it, honey?" Mrs. Walters asks.

"God damn it," I say between sobs. Mrs. Walters backs away from me, a little fearful, and says something about retaking the test in a few weeks.

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"You'll get it the next time," Stan says. "You're the best in the class."

"Can we go cruising after you get off?" I ask.

"Sure, honey," Stan says. There's no one in the store, so he kisses me hard, squeezing me tight, sending lightning through me. "Randy and your old man were here earlier," he says.

"Yeah?" I'm still buzzing from Stan's kiss.

"Yeah," he says, looking off. "There's some money missing from the register, too. A hundred-dollar bill I had right under the tray. I had to go in back and let your old man use the bathroom. . . ." He stops himself. "I don't think it was them, though," he adds, hurriedly. "I mean, the Johnson kids were—"

"Did you try to call them?" I ask, flushed. I can see the two of them doing something like this. Once they stole some watermelon from the market, and my mother had to drive down and pay for it. She was so embarrassed she made me stay in the car.

Stan doesn't say anything right away, then, "Yeah, they're not home."

The digital clock on the Marlboro sign reads 4:14. Shift change is at five, and I just know it'll be the end of us both if Sherri counts the drawer and it's short. My legs give out and I plop down on an overturned milk crate.

"Why don't you let me go after them," Stan says. "We both know where they are."

"I can go down there," I say.

"You don't want to go down there," Stan says. "Stay here and I'll be right back."

I stand at the register and watch Stan leave, glad that I don't have to go down to Vidalia's, a bar I've been to plenty of times but never had a drink in.

At five of five I leave the counter of the Stop and Go and walk quickly down the street. I make sure there are no cars pulling in, especially Sherri's blue-green Toyota pickup. Stan's relief, John, who is usually fifteen minutes early, is of course late.

I can't think what's happened to Stan, and I tell myself maybe I should call Vidalia's, but in the time it takes to call, I could be there.

"Hey, Stacey, what's on the menu tonight?" Mrs. Williams asks, slowing her car at the stop sign.

I wave and she waves back.

Randy's car is the only car in the Vidalia's parking lot.

A cue ball clicks against the delta of balls at the opposite end of the table. My old man stands with the pool stick poised in his hand like a weapon. He looks like a war hero, his arm damaged from battle. Randy comes from the bar with three beers and, seeing me, asks, "You want one?"

"Good news, honey," Stan calls out from the bench along the wall. He motions me over.

"What's on the menu tonight, Stacey?" someone from the bar hollers.

"They didn't take it," Stan says, his voice low. "I asked them, and they didn't take it."

"You asked them?"

"They didn't take it," Stan says, convinced.

The jukebox starts up loud, and my old man bets Randy twenty

dollars he won't make the next shot. Before Randy draws the cue stick back, violining it between his fingers, before he taps the pockmarked cue ball, I recognize there are only two possibilities: either he'll make it or he won't.

# Knollwood

DIAL'S EL CAMINO LURCHED UNDER THE CANOPY OF MAPLE TREES across the street from Knollwood Heights Elementary. He packed his cigarettes against the warped dashboard and switched off the engine. Yesterday's breakfast wrappers blew to the floor as he unrolled the window, exhaling smoke into the fresh air.

Through the windows above the bicycle racks, tiny heads bobbed in anticipation of the final bell. Now and then a face flashed in a single pane, or a tiny pair of hands slapped the glass. Oh, the impatience of youth!

Dial marked the set of windows closest to the exit as those of his first-grade class, Mrs. Slater's room. All the way at the other end of the single-story brick building, near the gymnasium, was Mrs. Ormiston's second-grade class; next to that, Mrs. Holstein's third; across the hall, Ms. Shelby's fourth. The mixed fifth/sixth class (Mrs. Kephart/Mrs. Degner) was in the dead center of the building, close to Principal Johnson's office. Mr. Tasa's seventh-grade class and Mr. Fleck's eighth, having grown so large, were no longer in the building but were annexed at Flathead High up the street.

Dial flicked a smoldering butt out the window. He'd gone a long way to end up so close to home. As a Knollwood Knight, he'd bused in from his grandmother's house on the outskirts of Kalispell. Now, twenty-five years later, he lived a stone's throw, above Marten



Dry Cleaners, two blocks away.

Space by space, the four streets framing the school filled with cars. Little Billy Pearce's mother pulled up in the royal-blue minivan—enough room for Billy and for the neighbor's kids, sweet Shasta Baker and her younger brothers, Kelvin and Tommy. Jesse Mason's father waited attentively in the family's silver LTD. Behind him, Mary Topp's mother and father were perched high in their red Jeep Wagoneer. In their rearview mirror, Chantell Young's twenty-three-year-old aunt tuned the radio in her older sister's Trans Am. Steven Oliver's father leaned against the chain link fence, having walked from Syke's Grocery, where he spent afternoons with Stephen Higgins's father (it was the wife's day to pick up little Stephen) and Art Sweet, the local unemployed mechanic.

Mrs. Rolf, the recess-lady-cum-crosswalk-guard, rolled the school zone signs into the street.

The 3:30 bell rang and the area was flooded with children, little backpacked robots running in every direction. Dial turned the key and the El Camino started up, then idled.

Joey Brown, a third grader whose babysitter, Jolee, wasn't going to be at Joey's house until four because of her waitressing job at the Arctic Circle Family Restaurant, turned down Mulberry Street. Dial pulled out. Joey swung his Incredible Hulk lunch box hard in the air, windmilling it over his head. The tiny plastic latch sprang, and the still-full plastic thermos bounced on the sidewalk. Joey scrambled after it, his miniature white sneakers scampering into the front yard of a clapboard house the color of a dentist's smock.

Dial followed Joey to the end of the block.

"Hi, Joey," Dial said, easing over to the curb.

Joey stopped and squinted.

"It's Dial."

"Hi, Dial," Joey squeaked.

"Want a ride home?"

"Sure."

"Hop in."

Joey slammed the passenger door, and the window rattled.

"How was school today?"

"We're learning cursive. You wanna see?"

"Sure, Joey."

Joey unzipped his backpack and fished through a nest of papers.

"See?"

Dial stopped at the light and admired Joey's cursive. He followed the delicate pencil from the solid bottom line, through the middle dotted line, up to the top solid line, and back down.

"That's real good, Joey," Dial said.

The light changed and Dial turned left.

"Hey, my house is that way," Joey protested.

Dial mussed Joey's blond mop.

"I thought you'd like some ice cream," Dial said.

"Pistachio! Pistachio! Pistachio!"

"Yuck." Dial made a face. "How can you eat that stuff?"

"It's good," Joey assured him.

"It's gross."

"Good."

"Gross."

"*Good.*"

Flathead High appeared on the left. The football team was scrimmaging on the field, practicing for Friday's game. Girlfriends in letterman's jackets watched disinterestedly from the bleachers, open books in their laps. A couple kissed in the shadowy arch of the science building, and Dial slowed the car. The girl reminded him of Michelle Peters, sweet Michelle Peters, pretty please how about some pussy? Pretty please before you go to college and those boys take it from you? Dial had waited at the high school since he'd been back, but apparently Michelle Peters didn't fancy him. Neither did Marianne Ritchie. Or Dawn Duncan. Neither did Loretta Higham, Shonda Lewis, Andrea King, or Allison Lee. The 2:20 bell at Flathead High was the first pleasure of Dial's day.

Joey shaped the bulb of his cone with his tongue.

"How is it?" Dial asked.

"Mmm," Joey said.

Dial spooned from a cup of Rocky Road. Linda Albright ran a hot rag across the top of a glass case filled with cakes from the local bakery. Linda's older sister, Keri, was Dial's age, and he noticed the sisters had the same general form. After Dial had left for college, he'd tried to stay in touch with Keri, who'd gone to work at JCPenney right out of high school. He sent Keri a maroon-and-gold sweatshirt with capital letters emblazoned across the front for her birthday. Between studying for exams, he'd scribble a postcard and walk it to the post office in the student union, sometimes after midnight. But no matter what time of night it was, the pool tables in the SU were populated with students who didn't miss home, didn't yearn for the company of friends it had taken so long to make.

"Didn't you think it was funny I didn't send you a thank-you note for the sweatshirt?" Keri asked when Dial showed up at Penney's. "Or for the perfume and the bracelet?" The bracelet was from a trip to Mexico, and Dial thought it would look nice on Keri.

Paulette Benson had said pretty much the same thing, except Dial sent her a baseball hat and a key chain. Paulette was the best four square player in Mrs. Kephart's class. Dial remembered her ponytail and how it always got in her face, and he thought the baseball hat was a perfect gift.

George Pietsch didn't send a thank-you for the miniature Pac-Man machine Dial sent—their favorite game in high school. They'd worn out the joystick at the arcade at Western Mall.

Letters to Michelle Roberts and Hugh Dylan never solicited a word. Dial wasn't sure where they were now. The rest were in and around Kalispell, but when Dial ran into anyone from the old days, it was as if they'd never heard of Knollwood Elementary or Flathead High.

The bell above the door of Spanky's Ice Cream Parlor rang, and Michelle Peters and her seven-year-old sister, Zenia, walked in.

"Hi, Michelle," Dial said, his spoon in his mouth.

Michelle lifted her blond hair, fanning her sweaty neck. "Hey, Dial. How's it goin'?"

"Okay."

"You gonna play softball again tonight?" Michelle asked. "We need a good first baseman."

"First base is the key," Dial said. *Maybe she does fancy me*, he thought. "Are the others gonna play?" he asked.

"Yeah," Michelle said. "Andrea has a sprained ankle, but the others will be there." She turned to Linda and added her order to Zenia's. Joey'd run over to point out the pistachio, and Michelle bent down to line her eyes up with Joey's.

Dial stared and then looked away. Linda Albright was glaring at him.

"C'mon, Joey," Dial said. "See you tonight, Michelle."

"See ya," Michelle said. "Don't forget your glove."

Dial merged with traffic. "Do you know how to drive, Joey?"

Joey shook his head. "Uh-uh."

"Wanna learn?"

"No way."

"C'mon. Put your hand here." Dial patted the steering wheel. Joey didn't budge. "It's cool," Dial said, taking Joey's tiny hand in his. He wrapped Joey's fingers around the thick, grooved steering wheel.

"I'm driving!" Joey screamed.

Dial raised his hands over his head. "Go!"

Joey held the wheel still and then jerked it excitedly. "Race car driver!" he yelled.

Dial caught the steering wheel with his knee. "Okay, that's enough."

"I can drive now," Joey said confidently.

Dial pulled up to Joey's house.

"Hey, Dial," Jolee said. "I just got here. Thanks for watching him."

"No problem."

"Later, Dial." Joey bolted from the car and disappeared into the house.

"Playin' softball tonight?" Jolee asked.

"Yeah."

"I might come watch." Jolee leaned against the El Camino. "I like to watch you run. You're a good runner."

Dial smiled wide. "Thanks, Jolee. If you come, I'll try to hit one out of the park for you." He edged the El Camino away from the curb. In the rearview mirror Jolee's tiny frame grew smaller and smaller. Up ahead, beyond Woodland Park and the softball field, two men were busy taking down a billboard for a local burger joint. LICK YOUR LIPS AND OPEN YOUR MOUTH, the billboard read. The two men were replacing it with an ad for a truck stop out on the interstate, mainly because a group of parents had made more out of the burger ad than they ought to.

# The Flat Earth

THE HOUSE WAS PERFECT. IF YOU WERE A PROFESSOR OF HISTORY on sabbatical evading a threatened paternity suit from one of your students, or you were a new bride who had recently miscarried, the house was perfect for the way it stood back from the road, camouflaged by deciduous trees, the short white snout of the Colonial barely a glimpse in a passerby's eye. Moss-covered flagstones obscured the path, so that you had to hop, skip, jump, from one to the next, as if forging new lands.

Steven had scouted this one ahead. He found the listing himself outside the Main Street Bakery among a whole ream's worth of flyers neatly stacked and placed at the bottom of the trash can. His eyes grew with excitement as he scanned the flyer—price, location, photo, address—and he carefully removed the rest of the flyers and hid them under the jack and tire iron in the trunk, where they remained, a valuable secret hidden within the blue metal and tinted glass of the Japanese sedan Ann's parents had bought them as a wedding present.

Other houses had been less perfect. Too many windows. Not enough space. Leaky plumbing. A sorrowful proximity to neighbors.

"It's difficult to match exactly *all* your criteria," their exasperated real estate agent, chosen at random once Steven had decided on moving to Porter—far enough away from his and Ann's troubles but not halfway around the world—told them. On several occasions, when the agent felt he'd pulled the rabbit out of the hat, he'd become

crimson-faced at Steven and Ann's complaints, which set off nicely against his gold jacket and blond hair.

The exclusive real estate agent for this particularly perfect listing, a short, tight middle-aged woman with black hair curled into rings big enough for a lion to jump through, warned them about the current resident, Greg.

"He doesn't want to move out," she explained. "But his ex-wife owns it and she wants to rent it."

Steven and Ann felt the first real break of their two-month marriage.

"Is he here *now*?" Ann asked. Steven could feel her shriveling as they stood in the walkway.

"I have the key," the Realtor said, producing a plastic key chain cut into the shape of a house. The black shingles of the house on the key chain were worn, and the tiny red windows had been rubbed until a soft pink light glowed from inside the two-dimensional home.

The front door wouldn't open. The Realtor had no trouble unlocking it, but something was pushing against it from inside. They let themselves in through an unlocked side door, and the Realtor called hello before stepping fully through the doorway.

It appeared as if someone had vaporized while eating dinner. The stove top was peopled with iron pots. Of the four pots, three were crusted over with food, and Steven could sense a system of rotation, the cleanest pot closest to the sink, a system he himself had implemented during the halcyon days of his bachelorhood.

The small folding table in the kitchen was set for one. A nearly full glass of water. A garden salad picked clean of tomatoes. An untouched plate of store-bought baked chicken.

"Maybe he's here," Ann said worriedly. Since the miscarriage she'd feared unknown human contact and was only slightly less fearful of familiar human contact, namely Steven's touch.

The rest of the house was piled floor-to-ceiling with junk. Bundled newspapers, coffee cans with tight plastic lids concealing who knew what, half a bicycle. The couches in the living room had

been turned on end to make room for unmarked brown boxes, which were taped and stacked like a bar graph around the room.

The bedrooms had been converted to storage areas as well, the master bedroom discernible only by its adjoining bathroom. The shower and sink were coated with dust, as was the mirror, but the toilet seat was up, and fresh water sparkled and gurgled in the shiny, clean bowl.

Steven jiggled the handle on the toilet and the water in the bowl stilled.

The Realtor self-consciously fingered one of her giant loops of hair, pulling on it until it hung like a fishhook, dangling down the side of her head. "What do you think?" she asked.

Ann looked at Steven and Steven looked at Ann and the Realtor turned away, pretending to read the contents marked on one of the boxes. Someone had written *FRAGILE* in tall, shaky letters.

Steven could see Ann processing the information, wanting to like the house. He could see the little mouse running in its wheel, powering the monkey to light the candle, which would burn the rope, snapping it, so that the bowling ball would fall into the pail, tipping the scale, forcing Ann to come up with an opinion. He had mistaken Ann's indecision and vapidty for deep thinking, and he'd been living in that well since he met her, when she was a student of his at the university. In more charitable moments Steven recognized that Ann was nearly twenty years younger, and hadn't he been indecisive in his youth? Hadn't he? He could no longer remember. An only child whose self-absorbed parents had been absent in every noncorporeal way, Steven had received tutelage from after-school clubs, teachers and guidance counselors who took an interest in his preternatural ability to interact with adults, and, once in college, his British history professor, whose influence led him to apply and be accepted to the graduate history program at the professor's alma mater. His personal ambitions were limited to pleasing those who had invested so much in him. Once Ann began exhibiting the need for protection and understanding, his abilities waned as dramatically as Ann's needs increased.



The cruelty of Ann's accidental pregnancy was deepened only by her subsequent miscarriage, and Steven saw these events on the timeline of his life, the words and dates written in bold, italicized and underlined. He'd fallen into history as a profession under the influence of his college professor but realized in time he was attracted not just to the narratives of the past, but to the idea of preserved history. He burned with betrayal at realizing so late in life how important legacy was and immediately began hoarding all documents, correspondence, and miscellany that pertained to his life, indexing the material and storing it in cardboard Bankers Boxes with the tightly squared lids. Unsure of who exactly would be curating his archives in the future, and what they would mean to that person and other citizens of the future, he felt no item was too small for collection, including the movie tickets from his first liaison with Paula.

Ann moved her head in an ambiguous motion, and the Realtor, who was again facing them, didn't receive this smoke-signaled communication.

"We love it," Steven said.

"We really do," Ann said.

The Realtor congratulated Steven and Ann, shaking wildly with relieved elation.

The first of the month brought the first of several delays in Steven and Ann's move. Calls from the Realtor were marked with increasing worry. Steven arranged daily outings to avoid their apartment back in the city—several strange persons appearing to Steven to fit the general description and humble-cloaked arrogance of a process server menaced him everywhere he looked—but Ann was interested in leaving the apartment only if she was leaving for good, leaving the claustrophobia of those walls soured and yellowed by sorrow.

Finally, in the middle of the month, the Realtor called. "He's moved out."

The Realtor's enthusiasm was, in fact, premature. Greg had made the initial step of renting a U-Haul, going so far as to back it up to the house in a way suggesting his intention of filling it with the long-packed contents of the house, but when Steven and Ann arrived with their own U-Haul, fully packed, ready to take possession, there wasn't any more than two boxes in the back of Greg's U-Haul. The pie-size wedge of wood Greg was using to prop open the back door had been kicked away and had to come to rest—skidded to a halt—in an island of weeds sprouted up around the flagstones.

"Where's the Realtor?" Ann asked, panicked, shading her eyes as she searched for the Realtor's car.

"She's coming tomorrow morning to check on us," Steven reminded her.

"Should we go back to that apartment?" Ann asked.

Steven would never, never go back to that apartment.

"We should just check into a hotel," Ann said. "He hasn't moved out. Can you see he hasn't moved out?"

A small blue pickup with the words *THE VEGETABLE KING* stenciled in gold on the doors rode cautiously up the street. Steven and Ann turned, and their stare froze the truck at the entrance of the driveway. The driver seemed to be making a decision of some kind, and Steven felt a sudden terror—he'd been discovered and his life was about to be overtaken by shame, innuendo, and bitterness. The driver brought the truck the final distance, and it came to rest in the two well-worn ruts of the dirt driveway. Steven braced for the inevitable question and almost blurted out the answer over Greg's introducing himself.

"Hello," Steven said. "This is my wife, Ann." Ann responded to Steven's wildly enthusiastic introduction with wonder.

"My wife's name is Ann," Greg said. "I mean, it used to be. I mean, she's my ex."

Ann seemed at a loss, and small tears lined her mascaraed eyes.

"We were told we could move in today," Steven said.

Greg looked at the U-Haul, then at the house, back to the truck. "It isn't going very well," he said.

"Don't you have some guys helping you?" Steven asked. "Anyone?"

Greg shook his head no. "No guys."

"You were supposed to be moved out weeks ago," Ann said in a burst of forcefulness.

Greg didn't say anything but looked from truck to house to truck again. The sun—which had hung high and bright earlier in the day—was slung low under the darkening clouds.

"We can help you load the rest of your stuff," Steven offered.

Ann shot him a look he knew the words to, but he wanted desperately to barricade himself with Ann behind the walls of the house, and as quickly as possible.

"That's very nice," Greg said. He smiled weakly, and his face betrayed a young man who had rapidly aged. Steven related to Greg in this way and was glad to spend a couple of hours in the company of someone who could grasp the concept of the suffocating boundaries of a flawed personal history.

Steven and Ann followed Greg into the house. Steven kicked the wooden wedge back under the door while Ann stopped and waited for him to complete the chore.

The kitchen remained in the same disarray they had discovered on their first visit. The boxes in the other rooms were untouched too.

"It's going pretty slow," Steven remarked.

Greg stood next to a tower of boxes. "Everything's really ready to go."

"How long ago did she move out?" Ann asked.

Greg looked at the stack of boxes he was leaning on. "A little over six months ago." As they unloaded the house of its boxed-up burden, Greg freely and frankly related the story of how he and his ex-wife had moved into the house from the city, how his ex-wife had commuted to her job as a secretary for a brokerage firm while Greg finished his college degree by correspondence.

"But she started working her way up the ladder," Greg said. "And

she didn't understand that I didn't want to follow at her heels."

Eventually Ann tired of carrying boxes and went upstairs to rest on the stripped bed.

At a certain point all loading ceased. Greg's U-Haul sat in the driveway half-loaded, the back of the truck open like a black hole in the glow of the porch light.

During the course of the loading, Steven and Greg had driven down to the farmer's market a few minutes from the house where Greg worked part-time. "They let me drive the truck," Greg explained. Steven and Greg brought back a case of light beer, and where Steven might accurately have accused Greg of dragging his feet, Steven felt himself become more expansive from the warmth of the alcohol, and his mind drifted toward Ann, whom he felt like he hadn't seen in a very long time. He crept upstairs and watched her sleep for longer than a minute. In the darkness Steven didn't see what he usually saw when he looked at her, the general unhappiness that leaked from every moment she breathed, an unhappiness that he knew had begun in her hollow insides but that he'd come to believe had spread to include everything having to do with him, an unhappiness he reciprocated. Any notion he had of waking her—a notion built upon alcohol and which had gained a panting momentum on the stairs—evaporated in that darkness.

Paula had begun the semester in Steven's class as just another history student, a freshman who, like other freshmen, specialized in knowing a little bit about everything, but understanding next to nothing. Their semester together was unmarked by exceptional scholarship on Paula's part, and Steven failed to distinguish her in any way from the other thirty-plus students who more or less showed up regularly for class.

Steven would have liked to remember if Paula showed up every

day, if she was indeed laying the groundwork for the limited future she must have envisioned with him.

This is not to say Steven was without blame in the affair. He recognized a certain symmetry, a certain sense of common interest on Paula's part, a sense that Ann hadn't known in a very long time.

Paula fulfilled the textbook case of an affair. She showed up at office hours. She waited after class to have a spontaneous conference about the most inconsequential aspects of British history. She asked frequent, irrelevant questions during class, both to hear her own voice and to remind him of the private song that might be sung into his ear if he would only let himself loose from the rigid construction of his marriage.

Finally, without much coercion, Steven fell in love with Paula. He fell in love with the way her fingers curled around a glass at the dinner table, the way she looked at him with total concentration when she had had too much wine with dinner. Steven felt like he was at the center of Paula's every thought, and that kind of centrifugal devotion was unknown to him, the sort of devotion he had shown Ann in the beginning, but without reciprocation it had diminished until it had evaporated.

Of course, Paula had her limitations. To Steven, she was a human event in perpetual motion, unmoored in time. His affair with Paula took shape in the languid weekday afternoons of Paula's apartment, a three-bedroom labyrinth with a collegiate landscape of mismatched furniture, signs and billboards stolen for their wry irony, and trodden carpet that had once been on the light side of the color spectrum but had for a long time—as long as Steven had known it—been a study in chiaroscuro. Those golden afternoons, at first infrequent and sporadic in their schedule, gained regularity when one of Paula's roommates contracted Lyme disease from a camping trip and was forced to move home, while the other roommate's arduous entanglements kept her away from the apartment for days and sometimes weeks at a time. Morning classes were followed by quiet afternoons spirited away with Paula from the rest of the world; consequently, a clutch of term

papers, evaluations, and half-researched exam questions languished for days on Steven's desk. He saw his academic career sliding out of the realm of his control, slipping beyond his sunlit vision, out past the horizon where his relationship with Ann lived, where it slid while he carefully ignored his academic work and concentrated instead on the daily surprise of pleasure with Paula, which lent the only mystery to his otherwise linear existence.

Ann's silence infected every room of their apartment, and Steven stood for a few extra moments before the door each night, his hand on the key in his pocket, the guilt of his life outside and inside that apartment door bearing down on his frame, so that he stood and prayed for the relief of a random act, one of those acts of God that can alter life in such a way that things can be viewed anew, with an eye of unfamiliarity.

Steven's growing sense of guilt finally manifested itself in an Olympic spree of selflessness, which resulted in the impregnation of both Ann and Paula, the last time he laid with either of them. In Steven's mind, their bodies raced to bear his fruits. But Ann's miscarriage disqualified her, and Paula was suddenly gone from class. Her daily absence was a reassurance at first—the impregnation was, of course, an accidental result of Steven's forced penance for his sins—but the rumor about Steven and Paula quickly spread, and Steven read an unflattering limerick about himself in the men's bathroom of the history department. It shocked him to read the intimate details of his sexual practices in a rhyming pattern, and Paula's absence from that day on induced a paranoia that gave way to real fear of never seeing her again.

Meanwhile, Ann withdrew into herself until she, too, disappeared.

The night sky purpled with dawn, and at last the U-Haul was loaded. A year's worth of dirt mottled the baseboards, and Ann, refreshed and invigorated as Steven had never seen her, took possession with a bucket of hot, soapy water.

"I'm sorry about the mess," Greg said. "I'm not a real clean person."

Ann continued scrubbing, and Greg stood in the center of the empty kitchen, a look of reminiscence clouding his face.

"What's going to happen to the Range Rover?" Steven asked.

Greg broke his reverie and his brow wrinkled. Steven became flushed with embarrassment as he realized Greg never mentioned the luxury sport vehicle Steven had noticed that first day, while he and Ann were awaiting the Realtor.

"Do you want to see it?" Greg asked.

"I just wondered if you were going to tow it," Steven said, trying to cover. "Your U-Haul looks too small to tow a vehicle that large and . . ." He realized he was gesturing uselessly and dropped his enormous hands to his sides.

The yellow light inside the barn caused Steven to squint, his tired and red eyes focused on the deep-green Range Rover stabled in the barn.

"Does it run?" Steven asked.

"I'm sure it does," Greg said. He ran his finger through a heavy coat of dust on the hood. A set of cat paws tracked up the windshield, their author resting in the hayless loft above.

"How long has it been since you've driven it?" Steven asked.

Greg winced. "I've never driven it."

"You should," Steven said. "You should fire it up and go for a spin."

Greg stared in the driver's side window. "Do you mind if it sits here? I don't know when she's going to pick it up."

"I'll go with you if you like," Steven said. He smiled mischievously. "Let's take it off-road."

"She didn't say when she would pick it up," Greg said. "I haven't talked to her in months."

Steven tried the handle on the passenger's side and the door swung open. A powerful synthetic smell escaped from inside the cab. He sank into the cold comfort of the leather interior. Greg watched

from outside the driver's window, his face darkened by the tinted glass.

"Come on," Steven shouted, slamming his door. The frightened cat leaped from the loft, thumped on the roof of the car, and streaked off into the night. Steven heard Greg scream but could no longer see him. He jumped out and called for Greg.

Ann appeared in the yellow light. "What happened?" she asked. And then: "Oh my God."

She kneeled down next to the Range Rover, and Steven came around to discover Greg, lying facedown, a pair of rusty wood-handled garden shears scissored horizontally into his back. The hooks that had held the trimmers close to the wall shone on the ground like loose change.

"I backed up when the . . ." Greg motioned at the paw prints on the windshield. He moaned and tried to move but could do no more than caterpillar back and forth. One of the blades was lodged firmly into his shoulder. The tip of the second blade had dug itself into the back of his meaty arm. Steven couldn't see any blood, and before he could move to stop her, Ann gripped the wood handles and pulled.

Greg's cry carried through the soundless night, his shirt filling with blood.

"I'm taking him to the hospital," Ann said.

Steven thought for a moment that she might actually pick Greg up, sling him over her shoulder, and walk the eleven miles into town to the hospital.

Together they loaded Greg into the Range Rover.

"I'll drive," Steven said, picking the key up off the ground.

Even though Greg lay heavily medicated upstairs, his wounds having been efficiently stitched in the emergency room, Ann insisted on remaining with him.

"He's going to be fine," Steven said, repeating what the emergency room doctor had said.



She felt Greg's forehead. "He's suffering."

"With those pills they gave him, he won't feel anything for a while," Steven said.

Ann fussed with the sheet over Greg, a sheet she'd pulled from a box in their still-packed U-Haul.

"You should let him be," Steven said, and turned his back on her, resentful. He thought he heard her singing a lullaby, and he stomped his feet on each step until he was downstairs and out in the late morning. He backed the Range Rover off the front lawn where he'd parked to unload the patient, so he could pull Greg's U-Haul out onto the street and begin the solo task of moving their sad shared possessions into the house.

A small, weathered man appeared from behind the hedges, approaching him with a courteous look Steven was sure no process server would wear, but his nerves were frayed and his paranoia seduced him into suspecting everyone.

"Excuse me," the small man said. "I'm sorry to bother you." He introduced himself, but Steven didn't catch his name, retaining only that the man spent his days tending the dead at the cemetery on the edge of town. "I heard there was a history professor staying at the old Chamberlain place."

"Where did you hear that?" Steven asked, alarmed. He set down a box of books straining in his arms.

The caretaker shrugged. "I heard it somewhere. I hope you don't mind my dropping in unannounced," he said. "But the town needs your help."

Steven cast a skeptical glance. "My help how?"

He listened patiently while the caretaker related a bit of local politics Steven had seen in the papers, about the adjoining town wanting to subsume Porter in an effort to streamline and help balance two otherwise meager fiscal budgets. The news item was of passing interest—he and Ann were just renting, and only temporarily—but the information was clearly troubling the caretaker. "What it is," the caretaker said, "is they've got it all backward. Conrad should be the

one to be folded into Porter, not the other way around.” The caretaker limned the history of the region, how the two brothers, Porter and Conrad, had employed a young Native American girl to guide them to the area that would eventually bear their names, certain that the land could be logged for fame and fortune.

“Except when they got here, the land wasn’t flat enough for them to log it with horses, which is how they did it back then,” the caretaker explained. He told about how the mountainous region devastated Conrad, who proposed they continue on to California, to participate in the gold rush. But it was the younger brother, Porter, who devised a system for bringing the logs down the mountains on primitive tracks made of fallen trees and greased with animal fat, using gravity and workers with poles to guide the timber to the river, where it was loaded on barges and shipped to the nearest western port for conveyance to places as far away as China. “It was Porter who saved it,” the caretaker said, “but it was Conrad who got all the credit. Likely as not because he was the one who kept the company’s books, and the only brother who could read and write.”

“But I don’t understand what it is you want me to do?” Steven asked.

“If you could investigate it and authenticate it”—the word was thick on the caretaker’s tongue—“then maybe people would have to acknowledge that Porter should be saved, because of historical significance. Every year those kiddies put that pageant on at the old folks’ home about how this part of the country got started, and it’s so full of lies it makes my sour stomach turn.” The caretaker spit angrily. “They’re going to take my cemetery away. Move all my people into the Conrad cemetery.” Steven wondered if the caretaker could see the irony in his wanting Steven to puncture the Conrad myth the town was using for its own gain in order to save the Porter cemetery. “They’re like family to me.”

The caretaker’s request appealed to Steven’s vanity, but the tale had unsettled him, highlighting as it did the uncomfortable thesis that as time passed, history was transmuted into myth—or that only

those histories that acquired the sheen of myth survived. He was willing to admit that his own personal history would never gain the importance of world events, but it even seemed to pale compared with a squabble between two small towns too insignificant to be found on most maps. He glanced at the boxes of his archives taking up most of the back of the U-Haul and denied their worthlessness.

"I can't help you," Steven told the caretaker. "I wish I could, but I can't." It wasn't the truth, he knew, but he also knew he couldn't afford to become a local spokesperson. The Conrad myth would have to stand, or the caretaker would have to find another advocate.

"Too bad," the caretaker said. "In that case, here." He slapped a piece of paper against Steven's chest. "You've been served."

Steven stood bewildered as the process server turned and marched away, then rocketed off in a white Toyota Camry he hadn't noticed hiding in the bushes, as camouflaged as the small article about the caretaker in that morning's *Porter Gazette*. He felt relief. The subpoena flapped in the breeze and he held it close to him, a fleeting thought about archiving the document only a distraction from the truth: He wouldn't be able to finesse the situation with Paula. He'd be called to account. It would ruin his marriage, surely. He'd have to accept responsibility for that, but perhaps in time, in a distant, rosy future, Ann would come to realize that she was better off, that a miscarriage and a philandering husband were the key to her ultimate happiness. He wished that for her. As for his own personal narrative, his only solace was that history was full of liars and cheats, and as he turned to enter the house they no longer needed to possess, he was forced to admit he was just another in a long chronology of those whose words and intentions were spoiled by their own hand.

# The Serial Lover

THIS ONE, THE ONE WITH JAMES NOW, HER NAME IS RITA. I NEVER knew James liked those Latin American women (or wherever she's from). Even though I heard James say her name into the hall phone—the phone under the beveled mirror his parents gave us for our wedding—I didn't put together that she was Latin American. She could be Spanish. Or it could be that the salsa music and the rum are making me think she's Spanish.

James sees me and his face goes flat.

"I'm sorry, Jane," he says to me. "I didn't know you were going to be here."

James kisses me on the cheek. He's been smoking cigars.

"Barbara decided she didn't want to see a movie," I tell him. "So this place popped into my mind. I didn't know you were going to be here, though. Isn't that remarkable?"

A smile comes across James's thin lips.

"It *is* remarkable," he says.

"Well, I'm going," I say, hopping off the tall chair at the bar.

"Will you be up later?" James asks.

"I'm pretty tired," I admit.

"Okay," James says, and turns back toward his table, back toward Rita, who I think now might be Cuban.

A glass breaks behind the bar and everyone looks. It feels like everyone is looking at me, the same feeling I had when James first

brought me here. We strolled through the low door together, arm in arm. James wore a new suit from H.T. Crouch & Sons, the clothier in Scottsdale he started working for right out of high school. (He actually started in the flagship store in downtown Phoenix and worked his way into the tonier suburb.) He's their number one salesman.

James had a friend, Patricia somebody, who worked in the women's department at Sak's Fifth Avenue, and she had fit me with a beautiful strapless silk dress. When I reached for my purse, this Patricia somebody shook her head.

"This dress was lost in shipping," she said.

It was like that. James knows a lot of women and these women, most of whom I know only by name, are friendly and giving as sisters if we meet. Even Patricia touched me in a familiar way, and I figured out later what I didn't know then: she was more than likely one of James's mistresses.

"You can't fault a man like James for his fine sensibilities," Barbara says. "The man simply appreciates beauty. He has an eye for it. He saw you, didn't he?"

He *did* see me. The world is full of endless possibilities that provide freedom and excitement, James is always saying. He seemed shy when we first met—me sulking at a bar over a bad break-up, him celebrating a milestone at work. I could be shy too. (My mother said I was weak in a social way. "It'll be your end," she used to say.)

My mother was strong. Like me, she married late in life. My father was a wanderer who didn't go anywhere. That's what he used to say about himself. He itched to be in the world like James, but for his own reasons he never went out. For his own reasons, too, he hanged himself in the garage.

"It seems like the only possible ending," my mother said when it happened. I understood then she knew more about loss than I imagined I ever would, or that I ever wanted to.

Barbara's been with James, too, a few years after we were married. James apologized, though—the only time he has.

"It really wasn't right," he said. "But it was just casual. Have you noticed how deep Barbara's eyes are?"

I had noticed and told him so. He likes this about me. He likes that I can see what he sees. I see beauty too. I understand how it fills James up to take in beautiful things. He's no good when he's run down.

Once he sat on the back porch looking at the rotting creosote bush in the corner of our yard. I was taking care of the things around the house that never seem to take care of themselves no matter how long I leave them. I'd check on James now and again, but I didn't bother him with foolish questions like some wives do. If he wanted something to drink, he'd get up and get it. Or he'd ask me. I pride myself on not bothering James with silliness.

So I went to check on James again and he was gone. I searched the backyard, but he wasn't there. Peeking out the front window, I saw him in the neighbor's flower bed, trampling the petunias and daisies. A look of complete concentration was drawn across his face. The neighbors were away in Mexico on summer vacation, so I didn't rush out and stop him or ask him what he was doing. I can sense when he is run down.

Someone at the bar makes a joke about Juan, the bartender, being drunk.

"If you want to stay, we'll leave," James says. "She isn't feeling well anyway."

"What's wrong with her?" I ask.

James shrugs. "You know, it's just general."

Rita is slumped over their table, watching the flame of the candle flicker inside the clear candle holder. She tips the glass and the candle floats from one side to the other on an ocean of melted wax. Suddenly Rita stands up and rushes into the ladies' room.

James follows her with his eyes and strains to see after the ladies' room door closes. He looks at me, and I can tell he wants to ask me if I'll go see if she's okay, but he knows he can't ask me that.

"I think I'll freshen up before I go," I say.

James smiles his appreciation.

Rita is running water down the sink and spitting into the rushing current.

"Are you all right?" I ask.

She looks at me in the mirror, and what can only be described as real terror comes across her face. I've seen the look before. They always assume they've been caught in an elaborate lie, but the truth is more elaborate than they could understand. James doesn't make a show of his women, but he doesn't dishonor me by telling lies.

I know the corrosive power of a lie. Every year H.T. Crouch sends James to Vegas for a convention where James catches up on everything new in the world of clothing. It's a small convention; the attendees don't even fill a hotel to capacity, and the gathering is really a fraternity. Men need that. They need to come together once in a while, leave their familiar surroundings and entertain their thoughts in a new, wild environment. I'd be lying if I didn't admit to a certain anxiety every year when the convention nears, but trying to guess what James is doing when he's out of my sight is a losing game. I have to rely on James's account when he returns, an account filled with the extreme behavior of Alex from Saint Louis, or Harry from Pennsylvania. Sometimes I wonder if James exaggerates the others' behavior to make his own seem small and rational. I've never been able to know how James considers himself.

James took me to the first convention, a gesture of kindness and a show of solidarity in the face of the scowls of the others. None of them wanted to be reminded of marriage, reminded that there was such a thing as a wife.

The others started going out at night without James.

"You can go if you want," I remember telling him.

"I don't want to go with them," he said. He meant it too. Whenever I am alone with James, I am the only one anywhere around. But I feared James would regret bringing me, so I volunteered to visit my sister Arlene, who lives in Payson. I live in fear of regret of any kind.

"I can drive you," James offered.

I assured him the bus was fine. I liked looking out the window, I told him.

The most powerful lie in my relationship with James is my own. But it's too late now to confess. It would only reveal my deceit. Maybe I really felt put out by what happened in Vegas. I'm like that. I sometimes say things I don't mean. I sometimes don't stand up for what I'm thinking because I don't trust myself. Maybe I was tired—for the moment, at least—of James and his women. The ramifications of that thought are unthinkable. I sometimes get upset thinking about Barbara.

Whatever it was, I let the guy at the Pine Tree Inn waltz me around the dance floor while my sister watched from our table. She's lived her whole life without a husband. "But I love men," she says. "The older I get, the more I love them."

I let the guy at the Pine Tree Inn take me up to his room, too. It's so easy when there isn't anyone to check your actions. My sister certainly wasn't going to say anything, and like I've already said, I don't verbalize what I'm thinking until I've had a chance to think it to death. I was thinking it to death while the guy did what he did to me in his room at the Pine Tree Inn.

After, the guy offered to drive me home and I said I wanted him to take me to my sister's house. I wasn't too clear on the directions, but Payson is small enough you can drive around and find everything sooner or later. We made a wrong turn at first and ended up on a dark stretch of highway that led back toward Phoenix. The guy pulled the car over to check his map and we got out. My eyes adjusted, and even though there were no streetlights, the moon was so bright everything appeared fluorescent. It was the first time all night either of us had stopped the locomotion of our actions, and the unexpected moment made me appreciate all that had transpired. What the guy said and did to get me to his room at the Pine Tree Inn was what every woman expects a man to say and do. And women need men to say and do those things so that a



familiar, comfortable atmosphere is maintained. Ask any man who is unsuccessful at romance and you'll find out he is trying too hard to be original. All men should know this. James knows this.

Rita shuts off the faucet. Excuses are working their way down from her brain to her lips, but she's too stunned from being seen in the light to say anything. She mumbles something about a bad dinner, an incomplete sentence of simple nouns and verbs, and the thought occurs to me that Rita might not speak English that well.

"Look, it's okay," I say. "I know who you are."

Rita's eyes grow wide.

"Do you know who I am?" I ask.

She nods, and it seems she doesn't speak English until she says, "Yes, I know who you are." The words are as clear and cool as an October night.

"James is worried about you," I say.

"Aren't you worried about *him*?" Rita asks. Her question seems confrontational.

I stare into Rita's face and see her incredible youth. At a distance she looks like a woman of about thirty. Up close, however, she has the face of an angelic child, a girl who might draw a hopscotch game in colored chalk on the sidewalk in front of her house.

"How long have you been seeing James?" I ask. I already know the answer, two months, but this is always a good test to see how on the level they're going to be with me.

"I don't think I should answer that," Rita says. Her childlike beauty is momentarily erased, replaced by hard edges. She wants to push past me, but I'm blocking the door.

"Two months, right?" I ask.

Rita stares at me incredulously.

"It's not a secret between me and James," I tell her.

"He tells you everything?" The question is more like a gasp.

A young black woman bursts through the bathroom door, drunk. She catches herself on the sink, and Rita is pushed aside, so that I can see myself in the mirror. My reflection is angrier than

I imagined I looked, and I'm unsettled by what I'm giving away. Rita pretends to be watching the drunk woman, who is checking her makeup, but Rita is really staring into the sink, wondering what she's going to say next.

The woman keeps glancing up at me in the mirror, and the uncomfortable silence makes her turn away from the sink without her purse.

Rita sighs heavily, perhaps surrendering herself to me.

The small brown leather purse spreads like a stain on the corner of the sink.

"Don't go in there," the drunk woman says to someone outside the door.

"Did James tell you about me?" I ask, asserting my superior position. As confident as I'm feeling, I never know the answer to this question.

Rita nods tentatively.

I expected the answer to be no, so my curiosity overwhelms me. "What did he tell you?" I ask coolly.

Outside the door we both hear the drunk woman say, "Shit, I forgot my purse in there."

"Just go in there and get it," a voice, another woman, says.

Rita glances at the purse. "He was very complimentary," she manages to say, her coolness matching mine. "He said he loves you. Don't you think that's shitty? That he can be with me and he still has the nerve to say he loves you?"

Oh, my dear Rita. My dear, simple Rita. I'm dialing up the words to make Rita understand, trying to come up with something she can get her tiny thoughts around that will illuminate for her how complex relationships can be, when she starts to fidget with the paper towel dispenser. "How do you know James and I aren't planning to run away together?" she asks without looking up at me.

I stifle a laugh. I'm not sure if Rita is trying to be mean or if she is under a delusion. "James is married to me," I say. "And he always will be."

"I'll go in and get it for you," another voice says.

The door opens, and Rita and I are expecting a stranger, but James walks in, startling us both. He appears like a giant in the fluorescent light. He shifts uncomfortably. "There's a line outside, and Juan says he's going to have to come in if you two don't come out." James looks at me when he says this, and Rita stares at him, waiting for acknowledgment.

James backs out of the bathroom without looking once in Rita's direction, and I'll admit this gives me a small pleasure. Rita charges after him, and they're both lost beyond the crowd waiting outside the bathroom door. By the time I make my way to the door, they've vanished.

On the way home I can't stop thinking about my mother. No words about my father's affair were ever spoken between us, but we both know the other knows. I actually knew first. My father and Candy Howard were caught by the innocent interruption of a child sent home sick from school. I knew right away that the naked body under my father wasn't my mother and the enormity of Candy's bare feet frightened me. The callused undersides of her feet made me gasp, and my father scrambled to find clothes for the both of them. When I think of my father's affair, Candy Howard's callused feet and my father wrapped in my mother's robe remain as the images of what can result from elaborate lies and deceit.

It's more complicated than that, I know. My mother wouldn't have been able to live with Candy Howard in her life. And Mr. Howard wouldn't have stood for it either. I loved my mother, and I didn't want my parents to divorce like everybody else's parents, but there was something dishonorable in the way my father scrambled when he was caught. I'll admit to dishonor, too, when I used his secret for favor and personal gain. In that instance, everyone behaved badly.

At the stop sign two blocks from our house, I hear Rita's question again. I'm thinking about that ugly robe and those callused feet, and suddenly I'm hearing Rita asking me how I don't know

she's not going to run away with my husband. A mild alarm colors my perception, and not only can I not answer that question, I can't figure out how James and Rita disappeared so quickly outside the ladies' room at the club.

I narrowly avoid a trash can the wind has blown into the street as I race home. I can see the driveway a million miles before I get there and I'm disappointed that James isn't home but surprised at the strange station wagon in the driveway.

"Hello?" A small man emerges from the dark shadows the house is casting under the moonlight.

"Can I help you?" I ask officiously. The sight of this dwarfish man is startling. He keeps putting his hands in his pockets and pulling them out.

"You don't know me," he says.

"Do you know me?" I ask.

"No," he admits.

"What are you doing at my house?"

The small man looks at the ground. "I'm looking for my wife."

I try not to give away what I know, but the picture of this small man and Rita on their wedding day appears in my imagination, and I think of Rita and think: *It's no wonder.*

"I can't see what I have to do with your wife," I say. "Do I know her?"

The small man locks his gaze on a cement seam in the driveway. He's trying to be delicate. He doesn't know how to say what he has to say. The air of weakness around the small man actually shrinks him until he is so pitiable I am about to tell him that his wife is, in fact, with my husband but that there isn't anything going on that he should be worried about when the small man says, "I found this."

He hands me a square of paper that falls open at its worn folds.

"I'm running away," is all the note says.

"And this," he says, handing me a folded-over photo. A crease runs across James's face, giving him a double smile. Rita is standing next to him, looking off as if someone called her name right as the

camera flashed. A small, one-armed totem pole stands like a sentry in a curio cabinet behind them. "That's in my house," the small man says. "After I found that, I started following her around, and the man in that picture lives here." He jams a thumb violently in the air.

Calmly, without allowing an awkward pause, I redeem the currency of the graceless note. "Is Rita your wife?"

The sound of his wife's name startles him, and he involuntarily leans forward.

"I just had dinner with her," I say. "And with my husband, James. She's a very charming woman." This cover, this lie, will be the small man's only compensation for his devotion to Rita, and it fills me up to pay him.

Unanswerable questions fill the small man's mind, but instead of asking them, he just stands still, looking past me into the street. He knows I'm lying, probably could produce more proof than the photograph, but he realizes it's useless and doesn't try to persuade me further about my husband. If James and I stand together, we can resist all accusations.

My mind drifts to Rita and James, the postcard-perfect picture of them hanging off the bow of a ship, sailing into a yellow horizon but somehow sailing *toward* me. My lie is still floating in the air, and I have to say, it never occurred to me that the small man's reward might be mine, too.

James pulls up in his car, the one he got when he traded in my father's old car, the passenger side empty.

"Hi, honey," James says to me, kissing me loosely on the mouth.

Honey, this is Rita's husband," I say.

"Oh, hello," James says, powerfully shaking the small man's hand. The small man wants to make a protest, wants to take back his hand and point and accuse, but James's charm overwhelms him and all he can say is, "Well, okay . . . goodnight."

James watches the small man drive away, and I tell him about the note.

"She's left him," he admits.

I feel sorry for the small man as his car disappears at the end of our street. The streetlights flicker once and then snap out, leaving James and me standing in the darkness outside our house. Before my eyes adjust, James's figure is as unrecognizable as a stranger's. I remember the name of the guy from the Pine Tree Inn, and the same thought occurs to me now that occurred to me then, standing among the moonlit trees: *I don't find freedom and excitement in these endless possibilities.*



# Lindy

WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO TO GET IN HERE: SET FIRE TO YOUR FAMILY while they sleep; lock a small child in an old refrigerator abandoned to the earth by its owners; lay wooden posts in the path of an Amtrak Sunset Limited; remove the stop signs at an intersection near a grade school; dump hydrochloric acid in a public pool; lure neighborhood boys and girls into your house for cookies and movies and store their body parts according to size in a reach-in freezer; order a Big Mac at a McDonald's and open fire on its patrons—all of these things will get you sent to the Arizona State Hospital, usually for life. Whereas I thought I would spend at least six months there, I ended up lasting only a day, the most bizarre day in my then eighteen-year-old life, because Lindy had no sooner introduced himself than he was dead.

Of the number of venues for serving your mandatory Christian service, a graduation requirement heartily endorsed by the priests and lay people of Randolph College Preparatory, there were two: the children's crisis center or the state mental hospital. And on the authority of generations of graduates before—an authority based on tales of crazy women shedding their clothes while walking down the hall, men who tried to shove eating utensils in various orifices, human beings acting like animals, performing for the benefit of craven teenagers whose hair was, at all times, cut above the collar—the hospital was the place to volunteer.



My assignment that first and last day, a day which seemed forever in coming as I waded through a series of checks (fingerprint, background, etc., as well as various interviews with doctors whose peculiarities paralleled their patients'), was a large man with a stone face who looked about forty, his dull gray crew cut meticulously maintained. "Thomas Major Hill," his chart read, along with an ominous instruction to "keep the patient out of the vicinity of any activated television."

"Call me Lindy," Thomas Major Hill said. "My friends call me Lindy."

"Is that a nickname?" I asked.

"Sort of. I'm Charles A. Lindbergh Jr.," he said. "I'm the baby Lindbergh."

Lindy seemed exceptional in his incarceration. He hadn't violated someone else and become a criminal; his brain just wouldn't unhinge itself from an assembly of facts: that he was born in 1930 to Anne Morrow and Charles A. Lindbergh; that he spent the first year or so of his life at Next Day Hill, the Morrow estate in Englewood, New Jersey ("That's En-glewood," Lindy said. "Not Inglewood, as in California. I've never been to California. I hate California"); that his real nickname was "Hi" because of something cute he once said; that he missed his nurse, Betty Gow; that his father was a great pilot. Lindy said he'd been separated from his family since he was young—when I asked him what had separated them he nodded vaguely, saying "Yep, exactly"—but that he'd tried several times to reunite with his sister, who lived in Hawaii. Apparently it was these reunions that caused Lindy to wind up in the loony bin.

"My sister has a magnificent house," Lindy said. "She has three children with her husband, Tom, who is a lawyer. They have a maid, their house is so big. I had a picture of them, but it got taken away."

I told Lindy I once lived in Hawaii, and his stone face softened with a big smile. "How did you like it?" he wanted to know.

"I loved it," I said.

I wondered where Lindy was from. When you meet someone, it's

interesting to guess at who their parents were, what their childhood was like, etc. I figured it wouldn't do any good to point out that mathematically Lindy wasn't old enough to be the Lindbergh child. Plus, to do so might enrage him, a feeling substantiated by something I learned later from Stillwell, Lindy's doctor.

Stillwell told me about another patient who came to the hospital claiming to be the son of Charles Lindbergh. Lindy was understandably irate. He publicly challenged this Lindbergh to prove his claim. This Lindbergh told a long-winded tale in the cafeteria one lunch about how Bruno Hauptmann snatched him from his crib, then handed him off to Al Capone, who changed his name from Lindbergh to Salvatore. This Lindbergh—now Salvatore—grew up under Capone's wing, managing several casinos in Las Vegas under the name Bugsy Siegel. When Lindy pressed this reputed mobster for details verifying his birth, this Lindbergh admitted he wasn't in fact the baby Lindbergh but Colonel Lindbergh himself. The colonel hinted that little Lindy was the bastard child of Mrs. Lindbergh and one of the construction workers who built the Lindbergh estate in Hopewell. Further, he hinted that the worker and Mrs. Lindbergh conspired to have Hauptmann abduct the bastard child and kill him. This sent Lindy into a fit, and luckily he was restrained after cutting the impostor with a sharpened toothbrush Lindy carried in his sock. By the time Lindy came out of isolation, a long hall of dank rooms in the windowless basement, the Lindbergh impostor was gone, transferred to a facility in Georgia.

I told Lindy about when I was sixteen, how I spent the summer with my aunt in Macon. Bobby Haynes lived next door. Bobby Haynes and his girlfriend, Beth, took me out to the lake with them on those hot summer nights. I kicked rocks around the lake while Bobby and Beth listened to the radio. After a while I got to where I could time when I could come back to the car. The three of us would go to the Dairy Queen if it wasn't too late. There was an even calm to those nights, a calm shattered when they found Beth face down at the lakeshore, her lungs clogged with red mud. Everyone,

including my aunt, thought Bobby did it, that he probably got her pregnant. They were satisfied in this when Bobby's mother found Bobby hanging in his closet by his rhinestone belt. He'd removed the silver buckle with the engraving of a cowboy lassoing a bull and put it on his dresser. My aunt sent me home shortly after that.

I didn't actually tell Lindy the part about them finding Beth and Bobby. Lindy spent the rest of that day playing chess with Old Sam Strumm, who claimed to be the greatest chess player in the history of institutionalization. The cause of the riot that day, the riot in which Lindy would end up dead, wasn't a disagreement of any kind over the chess match. The riot started because Martha Easton opened the piano when it was quiet time in the common area. I was still learning the rules of quiet time myself, so I wasn't sure that piano playing wasn't allowed, but the orderlies said, "Now Martha," and flipped the lid down. Martha flipped it up and started playing, and one of the orderlies slammed the lid down on Martha's fingers. Martha yelped and jumped up, the top of her head catching one of the orderlies on the chin so hard he opened his mouth and spit blood. As you can guess, in a minute everyone was up and screaming. Orderlies from other halls flooded the common area. For my part, I tried to pull the orderlies off Martha, who was cowering near the pedals of the piano, but I was so new I wasn't sure what to do. The sound of glass breaking hushed the room, and when an orderly stuck his head through the broken window, which had a shard of glass hanging like a guillotine blade, he looked down and saw Lindy crumpled on the sidewalk, ten floors down.

Or something like that. Who could re-enact that melee? With all the flailing arms and screaming, it's a miracle more people didn't get hurt. It's all true, though. Everything I said happened did happen. Well, except the part about me being an eighteen-year-old volunteer. That part was a fib. I wish I had the luxury of being an eighteen-year-old buttfuck volunteer, laughing at all the crazies while leaning against a new sportscar Daddy bought me, worrying about whether or not I was going to get blown Saturday night after

the dance. Eighteen for me was graduating from high school and being drafted into the army. Eighteen for me was worrying that I might not live to do the things these punk volunteers take as their holy God-given. Eighteen for me was being in the jungle.

The jungle was a bad place for a war, was the first thought I had on Vietnamese soil. The jungle is really all I see when I remember back. I can't remember anything I ate, or the places I slept, or anyone's face except Renshaw's and Kim Li's. And of course what happened.

Private Renshaw was my shadow on my first tour. Everywhere I went, he went. He was from somewhere in Kansas, and whenever we came upon a rice paddy, he'd shield his eyes and peer into the distance and say, "This ain't no wheat field." That sounds like a sweet, innocent thing to say, but that was just part of Renshaw's shtick. He might've looked like a corn-fed dope, but he had hellfire in him. At night in the foxholes, the sound of monkeys and who-knows-what echoing all around us, he'd tell about what he and his buddies would do back home after the Friday football games. Renshaw was a defensive lineman, which he had us understand wasn't a glory position necessarily, but he was also the quarterback's best friend, and to hear him tell it, boy, those cheerleaders couldn't line up fast enough. He amazed everyone in our platoon—Riker, Macdonald, Seeley and Sergeant Roberts with his tales of conquests. All his storytelling sort of backfired on him, though. He opened his mouth so much the others used to kid him. "Watch Renshaw around that grenade launcher," they joked. "Don't get too close to that beer bottle," was another one. Or: "Lock up your pets." Renshaw grew to hate the kidding, but he never let on. I sort of kept my distance from him in the foxhole, too. I knew the fag jokes wouldn't be far behind.

Vietnam wasn't anything like boot camp, let me tell you. In South Carolina the sky was quiet and filled with the colors of the rainbow at sunset. When you looked up in Nam—if you looked up—you didn't see the sky, but you saw the helicopter patrols that buzzed day and night in your ear. And the screaming. Everyone

screamed. I got so I was afraid to take a step forward.

Renshaw knew of a place to unwind. A couple hooches near our post housed ten or more girls, and one of the girls' mothers ran a shine bar out of a third, adjoining hooch. The thatched roof was so low Renshaw couldn't stand upright, which was okay because we never stood around for very long.

This one particular night, the night in question, Renshaw grabbed a girl and headed for what he called "the Renshaw Suite." It didn't matter which girl you chose; they all knew us and they all knew we went back into the dirt-floor rooms and either gazed over the mud windowsills or closed our eyes and thought of girls back home. Still, we got to know all the girls, and some of the guys could even talk about them by name.

Maybe Renshaw was getting Dear John letters from home or, more likely, he couldn't stomach another day of the smell of killing. The best way to explain what happened is to figure he just snapped. No one heard the girl's screams but me. I knocked on the wall of the Renshaw Suite to make sure everything was okay. You always checked on your buddy. The screams stopped as I reached the burlap bag splayed and hung in the doorway. I peered around it and saw the girl, her wrists tied behind her back. Renshaw'd stuffed one of his socks in the girl's mouth and was forcing her head down while he sodomized her. I could smell his sweat. Renshaw pulled the sock out of her mouth, but before she could scream, he shoved her head down on him so hard she gagged. He held a gun to her head and told her to take it nice and easy.

I stood watching. I realized that, through the tears, I recognized the girl. Kim Li Phan. Renshaw rolled his eyes in his head and nodded forward, relaxing his grip on the gun. He jerked up when Kim Li accidentally bit him, and he slapped her hard, knocking her into the corner. Renshaw stuffed the sock back into Kim Li's mouth and turned around, seeing me in the doorway. "This gook bitch bit me," Renshaw seethed. He yanked Kim Li out of the corner and asked me to help him get her out of the hooch. I followed them

down the noisy hall, Kim Li moaning and sobbing. “Don’t fuckin’ follow me,” Renshaw warned, pointing his gun at me. “Just stay where you are.” I stared at Kim Li helplessly, and her sobs faded into the dark as Renshaw dragged her into the jungle.

Things happened quickly after that. I was reassigned to a desk in a supply camp. The government needed me alive because I was the only witness. They never found Kim Li’s body. Renshaw swore his innocence at the trial, telling everyone I was making the whole thing up, but when you had the sort of reputation Renshaw had, it was easy for people to believe how he got from A to B. In the tradition of military justice, Renshaw was convicted of rape, but because there was no body, not murder. He got eight years and was hauled off to Leavenworth. I never saw him again. The war ended and I went home to North Dakota, got married, and settled down. Maybe you saw the movie *Casualties of War*—that was based on me, partly.

Well, tried to settle down. Not in North Dakota, though. I don’t know why I said that. I *did* go home to North Dakota, that part is true. Got a job as a night manager for Pete’s Fish & Chips. You never saw a bigger bunch of morons than the guys who worked there. My main responsibility was to count the receipts and make sure the money matched and deposit the blue bag with the locking zipper in the night deposit slot at the bank.

The bank parking lot wasn’t that well-lit, and I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised when I got jumped. It was three or four guys at least who came out of the bushes. One of them had a gun. I didn’t get a good look at their faces because another of them conked me over the head with a baseball bat. When I regained consciousness, the little blue bag stuffed with \$3,000 was gone. Mac, the day manager, didn’t believe my story and fired me. Who knew the bank had the parking lot under surveillance twenty- four hours a day? He gave me the same look Bobby and Beth did when I said I really did have sex with Mrs. Jones, the woman who cleaned my aunt’s house. I had to say something. Who can take the kind of kidding Bobby

and Beth gave me when I came back to the car too soon and found them naked in the backseat? I was just kidding when I said earlier that Bobby and Beth are dead. They're not. I wished they were when Bobby told me he asked Mrs. Jones if what I'd said was true and Mrs. Jones said she was going to have a talk with my aunt, who sent me home right after that. Bobby and Beth still live in Macon. My aunt told me they got married and had children.

I got married too. In Sacramento. North Dakota was too small for me anyway; and California is a dreamer's paradise. I dreamed of finding a woman to love and to make a home with on the Pacific shore. When I met Jill, she was waitressing during the day and taking law school classes at night. Not law school really, but criminal justice classes at the community college toward a degree so she could go to law school. You never saw so much ambition. It made me ambitious too. I got a job in the admissions office at the big state university. My coworkers liked me and we all got along fine. Jill started to make plans to transfer to the state university. We were also making plans to get married, which we did in a very low-key Vegas ceremony. "We'll do it big when we have lots of friends and paid vacations," she said.

People always say you should know someone inside and out before you marry them, but I found it exciting to find out about Jill along the way, sweet discovery after sweet discovery. The only discovery that wasn't so sweet was learning that Jill was in a secret competition with her best friend, Helen, who lived in New York. Helen was the fashion editor for one of those big glossy Madison Avenue magazines. Jill and Helen had grown up together outside of San Francisco, and Helen had gone to college right away and moved to New York after that. Helen's husband was a literature professor at Columbia and had published a big-to-do book on Shakespeare. Our autographed copy carefully supported the towels and sheets in our linen closet. Some days Jill seemed impatient with our ascent.

Then, out of the blue, I started to rise through the ranks at the university. One of the history professors found out I was a Vietnam

vet and asked me to give a lecture in his class. I did and the professor was so impressed that he recommended me for an adjunct job teaching a course on military warfare. Of course I had to lie about being a college graduate to get the job, but who wouldn't? Jill was able to quit her job at the restaurant, and she transferred to the university as a full-time pre-law student. I took on a couple more courses, freshman Western civ classes.

Jill talked about having children. We talked about getting out of our useless apartment and buying a house. Things were going well, but an uneasy feeling settled around me. Helen and her husband continued to write with fantastic details of their life in New York, about parties and museums and openings—all the things that get shallow people so excited they can't talk. What those people know wouldn't fill half of Jill's brain. She wouldn't see it that way (if you saw a picture of Helen, you'd understand Jill's agitation, though; Jill wouldn't admit that had anything to do with it). Jill grew agitated by the sight of me.

Then fortune knocked. Jill and I came home to a letter on embossed stationery. A big publisher in New York wanted to publish my book on the history of the world. "I didn't know you wrote a book," Jill said, but she was so happy she hugged me until I was blue. She called Helen immediately. The story of me blowing up in my editor's office and throwing the only copy of my manuscript out the window reached the status of legend with my immediate circle of friends. It still makes me laugh.

The guards are good sorts, and when there's a lockdown they always give me the same room, the one with the corner chipped away, which I did when I was eighteen. You figure it worked for Clint Eastwood, why wouldn't it work for your average Joe? "Hey, Lindy, how are ya' doin'?" the guard says and it reminds me of that show with what's-his-name on it, the one where he looks at the outside from the inside and wishes he was on the outside. You know the one.





# I Guess This is Goodbye, Then

THE WEEK TIM WAS SUSPENDED FOR STARTING FIRES IN THE BOYS' bathroom, my reputation was revealed to me. Principal Edwards had summoned us for interrogation simultaneously, and everyone was shocked to see me return to my seat so soon. I imagined the others regarded me with an air of caution, wondering what I would do to retaliate against those who had nominated me to the principal's ears. I dreamed of radical terrorism, toilets spouting like fountains, poison ivy on the swing set, ink in the lunch milk, the entire playground on fire. Transferring schools had seemed bad enough, but transferring from Rapid City to San Diego in the middle of my freshman year was socially disastrous. Not picked for basketball or football or baseball, Tim was the only other kid no one wanted anything to do with. "Those guys are a bunch of fags anyway," Tim said. "Humping each other over a little ball. Fuck 'em."

Tim and I spent most of the time hanging out after school at Tim's hideout, a tin construction shack left by the crew who had paved the highway behind my new home. We called it the clubhouse. It could hold up to five people, but only Tim and I ever went there. Weeds sprouted up inside the shack, nourished by the shaft of sunlight the doorless entrance allowed. We collected cans there, rummaged from the Holiday Inn dumpster down the highway, and cashed them in at the local recycling center. Weekends were our big score. In addition to the cluster of beer cans, we usually came

away with a full library of porno magazines discarded by weekend surfers. When the bell rang at the end of the school day, Tim and I raced to the clubhouse and spent the afternoon leafing through the fleshy pages.

Tim learned the delivery schedule at the Texaco next to the Holiday Inn and knew that when a truckload of goods came in, one of the clerks would have to leave a register to check them in. The other clerk was usually overwhelmed with cars pulling in off the freeway.

So we started stealing beer.

First it was six-packs behind our backs. Then we started walking out with a twelve-pack each. Olympia. Hamm's. Pabst Blue Ribbon. I selected mine more on the basis of color and design, but Tim always stole Coors.

"My dad drinks Coors," he told me. Tim's father left his mother when Tim was five. Tim never talked about him, except he always told me that his father drank Coors. I wondered if it was the only thing Tim knew about him. A small picture on the hutch in Tim's apartment showed the three of them. Tim was in his mother's thin arms. His father had his arm around his mother. They both had long, narrow faces with eyes the size of marbles, and their hair was identically feathered in the style of the times. I never told Tim that my parents died in a gas explosion before I could really know anything about them, back when I lived in Sacramento. That was before I was shipped from relative to relative, first Denver and then Santa Fe and then Rapid City.

We added our empties to the aluminum heaps outside the shack.

"Look at this," I said, fishing a used rubber out of an Old Milwaukee can. The tip was full and it was tied off in the middle.

"Gross," Tim said, coming closer. He knocked it out of my hand and stepped on it. The white fluid leaked into the dirt. "Have you ever used one?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"I have," he said. "On my neighbor."

I looked at him skeptically.

"Really. You can too, if you want. She's about forty," he said. "She's a mental defect, though. She sits on the curb and drools on herself all day."

We really did find Dora on the curb, just like Tim said. I'd seen her before but thought she was just waiting for a friend or the bus.

"Hi, Dora," Tim said.

"Hi, Tim," Dora said without looking at him.

"This is my friend."

"Hi," Dora said without looking at me. She seemed to be concentrating on something in the distance.

"You want to go inside?" Tim said.

"No," she answered. She shaded her thick-framed glasses and turned her head up to get a look.

"C'mon," Tim said. He pulled Dora by the arm and Dora rose like a genie.

"Let go," she said.

"C'mon, Dora," Tim said, gently turning her toward his apartment. "Let's go inside."

"I don't want to," she said. "I'll call the police."

I grabbed Tim's arm. "Man, don't." I tried not to sound panicked.

"Don't worry," he whispered. "She isn't going to call the cops."

"I am," Dora said. "I called them last time."

"Yeah? And what did they tell you?" Tim asked, smiling.

"They told me not to let you do it again," she said.

"Did the cops really come?" I asked worriedly.

"Yeah, they came. Didn't they, Dora? You called the cops on Timmy, didn't you?"

"Yep, yep," Dora said.

Tim grinned and I looked away, Dora's gaze following mine, trying to see what I was looking at.

Dora began waiting for me on the curb in front of her apartment, three doors down from Tim's. Her last name was Wells. "I think

I'm English," she said. Dora would say things like that that would crack me up, without trying to be funny.

What Dora told me about herself wouldn't be more than an hour's conversation no matter what day of the week it was, but she parceled the information out over time. She was born in San Diego and had never left. Dora didn't have any other friends besides me, she'd lived in her apartment for more than twenty years (before I was even born, I thought), and her parents lived "somewhere else." Someone from a special service came and checked on Dora twice a week, bringing her a small amount of marijuana to relieve the shooting pain in her eyes. The only thing Dora loved was bingo, so three nights out of four we'd take the bus to Our Lady of Hope, smoking a plump joint on the way.

Even though the bingo hall was the size of a double-car garage, they somehow managed to pack in more than two dozen people every night. The room was charged with nervous excitement. Dora played faithfully every week but couldn't seem to win. And it didn't appear to bother her. She only ever talked to one other person besides me, one-armed Eva. Eva's husband had axed off her left arm in a blind rage. "He was cuckoo," Eva said, laughing like the joke was somehow on her. I liked Eva's sense of humor. She could really work her bingo marker too.

Dora never played for more than a couple of hours. I'd sit in the corner, propped up on the stool with the wobbly third leg, smiling for good luck when Dora turned around in her metal folding chair. I didn't mind waiting; bingo didn't interest me. I liked to sit and picture myself on the stool, like an image from a satellite, and wonder if any of my old friends back in Rapid City would recognize me. I wanted to see the look on Lloyd Inman's face when he saw me with Dora. Man, old Lloyd would've been surprised. The whole gang would've. Zeke and Bruce and Georgie and J.P.

"Okay," Dora would say when she was finished. We'd hold hands while we waited for the return bus. Once or twice Eva took us out for a late dinner at Hardee's or Arctic Circle—the only

two places where Eva would eat. But it was usually just me and Dora. We'd spark up down the street from Our Lady of Hope and imagine we could hear the 57 bus before it turned the corner. The bus driver would accelerate on the freeway on-ramp, Dora's face pressed against the window, the yellow freeway lights flashing by like lightning.

I didn't tell Dora about the note someone passed me the morning after Tim's suspension. "I never knew you were a fag," it said. Someone had written "Me neither" in blue, curlicued letters. I turned around in my desk, but everyone was staring at the chalkboard, intently watching Mrs. Riggins explain algebra. Heat flashed across my forehead and I stood up and walked over to the trash can. Mrs. Riggins stopped the chalk and everyone was looking at me. I crumpled the note into a ball and dropped it into the garbage. Mrs. Riggins waited for me to reach my seat before she continued.

"What do you and Tim do up in the shack by the highway?" Tony Richards asked me at lunch. Now that I was infamous, I'd tried sitting at the popular table.

"Suck each other's dicks, probably," John Killspotted said.

Everyone at the table laughed and looked at me. I tried to laugh with them, to take the joke, and Greg Knot pointed and said, "Look, he likes it too."

Tony's sister, Lucy, spit out her mashed potatoes, laughing.

I picked up my tray, my hands and arms shaking.

"Oops. Time to suck a dick," someone said, and the table erupted.

The others started in too. John Killspotted said he'd heard I was in the hospital and asked if it was to get my stomach pumped. Greg Knot told a disgusting story about a gerbil.

I set my tray back down on the table. "Listen, fuckers," I said. Nobody moved. "Tim's the fag, not me. In fact, when he gets back,

I'm going to kick the shit out of him." I was shaking as I said it, and when Tim came back a week later, I was even more nervous. The whole school was talking about it, and I was worried Tim had heard what I'd said. John Killspotted put his finger in my chest at lunch and said, "We're coming up to your love nest. We expect you're going to do something about Tim."

"Yeah, okay," I said. Tim was out of earshot, but I felt his eyes on me. John Killspotted walked away, and I set my tray of turkey and gravy down across from Tim.

"Why are you talking to that Injun?" Tim asked.

"He asked me if I would do his homework," I lied. "And I told him, 'Fuck no.'"

"Doesn't surprise me," Tim said. "Stupid fuckin' Injun."

It was for reasons like this that I hadn't told Tim about Dora. I had been grounded by my aunt and uncle when report cards came out, and I told him I was still grounded to keep him from calling me up. I always ran to the door at Dora's in case Tim was looking out the window.

"Hey, do you want to meet at the clubhouse after school?" I asked nervously. "You know, drink some beers."

Tim looked across the table and smiled. "You mean you aren't going to visit Dora?" he asked.

Hearing her name in the cafeteria caused me to blush, and I stammered, trying to deny it.

"It's cool," Tim laughed. "I won't tell anyone." He shoveled a forkful of corn into his mouth. "I mean, that pussy's pretty sweet," he said. He smiled as he chewed. "And *easy*."

A sick feeling came over me.

"She can't keep her mouth shut about you," Tim said. He winked. "I think she really likes you."

"Yeah?" I asked weakly.

John Killspotted walked by the table. "After school, then," he said, and walked away.

"What's after school?" Tim asked.

"That's what I meant to tell you," I said. "When I told that fuckin' Injun that I wouldn't help him, he called me and you fags, so I told him to show up at the clubhouse after school. We'll fuckin' show him who's a fag."

Tim put his fork down. "Fuck yeah. I hate that Injun anyway."

"Meet me up there, then," I said, and picked up my tray. I spent the rest of the afternoon in the nurse's office with a sick stomach, sprawled out on a cot, staring at the ceiling.

John Killspotted and Greg Knot met up with me as I climbed the hill toward the shack.

"Hey, fairy," Greg Knot said.

John Killspotted laughed. "Hey, Tinker Bell."

"Shut the fuck up," I said, walking in front of them, as if I were eager to get to where I was going.

"You better beat your boyfriend into the ground," John Killspotted called from behind. "I'm not coming up here to watch you two make out."

We passed a group of sixth graders who had just gotten off the bus. "There he is," one of them called out, and the pack fell in behind me. I saw myself from the satellite again. I saw Zeke and J.P. and the others looking too. This would remind them of Dallas Tucker, the new kid at the high school adjacent to Knollwood Heights whom everyone had heard about, the beating and the disappearance. It occurred to me that I, too, was a member of that phantom class. I never even knew what Dallas Tucker looked like. It galled me to think everyone back in Rapid City would probably remember us both in the same breath.

I thought about the satellite picture and heard what anyone who knew me before would've thought out loud: *Is that really him? Is that where he went? It doesn't even look like the guy we knew. It must be a mistake.*

I didn't see Tim at first, but he poked his head out when he



heard the excited voices converging. He glanced at me and then at the crowd behind me, confused. He started to say, "What the—" but I rushed up and shoved him to the ground.

"Shut up, faggot," I said. Tim tried to get up, but John Killspotted kicked him hard in the stomach. Tim doubled over and the others started chanting, "Get him, get him." John Killspotted nodded, menacing, and I hauled off and kicked Tim in the crotch, my foot aching. My blood surged, rushing through me, my skin pinpricked. Images of Zeke and Bruce and Georgie and J.P. swirled across my field of vision, and I buried my foot again and again into Tim, who curled up on the ground. He wore a quizzical look, and I thought of Dora and I kicked him again, tripping and falling over his shaking body. Greg stepped up and kicked Tim and kept kicking, and the crowd kept chanting, and finally Tim rolled over onto his stomach and quit moving. John Killspotted said, "There you go, faggot," and kicked Tim hard again and Tim groaned.

I pushed through the crowd and ran. I could hear Tim's groans all the way back to my house.

After bingo Dora asked if I wanted to stay awhile, but I said I should probably go. Tim's window was dark. The temperature had dropped suddenly and the wind cut through my jean jacket. I hugged myself as I waited for Dora to put her key in the lock. All the apartments resembled one another from the outside, each unrecognizable from the next. Once Dora was inside, I kissed her good night. She waved to me from the window, but I was distracted by the large chunk of siding still missing from the corner apartment building. Tim and I had blown it away with a shotgun Tim's uncle had left behind. I guess I was surprised no one had fixed it. I touched the jagged groove. Tim was gone. I felt it right then. The next morning I would hear about how someone had called an ambulance, about Tim pissing blood. By lunch it would be confirmed that Tim's mother had transferred him to another school. Dora wouldn't know

anything about Tim and Tim's mother moving out, a young couple with an infant moving into their old apartment. Dora wouldn't have any idea about her having to move apartments either. Less than a month later I would be standing in front of Dora's, peering through the ghostly curtains at an empty apartment.

The houses across the street were strung with lit candy canes and Santas, but the apartment buildings remained dark. The holiday season had begun across the street and on the street over and block after block throughout the city. I can't remember what I got for Christmas that year. By then I had moved again, to Phoenix, where there aren't any seasons.



# Cheshires

YOU GOT ME AND YOU GOT TRINY AND YOU GOT ERIC. YOU GOT us plaguing two Irish girls at the Bitter End. We were all mortal as newts, having had many shots of Knob Creek, a whiskey our faggy bartender said might be better sipped. On top of the old Knob Creek, we'd had two Bay Breezes each, a very sick and fruity concoction that would take the fuzz off a peach, if you know what I mean.

The lasses could see we were in it to win it and walked out just as we ordered them a round.

"What about these, then?" Triny yelled after them. He tended toward bitterness easily.

"I'm sure you'll find a use for them," the little flivvers laughed at us. Triny said, "C'mon, C, let's go after them," and slapped me on the arm, but when we stood up, we couldn't find a use for our legs.

Eric mentioned that he felt sick, and I reminded him that he should've sipped the Knob Creek. There was general sorriness with me, especially for Eric, who'd just found out his blood was turning yellow from the eight ball tattoo he got from some dude on a bus at a Phish concert. There wasn't anything to feel glad about.

"What should I say?" Eric asked. It's how the evening had begun, wondering how to tell Eric's girlfriend, Jenna, about her tattoo.

"You just tell her," I said. "It ain't your fault."

Eric was not cheered by my words. Triny tried to pick Eric up by entertaining him with what he wanted to perpetrate on the cleaning woman at the office where his mother worked. The cleaning woman had told Triny she was psychic, and this gave Triny the heebie-jeebies about all the things he'd done, and oh, his poor mother, his poor, poor mother.

We were getting our game faces on, waiting for eleven thirty, for the cleaning woman to get off work and walk to the bus stop.

Triny drained his bottle of beer. "Okay," he said, and belched. "It goes like this." He took a fresh napkin and put three peanuts along one side. The nuts were us. Triny knew the way the cleaning lady went and knew there wouldn't be any trouble with headlights or anyone coming by.

"Clap your hands together tight," Triny told me. I put my cold hands together on the bar like I was praying. Triny flicked my thumbs up and screwed the mouth of the bottle into the tiny space between my outstretched palms. "Tighter," he said. I pressed my hands together as tight as I could, and the bottle stood at attention, its green tail wagging playfully in the air. "You'll have her hands and Eric'll have her legs," Triny said. He tapped the end of the bottle and smiled. He tapped it harder and the bottle wedged deep between my palms. Eric's eyes drifted toward the bottle of Knob Creek, and mine did too. I saw Triny's reflection in the mirror behind the bar as he raised his fist and slammed it into the bottle. My eyes burned as the bottle jammed against the bar and split, slicing open my hands. This cheered Eric up, and he held his sides from laughing. The faggy bartender pretended like he didn't notice, and Eric threw a dish full of peanuts at him and yelled at him to get a rag. Triny ordered another round of Knob Creek while Eric swabbed the bar with napkins. The faggy bartender poured the shots with one hand and reached under the bar and brought out a first aid kit with the other in a real show-offy way. When I pulled my hands apart, I saw that only my left hand was cut, and this made my eyes burn less. Eric wrapped my hand while I shot Knob Creek

with the other.

“Like Michael Jackson,” Eric said when he’d finished.

Triny tried to get another set of shots out of the bartender, but he wouldn’t serve us. Triny called him a name and the guy on the stool next to Triny told him to cool it and Triny called him a name too, but before the guy could do anything, we launched out of the bar, ready to light up the night, which was what Triny said to the bus driver when we stumbled on the 38L. Eric slid open all the windows in the back and we sat in the empty seats, listening to the sounds of Geary Street. The three of us bumped up and down in the dark, the fluorescent lights out for some reason, riding silently until Triny yelled, “Driver!” The bus driver put his wide horse-chestnut eyes up in the mirror above his head. “Drive this bus right into the bay, please. We’re the ones what escaped from Alcatraz and we want to go back.”

The driver stopped the bus, and I thought we might be forced from it, but two deaf guys got on instead, heading for the back of the bus. Triny started coughing so that he choked up a foul stink, warding off the deaf guys, who sat one across from the other by me and Eric.

I started feeling really sorry for the two deaf guys, who’d probably never had a good Friday night in their lives. They probably only sat around with other deaf guys and played crappy board games. I was sorry they never got to flirt with girls like the lasses at the Bitter End, or ones we’d seen earlier at Ireland’s 32. Deaf guys probably didn’t get sex, except for maybe a party of five, if you know what I mean.

The deaf guys who’d sat down on the bus reminded me of what I always wanted to forget, my sister, Ilene. She got bit by a dog when she was five, and it made her quit talking. She was a lot of fun before she got bit; we would always race to the fence in our backyard and see who could climb to the top the fastest. One time she fell down the other side of the fence, though, and our neighbors’ dog bit her in the face. Bit into her cheek and ripped out a hunk of flesh and

paraded it around the yard while my sister screamed and screamed.

My sister's face healed with the help of a plastic doctor, but she never wanted to go outside anymore after that. Finally my old man started taking her to pet stores so she could see that dogs can't really hurt you. She got so she could pet them if they were in a cage, but even now she gets nervous around them. Mostly she just sits at home in her room and listens to my parents fight.

Our bastard neighbors refused to put that fucking dog down. It died a couple of years later when it ran out into the street. I was living at home then and I heard it happen. The neighbors weren't home, and I dragged that dead sorry dog up onto our porch so my sister could see it, hoping that she'd see it was okay to come outside again, but she wouldn't look at it. The neighbors eventually got another dog, and whenever I'm home, which isn't so much since I got kicked out, I tell it, "Here, doggy, doggy. Here, boy," and when it comes close, I give it a good spray of the mace right between the eyes. Fuckin' dogs.

Anyway, the deaf guys started yapping with their hands right away. The one deaf guy seemed to be trying to convince the other deaf guy he was right about something, but the other one wouldn't hear it, turning away to look out the window. Not to be denied, the one deaf guy grabbed a rolled-up newspaper on the seat next to him and began hitting the other deaf guy, first smacking him on the arm, then on the leg. Me, Triny, and Eric were laughing our asses off, but they didn't hear.

"What's the time?" Eric asked.

One of the deaf guys was wearing one of those Day-Glo watches with large, luminous numbers, and I pointed to it.

"We got another couple of hours," Eric said.

"Let's get some more beer," Triny suggested, "to kick it in the driveway."

"We're broke," I pointed out.

"I have the keys to my dad's store," Triny offered. "I had to close up."

We agreed we should give a check on the old man's store. Eric and me thought Triny was the kitty-cat's meow for suggesting and offering, and I said so as Eric what-up-chucked on the bus floor.

"Should've sipped that Knob Creek," Eric said, and we all, including the deaf guys, laughed.

Our expulsion from the bus left us five or so blocks from Triny's dad's store, the Open Fish Market, a smelly, stinky place where we'd all worked at one time or another for Triny's dad. We race-walked up the street, and it was Triny in first with me in second and Eric coming in last. Triny unlocked the door and some of the fish smell blew by us.

Eric picked up a live turtle from the bin and dropped it in the fish tank. We all followed the flailing turtle's descent. "Let's have us a drink," Triny announced. Sapporo flowed. Whenever the salty, fishy smell came to my nose, I lifted my mini keg and drank. None of us talked about what would happen tomorrow, our trip to Disneyland to meet up with our class, the graduation trip we were supposed to be on before we got kicked out. It was Triny who'd decided we should make the trip anyway. We were agreed about what those who got us kicked out had coming: Mrs. Johnson, who was the one who got us kicked out by telling on us for selling the lunch tickets we stole from the cafeteria office. Then there was Patty Kennedy, whom we just called Dog Face, for telling Mrs. Johnson about the lunch tickets. Triny added Fiore Valenzuela—the super-slick spic with the tiny dick is what we called him—for what Fiore did to Triny during PE.

We got all the names down: Susan Greene, the cocktease whom Eric took to the Christmas formal; Trenton Jones, the prick captain of the basketball team who beat me out for student council freshman year (even though later I was glad when I found out student council was for homos); Mr. Snyder, the geometry teacher, for turning us in when we pissed in the hand soap dispenser in the girls' room. Andre Packer for trying to kiss Jenna in the parking lot in front of everyone. And Lisa Fu, who once cast a spell on Eric that made him



unable to get out of bed for two weeks.

We got down our travel plans, too: borrow Triny's uncle's station wagon, and if not that, thumb. We knew we could be there by the next night, latest.

Where the hands fell on the clock: Triny dipped the net into the tank and scooped up a wriggling fish. Me and Eric sat in the audience, giving him the thumbs-up or the thumbs-down. I began calling myself Zero, but Eric said, "You mean Nero." If we gave the thumbs-up, Triny dropped the net back into the water. If we went the other way, he'd chop the head off the flip-flopping fish with his knife. Mostly we gave the thumbs-down.

Eric looked pale in the light of the fish tank. He put his face up to it, staring into the murky water. I told Triny to get the turtle, and he said, "Wait, got something groovier." He reached into the live frog bin and shoveled a couple of handfuls up onto the counter. The frogs began their froggy dance, and Triny marked time with his knife, hacking and slashing, chopping bits and pieces that fell, rubberlike, to the floor. A limbless frog stared out from the countertop and Triny swept it to the floor with his arm.

"We should get going," Eric said.

"One sec," Triny said. He went into the back room, where his old man spent his life hunched over a calculator, and the song remained the same until he returned, a lit cigar between his lips. He passed them around, and we smokestacked the room until a thick haze floated above the dead frogs and the mounds of headless fish.

Out on the street, my hand felt better. The red stain across my palm was turning dark, and I wiggled my fingers. Triny locked up and we made our way down the street, puffing our cigars, grinning like Cheshires.

# Screen Test

WHAT YOU MEANT WHEN YOU COLLAPSED WAS: “I THINK I NEED to *lie* down”; that’s the way to say it. It’s hard, I know, harder still because I know you hate the word “lie”—don’t use it, ever. But there you have it, for future use, I mean.

When you faint like this (and I know you’re faking, although I will say the thing you do now when your head hits the ground is more convincing), I usually use the time to prod your skin with my fingers, or with a branch. Once, I took off your shoes and threw rocks at your toes. Think of it as an audition or a screen test. It’s not hurting you, and besides, you can’t feel it, right? Because you’re out like a light, right?



# Big Noise

IT WAS THE BEGINNING OF SUMMER AND I, FOR ONE, WAS GLAD OF it. A string of unsuccessful sublets had visited me in the spring—the share in Tribeca with the divorcee who threw me out when she caught me going through her purse; the warehouse in Brooklyn with the “artist” who turned tricks for drugs; the studio in the West Village that was sublet to me illegally, swindling me out of \$650; the hovel on 116th Street in the basement of a building that belonged to a maintenance man for Columbia University who needed to “flee the city”; the vacant one-bedroom I happened upon during an afternoon walk in Astoria where I lived until the real estate agent returned from Mexico. Summer meant the Hamptons, with their late mornings and hazy afternoons spent at the beach. And even though it was already June and I hadn’t lined up a summer situation, I remained hopeful that one would materialize. I had yet to find a situation as cushy as my first summer in the Hamptons, two years ago, when I was invited to stay with the Thornleys in Bridgehampton.

I’d convinced the Thornleys that our families, both being from the dust bowl, were related by marriage—a fact that I was vaguely aware was untrue. The Klipspringers were in fact from the dust bowl, as were the Thornleys, but it could have been a different Thornley family altogether. I failed to mention this fact when I met the Thornleys’ lovely daughter at Bull & Bear that summer. I was

then new to the city, a guest in the Upper East Side brownstone of Mr. and Mrs. Stahler, whom I'd met on an airplane bound for Paris. (I was on my way to visit a nice girl I'd met traveling through Europe the summer I dropped out of college.) The Stahlers were tiring of me, and I faced subletting a shoe box without ventilation in Spanish Harlem or someplace equally disdainful for the rest of the summer.

And then along came Margot Thornley, her butter brown hair just touching her smooth shoulders. Old Man Thornley had promised to meet her there to discuss his favorite subject—when exactly it was she was getting married—and I jokingly offered to propose from across the bar when the old man got there. Margot smiled, and it could've been love at first sight if I hadn't sworn off love—at least for the immediate future owing to a very unfortunate thing that happened to me once, the reason I came to New York. It was then that she introduced herself and then that her old man blew into the bar like a locomotive, just as I went into the incredible coincidence of our being related.

Old Man Thornley unbuttoned his worsted suit, and the gleam left his eye when he realized that Margot and I had just met. "Who have you been keeping a secret?" is what he said when he sat down, which caused Margot a little confusion. "Did you go to Brown?" was his question to me, and I shook my head sheepishly. "Yale," I said. "Class of ninety-four." This was a lie, but I'd just spent a week at the Yale Club on the Stahlers' dime (him finding out about the bill was the initial cause of their tiring of me), and I'd learned a great deal about New Haven from hanging around the locker room on the fifth floor.

"Harvard man, myself," Thornley said, signaling the bartender. An electronic ticker overhead announced the rising and falling stock prices and more than a few upturned faces squinted at it. "I'll have a Beefeater straight up," Thornley told the waiter. "And whatever they want."

By the end of the evening the three of us were suitably blotto,

and when Margot slipped away to the ladies' room, Old Man Thornley said to me in a confidential tone, "All Margot needs is a little persuasion. She *wants* to get married, she's just being lazy about it. For Chrissakes, she's a beautiful woman."

I agreed with him that Margot was indeed beautiful.

"Her sister was married at twenty-two," Thornley said. "And it worked out beautifully." He sighed heavily. "If Margot waits much longer, she'll be thirty and forced to choose between Loser A and Loser B."

The waiter slipped him another Beefeater—his fifth—and he came up with what he called a brilliant idea. "Why don't you join us out in Bridgehampton," he said. "We're opening the house this weekend, and all sorts of interesting people are coming over."

Margot wound her way back through the crowd. "There was a line," she murmured. She listed to one side when she sat down.

"Guess what, honey?" Thornley said. "Klipspringer here is going to join us out at the house."

Margot looked at me askance and then a smile spread across her face. "Well, good," she said. "Finally someone *fun*."

Fun was something Margot knew quite a bit about; and as it turned out, she was involved in a little bit of fun with her sister, Pilar, the same sister Old Man Thornley had bragged about that evening.

It seemed Margot and Pilar had befriended a young girl named Shelleyan, who had moved to New York from Phoenix. Shelleyan worked behind the counter at Versace on Madison Avenue (it was just one of three jobs she held when she met the Thornley sisters, but that was all to change shortly). She had moved to New York to become a fashion designer—and to travel in the circles of celebrity. New York was a rude reminder to her that talent isn't everything; flits and flakes who had no formal training, or who had studied at the Fashion Institute in Manhattan, were celebrated over those who truly understood the elements of design. When she met the Thornley sisters that afternoon at Versace, her only contact in the

world of glamour was the couple that designed underwear for Calvin Klein on a strictly freelance basis.

Margot and Pilar took an instant liking to Shelleyan. Pilar, being a young socialite and on several junior committees around town, thought she would make an excellent playmate. But it was Margot who came up with the plan to transform Shelleyan from a shop counter girl into a big noise. Since graduating from Brown, Margot had been toiling at the PR firm where she'd had a summer internship during college. Her father hated her working there, but she'd had some limited success coming up with marketing schemes for ladies' handbags and cellular phones. She wanted to try her hand at something more spectacular, something not so . . . *boring*. Pilar agreed to help.

The Thornley sisters searched for weeks for the best venue to announce Shelleyan to their friends and their friends' friends. There was the party down in Soho for the hottest rapper in New York; or the birthday party for the former Democratic senator; or the launch party for the revamped *R\*O\*C\*K* magazine. Pilar wanted to bring Shelleyan out at the party at Veruka for the new line of cosmetics from Estee Lauder. "There'll be a *ton* of celebrities," Pilar reasoned. "And press."

"But there'll be too many wannabes, too," Margot argued. "It needs to be something exclusive, something no one else can get into." Using this reasoning as a yardstick, Margot and Pilar decided on the engagement party of their good friend, Jenny Moore. Jenny's father owned the largest media conglomerate in the world, and *everyone* knew about Jenny's impending marriage to Jonathan Ryan, an executive at her father's company. However, not everyone was invited.

The days leading up to the Moore engagement party were filled with trips to the top designers in the city: Donna Karan, Oscar de la Renta, Gucci, Chanel, and Shelleyan's old place of employment, Versace (her former coworkers were stunned to see Shelleyan among the racks, rather than digging through the returns boxed up in

back). The Thornley sisters had an open, revolving credit line with each designer, and more often than not the girls borrowed outfits, having them returned by their father's chauffeur—if the outfits were in a shape to be returned.

Shelleyan liked a dress by Prada, but Margot and Pilar chose a sleek black Armani dress that fit Shelleyan like a second skin. "It makes your ass look delicious," Pilar said.

The day of the Moore engagement party, a Saturday, the Thornley sisters dropped Shelleyan off at Equinox, leaving specific instructions for various skin treatments with the coterie of personnel Margot and Pilar usually required on their weekly visits.

Upon her return from the salon, Shelleyan found Margot and Pilar lounging peacefully in the front room of the penthouse apartment off Central Park West where Margot still lived with her parents. "Wow," they gushed, sitting up on the white leather couch. "That really did the trick."

Even though the engagement party was literally across the street, at the boat-house in Central Park, Margot and Pilar and Shelleyan were driven in the Thornleys' limousine, an extravagance that clued Shelleyan in to how seriously she'd delved into a world not her own. Heads turned when the chauffeur opened the door and the three of them stepped out into the afternoon sun. A photographer snapped their picture and another asked them to pose together. Shelleyan posed for many photos that day. She posed next to an ice sculpture of two dolphins kissing with Suzanne St. Clair, the daughter of Morton St. Clair, who owned the largest chain of drug stores in the Pacific Northwest; she posed with Minnie and Anita Hammersmith, heiresses to the Hammersmith hotel fortune; with George and Jeremy O'Keefe, whose family owned two-thirds of the real estate in New York; with Tonya, Traci, and Tami Campbell—Margot and Pilar called them the Terrible Triple T's—whose mother's grandmother had invented one of the first board games.

Margot and Pilar arranged a group photo with Jenny Moore and Jonathan Ryan, positioning Shelleyan near enough to the couple



that if the picture ran in any of the papers, Shelleyan was sure to be seen. It was a photograph that would come to haunt Shelleyan, who fell asleep that night in her cramped apartment in Astoria, Queens, the magic of the party still everywhere around her. The next morning Margot and Pilar placed several strategic phone calls and when the newspapers hit the streets Monday, Shelleyan's face peered out from the pages in bedrooms, offices, and kitchens up and down the island of Manhattan.

The Thornley sisters repeated the same routine at several events over the next few months—a movie premiere at Lot 61; an after-hours party at Moomba for a new CD by Pilar's favorite band; the Velveteen party at Serena in the Chelsea Hotel; the Panty Party at Baby Jupiter on the third Wednesday night of the month; Trans Am at Culture Club; Physics at Vanity; Shag at Shine; and Body & Soul at Vinyl on Sunday nights. By the end of spring, Shelleyan, who had since moved into the Thornley penthouse, was on everyone's call list and was a must-have at any gathering that aspired to reach any significant status.

And so Shelleyan was a permanent fixture in the Thornleys' lives when I met her that summer in Bridgehampton.

I arrived by train, jumping the crowded Long Island Rail Road from Penn Station. The air conditioner on the train had failed, apparently broken beyond repair, so I sprang from the silver tomb the moment we pulled up to the platform. The cool, fresh air dried the sweat on my brow and I looked around, my eyes drinking up the wild green of Long Island.

The Thornleys had sent their limousine to fetch me, and I told the driver to take the scenic route. He obliged, giving the impression that we had no particular schedule to keep, and I stared happily out the window at the enormous mansions set back behind manicured hedges, wondering what marvelous scenarios were developing inside of each—trips to the beach, lunches on yachts, afternoon trips to the movies, dinner parties, nights drinking and dancing at the local watering hole.

At last we pulled into the driveway of the Thornleys' immense house. For a long time all you could see was the gabled roof supported by massive white pillars. The entrance finally came into focus, twin oak doors ornamented with brass knobs that gleamed impossibly in the sunlight. The chauffeur—whose name I'm ashamed to say I never learned—opened my door, and my heels clicked on the polished marble steps leading up to the front entrance. I raised my fist to knock, but the door opened automatically, pulled slowly back by a very old woman who I learned had been the Thornley family maid for over forty years, since Old Man Thornley was in his teens. I announced myself and the maid led me through the cool foyer and spacious front room peopled with extravagantly luxurious couches and expensive wood furniture. A large tinted window formed the back wall of the front room, and I could see Margot and Shelleyan lounging in their bikinis around a table shaded by a yellow-and-white umbrella the size of a parachute. Margot turned her head and I waved, but apparently she couldn't see any farther than her reflection in the smooth glass.

"Mr. Klipspringer to see you," the maid said, and then disappeared.

"Klip, darling," Margot said. "Come kiss me on the cheek. Give Shelleyan a kiss too."

I did as I was told, introducing myself to Shelleyan.

"Very nice to meet you," Shelleyan said.

"We were just debating whether or not we would go to the Tommy Hilfiger party tonight in Southampton," Margot said. "Shelleyan doesn't want to go."

"Why not?" I inquired.

"Because Tommy Hilfiger is a lame designer," Shelleyan said flatly.

"Jesus Christ," Margot snorted. "You don't have to wear his clothes, just drink his booze."

The two bickered about the party, and about some unfortunate thing that had happened at a party the weekend before that resulted

in Shelleyan being “accidentally” left at the party, having to catch a ride home with a Pakistani millionaire who tried to kiss her in the driveway.

I asked after Margot’s parents, wanting to thank them for having me in their home, but was informed they were at the tennis club for the afternoon and had dinner plans that would keep them out late.

“They’ll be at the National tomorrow, though,” Margot said. “For some reason my father is looking forward to seeing you again.”

I learned the National was a horse show, one of the biggest summertime events in Bridgehampton. Shelleyan seemed particularly excited to see it.

“I had a horse when I was young,” Shelleyan explained. “Patches. The greatest horse ever.”

“I find them revolting,” Margot said. “All that hair. And the *smell*.”

Margot’s cell phone rang and she answered it. Shelleyan and I sat silent, awkwardly listening to Margot and the unnamed caller banter about subjects ranging from who was and wasn’t coming to the National to the impending Moore-Ryan wedding at the Waldorf-Astoria. The conversation turned embarrassingly affectionate, but Shelleyan pretended like she wasn’t listening.

“That was Pilar,” Margot said, turning to Shelleyan. “She said to tell you hi.”

“When is she coming back from Europe?” Shelleyan asked.

“Two more weeks,” Margot answered.

Shelleyan excused herself to watch her favorite TV show on the big-screen television in the front room, and it was then that Margot filled me in about how she and Pilar discovered Shelleyan. She relished the details of the story, and the sun went down before she was finished. Feeling tired from my travels, I excused myself to one of the guest rooms upstairs and fell asleep, dizzy with all the glamorous details of Shelleyan’s new life.

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I woke very early the next morning to the sound of voices and scuffling in the hall. As my head hit the pillow the night before, I fantasized of waking somewhere around noon, sauntering to the kitchen to read the *Times* and sip coffee. But the clock read 6:30 a.m. and I was wide awake.

I cracked open the door and found Margot moving about the hall. She was half-dressed and crazed, dragging a Louis Vuitton suitcase behind her.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"It's Pilar," Margot said, her face tear-stained. "She's been in a car accident in France."

Old Man Thornley called up from the foot of the staircase, and Margot descended, turning her wilted back toward me.

The house was suddenly empty. The Thornleys took their maid, and the chauffeur never returned from the city where, Shelleyan told me later that morning, he'd dropped Margot and her family off at JFK.

"Did they give any indication when they would return?" I asked.

Shelleyan shook her head. She reached across the polished kitchen table and dug an orange out of the fruit bowl.

"Do you think we should leave?" I asked.

"I don't see why," Shelleyan said, peeling back a strip of rind. "I'm sure Pilar would want a welcoming party here when they get back."

"So they *are* coming back," I said.

"No, dummy," she laughed. "They're going to stay in Europe *forever*."

I didn't appreciate this sort of mocking. "But it sounded serious," I said.

"It's *always* serious with Pilar," Shelleyan said. She got up from the table and wandered out onto the porch, leaving a small pile of orange rind on the table.

I followed her outside. I was afraid to be left alone in the house until I could resolve the matter of whether or not the Thornleys would return to Bridgehampton, and if so, when.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Shelleyan plopped down in the same chair she had occupied the afternoon before. "Pilar is a drama queen," she said matter-of-factly. "Last month she called her parents in the middle of the night from her cell phone saying she was going to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge."

"Oh my God," I said.

Shelleyan laughed. "She wasn't even *at* the Brooklyn Bridge. She was calling from Tunnel, high on God-knows-what." She related a couple more stories, each as absurd as the next, and it was obvious that Shelleyan had a great deal of affection for Pilar.

I was beginning to take in the situation, that I would indeed have the run of the house, when Shelleyan asked if I still wanted to go to the National.

"Sure," I said. I could tell it meant a lot to Shelleyan to go, and I started to feel protective toward her, having only the slightest sense that what Margot and Pilar were doing was wrong.

"Good." She smiled. "I don't have a driver's license."

The fact that I didn't have a license either didn't bother me until Shelleyan opened a kitchen drawer and fished out a set of keys to the Thornleys' black Mercedes SUV. I backed out of the six-car garage, careful not to hit the cars on either side, each costing about as much as a small house in my hometown.

"I've been working on my accent," Shelleyan said cheerfully as we zipped down Route 2.

"What's wrong with your accent?" I asked.

"Margot said I should cultivate a lilt," Shelleyan said. She pressed a button on the console between us and the sun roof slid back.

"Do you always follow Margot's instructions?" I asked.

Shelleyan looked at me coldly. "They're just trying to help me,"

she said. "They know about these sorts of things. They have *expertise*. And besides, I don't want to be who I was. I want to be like Margot and Pilar."

I considered what she was saying and thought to warn her about what she wished for, but I couldn't bring myself to say anything.

Traffic came to a halt a mile or so from the showgrounds. The sun roof of the red BMW in front of us retracted, and a boy who looked seven or eight poked his head through. Shelleyan waved and the little boy's head disappeared back inside the car.

"What about you, Mr. Klipspringer?" Shelleyan asked. "What's your story?"

The question startled me. I quickly calculated the sum of what I'd told the Thornleys, wanting to keep the story straight.

"I'm from the Midwest," I said. "Came to New York about three years ago."

"Why did you come to New York?" she asked.

"I was involved in a sort of bad relationship that seemed in danger of going on forever," I said, which was mostly true.

"So you ended it by moving away," Shelleyan said.

"Something like that," I said.

"Doesn't sound very nice," she said.

Traffic picked up and we sailed into the parking lot of the showgrounds.

"No," I said. "I don't suppose it does."

Shelleyan's pace quickened as we neared the grandstand, which was filled with people dressed in white.

"Look!" Shelleyan said excitedly, pointing at what looked like a black stallion as it cleared a high parallel bar. I half expected Shelleyan to clap her hands and ask me to buy her a pony.

We took a seat on the low tier of the grandstand and watched the parade of horses as they galloped and pranced before us.

"Have you ever ridden a horse, Klip?" Shelleyan asked. Her trying out my nickname endeared her to me, and that old protective feeling returned.

"I once rode on the beach in France," I told her.

"That must've been wonderful," she said, her eyes trained on a pair of Thoroughbreds and their riders. We sat in silence, and then she said, "Who were you riding with?"

"Pardon?" I asked.

"On the beach," she said. "You were probably not riding *alone*, were you, Klip?"

The sudden intimacy stunned me, and I was stuck for any answer beyond, "No, I wasn't." It was the first time in telling this story that I had admitted there was someone else on the beach that day in Nice. It felt dangerous to let that information out into the open.

Shelleyan took her eyes off the horses momentarily. "It's always interesting to me what people *don't* say," she said.

I was about to confess the entire story, that the woman I was with that day in Nice was the only woman I'd ever loved, and that it hadn't worked out for reasons that still baffled me, and that I had no hope of ever recapturing the feelings I had then, when who should pass in front of us but Cheryl and Stephanie Mason.

The Mason sisters, as they would have everyone know, were identical twins. But it was more than that: the sisters were literal mirror images of each other, and no picture existed either where one appeared and not the other, or where the two weren't wearing matching outfits, matching hairstyles, matching accessories, and matching smiles, all of which matched their twin attitude of condescension and their vicious mean-spiritedness. I'd made their unhappy acquaintance my first week in New York, at a fund-raising event at Metrazur in Grand Central Station. I'd conned my way past the security guard and mingled with the crowd. I spotted the sisters (they were wearing matching sequined dresses that night), and it didn't take much to get them to invite me to stay with them at their loft in Soho. I thankfully moved in with them, and for a week the three of us played together in the various downtown night

clubs, them always paying with money Cheryl claimed “magically appeared” every month in their bank account. I learned later—after the sisters had unceremoniously kicked me out of the loft—that their father was an investment banker who paid the girls to keep away from him and the rest of their family.

I hadn’t seen Cheryl and Stephanie since, and it was a shock to see them standing in front of me, dressed in navy-blue-and-white sailor costumes.

“Well, well,” Cheryl said. “Look who it is.”

“Is that Klipspringer?” Stephanie asked.

The sisters raised their black Ray-Bans simultaneously.

“And is that Shelleyan,” Cheryl asked. She turned to her sister and said, “It really is a high-society affair!”

Shelleyan glanced at the sisters and smiled. “Do I know you?” she asked.

“No, but we know you,” one of them answered, adding dishonestly, “and we’re *big* fans.”

Shelleyan looked at me and I smiled nervously.

“So Klipspringer,” they said. “Where are you staying *this* summer?” They tittered and a wave of nausea passed over me. I explained that Shelleyan and I were guests of the Thornleys, and that the Thornleys had been called away to Europe unexpectedly.

“Oh, we know all about Pilar’s accident,” they said. “She probably called her family *last*.”

I was wishing they would go away when a noise I can only describe as terrible silenced the pockets of chatter around us. Everyone turned their heads in the direction of the awful noise and saw a man lying motionless in the grass, his horse dancing nervously around him. A small group rushed to the fallen rider, spooking the horse, which zig-zagged away, finally bolting toward the parking lot.

Shelleyan gasped and brought her hand to her mouth.

“I’m sure it’ll be okay,” I said. “He was wearing a helmet.”



"What will happen to the horse?" Shelleyan wanted to know.

"They'll probably kill it," the Mason sisters laughed.

Just then one of the sisters' cell phones rang, and they walked away, passing the phone back and forth to scream hello into the receiver, and their conversation carried through the hushed grandstand. The rider finally stood under his own power and everyone was relieved, though Shelleyan sat sullenly on the drive back to the Thornleys'.

She spent that night in her room, and, without anyone to keep me company, I sat on the Thornleys' private beach in the dark, pondering the reflections of the stars in the vast, unsettled ocean.

The next morning I heard a concert of voices in the foyer, but all was quiet by the time I reached the landing. I was surprised when, later that afternoon, the house was filled with voices again, the source of said voices being Shelleyan and the Mason sisters fighting over the last Diet Coke in the refrigerator. I avoided them entirely, and we drifted around one another in that enormous house for the next two weeks. By then I'd taken to following around a Swedish au pair I'd met in a bookstore in Bridgehampton, and so it was with great sadness that, upon the Thornleys' return, I packed my bags at their request. They had returned not only with Pilar, who looked none the worse for wear, but also with an unsavory story about me given them by their hosts in France, the McGintys, who were related to the woman with whom I rode horses on the beach that summer afternoon in Nice. Who knew a simple act like giving a witness report to the police about an accident the woman's friend caused would follow me around for all eternity? I did not realize until much later that I'd revealed myself as an outsider, confirming a long-held suspicion by the woman's acquaintances, a suspicion that rippled until I was forced to leave France. But the Thornleys did not ask for a defense or excuse or even my side of the matter, and it was only on my way out to the curb to wait for the taxi that I laid eyes on Mrs. Thornley, who was as beautiful as her daughters.

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Like everyone else, I read about what happened to Shelleyan in the daily papers. By that time I had taken up with the Oliver woman, who walked in on me playing “Für Elise” on the piano at Russian Samovar on Fifty-Second Street, and I became involved in a matter concerning the Oliver woman and her best friend, so I had all but forgotten Shelleyan and the Thornleys, and the Mason sisters, and the Moore-Ryan wedding—until it was splashed across the front of the *New York Post* and the *Daily News*.

At first you couldn't see the Mason sisters' hands in the whole mess; but once I learned about Margot and Pilar Thornley's active campaign to keep the Mason sisters uninvited to the wedding, what didn't make sense to your average reader—how Shelleyan came to be introduced to Jonathan Ryan and why Shelleyan had a falling out with the Thornleys—made a lot of sense to me. The rest of the story—Jonathan Ryan falling in love with Shelleyan, Jenny Moore catching the two of them at the Peninsula Hotel a few days before the wedding, Old Man Thornley firing Jonathan Ryan—was probably just how the Mason sisters had scripted it.

The papers called Shelleyan all sorts of names, but the Thornley sisters went unindicted. Worse, they provided nasty quotes to the gossip columns about Shelleyan, and one of the last items to appear was a story about how Shelleyan had tried to get into a party at a club in the East Village, only to be turned away by insults screamed at her by Margot and Pilar. The Mason sisters were never mentioned.

A few months after the wedding was canceled, I glimpsed Shelleyan walking down Madison Avenue. I almost didn't recognize her. She was camouflaged head to toe in black, her hair cut short and dyed brown. Her face was heavily made up with eye shadow and lipstick; it was a look that didn't become her, and I started to tell her so, when I noticed something else, the far away look in her eye as we stood talking, a look I recognized from my reflection in the mirror every morning. It was the look worn by those of us who

had our dream in hand only to have it thieved without warning, spiraling us into orbit around those who were luckier than we were, or who hadn't yet realized what their dream was. We said good-bye, and as Shelleyan continued down Madison Avenue, I thought of all the unfortunate places she had yet to go.

# The Oswald Sightings

## Oklahoma City, OK

*SWEAR TO GOD.* STANDING THERE PLAIN AS DAY, JUST AS YOU ARE, his arm around my girlfriend Peyta. Peyta introduced him as Ozzie, which I just assumed was kind of like a nickname, like the way Peyta called me “kid” and I called her “sis.” It was in January 1960—maybe ’61, ’62 at the latest, because I remember staying home for New Year’s 1963 because of what happened with Peyta’s car.

Anyway, it was January ’60 or ’61 or ’62, and Peyta had just come back from Cuba—she liked to take her vacation days all at once, usually to some exotic locale south of the equator. She flew free on account of her being a stewardess with TWA. Peyta would always bring me back something nice, since my second husband, Gerry—a pilot for TWA—never took me anywhere.

At that time Raleigh’s was *the* place to go for dinner. It was swank, for Oklahoma. But not swank like California. “Order whatever you like,” Peyta told me, insinuating that Ozzie was going to pick up the check, though she didn’t seem surprised when he emptied his wallet to cover the tip. Peyta charged the whole meal on her shiny new gold Visa card. “It doesn’t have a limit,” she told me. I caught Ozzie admiring it before Peyta slipped it back into her wallet.

Raleigh’s was empty that night for some reason, which was unfortunate because on a normal Raleigh’s night Ozzie’s whiny voice

would've been drowned out by the hustle and bustle. But dinner was practically ruined by Ozzie's monologue about a book he'd just read, *The Rise of the Colored Empires*. I remember the title exactly because he wouldn't shut up about it. On and on and on about *The Rise of the Colored Empires* and how we all (by which he meant us whites) had to watch our backs. I wanted to talk to Peyta about Dawn, the new flight attendant on Peyta's crew, and to ask her point-blank if Gerry and Dawn flirted on the job. Gerry and I had known Peyta for years, and he never said two words about Peyta outside her presence; he'd been flying with Dawn for only about two months, and though I'd never met her, I knew from Gerry that she was witty, charming, and extremely intelligent, and that she was an amateur photographer. Our dinners were punctuated by Dawn's witticisms or insightful observations on this or that. I couldn't get a word in edge-wise, though, on account of Ozzie's lecture about *The Rise of the Colored Empires*. I never chewed a steak so fast as I did that night.

Anyway, Peyta broke up with Ozzie by the summer, calling him boring and ill-mannered. I was a bit surprised at this as I hadn't seen hide nor hair of her since our dinner at Raleigh's. I had assumed she and Ozzie were having the time of their life; she didn't even talk about him on the job, apparently, because Gerry had no idea who he was when I mentioned him to ask if Peyta was still seeing him. Gerry screwed up his face. "Peyta has a boyfriend?" he asked. I said "Sure she does," just as you are. "I'm pretty sure she doesn't," Gerry said, and I couldn't convince him otherwise before he buried his head in the sand and quit listening altogether.

Things were pretty back to normal by summer; as I say, Peyta began picking up some extra shifts in order to save money for a flower shop she wanted to start somewhere near the downtown galleria, but she squeezed in a girls' night out as often as she could. The best was the two tickets to a Bob Dylan concert she got for flirting with Dylan's tour manager on a flight from L.A. to Nashville. The tickets were great, too. Dylan wasn't any farther than here to there, swear to God.

That was the summer I started my book club, which I envisioned as a sort of social club for other ladies like myself whose husbands were gone for long stretches of time. I began to notice familiar faces down at the local branch of the library, which is what gave me the idea. I handpicked the ladies I wanted to join and paid a calligrapher to do up a nice invitation on some silver paper I picked up in the bargain bin at the five-and-dime.

"Oh, I don't know, honey," Peyta said when I asked her if she wanted to join. "I'm not much of a reader."

"You and Gerry both," I laughed, the dig oddly satisfying. The summer had seen a spike in amusing anecdotes about the ever-charming, ever-astute Dawn, who Gerry assured me was very popular with the other flight attendants.

"Yeah, she's great," is all Peyta said when I asked her about Dawn—not the commiserating I was hoping for. (I learned the word "commiserating" from the book club, among many, many others.)

I gave Peyta a copy of the first book for the book club—*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*—and I even wrote her name inside it and put a smiley face next to it. I did the same for each subsequent book—*Wuthering Heights*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, etc.—even though Peyta made it to only one in three meetings, usually for the books that were short or had been made into a movie. Gerry felt threatened by my book club; he called it "the Hen Club."

"Cluck, cluck, cluck," he'd say if he caught me reading on the couch, or at night before going to bed. Jealousy is what I thought it was when I found a copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*—the book club selection for that particular month—packed in with Gerry's dirty clothes upon his return from a fishing trip to Lake Overholser with some other fly-boys. These trips were of no interest to me, and they got Gerry out of the house at least once a month, sometimes twice depending on the weather.

I held up the copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and chuckled, delighted that I could give Gerry a good ribbing and maybe even a hard time about taking an interest in my so-called

Hen Club. My delight lasted just a moment, though, when it sank in that Gerry was trying to horn in on my book club, a thing that was mine and mine alone. I believe I actually turned red. I remember putting my hand on my cheek to feel if I was flush. It was almost a relief, then, when I opened the cover and saw Peyta's name in my handwriting, the smiley face staring up at me, mocking-like. I slipped the book into my nightstand without thinking and walked around the house in a daze.

What made me follow Gerry in my own car—a baby-blue Thunderbird that my first husband had bought for me, a car Gerry refused to ride in—I don't know. Maybe I was still in a daze. That's the best explanation. All the times I had suspected Dawn, I never once thought to back the T-Bird out of the garage. Funny, Peyta's betrayal stung worse than Gerry's. *How could she?* All the nice things I'd ever done for Peyta bounced around my brain as I tailed Gerry to the Commodore Motel, out by the airport. A sickness came over me when the young clerk behind the counter greeted Gerry with a salute. The sickness spread when I spotted Peyta sitting in her red Corvette in the parking lot. Gerry made a big show of driving around to the back of the Commodore, taking the stairs slowly, as if he were just a single man nonchalantly checking into room 203. I remember he looked younger that day, spry in a way he hadn't acted in the whole time we were married. I felt a jealousy rise up inside me: I wished it were *me* he was taking into that motel room, which is crazy, I know, but just as you are, I felt it. I imagined Gerry making the most spectacular love in the world inside room 203, and I fantasized about walking into the room before Peyta could get out of her car. Gerry would make up some excuse, and I would pretend to accept it, and we'd make love like teenagers on prom night. The fantasy seemed a real possibility, but it grew fainter and fainter as Peyta climbed the stairs to the room. I'd grown so insignificant in their lives that neither checked over their shoulder when Gerry opened the door, a big, goofy grin on his face. They stood chatting like neighbors before Gerry invited Peyta inside and the door

slammed shut on my second marriage for good.

The sound of the door slamming echoed in my head as I pressed the accelerator on the T-Bird. The first hit popped the trunk on Peyta's 'Vette. I backed up and rammed the car again, this time smashing out the back window. All the doors of the occupied rooms at the Commodore flew open, all except room 203's. A small boy in a cowboy hat held onto the second-floor railing, and I waved at him as I threw the T-Bird into reverse, taking aim at the driver's side door. The Corvette was slowly streaked with blue and vice-versa. That's what I think of when I wonder where Gerry is now—blue on red, red on blue.

### **Burlington, VT**

He introduced himself as Jack, but I knew that was a lie. I can tell when someone's lying. But what did I care? I think I told him I was James, but I might not have. It was a seven-hour bus ride, and I intended to ignore the person in the seat next to me regardless of whether his name was Jack, Joe, Tom, Mike, or Lee Harvey Oswald, as it turned out to be. We were roughly the same age, so I can see how he thought we might have something in common, but the reality was I was a freshman on scholarship at Columbia University and he was a loony tune aimlessly riding the bus to God-knows-where. I doubt he even knew where Columbia was, or how prestigious a scholarship to Columbia was. I would probably have had to explain it to him like I did the hayseeds at my high school, or to Lily Mackenzie, that snob, who pretended not to know anything about the programs of study at Columbia after she was accepted early to Yale—even though I know she applied to Columbia. I was pretty sure they'd turned her down, based on the arrogant interview she gave the local paper for a story about how Lily and I were going away to big-time colleges. My mother bought ten copies of the newspaper, even though they forgot to mention that I was going to Columbia on scholarship.



I wasn't eager to see my mother's face, or Lily Mackenzie's, for that matter. They wouldn't know anything about it, and they could all shove it if they had something to say about it. I felt like saying that to Oswald when he asked me why I was headed home—and him clueless that it was the middle of the academic calendar. What made me want to tell him is that he sort of looked like Professor Thompson, who was the reason I was on that goddamn bus to begin with. It creeped me out plenty, sure. I could still hear Professor Thompson's offer to become his teaching assistant—I knew students like me were offered such positions, but my love for nineteenth-century British literature wasn't the most ardent in our class, so I was surprised at the suggestion. I accepted, of course, owing more to Professor Thompson's being a graduate of Harvard, where I hoped to do my graduate work than anything else.

The assistantship was as boring as anything Oswald had ever done in his life, I'll bet. The sheer volume of papers that need shuffling, files that need filing, books retrieved and returned to the campus library, just to keep a professorial office running is bone numbing. And the endless phone calls and notes from students wanting this or that. That the world is full of people who want something or other is the only thing I really learned during my short tenure.

That and the fact that Professor Thompson, who made a great show of being the distracted, rumpled teacher, was actually savvy enough to use two different exams so that students in one class couldn't pass answers to the later class. So when Sheila Gardner gave the exact alphabetical sequence of answers for the midterm she didn't take, it wasn't hard to trace it back to me. Maybe Oswald would've guessed that ending for me; I felt it a little too, when I first discovered the answer key by accident in Professor Thompson's top desk drawer, the As and Bs and Cs and Ds listed neatly next to their respective question numbers.

Oswald would probably have pointed out how much Sheila Gardner resembled Lily Mackenzie, but you can't ever take the

word of lunatics. Maybe they did look alike, but Sheila was nicer to me than Lily ever was. I wanted to talk that one out with Oswald, who had fallen asleep with his greasy forehead against the window, to parse my memories for the exact moment Lily and I transformed from being the two smartest kids in school to being academic adversaries, pitched against each other in everyone's minds until we were convinced we were natural enemies. The last good memory I had surfaced as Oswald began snoring: Lily swooshing by me on the late-afternoon bus, her orange-and-blue plaid dress whispering around her knees, her skin brushing against my hairless leg, a warm tattoo where our skin had touched evaporating as the ancient bus cranked to life.

### **Baton Rouge, LA**

Wasn't me that shot him, no. He got me caught, but I didn't shoot him. Give me another life sentence if I'm lying. Didn't you read the history books? It was Jack Ruby that shot Oswald, not me. I shot John Alexander Hamilton, not Oswald. Ask around. How'd he get me caught? That's another story. No, wise-ass, it's not in the history books. I'll tell it to you, since you asked.

It was the night I killed John Alexander Hamilton, my girlfriend's ex. They were just separated, actually, but they were working on their divorce. She was working harder than him, though. She kicked him out because the house was in her name—he'd owed a lot of money to the federal government when they got married, some failed business or another before he met Jennifer, so they'd kept everything separate. Jen and I met the summer of '61 at the annual Fourth of July picnic they have in Sanders Park. I was there with a buddy from back home that flew in for the weekend. He was married, but he hooked up at the park pretty quickly, just left me on my own. I wasn't really wanting a girl, but when you come across a girl like Jen, you have to stop. She was there with a couple of friends and I remember this blast of pecan pie hitting me when I saw her. Now, normally I would've

been too shy to go up to a group of girls like that, but I had to. Truly. *Had to*. I walked up and just said my name. Like that. Jen looked at me like I had the wrong person, but I had the right person, all right. Boy, did I. How I got Jen away from her friends is just as much of a mystery to me as how I came to shoot her ex. It just happened. We walked around until it got dark, just talking. She told me about her ex right up front, but she didn't say "ex." She said "husband." But she dropped in the ex by the time the fireworks started. "You passed the test," she said.

She asked me to move in shortly after that. I gave up my apartment, no problem. Jen's house was small but cozy. The walls were empty, since her ex had taken all the pictures and mementos. "The mirrors broke in the driveway, actually," Jen said. "That's his bad luck." I tried to sweep the little pieces of glass out of the cracks in the driveway, but you could still see some when it was a sunny day.

Jen worked days as a secretary for a law firm in downtown Baton Rouge—that's who represented me when I got arrested—and I was working nights as a short-order cook at Harry's, a chat-and-chew off the highway. Thursdays and Sundays were my days off, so we really only had one day together during the week. Thursday nights were the one night during the week her ex would never come knocking. At first it was real innocent-like—her ex would drop by on his way home from his job down at the port switchyard, where all the cargo is taken off ships and put on trains because of how low the Huey Long Bridge is, to pick up something of his that he'd said Jen could have, but then changed his mind about. Stupid stuff like the toaster, or a set of towels he'd bought on his credit card. Jen was annoyed, but what could you do?

Next he came to my work, ordering a big meal and making a real production out of it. I noticed him right away but thought it was a coincidence. I didn't spit in his food or anything, truly, even though he kept sending his order back, claiming it wasn't fit to eat. I kept re-making his order because Burt, our manager, was off somewhere

doing God-only-knows-what. I wasn't sure how it was going to end, but I knew he wouldn't pay his check when he left, which he didn't. Burt took the check out of my pay, and I didn't say anything. It went on like that. Phone calls late at night. Tires screeching out in front of the house. The worst of it was when Jen's ex switched the utilities off, telling the power company and the phone company to shut down his accounts. Jen forgot the utilities were in his name—she just continued to pay them every month—and so we had to check into the Holiday Inn for a night that summer while we got the utilities fixed. I was thinking about the look of humiliation on Jen's face when the van—one of those VW vans hippies get high in—smashed through the wooden rail and plunged into the river. Actually, I'd been thinking about that look on her face ever since the night at the Holiday Inn. A heat I'd never felt before just burned me when I thought about how much humiliation her ex caused her. *You make one little mistake*, Jen would say, trying to make a joke about it, but it wasn't really that funny. If you make a mistake, you pay for it and that's that. You don't keep on paying for it over and over. I didn't tell that to Jen, but I hope she knows that's why. All I meant when I called her ex out of that crappy, unlit bar of his on Main Street was that he should pay for what he'd done. Her ex knew it too. He didn't even act surprised when I leveled my shotgun at his chest. I think he expected to finally pay, if you ask me.

Anyway, back to the van. I thought the damn thing would bob along the river, but it landed on its roof, the back wheels spinning like Ferris wheels. Me and this other guy—Oswald, as it turns out—pulled over and rushed down the riverbank, which was slick with moss because of a recent thaw. I could see this woman trapped in the driver's side, but she looked okay to me. I thought about getting out of there when I saw the look on Oswald's face. Maybe I thought jumping into the river would wash away Jen's ex's blood—I was surprised at the blood spray, or I would've thought to bring another shirt. Can't really say what I was thinking. I jumped into the water, which was cold as cold gets, probably. Oswald jumped

in after me, but I lost sight of him as I tried to get this woman, who turned out to be bigger than I first thought, over my shoulder. She was dead-like, and I thought she might be, but she moaned when I lost my footing and we came crashing down. The cold water woke her up, and just as I laid her out on the dark riverbank, I heard Oswald shouting. Night fell just like flipping a switch, and I could hardly make him out, holding on to a plastic bag full of garbage someone had dumped, screaming about how he couldn't swim. What kind of person jumps into a river if he can't swim? Get me? I started shivering as I waded back into the middle of the river, yelling out for him to kick his legs. I got in up to my waist, and my body starting heaving, the smell of Jen's ex's blood heavy in my nose. I wasn't sorry, that much I knew. I thought about how much better off Jen was going to be from that day on—even if it meant that we couldn't be together. Oswald kicked his way over to the riverbank, splashing like a wild animal. The air was suddenly loud with police sirens, and I emerged from the river, soaked and shivering, ready to embrace a life made up only of the past.

### **Dutch Harbor, Unalaska, AK**

This Oswald he come on board for Coolie, the cook's assistant. None of us liked Coolie, so we didn't give a damn, but this Oswald was a lazy S.O.B. Lay in his bunk for two days till Cap'n said, "You ain't sick, get up," and this Oswald got up and started work in the galley. I paid him no mind and he paid me the same. Shoot—after nine, ten hours cutting on the line, I hardly noticed anything 'cept my plate at dinner and my pilla at night. Not even the stank from the feet of one Mr. E. S. Townsend, the government inspector we picked up when we picked up this Oswald. Why Cap'n bunked 'em both with me, I did not know. He was P.O.'d at me and Buck for bringin' the ship up late from Seattle. I told Cap'n it were Buck's fault—was him that showed up a day late—but Cap'n had it in for me ever since we pulled in late.

I didn't mind bunking with Townsend—but this Oswald was on me from the get to help talk Cap'n into giving him a spot on the line. He'd come in and switch on the light while I'm tryin' to sleep, saying he'd only turn it off if I promised to talk to Cap'n about putting him on and givin' him 1 percent like each of us on the line got when we docked and the haul was counted up. This Oswald followed me everywhere—up on deck for a smoke, down in the film room when a couple of us wanted to watch one of the three reels of war movies Cap'n kept for our entertainment, even in the pisser, where you had to hold yourself up by the wall because of the chop. The only place I were safe from this Oswald was in the wheelhouse, where I went to call home ship-to-shore. This Oswald wouldn't go into the wheelhouse 'cause Cap'n hated his little skinny ass for playin' sick and makin' the cook do everything them first days.

Cap'n didn't mind my tryin' the phone on my breaks. "You either smokin' or callin'," Cap'n said in his broke English. He put his thumb and finger together on an invisible ciggy with one hand and held a phone like with his other. Us cutters got real good at speakin' Dutch English 'cause that's where Cap'n and his crew were mostly from. Us cutters were mostly Americans, as a certain percent of us had to be from the God-blessed U.S.A. in order for Cap'n to pull up fish from American waters.

I probably spent more time with Cap'n than any other cutter, which is why this Oswald got on me right away, I figured. Cap'n didn't listen to anything I said, though, just laughed when I picked up the phone and dialed my house in Idaho to say, "Hello, baby, it's me," before my wife, Betsy, hung up. Them ship-to-shore calls costed ten dollars a minute, and when I got my paycheck every two weeks, it was always minus two-eighty, my twenty-eight one-minute calls—two a day—itemized on a scrap of paper stapled to my check.

I went to writing letters to Betsy to try an' explain why I had to run off to Alaska and leave her and the baby in Pocatello. Cap'n gave me the letters back in a bundle at my farewell party. He'd wrapped

them present like and had a good laugh when I opened it and saw all my letters marked "Return to Sender" in Betsy's scrawl. I expected a present from this Oswald, as he was getting my spot on the line, since Coolie was back from wherever he went off to. I read them letters start to finish on the plane ride to Anchorage. Some of 'em I wish Betsy had actually read, but some I was glad she hadn't. Like the beginning ones where I said I had to go to Alaska because of money. Betsy knew we had money enough, so she'd'a sniffed that as a lie. The second letter I said I had to clear my head and I was embarrassed to read it. I went back to talking about money in some other letters, not saying 'cause we needed it, but saying it was a man's job to make money and I couldn't make no money in Pocatello or anywhere else 'cause of my run-ins with the judges of several states. I was glad, too, that Betsy didn't read the letter where I said I was afraid of the baby. I was embarrassed about that, too, but not like I was embarrassed about saying I needed to clear my head—that wasn't true. I *was* afraid of that baby, though. What that baby gonna think about a daddy like me? What he gonna tell his school chums about a no-good like yours truly? It is a burden to go through life aware that you are an embarrassment. The only place no one was embarrassed of me was on the boat. And all I had to do was kick a little ass now and then to keep it that way. That's what made me turn around in Anchorage and go back to Dutch Harbor, to find another boat. Before I left, I wrote one more letter to Betsy—paid a girl at the airline counter to type it out so Betsy wouldn't know it was from me. I said I knew my leaving was just one sorry act in a life full of sorry acts and that it was okay for her to stay P.O.'d at me. I said I knew I was in no position to ask a favor but if she ever wanted to do me a favor, it was this: when she was comfortable with a new man who was a real man, and the baby was all grew up into a real man who maybe was raising a real man of his own, would she just put aside her anger for five minutes and dredge up some pity for them who was cowardly and knew it?

# Carl, Inc.

CARL RUMMAGED AT RANDOM THROUGH THE TOWERS OF PACKED boxes, the early-afternoon sunlight illuminating dust motes stirred by the opening and closing of boxes. Sunlight gleamed off the empty oak shelves and burnished a zigzag of hardwood floor peeking out from under its load, scarred over the years by Carl's continual pacing. The last sheet of his personalized letterhead fluttered atop his barren rolltop desk, and he reached to calm it, the light green-specked paper (the printer had called the color Bamboo Shoot) embossed with his name and soon-to-be former address pleasing to the touch. He was certain of the spelling—p-r-o-f-l-i-g-a-t-e—but couldn't chance relying on his frazzled memory for what he was certain would be his finest letter. While he welcomed the move to Florida and considered it a fresh start for him and Gloria, he regretted that he wouldn't be present for what was sure to be the biggest imbroglio the towns of Porter and Conrad had seen since the days when those eponymous brothers floated down the river with a Native American guide and began settling the area, their mutual love for the guide's daughter the cause of their eventual split and lifelong warring. Where you came out on absorbing the smaller, poorer town of Porter was largely a matter of geography, and Carl doubly regretted their move, as he appeared to be the lone dissenter in Conrad.

He resisted the urge to call the city council members out on



the controversial grounds of eminent domain, though he could effortlessly summon the passion for a jeremiad in favor of inalienable rights and the American Dream on par with any Shakespearean soliloquy. His students always rallied around that cry, as much as the rest of the semester's reading bored them. He wouldn't miss their open hostility as he labored to limn the finer points of *Don Quixote*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and his personal favorite, *Moby-Dick*, among others.

The city council would be as unmoved as his juniors, he knew, and so he took the practical tact: he'd argue against absorption based on the enormous slice of the treasury that would have to be devoted to making two towns into one. "Profligate spending of taxpayers' hard-won coin must cease and desist" would be his parting shot. If only he could locate his favorite dictionary, the pages gray from years of thumbing through for just the perfect word that would slay whomever he happened to be addressing about whatever issue needed the alert attention of a vigilant citizen. He knew Gloria would forgive him in time.

Outside, he heard the first rumblings of the annual block party, which had threatened to become semiannual until Carl told Mrs. Jensen flatly that two block parties a year would simply be too much local traffic siphoned down Montague Street, which was treeless and riddled with unpaved swatches in the shape of several recognizable Midwestern states. Mrs. Jensen had mumbled something about polling the rest of the block, but she was acutely aware that she lived on the corner of Montague and Orchard Avenue, and Carl intuited that this technicality would rein in lonely Mrs. Jensen's desire to double the amount of forced friendliness Carl could hardly endure. The annual Orchard Avenue block party had come on slowly, stirring an uneasy feeling in his stomach, a raw sensation at the back of his throat. As the day grew closer, the malady internalized and he was subjected to jabbing, shooting pains that ran the length of his arms, ricocheting down his spine, numbing his feet. His wife, Gloria, dutifully encircled the date on the Christmas

calendar featuring colorful prints of vintage produce crate labels their son, Floyd, had sent. Floyd had marked significant dates in the Richter family history—birthdays, anniversaries, and deaths—and Carl noted with chagrin that the block party fell on the same date some forty years previous that he'd asked Gloria to marry him, forcing a postponement of the anniversary celebration he'd planned: renting out the Bijou Theater in Porter for a showing of *Bringing Up Baby*, Gloria's favorite movie. A warm spell had descended on their engagement at Central Park that day, he remembered. The weather for the block party was unseasonably warm too, a similarity that irked him no end.

The dictionary was not to be found. Carl eyed the stacked boxes with annoyance and reluctantly substituted "extravagant" for "profligate." But he'd lost momentum, and the issue of city hall's profligate spending on inappropriate expenditures like free snacks for those children enrolled in the after-school programs at Davis Elementary—programs that taxpayers like him were already funding lock, stock, and barrel—would be left undrafted before the block party, which more than increased the probability that he wouldn't finish it before their scheduled plane ride to Florida. He wasn't above mailing the letter with a Florida postmark, but it wouldn't be the same, he knew, resigning himself to the inevitability.

He'd have to stand on his record. His successful rebuff of the chain retail store that wanted to invade downtown Conrad would be his lasting achievement, he guessed, but he was equally proud of his triumph on behalf of his fellow citizens who'd decried a slice of the town park being designated a leash-free zone, the outcry owing to people letting their dogs run leash-free all over the park, not just in the roped-off area, as well as his prevailing over the city council's edict that old parking permits for Lake Mary had to be scraped from car windshields rather than plastered over with new permits, a bold anti-Americanism he'd dealt a death blow immediately, caring nothing for the residents' pride in the decoration of their permits—the number of which somehow registering some kind of

boast among lakegoers. The other side of the balance sheet nagged at Carl like an ache, the unpainted crosswalks, the speed bump he'd practically begged to be added to one of the busiest streets in Conrad, the campaign for a curfew for those under sixteen that had fallen on deaf ears.

Carl had until now steered conspicuously clear of the annexation debate. As Conrad's leading reflexive contrarian, he'd kept his voice in the rigorous debate about whether or not the nearby town of Porter should be absorbed for the purposes of streamlining municipalities and thereby bringing all services under a single, smaller budget—and thereby quelling the threat of higher property taxes for both Conrad and Porter—strangely silent. The citizenry, often wearied by Carl's tirades against this and that, ascribed his reticence to Gloria's having been born in Porter. In truth, Gloria was as vocal about the proposed annexation as she'd been about anything in their long marriage, as far back as he could remember. "Porter can't survive on its own," she'd say to anyone who would ask. Carl's viewpoint was more Darwinian, but the stringency with which Gloria spoke of annexation silenced the easy oratory he would otherwise have delivered.

The sun rose high above Orchard Avenue, casting the shimmering ash trees and crimson maples in relief. Across the street, Irma Coolidge and her husband wrestled a folding table to life in their cobblestone driveway. Everyone else on Orchard Avenue had a paved driveway except the Coolidges. Who ever heard of a cobblestone driveway? Carl couldn't think of anything but that cobblestone driveway whenever he saw the Coolidges. It was their defining characteristic, infinitely more interesting than the fact that they'd both taken an early buyout from the software company in Silicon Valley where they'd met. Irma and her husband were a drag on the Orchard Avenue age curve, and consequently, no one knew them very well. Gloria made an exaggerated effort to show kindness to Irma, especially when talking about the Coolidges to other neighbors, but it was always strikingly transparent that

neither she nor Carl knew their neighbors at all. Carl believed a neighborly wave sufficiently held up his end of the relationship, even in close quarters like the Main Street Market, where he'd been earlier that morning when Gloria sent him out for a can of crushed pineapple. Carl liked cruising the quiet streets, conscious his trips around the neighborhood were numbered, and he was surprised to find Irma Coolidge in the spices aisle at such an early hour. And while they were the only two patrons, Carl gave a quick wave and disappeared down the canned fruit aisle, dawdling until he heard the cash register beeping and the murmur of pleasant conversation.

He turned down the adjoining aisle and was reminded of his defeat in his war with Main Street Market to change the sign that read oriental to something less racist. He'd suggested "International Foods" or "World Market" as plausible substitutes when his argument that the sign should read "Asian," not "Oriental," failed, but Mrs. Martins smiled politely whenever he brought it up. Her husband, Ed, was as unreceptive.

"It makes you look small-town," Carl had reasoned.

"We live in a small town," the Martinses would invariably reply.

"At least move the red and white kidney beans into the canned vegetable aisle," Carl had pleaded. "Kidney beans are not Oriental. I mean Asian."

He suspected the Martinses were still angry with him about his leading a petition drive against their being granted a license to carry alcohol. He wouldn't miss the Martinses when he was soaking up the Florida sun. Nor would he pine for the Coolidges, who would forever remain a mystery.

Carl longed for neighbors like those who populated some of his favorite novels. He'd dedicated the better part of the last twenty years of his life to the unremarkable juniors at Conrad High, none of whom could fully grasp the piousness of Charles Bovary from *Madame Bovary*, or the generous philanthropy of Mr. Norton from *Invisible Man*, or the moral certitude of Basil Hallward in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which was matched by that of Cranly from *Portrait*

*of the Artist*. He longed for neighbors as loyal as Stevens from *The Remains of the Day*, or with the fortitude of Captain Ahab. Instead Carl was reduced to identifying with the ruined Dick Diver from *Tender Is the Night*, who is forever banished to upstate New York for his sins.

Carl's next-door neighbors, Jim and Marion Shaw, sauntered across the championship grass they'd laid the season before. The Shaws' sending away for the same grass seed used in the previous twenty-six Masters Tournaments at Augusta National was the talk of the neighborhood all last fall. Once a fortnight a team of landscapers descended upon the Shaws' lawn to surgically repair tiny divots created by careless mailmen and newspaper delivery boys. Carl watched with disdain as the landscapers once spent an entire afternoon brushing the lawn as you would a dog or cat, combing through for fleas.

Jim and Marion balanced shiny tumblers of vodka tonics in their hands as they trod the slope between their house and Carl's. Marion caught sight of Carl in his study and waved through the window. Carl nodded and then pretended to be distracted by something deep in the recesses of his cluttered study, drifting away from the window nonchalantly, not wanting to give Jim the satisfaction. He sometimes wished the Shaws weren't the only childless couple on Orchard Avenue—he would've loved to have their kid at school, if only to have some kind of real leverage over that smiling son of a bitch and his docile little wife.

Well, he did have leverage, a strike that could level Jim without warning. But his wife had made him promise that they'd leave Conrad without any further scrapes or disturbances, and Carl had reluctantly agreed, his dreams of stunning Jim and Marion with news of Jim's extramarital affairs rendered impotent. He'd happened upon the bit of gossip accidentally, though in retrospect, spying Jim tucked into a corner booth of Vidalia's Bar & Grille on the outskirts of Porter with a brunette Carl recognized but couldn't place lacked the requisite layer of subterfuge extramarital affairs usually required.

But the kiss Carl had witnessed as he waited for a fried peanut butter and banana sandwich—a childhood favorite of Gloria’s that he liked to spring on her now and again, this time as a salve for a dustup with the local PO over whether or not mail carriers should be allowed to talk on their cell phones while delivering mail—had left little doubt that Jim was stepping out on Marion. Carl had tailed Jim and the woman, who he was pretty sure was the new secretary at Davis Elementary, or maybe a substitute teacher, to a matinee showing of a Hitchcock movie at the Bijou. The fried peanut butter and banana sandwich was cold by the time he got home, and he buried it deep in the garbage can in the garage in order to avoid saying why.

He savored his newly acquired knowledge, though the taste turned bitter when the *Conrad Chronicle* published his letter to the editor decrying the faded crosswalks in and around Conrad—especially those that bridged the busy streets in front of the high school—and Gloria extracted the promise to shut down what she derisively referred to as Carl, Inc. The bitterness blackened and multiplied once Jim started shouting to the rooftops about annexation. His rise in the local media as a proponent reached the heights of spokesman, and those who were like-minded began to regard him with an air of authority, which stoked Carl’s outrage and tempted him to break his solemn promise to Gloria.

A small breach had occurred the day before, when Gloria had sent him down the street, to the Duncans’, to borrow a chafing dish to keep her scalloped potatoes warm. Gloria’s scalloped potatoes had become legendary over the years, and the chafing dish they’d purchased specifically for the block parties had mistakenly been packed irretrievably away. The Duncans were replete with chafing dishes, owing to their daughter’s backyard wedding two summers previous. Carl had taught the Duncan girl, and while she was one of the smarter kids to pass through, he was surprised that she’d been able to attract a husband from a pedigreed family in Saint Louis. The gleaming chafing dishes were talismans of a long, hot, humid afternoon. In his position as high school English teacher,

Carl received many such invitations and he had successfully begged his way out of most—he began to suspect former students invited him for sport, to see if he’d actually RSVP—but Gloria was adamant that they attend the Duncan wedding. He liked to think his presence merited some conversation among his former pupils, though in actuality they probably hardly noticed.

Looking back, Carl couldn’t discount the fact that he’d brought up Jim and the annexation in order to introduce the topic. But Bob Duncan’s response was the curative for what had been ailing Carl.

“He’s a douchebag,” Bob had said.

Carl had agreed wholeheartedly and indulged in a little gossip about Jim and Marion. He hinted to Bob that Jim was cheating on his wife, but the innuendo made Bob recoil and Carl let it drop, thanking Bob for the chafing dish with promises not to have to mail it back from Florida.

The phone interrupted Gloria’s measuring and stirring. Her voice echoed into the study when she said hello, but died like a summer wind as she began to speak into the receiver. The frequency with which their son, Floyd, called to speak to his mother would’ve alarmed the average parent, but Carl couldn’t have cared less. He hadn’t spoken to Floyd in more than a year, since Floyd’s infidelity caused the breakup of his marriage to Andrea, the aerobics instructor he’d met over the internet the summer after he graduated from the state university. The memory of Floyd’s bringing Andrea home to meet him and Gloria was a painful one—Andrea was sullen and given to exclaiming everything as “remarkable” even in the instances when something was, in fact, unremarkable, a social tick Carl gently ribbed Andrea about, donning the guise of the high school English teacher, replete with the bombastic voice he sometimes used to bring home a particular literary theme or trope, telegraphing to his students that, yes, it would be on the test. But the kidding smarted Andrea, and she began avoiding being alone with Carl, a counterfeit smile holding his face hostage any time she walked into the room. *Thank Jesus they eloped*, Carl thought when his

son called with the news, though it broke Gloria's heart.

Carl's heart was similarly rent when Gloria relayed that Floyd had moved into a small apartment near the house he had shared with Andrea, a house Carl had had to cosign for. Floyd's persistent infidelity took the curious form of an addiction to online pornography, a habit, he professed to his own mother, that he couldn't break. He'd taken such drastic measures as to put a parental block on his web browser, as well as shred his credit cards and log-ins and passwords, but inevitably he'd use a search engine to find snippets of free pornography, which would lead him back down the rabbit hole. Andrea's reaction was the same as Carl's—abject disgust—though he had no way of communicating his sympathy to her. He couldn't bring himself to speak to Floyd directly, mostly for fear of what he might say. A spirited lecture on the adult responsibility toward self-control and morality sprang fully formed into his mind, but he knew Floyd wouldn't want to hear it. And Carl didn't want to have to say it. He and Gloria had done their part to raise their child, and Floyd's predilections were a harsh referendum on their parenting. Carl had parented in the same manner he taught: he led by example. If Floyd couldn't intuit the righteousness that permeated the rooms of his own home, well, he'd never know it.

A rapping at the study window broke the internal monologue inspired by the murmuring emanating from the kitchen. Mrs. Lumly flashed a toothy smile and gave a wide wave. He maneuvered around a stack of boxes and hoisted open the window.

"Hello there," Mrs. Lumly said. She stuck her head through the window. "Looks like you're all packed up."

"Almost," Carl answered. The stifling scent of Mrs. Lumly's citric perfume filled the study.

"I guess it's really happening," she sighed dramatically.

Mrs. Lumly was the only Orchard Avenue neighbor to express remorse about their moving to Florida. Carl ascribed this to her being a born-again Christian and had, for the entirety of their neighborhood, discounted any nicety exhibited by Mrs. Lumly for



the same reason. The Lumlys were the most charitable citizens on Orchard Avenue or anywhere else, and for their niceness they were granted invisibility. None of the others on either side of the street counted the Lumlys among their friends, a truth that was never more evident than when the Lumlys trucked in church friends for an evening of cards or prayer service or whatever it was the Lumlys did with friends.

To their eternal credit, the Lumlys kept their religion to themselves. Carl had accidentally waded into the deep waters of Christianity at last year's block party when he ventured out against his better counsel. The Lumlys were regaling Jim and Marion with a secular tale about someone who had flatly rejected the idea of God. "Wouldn't even consider it," Mrs. Lumly said, baffled. "You believe, right?" she asked Carl as he began to drift away from the conversation. Jim and Marion appraised him as he rocked back on his feet, leaving deep impressions in the championship grass.

"Flying is as close as I come to believing in God," Carl joked, pointing at a silver 737 as it graced the sky.

Mrs. Lumly's appearance at his window retrieved that particular memory from the carefully ordered storehouse of memories Carl kept. In truth, his retort had revisited him in the days since he and Gloria designed their move, the flight to Florida ahead of the moving van the most economical and logical way to facilitate their cross-country sojourn. Carl had booked the one-way trip with the same travel agent they'd always used, against Gloria's advice to use the internet, advice Carl guessed was recycled from Floyd, whose downfall had been aided by the cursed internet. Carl may have engaged their trusted travel agent for precisely this reason—spite and shame were life's two greatest motivators, he knew—but regardless, he'd been plagued by sudden heart palpitations, night sweats, and a relentless insomnia ever since. The thought of sealing himself inside a giant metal tube and hurtling through space and time at speeds ten times those he liked to drive was debilitating. He and Gloria hadn't flown for a decade or more, and while the rational

mind would be quick to illuminate the advance in avionics, Carl could only shudder at the idea of trusting his life with two pilots he neither knew nor could see. Hiding his anxiety from Gloria had only heightened his dread of the day in the not-too-distant future when he'd be forced to either honor the airfare or run screaming down the Jetway, Gloria at his heels, sobbing and hyperventilating about a train or a bus.

Mrs. Lumly excused herself with exquisite Christian grace, and Carl wanted to call out to her that he'd been a brave, intrepid soul once, a long, long time ago. Gloria knew the tale by heart, how he'd moved to New York City right out of college to take an internship at Harper & Row Publishers. Carl had fancied a life lived in tweed jackets with patch elbows, peering out under a fedora while typing, pipe smoke burning his eyes. He'd been touched by the Great Books in college and dreamed of writing one or two, though he knew instinctively that he didn't have the talent. So to midwife them from the confines of a cramped office in Midtown Manhattan, taking authors to lunch on the expense account to live vicariously through their stories of roaming the ends of the earth, seemed the next best thing.

He'd managed a cold-water flat in Spanish Harlem—the internship was unpaid, and so he was reduced to borrowing from his father, whose Depression-era childhood had eviscerated his own dreams long ago—and enjoyed the short subway ride to the Harper & Row offices. Life in New York suited him. The electric lights and the music the city made at its peak rush hour never failed to entrance him, and he cherished the strange faces he passed on his nightly strolls, partly to avoid his tiny apartment but also to imbibe the city, to introduce it to his bloodstream. He'd ride the local downtown just to stroll around the Village for an hour, or take the crosstown bus to Chelsea to do likewise. He became an expert on the various neighborhoods, never lost or lacking for something to see and do.

His dreams of settling permanently in Manhattan were dashed one particular evening on the uptown Lexington Avenue line. The

subway car was full of harried men trying to make trains at Grand Central for suburban points north and east. Carl took his usual position at the door—he disliked sitting on the subway, mostly because he sat at a wooden desk for most of the day but also because he had an irrational fear of being poked in the eye—across from a comely woman in a business suit dutifully reading her *New York Times*, which she'd folded in columns in the style proscribed by its printing. The car lurched into the next station and a vagrant shuffled down the aisle, glaring at the passengers, who pretended not to notice him. Carl averted his eyes, and to his relief, the train rolled on, propelling him to the tiny bit of real estate he called home.

The woman tucked her *Times* into her bag and pulled out a fashion magazine—in the retelling he could never recall which—and began carelessly flipping pages. Whether the magazine caught the vagrant's attention or the simple fact that she was one of only a couple of women on the train, Carl couldn't guess. He could feel his muscles tense as he swayed with the bouncing car, riding the underground rails, his nose filled with the putrid incense of oil and dust.

He heard the commotion before he witnessed it. The vagrant slapped the magazine out of the woman's hands, wearing a salacious grin. She calmly retrieved the magazine, which had slid down between her and the man sitting next to her, who pretended not to see. She began reading the magazine anew, only to have it slapped away again. The woman refused to acknowledge the vagrant and simply picked up the magazine and opened it to the page she was reading. Carl felt his blood convulsing. He scanned the car, but no one else seemed to notice the confrontation, or they were ignoring it. In the retelling of this episode, Carl timed the approach to the next station such that when the doors groaned opened, he grabbed the vagrant and tossed him out onto the platform, menacing him with chivalric words and icy glares. Sometimes, depending on the listener, the woman was so grateful that she bought Carl a cup of coffee. In his younger days, when the unpleasant encounter was at its

freshest, he intimated at an ensuing sexual relationship, though he hadn't exaggerated like that since his youth. He'd retold the story so frequently that it was hard to parse the fibers of truth from fiction, though he knew well that he hadn't reacted quite so valiantly that day and had excused himself three stops early, opting to hoof it the rest of the way to his place rather than be caught in limbo between his desire for action and his inability to act. He shunned the subway from then on, choosing to walk home from work rather than risk the humiliation of facing the woman should the uptown local be her regular train.

Maybe he'd always been a coward. He'd always imagined he possessed the ordinary measure of courage, the same as everyone else, but he'd never been tested. Unbelievably, the flight to Florida loomed as the first real challenge in what had previously seemed to him a long and heroic life. He was constantly reminding himself to stay vigilant against a softening disposition, to never allow age to invalidate his lifelong passion for righting wrongs and, more importantly, his well-honed morality.

Dusk gathered around Orchard Avenue, the coming darkness drawing his neighbors, who had previously wandered a discernable path through the lawns on both sides of the street, nearer. Carl hoisted the window to his study to admit the cooling breeze, the distant chatter of the block party wafting in along with the fragrance of the evergreens in the valley beyond. He marked the annoyingly high pitch of his neighbor's voice, inadvertently glancing up to see Jim holding forth in the McIntoshes' driveway, more than likely singing the same song he'd been singing for months, about how important it was to annex Porter. Carl had actually heard Jim use the phrase "to save its life" on more than one occasion.

"You looking to get a Nobel Prize out of this?" Steve McIntosh asked, throwing the group into laughter. *That a boy, Steve*, Carl thought. Steve was one who let his dog run without a leash, but with this dig at Jim, Steve jumped in Carl's estimation.

Jim answered with a punch line of his own, but Carl couldn't

hear it over the tittering.

The sun dropped precipitously and Orchard Avenue began to glow. Carl had begun clearing his desk—the moving van would arrive in the morning—when Gloria rotated into his line of vision. He watched as his wife held a small paper plate in her delicate fingers, forking at a piece of chocolate cake. Mrs. Lumly sauntered over and Gloria engaged her in some small talk, the substance of which was no doubt irrelevant. Gloria's hair was tied back to hide the haircut she'd rushed out to get earlier, one last trim at the hairdresser who always seemed to cut off an inch too much, a last lecture Gloria had relished giving. Carl enjoyed ribbing Gloria about her friendship with Mrs. Lumly, whose conversion didn't seem to be of concern to Gloria. Carl had made a few offhand comments about how the need to believe was always more interesting than the belief itself, and at first Gloria chuckled at his asides like she always had, but soon she began making her own, telling Carl she was "off to hear the gospel" when visiting the Lumlys, or characterizing Mrs. Lumly's cordial, neighborly conversation as "preaching." Carl appreciated the digs at Mrs. Lumly—when he first met Gloria, she was too timid to criticize anyone, always saying "I'm sorry" even when it wasn't her fault, apologizing to those who should be the ones to apologize—but Gloria's acid tongue had developed over the years, and Carl couldn't help but feel guilty.

The episode with the Garner boy would replay in Carl's mind, persecuting him to the end of his days, he knew. The Garners were an especially loathsome brand of Conradian. The *père* had inherited untold wealth from his family, whose lineage included inventors and patent holders dating back to before the Civil War—it was rumored that the Garners held the design patent on more than a dozen household appliances—while the *mère* was also from money, heir to a sewing machine fortune. And the *filis* of these two specimens was a genius, as the Garners were quick to insinuate or flat out proclaim. Carl had written the Garner boy off upon the Garners' return from Paris.

"We were only there a week and he just picked up the language," Mrs. Garner said in answer to Gloria's question about French cuisine. She nodded at her son and the Garner boy answered, "*Oui*."

Carl could barely stifle his annoyance when the Garner boy came around, which he did with surprising frequency. In the beginning Carl couldn't discern whether or not Gloria was encouraging these visits, but it quickly became clear that the Garner boy sought out Gloria's company, and if Gloria had been honest, she would probably have admitted that Floyd's absence was a contributing factor to her indulgence. Carl would come home from school and find the two sharing a cup of tea in the kitchen or pulling weeds from the flower beds that shrouded the house.

"He *is* a smart kid," Gloria said one day after the Garner boy had left.

An epithet he'd overheard Gerald McHenry use against one of his most hated students in the teachers' lounge sprang from his lips. A tremor of shock registered on Gloria's face, and Carl turned away in embarrassment at his overreaction. The embarrassment was multiplied when he overheard Gloria repeat the hateful epithet to the Garner boy's face as if it were her own. The Garner boy suffered the rest of the afternoon in near silence and his visits ceased entirely, as did the Garners' neighborly banter.

"At least we won't have to hear about what a genius their kid is, eh?" Gloria said the first time the Garners snubbed them in public. Carl nodded, his eyes burning with tears. He hadn't realized the degree to which Gloria acted as a counterbalance to his own curmudgeonly behavior. The seeds of his cynicism had been planted that day on the subway in New York, hardened and tended through his years of teaching high school English, so there was little hope for further evolution. But Gloria had been untouched by bitterness and antipathy when he first met her, the slightest criticism, warranted or unwarranted, gliding off her with ease. And her patience had been legendary, always smoothing over waiters and store clerks in the wake of Carl's rage about this or that.

Carl had begun to think about their move to Florida as a rebirth; he made a silent promise to check the nasty comments and politically incorrect soliloquies. In Florida he'd be a model citizen, slow his overreaction time, learn to breathe when the first signal of distress loomed. He'd be the last one out of the boat, the first to lend a hand, a guard against festering frustrations, unequivocal in his equanimity. He'd have to face Floyd, too, he knew.

Gloria broke away from Mrs. Lumly, who pulled her back for one last hug. Carl was sure certain promises to keep in touch were being proffered, and he winced knowing how shallow Gloria's were. She'd send a postcard the first week or so after they'd landed in Florida, and then Orchard Avenue would recede into the twilight of the past. Carl marveled at Gloria's graceful exit, knowing the ridicule it cloaked. He hardly recognized the woman who strode across their lawn, except for the quick smile she flashed him as he lowered the window. A longing overcame him and he murmured a benediction for the soon-to-be-abandoned house where so many little murders had been committed.

JAIME CLARKE is a graduate of the University of Arizona and holds an MFA from Bennington College. He is the author of the novels *We're So Famous*, *Vernon Downs*, *World Gone Water*, and *Garden Lakes*; editor of the anthologies *Don't You Forget About Me: Contemporary Writers on the Films of John Hughes*, *Conversations with Jonathan Lethem*, and *Talk Show: On the Couch with Contemporary Writers*; and co-editor of the anthologies *No Near Exit: Writers Select Their Favorite Work from Post Road Magazine* (with Mary Cotton) and *Boston Noir 2: The Classics* (with Dennis Lehane and Mary Cotton). He is a founding editor of the literary magazine *Post Road*, now published at Boston College, and co-owner, with his wife, of Newtonville Books, an independent bookstore in Boston.

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## Praise for WE'RE SO FAMOUS

"Jaime Clarke pulls off a sympathetic act of sustained male imagination: entering the minds of innocent teenage girls dreaming of fame. A glibly surreal world where the only thing wanted is notoriety and all you really desire leads to celebrity and where stardom is the only point of reference. What's new about this novel is how unconsciously casual the characters' drives are. This lust is as natural to them as being American—it's almost a birthright."

—BRET EASTON ELLIS

"Daisy, Paque, and Stella want. They want to be actresses. They want to be in a band. They want to be models. They want to be famous, damn it. And so . . . they each tell their story of forming a girl group, moving to LA, and flirting with fame. Clarke doesn't hate his antiheroines—he just views them as by-products of the culture: glitter-eyed, vacant, and cruel. The satire works, sliding down as silvery and toxic as liquid mercury."

—ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

"Jaime Clarke is a masterful illusionist; in his deft hands, emptiness seems full, teenage pathos appears sassy and charming. *We're So Famous* is a blithe, highly entertaining indictment of the permanent state of adolescence that trademarks our culture, a made-for-TV world where innocence is hardly a virtue, ambition barely a value system."

—BOB SHACOHIS

"Clarke seems to have created a crafty book of bubble letters to express his anger, sending off a disguised Barbie mail bomb that shows how insipid and money-drenched youth culture can be."

—VILLAGE VOICE

“Darkly and pinkly comic, this is the story of a trio of teenage American girls and their pursuit of the three big Ms of American life: Music, Movies and Murder. An impressive debut by a talented young novelist.”

—JONATHAN AMES

“This first novel is plastic fantastic. Daisy, Paque and Stella are talentless teens, obsessed by Bananarama and longing for stardom. They love celebrity and crave the flashbulbs and headlines for themselves. The girls become fantasy wrestlers, make a record, get parts in a going-nowhere film, then try to put on big brave smiles in the empty-hearted world of fame. Sad, sassy and salient.”

—ELLE MAGAZINE

“*We’re So Famous* smartly anticipates a culture re-configured by the quest for fame. The starry-eyed girls at the center of this rock-and-roll fairy tale are the predecessors of today’s selfie-snappers. With biting wit and wry humor, Clarke brilliantly reminds us that we’ve always lived for likes.”

—MONA AWAD (FROM THE REISSUE EDITION),

## Praise for VERNON DOWNS

*"Vernon Downs* is a gripping, hypnotically written and unnerving look at the dark side of literary adulation. Jaime Clarke's tautly suspenseful novel is a cautionary tale for writers and readers alike—after finishing it, you may start to think that J.D. Salinger had the right idea after all."

—TOM PERROTTA, author of *Election*, *Little Children*, and *The Leftovers*

"Moving and edgy in just the right way. Love (or lack of) and Family (or lack of) is at the heart of this wonderfully obsessive novel."

—GARY SHTEYNGART, author of *Super Sad True Love Story*

"All strong literature stems from obsession. *Vernon Downs* belongs to a tradition that includes Nicholson Baker's *U and I*, Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage*, and—for that matter—*Pale Fire*. What makes Clarke's excellent novel stand out isn't just its rueful intelligence, or its playful semi-veiling of certain notorious literary figures, but its startling sadness. *Vernon Downs* is first rate."

—MATTHEW SPECKTOR, author of *American Dream Machine*

"An engrossing novel about longing and impersonation, which is to say, a story about the distance between persons, distances within ourselves. Clarke's prose is infused with music and intelligence and deep feeling."

—CHARLES YU, author of *Sorry Please Thank You*

*"Vernon Downs* is a fascinating and sly tribute to a certain fascinating and sly writer, but this novel also perfectly captures the lonely distortions of a true obsession."

—DANA SPIOTTA, author of *Stone Arabia*

*"Vernon Downs* is a brilliant meditation on obsession, art, and celebrity. Charlie Martens's mounting fixation with the titular Vernon is not only driven by the burn of heartbreak and the lure of fame, but also a lost young man's struggle to locate his place in the world. *Vernon Downs* is an intoxicating novel, and Clarke is a dazzling literary talent."

—LAURA VAN DEN BERG, author of *The Isle of Youth*

## Praise for WORLD GONE WATER

“Charlie Martens will make you laugh. More, he’ll offend and shock you while making you laugh. Even trickier: he’ll somehow make you like him, root for him, despite yourself and despite him. This novel travels into the dark heart of male/female relations and yet there is tenderness, humanity, hope. Jaime Clarke rides what is a terribly fine line between hero and antihero. Read and be astounded.”

—AMY GRACE LOYD, author of *The Affairs of Others*

“Funny and surprising, *World Gone Water* is terrific fun to read and, as a spectacle of bad behavior, pretty terrifying to contemplate.”

—ADRIENNE MILLER, author of *The Coast of Akron*

“Jaime Clarke’s *World Gone Water* is so fresh and daring, a necessary book, a barbaric yawp that revels in its taboo: the sexual and emotional desires of today’s hetero young man. Clarke is a sure and sensitive writer, his lines are clean and carry us right to the tender heart of his lovelorn hero, Charlie Martens. This is the book Hemingway and Kerouac would want to read. It’s the sort of honesty in this climate that many of us aren’t brave enough to write.”

—TONY D’SOUZA, author of *The Konkans*

“Charlie Martens is my favorite kind of narrator, an obsessive yearner whose commitment to his worldview is so overwhelming that the distance between his words and the reader’s usual thinking gets clouded fast. *World Gone Water* will draw you in, make you complicit, and finally leave you both discomfited and thrilled.”

—MATT BELL, author of *In the House upon the Dirt between the Lake and the Woods*

## Praise for GARDEN LAKES

“It takes some nerve to revisit a bulletproof classic, but Jaime Clarke does so, with elegance and a cool contemporary eye, in this cunningly crafted homage to *Lord of the Flies*. He understands all too well the complex psychology of boyhood, how easily the insecurities and power plays slide into mayhem when adults look the other way.”

—JULIA GLASS, National Book Award-winning author of *Three Junes*

“As tense and tight and pitch-perfect as Clarke’s narrative of the harrowing events at *Garden Lakes* is, and as fine a meditation it is on Golding’s novel, what deepens this book to another level of insight and artfulness is the parallel portrait of Charlie Martens as an adult, years after his fateful role that summer, still tyrannized, paralyzed, tangled in lies, wishing for redemption, maybe fated never to get it. Complicated and feral, *Garden Lakes* is thrilling, literary, and smart as hell.”

—PAUL HARDING, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Tinkers*

“Jaime Clarke reminds us that if the banality of evil is indeed a viable truth, its seeds are most likely sewn among adolescent boys.”

—BRAD WATSON, author of *Aliens in the Prime of Their Lives*

“In the flawlessly imagined *Garden Lakes*, Jaime Clarke pays homage to *Lord of the Flies* and creates his own vivid, inadvertently isolated community. As summer tightens its grip, and adult authority recedes, his boys gradually reveal themselves to scary and exhilarating effect. In the hands of this master of suspense and psychological detail, the result is a compulsively readable novel.”

—MARGOT LIVESEY, author of *The Flight of Gemma Hardy*

Smart, seductive, and suggestively sinister, *Garden Lakes* is a disturbingly honest look at how our lies shape our lives and destroy our communities. Read it: Part three in one of the best literary trilogies we have.”

—SCOTT CHESHIRE, author of *High as the Horses’ Bridles*



**The Last Lemonade Stand on the Block** was a title before it was a manuscript, of any kind, born at the moment when I realized what all the adults had been keeping from me—namely, how things really are, and everyone’s complicity.

Rereading this early work brought a level of suspense in that I often had no idea where the stories were headed, as if they’d been written by someone else, which, of course, they were.

The physical act of retyping these stories was an exercise in restraint. So often I wanted to show the Young Writer the way, but that would have been a terrible shortcut and one that did a disservice to the struggles of the Young Writer. The stories have been lightly copyedited for clarity but are otherwise presented as originally written.

In the end, what this collection represents is the endless questions and the self-implication inherent in the answers: Why is life so hard? Why are people so terrible at it? And worse, why are the same people who are capable of kindness sometimes so horrible? Why is selfishness our default behavior?

But mostly what you’ll find in these stories is a young man discovering the world, and completely objecting all along the way.

—JAIME CLARKE

