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## The Sweet River: A collection of short stories

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THE SWEET RIVER: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

by

Keith Harold Menter

Bachelor of Arts  
Southern Methodist University  
1991

Bachelor of Arts  
Southern Methodist University  
1991

Master of Arts  
University of Texas, Dallas  
1996

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the

**Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing  
Department of English  
College of Liberal Arts**

**Graduate College  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
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Keith H. Menter

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ABSTRACT

**The Sweet River: A Collection of Short Stories**

by

Keith Harold Menter

Douglas Unger, Examination Committee Chair  
Professor of English  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Herein is a book-length collection of short stories entitled *The Sweet River*. The stories in this collection follow a self-discovered structural paradigm found in the works of influential short story writers. This paradigm comprises four sequential stages: situation, tension through a series of patient complications, catharsis or reversal and double reversal, and epiphany. Thematically, the stories feature a protagonist adrift from conformist society, in search of transcendence amid the age-old dichotomy between the self and the other, and ultimately facing a moral crucible. Stylistically, the stories rely heavily on the external landscape as a means of avoiding sentimentality while still preserving emotional resonance.

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## THE SLEEP OF THE INNOCENT

A trip, Jennings demanded, something, anything, to flounce him from the tired self-pitying tether of this bed and bungalow. It was time to move, forward, backward, it didn't matter, so long as the lachrymal treading, the hand-wringing standstill, was belayed, and he could reconstitute himself once again as a man with strength, a man who could keep the prow of his chin turned against the world in unvanquished defiance, not hidden or safeguarded by pathetic longing.

He craned his neck backward, thrust his chin to the ceiling and pushed his lower teeth well forward. "I must go forth, for death lurks in every shadow, at every turn, and the man who dies afraid does not die, for he cannot sleep," Jennings said with a gravelly voice.

At the conclusion of his loud words, Jennings retracted his chin and laughed, amused by his predawn grandiloquence, though assured by his verbal lucidity and the gist of his former sentiment. He wondered what his last priggish editor would have said had he submitted a piece with such transcendent reckoning. He doubted the omnipotent lard-ass would have said anything, just a quick unilateral excision efficiently ending all debate. Not once in the preceding month had he missed the newspaper business at all. Not one dry, lifeless, overzealous minute of it. But he did miss Christine — Chris, he called her — the heartbreaking shrew who sent him spiraling downward into this bedroom vat of boozy sentimentality.

A trip, yes, arrangements must be made.



He remained in bed, his back propped against two lumpy pillows. A lone white sheet lay tangled in a nest before his feet. A beige phone was cradled in his thick youthful hands. Jennings was alone, in a bungalow's retreat, gratefully jobless, with the view of the placid ocean as his sole companion. He blinked his eyelids twice in rapid succession then spread his achy eyes wide open. The pressure in his head rose and capsized.

Jennings had not slept well. He felt bloated and congested. He removed one hand from the phone and used it to squeeze his thumb and forefinger against the flared sides of his nose. With his nostrils closed, he blew air violently from the back of his throat into his sinus. One ear popped; some relief was provided. He tried it again, this time forcing more air to the recalcitrant side. The second effort was to no avail. The other ear remained impacted. Jennings then coughed up a lump of dull-yellow viscous matter, turned toward the bedside table, leaned and spat it into the pale remnants of his previous evening's scotch glass, watching the frayed lump bob to the shallow surface. He wiped the spittle from the corner of his mouth with his bare shoulder, and returned his gaze to the dormant ocean, so different from the one he had experienced during the night.

All night, Jennings had ridden phantasmagoric dreams of Chris, and after each dream, he was bucked awake to face the eerie night alone, before being wrenched again along roiling, nightmarish swells. The night had lasted forever, a voyage across cold, whitecapped seas, with Chris at the helm of a spectral ship. She had steered them into tempests and stormy, shark-infested waters, and it had required all the fortitude he could muster to cling to the invisible rigging, so that he wouldn't be flung out into the murderous void.

Chris had charted his course all month, but now Jennings desired to set his own. A

trip, yes — an exploration into manhood. He was convinced. There was no doubt that is what he required.

He was thirsty, but still too otiose to move. He looked again toward the peeling bedside table, knowing he hadn't, but wishing he had brought with him late last night, before he entered his hallucinatory dreamscape, a bedside glass of water. He also regretted hawking into his scotch glass. He felt he could have, for expedient relief, swallowed the scotch glass's residue. More regret, too much regret, something else to resign to a mist-enshrouded cavity.

An untouched bottle of Ambien sat next to his scotch glass, and Jennings knew not why he had continued to deny himself its soporific, relatively dreamless comfort. Perhaps, he mused, it had to do with self-induced pain being a precursor to deliverance. He chuckled out loud, momentarily uncertain about his degree of insincerity.

He picked up the phone and dialed the number to Fernando's cell, primping himself in cheerfulness, preparing himself to move again into an unknown future.

Jennings had worked with Fernando for a time at a small daily in South Florida, before Fernando returned to Guatemala City to enter the family business and find a suitable wife. He and Fernando had stayed close over the ensuing decade, which was rare in such a peripatetic profession. Maybe the reason they had remained so was because Fernando had quickly gotten out of the field and was no longer a reminder to its many downsides, of which there were, in Jennings' estimation, a soul-robbing plethora.

For Fernando, the entry-level job had been a lark, a way to remain in the States for a spell after college, drink and screw away from nosy family and friends, away from Guatemala

City's endogenous, privileged, tiny top layer of society.

For Jennings, the job had been mandatory, a means of basic, purportedly noble, pauper-like survival. Jennings didn't have family for lee. He had to work. He never liked his choice of professions. In fact, he detested it. It wasn't so much the disparate, laughable pay scale, but more the smug sanctimony, the repetitious invasions of privacy that were dishonestly defended by blind and unfeeling acolytes of the First Amendment, reporters who thought they were artists, but who were, in actuality, hacks. It was obviously not, in Jennings' opinion, that reporters shouldn't have the freedom or the right to write about whatever and whomever they wanted. It was just that discretion, humanity and truth should, if the world and its inhabitants were sacred, precede headlines, circulation and advertising sales. The way it stood, people were subjects to be paraded and manipulated. Furthermore, on a tactile level, Jennings was not sure if he could continue to brook the rehashed monotony of it all.

But fortunately, all of that, for the time being, was in the past and he need not concern himself with it. Jennings had a few bucks saved up, enough for a few more months of escape.

"Qué," a sleepy voice answered.

"Qué pasa, mi amigo?" Jennings asked in feigned, upbeat tones.

"Jennings, do you know what time it is? Some of us still have jobs. I, unlike you, can't spend my days drunk in bed and pining over lost love."

"Easy, big boy. You first have to lose love before you can pine over it," Jennings said.

"And what's up with trampling on the tender and vulnerable emotions of your misty-

eyed, grief-stricken friend?"

"Sorry. I know she was supposedly the one, but it is early."

"Just think of this as a friendly wake-up call, as your wholesome, well-wishing friend stirring you to excellence," Jennings said. "Imagine how impressed your exploited employees will be when you're at work before them."

"How can I begin to thank you for your care and compassion? But I have a feeling that this phone call entails more than your recommendation that I lead by example."

"So it does. Always the astute businessman. Look, I'm going to take you up on your offer of a ticket to the promised land after all, if it's still on the table."

"Of course. When do you want to come?" Fernando asked.

Fernando had not even paused to calculate the pros and cons of Jennings' unexpected and spontaneous decision to come for a visit. Jennings, now more than ever, appreciated his friend's optimistic loyalty, his rare fidelity.

"I was thinking the sooner the better, maybe even today," Jennings answered.

"That might work out," Fernando said unhesitatingly. "Daniella is leaving this morning for Miami, on another shopping spree, and she's taking the kids with her. They won't be back until Sunday or Monday, so that gives us four days to catch up unhindered. Consider it done. I'll call Aviateca and arrange for you to pick up a ticket at the airport. You'll have to pay an exit tax, probably 40 bucks, but the rest will be covered."

"You sure? I don't want to take advantage," Jennings said.

"I'd be honored to have you as my guest. You haven't been here in ages. I've got more mileage than I know what to do with. Plus I'm starting to get free tickets from our new travel agency."

“You have a travel agency now?”

“Just a family sideline to get free and discounted tickets.”

“Must be nice. Okay, I’m in, guilt-free. Make it first class, and while you’re at it stock up on Gallo, Dorado and Johnny Walker Black.”

“Anything else?”

“Maybe one of those bewitching Latin lovelies with the perfect skin.”

“I thought you were in mourning.”

“True, but I’m trying to get out of mourning.”

“I’ll see what I can do. In the meantime, you need to pack and get on the road so you don’t end up flaking on me. I think the flight leaves daily around 2 in the afternoon. You should make it no problem. You may even see Daniella and the girls at the airport. I’m sure they’ll come in on the same plane you’ll leave on.”

“What if she’s arm in arm with some Latin crooner and the girls are calling him papi?” Jennings asked.

“Be sure not to bother them. Then she’d have to give me a pass to cheat. Tit for tat or tit for something.”

“All talk,” Jennings responded. “She could sleep with every member of Menudo, current and former, and you wouldn’t stray.”

“Depends if they were all at once or each one separately. Alone, they wouldn’t be much competition. Together, it could be a battle. Regardless, I’d at least want her to tell me all about it. I’ll give you 10 to 1 their talents stop with their voices.”

“Probably,” Jennings said. “Still confident after all these years, huh?”

“Absolutely. It’s the only way to go. You know that as well as anyone.”

“Yeah, it’s just been a while. Hey, I really appreciate this. Do you need me to bring anything?”

“Just your personable, drunk self.”

“Done,” Jennings said.

Jennings peered across the room, over a heap of clothes, at the digital clock that sat unevenly on the sun-warped synthetic-tiled floor. The clock read 7 a.m. He had moved it there from the archaic bedside table — more a piece of flotsam than a piece of furniture — a week ago with the avowed purpose of rising early to jog and sober up. He had done neither. He had spent mornings in bed, idle, in a state of guilty, hazy, woebegone fatigue and frustration. He had known he’d be awake each morning before the alarm rang but he had hoped that the annoying buzzing would stir him to action and dispel his torpor. Wishful thinking, he had concluded six mornings in a row as he turned it off and returned to bed — much like his passive desire for a reconciliation with Chris. Last night, he had not even set the alarm.

Jennings figured the drive from his rented bungalow in St. Augustine to the airport in Miami would take approximately four hours; it would be a straight shot down I 95 and he’d be able to open up his boxy, 10-year-old Volvo and let the part-tropical, part-exhaust air stream in. That left him a little over an hour to shower and pack. Plenty of time. His only concern was whether he could hold himself together on the trip.

He’d been hammering the booze home all month, often and hard: beer in the midmorning, Cape Cods in the afternoon, Scotch in the evenings, and no exercise to cut any of it. When he returned to the States, he was in store for a bumpy ride. There was no doubt this one was going to be a tough, obdurate drunk to kick. He’d have to seclude

himself in water and exercise — boil it out, as Hemingway used to say — and maybe even Buspar as well, for at least two weeks, and not touch a drop of alcohol, not even wine or beer.

The warning signs were already present, foolish but vindictive. His mind had begun compulsively to obsess on irrational games, such as forcing him every few minutes to find a collection of his literary heroes who drank heavily without cracking up or a cast of actors with similar looks to himself who were ogled by their fans and had no trouble getting laid. Jennings thought maybe the mind games had to do with some kind of a contradiction between ego and self-image. But what did he know — the mind mystified him. He had dealt with similar bibulous fallouts before, so he knew if he measured his drinks and read a few hours a day to take his mind away from himself and preoccupy himself with words he could get away with two or three more days of sotted profligacy. He'd be OK. He was in control. The masochistic, suicidal thoughts hadn't started yet. He'd take his version of the cure in good time; but today, he felt pretty good, albeit mentally more so than physically. Thus far he had had his own words to lift him. Surely, that augured well. Now was not the time to worry. His recovery would be manageable, and afterwards, the slow road back to drunkenness would be sweet. He rose from the bed, walked to the bedroom's front windows and stretched in restrained motions.

It was a gorgeous day. The sky and the ocean melded together in freshening blue promise. It was a day to build an elaborate sandcastle, read a cheap paperback novel, wade in tranquil surf, or travel south — he had chosen the latter.

The drive down the coast would be carefree and picturesque. He clapped his hands and popped his knuckles. He had a trip to prepare for. Yes, a trip. He walked into the

bathroom, drank from the basin's tap and ascended to the shower, altogether confident, glad to have a purpose, even if only fragmentary.

He stepped from the shower, wrapped a beach towel around his waist and perused himself in the mirror above the sink. His auburn hair was still very short, a month after he had had his head impetuously sheared, a day after Chris — who had preferred his hair long — had convincingly ended the union. He decided not to shave his week's light growth of whiskers; he needed to give balance to his short hair.

What he saw in the mirror was a strange amalgamation of a jogger and a drinker. The contours in his face were slightly puffy, but they held firm and handsome. He was relieved to see no trace of tumescence cascading over the towel, though he was dismayed to see that his relied-upon leanness contained a tinge of softness.

He wagged a forefinger at his reflection.

He dressed in boxers, Levi's 501 buttonflies with a black-leather belt, a red-checked gingham shirt — opened midway down his midriff, the sleeves rolled up to just beneath his elbows — and \$7 Kmart rubber sandals. As a veteran of travel, he packed a slender duffel bag deliberately and efficiently: dock kit first, then a replacement set of Levis, then boxers, socks and a few shirts, including a light-weave white Oxford and a black pique Polo-style short-sleeve. On top of his clothes he placed his plain black cowhide cowboy boots, which nowadays he wore only when he traveled. He put them at the top of his bag so that he'd have easy access to them at the airport and could change out of his sandals before checking his single piece of luggage. Anything he forgot or needed he could borrow from Fernando.

Jennings' stomach still felt queasy, but he knew he needed something to coat and



tame it before he left. He would eat a more substantial meal at the airport, after his dyspepsia had subsided. Airport food was getting better every day, Jennings told himself with prescient delight.

He moved the few feet to the small kitchen and opened a can of chicken broth. While it warmed in a saucepan, on a dirty electric burner, he went outside to bring in the Paul Bowles' novel he was involved in and the deck chair he had been reading it on. Both were speckled with sand. He shook the sand off each and carried them inside, reminding himself along the way not to forget to pack the book beside his boots and to be sure to get cash at an airport ATM before he retrieved his \$40 ticket and boarding pass.

He sipped the tepid broth straight from the saucepan, and, when he had consumed all of it, he made his final preparations to leave: forcing himself to piss, grabbing a coke and a Coors for the road and shutting off all the lights.

As Jennings had imagined, the drive had been painless, if not pleasurable. He had stopped only once, briefly and effortlessly, for gas, a bag of Fritos and a Coors Light tall boy. He had not even allowed himself to get upset by the tacky sprawl of stuccoed and clapboarded beachfront accommodations that seemingly cluttered the entire coastline; nor did he grow despondent over the continued recession of the wetlands, not hitting any glades until he was well-past Orlando.

The drive, with windows down, had been stamped by his first soothing psychological spell in a month — outside of his books. The four hours had been glorious. He didn't face one precipitous drop in self-esteem the entire way. His mind didn't force him to play any games. The traffic had been sparse, the weather limpid, rich and balmy, the briny scent in

the air clean, constant and salubrious.

Nevertheless, despite his healthy mood, Jennings didn't feel up to an encounter with Daniella and the kids, no matter how genuinely friendly Daniella and the girls always were. Daniella, who had met Chris on two happy occasions, would inevitably ask how he was coping with the break-up; and he was far too sober to be forthright and far too fond of her to be reticent. Instead of waiting for them at their arrival gate — the same one he'd been told by the ticketing agent he'd be departing from — and going through the obligatory social motions, he lounged casually on a bar stool, two gates down at a fashionable taco stand, eating delicious and tender tacos al carbón — as his clairvoyance had guaranteed they would be — and quaffing a Carte Blanca infiltrated with a robust lime wedge, the taste of Central America, he thought. His excuse to Fernando would be that he fell back asleep, got a late start and barely made the flight, making it in the nick of time only because of the mystical draw of friendship. He asked for another Carta Blanca con limon and more cilantro-infused salsa.

The flight was straightforward, the passengers sparse. Jennings read Bowles, summoned the discipline to refuse a free Johnny Walker Black and instead drank a single Gallo. He even dozed dreamlessly for an hour, propped against a window prismatic with the sun's rays. Only once during the flight did he clench, when the plane hit a pocket of turbulence and the plain-looking American lady in the aisle seat leaned across to initiate conversation. He hated to be rude, especially to a stranger, but he wasn't prepared for an exchange. He smiled faintly and pretended to be too concerned for speech, closing his eyes and gritting his teeth, hoping the raised demarcation along his jawline illustrated his

fear. In truth, Jennings felt too unpracticed at interpersonal communication to summit its first xenophobic peak, which, to him, always appeared steeper than all the ones beyond. Besides a few inebriated chats with Fernando, Jennings hadn't talked to anyone in a month.

The remainder of the flight, he stared out the window at the ethereal atmosphere.

Stepping from the plane and onto the Tarmac, Jennings was surprised by the dankness in the air. Guatemala City was nestled in a valley, 3000 feet above sea level, in the country's highlands, and ordinarily, the altitude provoked a light emptiness in the air. For a moment, he was puzzled. Then he remembered that the rainy season loomed. He looked far in the distance, beyond the encircling mountains, and was pleased to see the gray clouds gathering for what was sure to soon be an outburst of drenching rain. His memory had not failed him.

As was always the case when he arrived in Guatemala City, customs and baggage retrieval were a formality, easy and quick, none of that nervous pressure inveighed against the traveler by fascist stateside agents and their sniffing dogs. Within minutes, Jennings was clear of customs, his duffel bag in his possession. He stepped from the immigration terminal into a small waiting area, protected by a rifle-toting policeman and a waist-high rail, situated just before a promenade and a narrow two-lane road. Jennings stood at the rail, near the exit, and scanned the horde of peddlers and cab drivers, and families waiting eagerly for their loved ones. Jennings wondered from where a family's love sprung. How much of it was selfish solace and how much of it was precious symbiosis?

Jennings was disengaged from his rumination by the sound of his name being called.

“Señor Jennings, Señor Jennings.” He quickly espied its approaching source. A short, broad, bucktoothed man walked purposively toward him. At first, Jennings didn’t recognize him. Jennings drew back a step. Then it clicked. The man was one of Fernando’s bodyguards. His name was Jakob, or maybe it was Joaquín. Jennings’ Spanish was poor, his recall sporadic, his pronunciation almost indecipherable. He wasn’t sure why he never just sat down and learned the damn language. “Hola,” Jennings said, cognizant that if he silenced the “H” he wouldn’t butcher the greeting too badly. The bodyguard grinned broadly, shook Jennings’ hand and muttered something that Jennings could tell from the tone was kind. The bodyguard then reached over the rail and grabbed the duffel bag; with his other hand, he pointed across the promenade at Fernando’s idling Eddie Bauer-enhanced Ford Explorer, and said, “Don Fernando está allí.”

As Jennings followed the rear of his bag through the flexible crowd, he reflected that maybe communication was easier when there was a language barrier. He doubted he’d ever learn the language. Why ruin a good thing?

Another bodyguard, more coppery Mayan than tan Spanish, whom Jennings didn’t recognize, held the front-passenger door open for him. Jennings stepped up and in, and said “Gracias” as the car door closed for him.

Fernando lounged behind the wheel, his head propped up with his left hand, his right leg bent, knee heavenward, across the middle of the bench seat.

“Comfortable?” Jennings said.

“I am now. I was worried you were going to pull another disappearing act and not show. Daniella called, after she landed, and said you were nowhere in sight.”

“Yeah, well, when I saw the pilot with his hand on her ass, I took your advice and

chose not to interfere.”

“Appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it. No, I was lucky I made the flight at all. I was running way late.”

“Mmmhmm. You were likely in an airport cocktail lounge and lost track of time.”

“You may be onto something,” Jennings conceded with a wry smile. “Hey, have you ever thought about the derivation of the word ‘cock ... tail.’ Interesting, huh?”

“Fascinating. How much did you drink on the flight? You know, it’s really not safe for you to travel on airlines that serve complimentary booze.”

“You’d be surprised. I happen to have been very well behaved. I saved my drunk antics just for you,” Jennings said.

“Great. So what do you want to do? I’m at your disposal.”

“It’s your city,” Jennings said.

“Not just yet. A couple more years,” Fernando said, immediately forfeiting the subject of business. “How about we drop off your bag at the condo? You haven’t seen it yet. The view’s breathtaking, fourteenth-floor penthouse. I think you’ll like it. Then we can go to the Hacienda for a good steak and play it from there. Sound good?”

“Sounds primo,” Jennings said.

“Anyway,” Fernando said, “I need a shower, and, if you need to freshen up, I’ll see to it that you’re allowed to use the guest bathroom.”

Jennings furrowed his brow, pursed his lips and blew air out in mock relief. Fernando nodded like a monarch.

“There’s a Super-24 on the way we can stop at for beer. We’ll be overlooking the city in 15 minutes.”

“Lead on, mi jefe,” Jennings said. “It’s time to beckon the night.”

“I didn’t think it was possible, but your pronunciation has gotten worse.”

“Thanks. So, are we due for rain?”

“Not for a couple more days. But when it starts, we’ll get a sobering downpour every afternoon for months. You should consider moving here.”

The thick gates to the apartment’s compound opened slowly inward, automatically activated by a radar disk on the inside windshield of the Explorer. A guard in an adjacent booth waved nonchalantly at them as they drove through. Following Fernando’s lead, Jennings returned the wave. They drove past two tennis courts, which looked to be newly surfaced, and a large pool with a small waterfall on one end that was built into a steep mossy bank. Jennings noticed that the spume and current from the waterfall created a cat’s-paw along the pool’s surface. A stooped gardener at the other end of the pool was trimming roses that swayed gently because of the waterfall’s souging breath.

Fernando drove up a circular drive to the entrance of the spire-like building and put the car in park, leaving the motor running. Before Jennings could open the front passenger door to exit, Joaquín was on the move and had the door askew and Jennings’ bag proffered. Jennings descended to the driveway and took the bag from him and thanked him in English. Both bodyguards then jumped into the front seat and began advancing the car toward the residents’ parking lot.

Fernando carried the beer, and Jennings followed him into an antiseptically clean foyer and immediately onto a waiting elevator. Jennings didn’t say anything as Fernando balanced the beer and inserted a small cylindrical key into floor fourteen’s lock and

rotated it a half turn to the right. Upon doing so, they were whisked up to a short hallway and the door to the penthouse suite.

Fernando opened the weighty door effortlessly, walked across a buffed hardwood floor to a glass entertainment center bracketed above a circular bar and flipped on power to a receiver and CD player. He laid the two six packs down on the bar's cherrywood counter, swiveled and, with hands gesticulated, proudly but modestly said, "Not bad, huh?"

A Luis Miguel song began playing, piped through minute speakers festooned all around the sparkling-white walls of the large living room.

Jennings spun in a slow 180-degree arc and was struck by the panorama of green from the distant cordillera, which he saw through an open sliding glass door and a gamut of open windows. "It's amazing," he asseverated.

"Thanks," Fernando said casually, taking a beer from one of the six packs. "Why don't you grab a beer and check out the place. I'm going to jump in the shower. The guestroom is down the corridor to the right, past the girls' bedrooms. I told the maid she could leave early, as we'd be going out for dinner, but she was instructed before she left to lay out towels and toiletries for you. You should have everything you need."

"That I do. I'm in heaven," Jennings said.

Fernando bowed, turned and walked left, down a hallway to where, Jennings assumed, the auditorium-sized master bedroom must be. Jennings smiled after him, remembering the dives they used to frequent together around Tallahassee.

Jennings decided to forgo a shower. He opened a beer and took it with him through

the open sliding glass door, onto the narrow adobe balcony. He ambled to the edge, leaned against the balustrade and stared out.

After a few minutes of acute visual penetration, he felt he had successfully insinuated himself into the topography's juxtaposition between city and wilderness, a juxtaposition that to Jennings felt more harmonious and natural than elsewhere.

There was civilization, yes, but the land was too fresh, too fecund ever to be enslaved. He drank deeply from his bottled Dorado, without regret. His head felt clear. Jennings had been to Johannesburg once, when he was a teenager, with his parents, before they died, and the view he experienced now seemed very similar to his memory of that trip's landscape — a trip which now seemed so long ago.

He returned inside for another beer and to put the remainders in the bar's refrigerator.

Jennings was sitting at the bar in reverie — aloof from the present, his head tilted back — when Fernando finally presented himself for the evening.

"Wake up," Fernando said loudly, jostling Jennings to concurrent attention. "Don't pass out on me yet."

"Whoa," Jennings said. "I was miles away. A foreign land, a distant time."

"Sounds like you were here to me," Fernando said.

"I guess it does all run together," Jennings said.

"You ready?" Fernando asked.

"Oh, yeah," Jennings said. "I washed my face, repositioned my Johnson and even put on a little cologne. I'm good to go, nothing to hold me back."

"Excellent. I already called down to the bodyguards. The car should be out front."



“Always planning ahead,” Jennings said. “And before we depart, allow me to say that you are looking particularly cute tonight?” Jennings ribbed, giving Fernando an embellished once-up, once-down perusal. Fernando was shaved, showered and pomaded, looking confident and clean. He wore gray slacks, a matching gray vest over a starched white, long-sleeve shirt and Italian-style dress shoes. He was not classically good looking, but he was held together with an air of effortless charisma.

“Certainly,” Fernando said. “It’s not every day you come to town.”

“Finally, a little respect,” Jennings said.

Jennings went behind the bar and opened two beers as roadies; he handed one to Fernando. Jennings loved the fact that, in Guatemala, there were no captious open-container or drunk-driving laws, at least none that were actively enforced. Even though Fernando had the option of having his bodyguards drive when he drank, he nearly always chose to drive, unless he was on the verge of passing out.

He followed Fernando out of the apartment to the elevator. The elevator was there in a flash. They stepped on board. The elevator began its descent. It stopped at the tenth floor. The doors opened. There was no one there. Jennings heard the scampering of little feet.

“Kids,” Jennings said.

“The same everywhere,” Fernando replied.

As they continued on to the first floor, sipping their beers in silence, Jennings wondered why conversations on elevators, even when no else but a friend or loved one was aboard, were always characterized by sheepish small talk and followed by long intervals of silence.

The drive to the restaurant took longer than Jennings anticipated. It was dusk and well past rush hour traffic, but antiquated lorries billowing smoke and crawling buses overflowing with passengers slowed their progress. Jennings tried to imagine where the passengers on the buses came from, where they were all heading, what they had done during the workday and what they would be doing once they reached their evening's destination. He sensed a mind game coming on. He wished he had brought the full six pack.

When they arrived at the restaurant, just before they stepped inside its courtyard, Jennings observed Fernando give the bodyguards 100 quetzales, or what Jennings quickly converted as being equivalent to about 20 dollars.

"Is that for their dinner?" Jennings asked, as he and Fernando entered the courtyard.

"Yeah. I told them to get something to eat and be back here in an hour. I'm sure they'll go to the Pollo Campero down the street. Don't worry, I'll protect you if anything goes down."

"I feel so much safer," Jennings said, surmising that kidnappers, in the unlikely event they ever attempted to abduct someone in Fernando's party, would go for it during a routine, predictable part in his day.

"Hey, just out of curiosity, are the bodyguards given a salary?" Jennings asked.

"Sure, but in addition, I try to cover their meals, especially if they're going to be working late, as I imagine they will be tonight."

"What a guy, spreading the wealth."

"I may even buy your dinner if you behave."

The courtyard was illuminated by tiki torches, the latticed wooden fence around its

perimeter garlanded with vine. Jennings heard the faint trill of a lonely warbler and smelled lilac in the syrupy air. In the middle of the brick courtyard was a dry fountain, its interior center sculpted into an angel replete with flowing robe and bow and arrow. Interspersed around the fountain were a few unoccupied wrought iron tables and chairs.

A beautiful hostess greeted them officially, if not sternly, at the restaurant's entrance, in front of the open double doors. She knew she was beautiful and that, Jennings reasoned, accounted for her recompensed studiousness.

Jennings looked past her, inside the main dining area, and saw that most of the tables were filled with noisy patrons who were being attended to by a large staff of solicitous waiters dressed in white dinner jackets and black trousers.

"Why don't we sit outside," Jennings suggested to Fernando. "It's a perfect night."

"Alright. If you want. You're the guest."

Jennings watched Fernando relay his request to the hostess. Her expression did not change. She simply nodded in affirmation and spoke her assent. She motioned to an elderly waiter behind her, and, almost immediately, two younger waiters were placing a linen tablecloth on the closest outdoor table and wiping down two chairs.

When they were finished preparing the table and had moved off, Jennings sat down.

Fernando excused himself and went inside to use the restroom. Jennings smiled at Fernando's receding figure, his inimitable swagger.

The elderly waiter walked up to Jennings and asked, or so Jennings translated, whether he would care for a drink. Jennings decided it was time to switch to Scotch and anesthetize any incipient mind games that might ruin his evening. He ordered a Johnny Walker Black con agua mineral, which was promptly delivered.

Jennings finished the scotch before Fernando returned from the bathroom.

“Thirsty?” Fernando asked, looking at the empty glass.

“A little,” Jennings said.

Fernando called the waiter back. Fernando opted for a rum and coke, saying to Jennings that he had recently discovered that his hangovers, now that he was only a weekend drinker, were mitigated if he drank rum and cokes instead of scotch and waters. Partly as a joke and partly as an act of one-upmanship, Jennings proceeded to order a double scotch. Jennings was not too worried about the forthcoming hangover. He felt himself loosening into insouciant happiness. He would follow the evening wherever it led. What else did he have to do?

Jennings could feel himself getting drunk but he was sure his tolerance would hold throughout the evening; it would be there. He was many drinks away from losing his banter and turning antisocially inward.

“So when are you going to start dating again?” Fernando asked as dinner was served. “You know you’re not getting any younger. Most of the good ones are going to be gone pretty soon and the ones that are available are going to be too young to date. You’ll either find them too ignorant or they’ll find you too old and boring. And the good ones your age will be divorcees with kids and baggage. The kids will despise you and the baggage will cripple you.”

“My, my, the food looks good,” Jennings said, knowing he was in for an inquisition.

“You call this cut of meat lomina, huh?”

“Close. Lomita. And you’re not getting off the subject without answering me.”

“You’re going to kill my buzz,” Jennings said.

“That would be hard to do,” Fernando said.

Jennings pretended to survey the courtyard. “Beautiful spot, huh?”

“I’m still waiting,” Fernando said.

Jennings cut a bite from his thin steak, placed it in his mouth and chewed it slowly and reflectively. “Damn. This is good,” he said.

“Only the best for you.”

Jennings sighed. “Yeah, that’s what I used to think,” he said. “But no longer does such seem to be the case, present company excluded, of course.”

“Of course.”

“It seems the lipstick on the wall has dried, and it indelibly reads, in her favorite raspberry-red shade, ‘I’m gone for good. You blew it.’”

“And it’s taken you a month to make this breakthrough?”

“I guess I’m a little slow on the uptake,” Jennings said.

“Apparently.”

“But you’ll be pleased to hear that I’ve made quite the life-changing insight,” Jennings asked.

“I’m all ears.”

Jennings took an exaggerated breath, expelled it slowly and raised his hands in mock supplication. “You sure you’re ready for this?”

“Edge of my seat.”

“Hookers.”

“Excuse me.”

“You heard me. Hookers.”

“Would you care to elaborate?”

“Why not,” Jennings said. He took a long swallow from his drink then continued. “You see, it’s really very simple when you think about it. Relationships, I mean most relationships — I know you and Daniella are the exception to the rule. But most relationships, that is if they involve a person such as myself, who can’t make compromises, are doomed. Keep in mind that the reason I can’t compromise or budge — and I’m talking ideologically here and not stupid stuff like where to go for dinner or who has to take the trash out — has nothing to do with selfishness or ego on my part. It’s because I recognize that there exists the possibility of something higher, something maybe transcendent, and therefore, if I’m to be true to myself and thus true to another, I have to be one, not half of one.

“You see the paradox is that a relationship in which neither individual compromises or expects compromise must be, it has to be, the healthiest, most positive and respecting of all relationships. You’d be together but you wouldn’t suffocate the person you were unconditionally in love with. You’d be closer than any couple that compromises. You’d have to be, because compromise means conditions and conditions mean it’s not love.”

“So, why then all the moaning and grieving? You know who you are and you know what you want.”

“It’s not that simple. Incompatibility, my friend. You see most if not all candidates will want a modicum of intersection. That — as I have learned the hard way — is inevitable. Chris came the closest. She was the prospect, the one to be two. And still, it didn’t work. She moved on. Later days, as it were.”

“There’re other fish in the sea.”

“Yeah, but most fish swim in schools and the ones that don’t are sharks,” Jennings said.

“So, let me guess. This is where the hookers come in.”

“Bingo,” Jennings said.

“I think I better get another drink before you continue. I’m sure you need one?”

Without waiting for an answer, Fernando picked up his half-full drink in the dewy night and rattled what remained of the ice, saying loudly to the elderly waiter who stood by the entrance, “Dos más, por favor. Lo mismo.”

Jennings waited for the drinks to arrive before he continued, and while so doing, he finished his existing drink. He was pleased to be explicating his angst; alone it had been nonverbalized and too ambiguous. He thought perhaps he was speaking of his future, a place beyond his grief.

When the drinks arrived, Jennings started from where he had left off. “Think about it. It makes sense. I’m a male, I’ve got testosterone, and I like sex. But I’m stuck. If I know what I know and I’m true to it, then in good conscience, I can’t date, because remember the lipstick is already on the wall. I’ll just end up causing two people pain. Now, one-night stands might work — assuming you can get them in this day and age — but even there, you’re on shaky ground. What if I fall for the girl or the girl falls for me? Because of that possibility, it means you’re taking advantage. You’re not treating yourself or the girl like an individual; you’re both just objects using each other; and that would make me a hypocrite. So what remains? There is only one logical conclusion: to pay for sex.”

“But wouldn’t that also be objectifying and disrespecting the individual?”

“No, it’s distinctly different. It’s a free exchange, not a base calculation. There is no

emotion, no hidden agenda. You can't take advantage of someone who knows in advance what the outcome will be?"

"Interesting. But I'm afraid what you think is cut and dried, black and white, is all too gray. Plus, you're full of shit, and to prove it, I'll call our bluff. After dinner, we are heading directly to Josephine's."

Jennings laughed. "Good old Josephine's," he said.

"Only this time, there is no Chris to keep you chaste," Fernando noted.

Jennings stood at the steps of Josephine's; he procrastinated his own entry. Fernando was already inside the club's vestibule. Jennings waved to the bodyguards as they moved the Explorer past him, to a nearby parking space. The bodyguards smiled back at him. Joaquín gave him the thumbs up. Jennings waved again. Then he straggled onto the steps of Josephine's.

The night was warm. A zephyr licked Jennings' face, stirring a vague, illiterate premonition in his mind. He was not prepared to play. He shut the game down. He ignored it. He gazed at a small neon marquee above the black metal door, the word "Josephine's" in light-blue cursive lettering. Two gas lamps flickered on either side of the door. The rest of the building's facade was nondescript. It had not changed since the last time Jennings had been there, but, for some reason, it seemed different, incomplete and somber. Jennings thought gargoyles might make an appropriate addition to the façade and, paradoxically, give it life.

Jennings entered the vestibule's hazy atmosphere to find Fernando checking his gun, handing it over to balding man with a pitted face who appeared to be the new manager.



“I thought maybe you had left and gone back to Florida,” Fernando said to Jennings.

“I couldn’t leave you here by yourself. What would Daniella say?”

“What a guy this guy is,” Fernando said, more to the manager than to Jennings.

Fernando introduced Jennings to the manager, who, in perfect English, said,

“Welcome. If there is anything you require, please do not hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you,” Jennings said, accepting his extended hand and shaking it firmly.

“Do you have a good table for us, Alejandro?” Fernando said.

“Anywhere you want. Please follow me.”

Jennings walked behind Fernando, who walked behind Alejandro. They made their way down a dark passageway, advancing to the glow at the passageway’s end. The passageway opened up to a ramp that descended to a chamber lambent with light. The strongest light came from a vaulted stage at the rear of the room. Where the stage and its adjacent bar were not, black velvet drapes covered the windowless walls.

Jennings followed Fernando and Alejandro down the ramp to the sunken floor. Men in business suits sat smoking cigars at small round tables close to the raised stage. Jennings looked up at the stage. A petite naked girl with shoulder-length black hair spun herself around a burnished golden pole that ran from a round dais to the ceiling. Her legs were wrapped around the pole and her hands gripped the pole high above her head. Every few seconds, she placed a bare foot on the dais and pushed herself off and around again, in two languid revolutions, her hair flowing behind her in slow motion. She seemed at ease, like a schoolgirl riding in circles on a scooter. When the music’s tempo began to increase — in a final flourish before the song’s end — she slid down the pole and strutted to the front of the stage, swaying her narrow hips and shaking her small breasts, her arms

outstretched in a pose of benediction. At the completion of her routine, many of the men applauded.

“If you recall, you’re allowed to watch sitting down,” Fernando said.

“Sorry, partner. A mild fugue,” Jennings said.

“Where would you two gentleman like to sit?” Alejandro said to Fernando. “There are open tables beside the stage, if you would like.”

“I think we’d like to sit over where it’s a little quieter,” Jennings said.

“Never one for the front row, huh? As you see fit,” Fernando said.

Alejandro escorted them to a nearby table and asked what they would care to drink. Jennings ordered a scotch, Johnny Walker Black, no water, and Fernando asked for a rum and coke with Flor de Caña rum.

“I’ll send a waiter over with your drinks right away. Thank you for coming.”

Alejandro said as he moved away.

“Happy? Content? On the dawn of enacting your life-changing insight?” Fernando asked, staring out at the empty stage.

“Why don’t we just see what develops and not force anything. Just because I know the score doesn’t mean I’m ready to play the game.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Good.”

“So, what did you think of that last girl on stage ... just for argument’s sake?”

Fernando asked.

“She was cute,” Jennings said.

“What do you mean cute?” Fernando asked.

“I don’t know, innocent, like.”

Jennings saw that two of the dancers sat at a table nearby and were whispering to each other and looking coyly in his direction. Jennings was slightly blurred because of the drink, but he didn’t feel drunk. The girls both wore halter tops, panties, garters and high-heeled shoes; he was able to perceive that one of the girls was the one who had been dancing when he and Fernando had entered the club an hour before.

“Friends of yours?” Fernando asked, noticing the girls’ attentions.

“Didn’t you know I used to be married to the young one before I got involved with Chris?”

“You mean the innocent, cute one? Funny place to regain your innocence. I mean, after being married to you, she must have had very little innocence left. Let’s see, four years ago she would have been, what, 15, tops. You would have been 25, 26.... Robbing the cradle, shame on you. No wonder you didn’t tell me about her.”

“Isn’t that the Latin way?” Jennings asked.

“Sort of. You got it half right. There’s nothing wrong with younger women. In fact, I’m a big proponent of it, as long as it doesn’t ever involve my daughters. But the other half of the equation is to never forget to brag to your friends about your conquests.”

“I’m sorry,” Jennings said. “Until the next time, it will never happen again.”

“Good. I’m glad we’ve got that cleared up. So are you two former love birds on speaking terms?”

“I don’t think so. After the third abortion, we went our separate ways,” Jennings said, amused by the banter but tiring of its ebb.

“You owe it to each other to try to make it work out,” Fernando said. “You’d look so *cute* together.”

Although he knew it was coming in advance, Jennings didn’t have time to stop Fernando. He wasn’t sure he wanted to. The evening was changing from the abstract to the real. Fernando motioned the girls to come over with the reverse wave of his right hand. Jennings looked into his glass as the girls made their way to the table. He wasn’t nervous, just unprepared for social contact. An internal voice recommended he take a swig from his drink. He did so with his head still down — his chin almost to the base of his neck, his lower lip extended forward — lifting the bottom of the glass up into the smoky air. After his guzzle of stiff scotch, he felt somewhat relieved; he anticipated the defensive comforts of the language barrier.

When the girls were seated, Jennings looked up. The young girl had chosen to sit next to him — his former wife, huh, he thought. The other girl, who was only a couple of years older than the young one, sat next to Fernando. She had a round face and her breasts were pushed far up her chest by the halter’s constricting brassiere.

Fernando greeted them in effusive Spanish and made the preliminary introductions. Jennings simply said, “Hi,” and dimpled his cheeks. He allowed Fernando to provide his name for him. The young girl said her name was Theresa. The other girl with the pushed-up breasts called herself Margarite. Jennings wondered if those were their real names.

Fernando began to ask the girls fast-paced questions, many of which they chortled at before answering. Jennings tried to follow the exchange, but only caught a few tidbits and a few references to his name. He determined that the girls had been recruited from Nicaragua six months previously and that they didn’t dislike Guatemala.

Jennings couldn't glean much else. He sipped his drink patiently, waiting for Fernando to relay a summary of the confabulation. It didn't take long.

"It seems Theresa, for some unknown reason, is quite smitten with you. She says she noticed you from the stage when we walked in and she thought you were rather guapo."

"Meaning?" Jennings asked, as he looked at Theresa's delicate features: her diminutive ears, the close set of her cheekbones.

"Meaning," Fernando said, "she thinks you're quite the looker."

"Is that right?" Jennings asked, not taking his eyes off her.

"'Guapo' means handsome. Believe me, that's the word she used, not me."

"Sí. Muy guapo," Theresa said, getting up from her chair, moving sideways, toward Jennings. Jennings wasn't sure if she was going to sit on the arm of the chair or on his lap. Neither was he sure which position he would prefer. She turned her back to him, the upper whorls of her shoulder blades in front of him, and shimmied over the chair into his lap. She giggled, her friend laughed, and so did Fernando.

Jennings barely felt her descend to his lap. All he could feel was the radiating warmth of her weightless body. He smelled chamomile in her hair. She swiveled on his lap and faced him. Her eyes seemed to regard him with unabashed trust. He was heartened. She ran the four fingers of her left hand around his eyes and over his nose. Jennings wondered if she was telepathic.

"Me gusta," she said, and again, her friend and Fernando laughed.

"Oh, yeah," Jennings heard Fernando say. "She's also infatuated with your blue eyes."

\* \* \* \*

It was 2 a.m., and Jennings rested next to Fernando on a davenport in the club's private VIP lounge drinking cheap champagne. The room was bathed in diffuse light, illuminated by a single upright lamp in the room's corner. A hard rock song blared from a jam box. It was sung by the Cult, a group that, many years ago, Jennings had listened to when he jogged. The jam box was perched on a coffee table that Jennings and Fernando had carried to the far wall opposite the davenport. The girls had asked for the additional space so they could dance freely.

In the center of the intimate room, Theresa and Margarite danced. They were naked. Their clothes were scattered about the shag carpet. They really seemed to be having fun, Jennings thought, with mild surprise. They were trying to move in unison, almost like cheerleaders, and the only time their rhythm was disrupted was when they passed a bottle of champagne between them and drank.

Three hours earlier, when they bought the girls drinks for the first time, Jennings had found out from Fernando that management had recently instituted a policy that enjoined the girls from drinking anything but champagne when they were working. Fernando explained to him that the amount a girl was paid depended upon the number of champagne charges she could accumulate in any given pay period.

Jennings could not get the ramifications of the policy from his mind. He determined that, while management was making big money padding customers' bills with champagne expenditures, many of the ambitious girls were becoming winos. Even though the girls told Fernando they always drank most nights anyway, and champagne had always been their drink of choice, Jennings still decided the policy was manipulative.

He had relayed his condemnation to Fernando, but Fernando had told him to relax and stop being so analytical.

Fernando mollified Jennings somewhat by reasoning that the girls were free to leave whenever they wanted; they weren't slaves or even indentured servants. They were there of their own volition and they were there simply to make money.

Despite Fernando's reasonableness, Jennings, as an act of drunken solidarity, had switched from scotch to champagne. He toasted the girls with his own glass of champagne after every one of their performances. When the Cult song on the mix concluded, he did so again, raising his glass high in the air. Fernando chose to clap.

Theresa came over to Jennings, poured more champagne into his raised glass and sat on his lap, obviously at ease with her naked body. She asked Jennings in simple Spanish if he liked the music and the dance. He said, "Sí, muy bien." She gave him a cuddle and then excused herself to the baño. The other girl went over to the jam box, turned the music down and followed her out of the lounge.

Fernando gave him a look of petitioned entreaty. Jennings knew Fernando was restless to leave. Fernando had remarked a couple of times in the past half hour that he had a 10 a.m. meeting that he could not cancel.

"The meeting tomorrow, I mean today," Fernando said, looking at his watch, "shouldn't take long. After I'm done, we'll go to Antigua for a late lunch. Deal?"

"Fair enough," Jennings said.

"Maybe if you'd have given me a little notice of your arrival," Fernando said, "I could have rescheduled."

"No worries. While you're making us money, I'll sleep in," Jennings said.

“Speaking of sleep, are you almost ready to blow this shrine to the female body?”

“Lead the way. I’ve seen plenty,” Jennings said.

“Let me first settle up,” Fernando said, standing up from the couch. “I’ll be back in minute.”

“You need some money?” Jennings asked for the sake of etiquette and propriety, expecting Fernando to say, “I’ve got more money than I can spend.”

“I’ve got more money than I know what to do with. Consider yourself my favorite charity,” Fernando said, patting Jennings on the knee.

Almost verbatim, Jennings thought. Not bad. He celebrated his foresight with a sip of champagne.

“You’re too good to me,” Jennings called out. Fernando strode to the lounge’s exit and the club’s vestibule. Jennings stood and walked with his glass of champagne over to the jam box in order to rewind the tape and listen to the Cult song one more time. He still wasn’t positive Fernando was right. How much free choice was involved in this business, he asked himself. Was Fernando’s argument legitimate or was it rationalization for men’s enjoyment? Maybe it was just different than in the States, Jennings decided. Who was he to judge?

The ride back to the apartment had been strange for Jennings. He had sensed something was awry. Fernando kept looking in the rearview mirror for no apparent reason. The bodyguards had been tightlipped; they had hardly paid Jennings any notice. Joaquín, who was usually so congenial toward him, had not even smiled when Jennings walked out of Josephine’s and up to the car. Jennings had asked Fernando during the ride



if they were being followed, if anything was wrong, but Fernando had just shaken his head and said, “No, what are you talking about? You must have drunk yourself into a state of paranoia.”

Jennings sat at the apartment’s bar, replaying the evening and the ride home in his head. He sipped from a beer, which he promised himself was his last drink before turning in. He hoped he had not offended Fernando in some way. He wracked his brain trying to find a remark he might have made that could have been interpreted as rude or derogatory or offensive. But he couldn’t remember one.

Jennings decided the best thing to do would be to just ask Fernando what was up and find out if he needed to apologize.

Fernando had gone into the kitchen, saying he needed a Gatorade as a hangover retardant. Just as Jennings called out his name, the doorbell chimed.

“I’ve got it,” Fernando said loudly, walking from the kitchen to the front door.

“Jennings, do me a favor and come over here a sec,” Fernando continued.

“Why?” Jennings asked.

“Just get over here,” Fernando commanded.

“OK,” Jennings said uncertainly. Jennings took a sip of his Dorado, placed the bottle on the bar’s countertop and walked to the door, to stand alongside Fernando. If *it*, whatever *it* was, meant backing his friend, then so be *it*.

“Surprise,” Fernando said, as he flung the heavy front door open.

Standing in the doorway was the young girl from Josephine’s. She was wearing a yellow silk robe and had a woven drawstring tote draped over her shoulder. Behind her was Joaquín. They were both laughing, as was Fernando.

Jennings tried to suppress a smile, but couldn't. He knew Fernando had hoodwinked him and must have hid the girl in the back of the Explorer during the time he was settling the bill. She was obviously the reason for Fernando's and the bodyguards' odd behavior on the ride back to the apartment.

"Gotcha," Fernando said, a full glass of orange Gatorade in his hand.

He ushered the girl in and said adios and gracias to Joaquín. Joaquín waved goodbye and closed the door. Fernando placed his free hand on the girl's shoulder, opposite the one from which the tote hung.

"Aren't you going to say hello?" Fernando asked Jennings.

"Hi," Jennings said to the girl. For the life of him, he couldn't remember her name. "Perdón. Un momento," Jennings said to her.

"OK. You got me," Jennings said to Fernando. "You are the king, but as your loyal subject, would you mind telling me what exactly is going on here?"

"Have you forgotten about your *life-changing insight*? I am merely trying to provide you with the opportunity to put your theory to the test. It's all arranged. It's on me, from one friend to another. She's yours for the evening or," looking at his watch, "what's left of the morning. If it's any consolation, I'm pretty sure she wanted to come home with you, without my financial intervention. It's just that she has management to answer to. She probably would have played for free but Alejandro might not have understood. That kind of thing is bad for business. Now, don't worry. She knows you're here only for a short visit and you're not going to make her your wife — I mean not again. So you won't be misleading her or taking advantage of her. It's arranged just as you wished. Your experiment has not been compromised. There will be no emotional attachment, just an

exchange of oh-so-beautiful pleasure.”

Jennings knew his bluff had been called after all. But was it really a bluff? Was it not the selfsame solution he’d been contemplating all month? Had this not all been inevitable when he placed the call to Fernando early yesterday morning?

Jennings didn’t know what to say.

“Cat got your tongue?” Fernando asked.

Jennings still didn’t know what to say. He scratched his head.

“El está tímido,” Fernando said to the girl.

Fernando took the girl by the hand and led her to the hallway, to the right, toward Jennings’ room. Jennings moved to the bar. He drank his beer. He felt a draft purl in from the open windows. He looked out. The night was starless. He thought he saw a flash of heat lightening above the ridgeline, beyond the mountains.

Fernando returned quickly. Jennings watched him re-enter the room.

“The father of the bride,” Jennings said.

“My daughter is yours. Take her,” Fernando said, pretending to wipe a tear from his eye.

“You’re too kind,” Jennings said.

“Hey, you don’t have to do this if you don’t want to. It’s your choice.”

“I’m sorry,” Jennings said. “I just didn’t think it was going to come to this.”

“Sure you did,” Fernando said.

“How do you know?” Jennings asked.

“Because you thrive on moments like this. You always have. It’s the same reason you drink so much. It’s why Kerouac is your muse. You’re always needing more than one

perspective. And here's your chance for a new one."

Jennings didn't respond. He was intrigued by Fernando's succinct analysis of his life.

"This month, it's Bowles," Jennings said.

"What?" Fernando asked.

"Nothing," Jennings said.

"Hey, if you're having second thoughts, I can always radio Joaquín and have him drive her back to the club," Fernando said.

"I just thought it would feel different."

"You haven't done anything yet."

"But it looks like it's a fait accompli," Jennings said.

"Your decision," Fernando said.

"This is what it's come to," Jennings said. "Time to face my own drummer."

"You sure?"

"I guess so," Jennings said.

"Well then, I'm going to bed. Enjoy yourself. Some of us have to work tomorrow and some of us, it seems, have to work tonight. Please treat my daughter nicely."

"Hey, before you turn in," Jennings said, "tell me her name again. I'm drawing a complete blank. For the life of me I can't remember."

"Theresa, moron. And to think you don't even know my little girl's name."

Fernando shook his head in jest, turned, walked to the hallway and made a left toward his bedroom. Jennings then also began to walk to the hallway, to turn right and join Theresa. But he hesitated. He turned around. He remembered there was a phone behind the bar.

Before he dialed, he searched the liquor cabinets and located a bottle of tequila. He took down a shot glass from the uppermost glass shelf and poured out a full shot. He placed the top of the shot glass to his lower lips and inverted the tequila. He chased the burning sensation with what was left in his beer. Only then was he ready to dial the number, a number he had sworn to himself he would never dial again. He dialed, and, as the number rang, he wondered how many times he had called it over the past three years. What was once a day multiplied by three years? Three times 365.

The answering machine picked up. He pushed down on the reset lever and dialed again. This time, on the fourth ring, a sleepy voice answered, "Hello?"

"Chris," Jennings said softly.

"Stu, is that you?" she murmured.

"Yeah."

"Where are you?"

"I'm in Guatemala with Fernando. I know it's early, and I'm sorry for calling."

"Are you OK? You don't sound too good."

"I don't know," Jennings said. "I guess I'm really drunk."

Jennings waited for her to say something, but there was silence on the other end.

"I know it's stupid to be calling and you're going to think I'm crazy — more crazy than you already do, if that's possible —but, I don't know, I had to."

"What's going on? Why *are* you calling?" Chris asked.

"This is going to sound bizarre, but ... well, there's a girl waiting for me in bed, and I don't know what to do. You see, I guess I would rather she be you."

Again, Jennings heard only silence on the other line, maybe a drawn-in breath — he couldn't tell.

"It's funny," Jennings said, "the girls I want to want me for who I am, don't, and the girls who don't know who I am, do."

Jennings forced a chuckle.

"Stu," Chris said. "I can't help you. I can't do it anymore."

Jennings paused. He felt a tear run down his cheek. "I know, I'm sorry I woke you. You better get back to sleep, you have to get up early."

"Are you going to be OK?" she asked him.

"I don't know," Jennings said, then he hung up.

So that's that, Jennings thought, it's finally over, just like you've pushed for since the beginning. Jennings wiped his eyes and walked to the guest bedroom, to his guest, to the girl named Theresa.

Jennings heard Fernando preparing to leave for his meeting. He looked down again, from the bed to the three prophylactics that lay on the hardwood floor. He had been staring at them for what must have been hours. Two of the prophylactics had broken during sex. He could see the flayed flaps on two of the tips. At least he had not come inside her, he thought. Was that any consolation?

Jennings rose from the bed. He looked at Theresa's supine form. One small brown breast peeked out from beneath the sheets. She made a short wheezing sound, scratched at her nose, and sighed. Her eyes were closed. She was still fast asleep, as she had been since they concluded. The sleep of the innocent, he thought.

Jennings had slept hardly at all. As he walked to the bedroom's exit, to catch Fernando before he left, he saw himself in the applique of mirrored glass that covered the closet's sliding door. For most of the time he and Theresa had fucked — but especially when he was on top — Jennings had watched his reflection on the closet. He had seen his own expressionless face every time he had thrust into her, every time he had pulled out from inside her. Throughout it all, he had felt almost nothing. No, it had not been the girl. Her fit was snug, her passion sincere. No, it had not been the sheath of the rubber, its tactile deprivation. It was his remoteness, his utter displacement. He had known that as he had fucked. But he had not cared.

Now he knew he did. The present had returned. And he was sickened, repulsed — by himself, not by her — by the vulgar, self-annihilating betrayal of his innermost ontology, of the love he had once known. How could he have strayed so far from himself? How could he have become so artificial?

This wasn't just another one of his games, he thought. This was his fucking life, or what was left of it. Two of the condoms had broken. Not one, but two. And he hadn't cared. He no longer knew who he was looking at when he looked at himself. Had he ever? Maybe that was the problem all along.

He walked out of the bedroom. He needed to catch Fernando before he left. Predicaments like this were real. Life was real.

"You look like shit," Fernando said. "You look like a ghost. What, you can't handle young women anymore?"

"What have you done?" Jennings asked.

"Me?" Fernando replied, a frown forming on his forehead.

“No, I don’t mean you. I mean me, whoever that is,” Jennings said, struggling to hold Fernando’s penetrating stare.

“What’s going on?” Fernando asked, the concern palpable in his voice.

“I was wrong, and you were right,” Jennings said, his head drooping. “There is no black and white. And I guess that’s how it should be.”

“So, big deal, you discovered something. That’s life. You move on,” Fernando said.

“If only it were that easy,” Jennings said.

“You’re going to have to help me out here,” Fernando said. “Something else is going on, isn’t it?”

“I broke two rubbers. You tell me what that means.”

“Two?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Relax. I wouldn’t get too worked up. She’s not a street-corner junkie, you know, a two-bit whore. I’m not saying she’s the Virgin Mary, but Josephine’s has been around forever. They have clubs all over Central America. There’s a reason for that. They’re a respected establishment. Hell, their motto is Secreto y Seguridad. Secrecy and Safety. They guarantee it. The girls are tested all the time.”

“I’m sure that’s what they say. What do you expect them to say?”

“Think about it, it’s a business,” Fernando said. “If a customer contracts something, word leaks out and business suffers. That’s why they have precautions and measures in place, to guarantee that doesn’t happen.”

“Right. You’re trying to tell me they can regulate the actions of every girl and every John? The funny thing is, I don’t know if it matters. I think maybe I deserve whatever



happens. Maybe I've had it coming. Maybe I asked for it."

"Look, I'm sorry. I thought I was helping you out, letting you learn for yourself. I really thought this is what you wanted — at least once."

"I did," Jennings said. "I just didn't know."

"I feel terrible, like I'm responsible. If I had known this was going to happen, I'd never have set it up."

"You're not responsible. This is my gig. It was inevitable. One way or another, it was going to happen."

"I tell you what. After my meeting, I'll go by Josephine's and talk to Alejandro. I'm sure he'll be there for the Friday lunch crowd. I'll ask him when she was last tested. I'll call you right away. "Trust me, I think it's fine. Just relax, get some sleep — and that means no more sex — and I'll call you in a couple of hours. We'll get some ceviche for lunch and by this afternoon, you'll feel better. It's not going to help to worry. What's done is done."

"Do me a favor," Jennings said. "Don't get the girl in trouble with management. She didn't do anything wrong. And also, try not to let her find out you went by. She'd only be offended."

"I'm a businessman, not a reporter anymore. I know all about discretion."

Fernando looked at his watch. "I hate to leave you in this state, but I've gotta go. I'm running late. Just try to chill. Things work out."

"What about the girl? What do I do about getting her home or back to the club?"

"It's taken care of. Joaquín is downstairs, out the back entrance, and whenever she's ready, just take her down and he'll take her home in the pickup. Rodrigo will go with me

in the Explorer. It's all arranged."

"Why don't I wake her now and you take her down on your way?"

"I would but it's probably better if you do, just in case someone happens to get on the elevator. I've got to live in this building. I left a spare key for the elevator on the bar. Just take her down to the basement. Joaquín will be there with the car."

"OK."

"I'll be back as soon as I can. Try to take it easy. Drink some Gatorade."

Fernando walked out of the front door.

Jennings returned to the guest bedroom. The girl slept on. Jennings stepped over the one intact rubber and the two broken ones. They looked like dead animals, he thought.

He lay on the bed beside the girl, on top of the bedspread. He looked up into the skylights. The sky was overcast, but the gray was luminous, as it had been all night. All night, as he had gone through the motions of fucking, Jennings had sensed that someone else had been in the room besides himself and the girl. He wondered now if it had been the leaden sky's incongruous light or just another one of his unidentifiable selves.

He looked at the girl. He didn't want to wake her. But he needed to be alone. He was desperate to be alone, to try and remember what that was like. For a month, he had believed he had been alone, but he had not been. Maybe he had never been alone. Maybe that was the point after all.

He tapped her gently on the shoulder. She woke slowly, a beatific smile on her face. "Buenos días," she said. He supposed she was going to lean toward him, to kiss him. She did not. What a fool he was, he thought.

She rose from the bed and walked to the chair that held her undergarments and robe.

She dressed with her back to him. When she was done, she turned around and said, “Listo?”

“Sí,” Jennings said.

She walked out of the room. Jennings followed.

Jennings walked with her to the elevator. As they traveled to the basement, they did not speak.

Jennings saw Joaquín sitting in the white pickup. He pointed out the pickup to the girl. “Ah, sí. Gracias,” she said. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed Jennings on the cheek. “Siempre es interesante la vida,” she said. She walked away.

“Adios,” Jennings said after her.

He waved to Joaquín. Joaquín waved back.

Jennings was not sure if the wave was directed to him or to the girl.

Jennings rode the elevator to the penthouse, where his month’s hangover was sure to be hovering. He knew what he must do.

He walked past the bar and then left, down the hallway, past the girls’ rooms, to Fernando’s bedroom. Jennings moved toward the walk-in closet. On his way, above a credenza, he noticed a painting. For a moment, he stopped. It looked familiar, but Jennings did not think he had seen it before. In the painting, a secluded Mayan temple rose from a verdant barranca. Not one human figure inhabited the desolate painting. Only nature suffused the temple. Jennings wondered why the artist had chosen not to paint even a single person — neither Indian, nor tourist — on the steep steps of the temple. Maybe, Jennings decided, it had something to do with the temple being timeless.

Jennings moved into the walk-in closet. Underneath Fernando’s suits, next to his shoe

rack, sat a freestanding safe. Jennings knelt in front of it. He spun the safe's dial to zero and then began effecting the combination. 12-31-89. It was a combination he could not forget. The numbers represented December 31, 1989 — the evening Fernando had chosen to marry Daniella, the evening Jennings had been their best man. In the planning stages of the wedding, Fernando had said that date was a sign he could not ignore — how many New Years' Eves, he had rhetorically asked, fell on a Sunday, at the dawn of a new decade? Left one more turn to 31. Right to 89. There, Jennings had it. He took his hand carefully from the dial. He pulled down on the handle. He listened to the locks withdraw. Click. He opened the safe's door.

There were three to choose from. Two were black. One was silver. Jennings removed the largest of the black ones. He ejected the cartridge. It was full. He clipped it back into the stock. He stood up. He moved with the gun at his side. He did not look at the painting. He exited the bedroom. As he passed the bar, he glanced at the phone. He hesitated but he did not stop. He could not, for it was better not to think.

He walked onto the balcony. He pressed his thighs lightly against the balustrade and looked out over the populated valley. Far off, a vast bank of dark clouds tumbled over the ridgeline and began to descend the mountains' slopes.

He heard the games igniting in his head. His month's hangover would arrive with the clouds. But never again would he have to listen. He lifted the gun before him. He disengaged the safety. He advanced a bullet into the chamber. He raised the gun in an upward angle to his mouth and placed his lips around the barrel's end. He was so close. No more games. No more regrets. No more guilt. He rested his right forefinger on the trigger and felt tears stream from his eyes. Could it really be over? Was there

transcendence only in death? Or, had he just not given life a chance?

He shook his arm in futility and felt the barrel rattle against his teeth. “La vida es interesante.” Isn’t that what she had said?

Damn.

Jennings took the gun from his mouth, drew it far behind him in windup and hurled it into the oncoming storm.

His head throbbed. A raindrop glanced against the top of the balustrade.

He walked inside to wait by the phone. “The man who dies afraid does not die, for he cannot sleep.” Isn’t that what he had said? Perhaps there was time to find himself and sleep the sleep of the innocent.

## THE FIGHT

He waits for her in a dimly lit cafe. They had fought that morning, and fought hard, harder than usual, and, as is often the case with them, only a ritualistic reprieve, a nighttime repast, can, first, take them out of each other, and then, more importantly, put them back into each other. Though, after a fight, they go the remainder of the day without speaking to one another — or, for that matter, speaking to anyone — it is implicit that late that evening they will reconvene at the cafe of his choosing. The progression towards rapprochement will be as such: he will shower and shave before her; he will dress in a white broadcloth shirt, open to the third button from the top, flax linen pants, and well-worn harachi sandals; he will scent himself with the cologne she bought him for his last birthday; he will write only the time and place of their rendezvous on a plain eggshell piece of stationery and leave it on her pillow; and, without any recognition from either of them, he will walk out alone into the last remnants of that day's light and drive to the cafe, in their only car, an old Peugeot, to wait for her.

While he waits, he watches the lone, nearly exhausted candle flicker its dying breaths before him; he leans his head back and follows the candle's wayward light as it flinches across the ceiling, like a scared young middleweight challenger in the early rounds of a championship fight. He brings his head down from the ceiling and squints at his watch. Soon she will arrive — by what means or method he never inquires — gaily resplendent in a sheer silk georgette dress, scooped low on her cleavage, cleavage that agonizes him as much as it enamors him.

He calmly waits, his drawn-out scotch abating, the decanted bottle of Barolo wine almost oxidized enough for her arrival, for her all-too-discerning palate. She walks in, and what little light there is in the cafe races to suffuse her and only her. Her head is held high, aloft, regal. She is indifferent to the devotional stares from the few other diners who are still there, who mark her entrance with flagrant, wrenching turns of their necks, an entrance, he imagines, more dignified than a queen's on coronation day. The maitre d' and waiter are not in sight. She spots him. She moves to his table. She is stately. Her perfectly proportioned face betrays no emotion. It is as phlegmatic to him as it is to the loyal subjects she has just passed. She stands before her chair, her throne. She is now immobile. He waits, still seated, for her signet, for the seal he knows so well, for the sign of her one arched eyebrow, which will commend his choice of table and commence their truce and speed their recovery.

There, he has it. He stands up. He walks around her, and, as he does so, his hand brushes faintly against the whorl of skin on her elbow. He pulls back her chair. She is seated. He flutters the napkin onto her lap. Her dewy smell daubs him.

He returns to his seat. Still no word has passed between them. He waits for her to smell the cork, for her to nod slightly and beckon the wine. Even though he never drinks wine, he pours the wine with the care and expertise of a sommelier. She twirls it and puts her nose in the glass. She takes a deep sip. She chews the wine elaborately. Her lips pucker. She swallows and her eyes roll back in her head. She is pleased. This he knows. He is relieved. When her eyes come back, they seem more alight than before. She has the kind of eyes that were made to dance late at night in a dark cafe, the kind of eyes that transfix him, the kind of eyes that have always transfixed him.

He anticipates the belated arrival of the waiter with much eagerness. She opens her menu and scans its offerings. She does not take long. She closes the menu quietly and lays it down on the white linen tablecloth. She waits to order. The waiter takes a fraction too long. Only he knows she is perturbed. The waiter sidles up to the table. He had thought earlier that the waiter appeared tired, but perhaps he misjudged shyness for fatigue. The waiter forces himself to look at her, and only at her, while he stammers the specials, but he cannot hold her impenetrable gaze. He cannot retain his professional composure, the standoffish reserve that he has so long cultivated, that has kept him in this business for so many years, that has kept him alone. By the end of the recitation, the waiter's head has fallen so low that, between the frayed collar and the sheared demarcation of thinning hair, he sees the waiter's slovenly neck, a neck bristled with moles, dirt, and fuzz. It is only in her presence that he notices these human flaws. When the waiter is finished, she does not hesitate. She orders a tureen of steamed mussels, as her appetizer, and a small bowl of al dente linguine topped lightly with arribiate sauce. She refuses to pay homage to traditional food and wine pairings. He adores this about her. He orders vichyssoise to start, and then tenderloin broiled very rare. He also orders another scotch, this time no water or ice.

She does not like to talk until the food arrives, and, even then, the conversation, if there is conversation at all, is concise, pithy, a conversation that he will catalog and remember, that he will regularly use to fortify them together against old age. Gentle crow's-feet fan the corners of her eyes. They tease him. He looks away. Beyond, at the table in front of the large picture window, beneath the pleated valance, an elderly couple stands to leave. The old man turns and looks towards them, hoping to catch another



glimpse of the queen, even if only a glimpse from behind, a glimpse of sable mane cascading on bare shoulders. His wife pulls him back. She puts her arm in the crook of his and propels him to the door. They are gone. One other assemblage remains: a plump, contented couple drinking from demitasses, and their two equally plump children spooning spumoni.

The waiter delivers the appetizers and skulks away, abashed over his former timidity. She does not wait. She picks up a mussel with the thumb and forefinger of her right hand, and, with her left hand, she lifts the small fork. A globule of broth falls back into the tureen. She pierces the flesh of the mussel with the fork's tines, and unhinges it from its shell. Her mouth opens. Her teeth gleam white. They compete with her aureole for their portion of her theft of light. She chews the mussel slowly. Again her eyes seem to roll. He times his spoons of soup, so that he sees her eat each mussel. She slows down intermittently to tear the baguette and mop up the briny broth, and he adjusts accordingly. He sees every bite she takes, every undulation of her throat. He wants to say something, but he does not want to interrupt her. He drinks his scotch.

The waiter brings their main courses. The waiter lingers; the waiter wants to restore his injured manhood, to challenge his demotion, his servility. The waiter tops off her wine. He knows the waiter stands no chance at resuscitation. She gazes at the waiter unblinkingly, and, within this redoubtable gaze, again the waiter crumbles.

She is not pleased with her linguine, that much is evident. She pokes at it indifferently, apathetically. She lays her fork down. While her eyes drift from the table, he peers closely at her food. She is right. When it comes to food, she is always right. The onions are not glassy and the tomatoes lack the immoderate redness she demands.

She will not complain, but they will not return here. He asks if she would like some of his tenderloin. She brusquely says no. She turns away from him. The candle dies. He begins to panic. He cannot see her face. But then, politely, sensitively, as if they had just met, she adds no thank you. She turns back to him. He feels her foot ascend the inside of his leg. He snaps his fingers and calls out for the check. They are anew.

## WILL

Blake turned off his watch alarm before it sounded. He tried to let the morning sunlight revive him to a day that promised nothing but nuisance. Light streamed in through the shutter-less windows and spilled over the bare back and honey brown hair of his sleeping companion. Her long hair was wildly nested. He had serviced her many times during the night. He had enjoyed it then more than the memory of it now. She was a member at the country club where he taught, around his age, 26, far too young for her husband, a grandfatherly man who apparently couldn't satisfy her no matter advances in pharmacology.

Blake hoped she wouldn't wake. Not even beautiful women held beauty on post-coital mornings of this adulterous sort. He eased out of bed, and, still naked, quietly gathered his clothes into his overnight bag, where he was glad to see a fresh change awaited him. He padded down the stairs, then along a hallway, past three bedrooms, to a kitchen sparkling with chrome, glass, and oblique light reflecting off the pool. He felt nauseous, not from the immense whiteness that surrounded him, rather from the prospect of the day. Also, he supposed, from the night's proceedings. He had taught her husband tennis, private lessons each Wednesday night for upwards of a year now. Bob could even be deemed a friend, a good guy, but old — though old age, if Bob were to find out, would likely not mitigate the knowledge of being cuckolded.

Checking first to make sure the house alarm was off, Blake, with bag in hand, let himself out into the park-like backyard. Beyond the pool, the land rose to a level expanse

where a tennis court stood. Bob should have bought his wife a ball machine and insisted she play at home, not at the club. She was too sexy to be allowed out of the house. But then no one would see her, and maybe that was the whole point.

Blake was still naked, but within an estate this size, unseen to the outside world. He ambled towards the pool, stretching his back from side to side as he went. The sun felt good on his tired sex. He sensed it replenishing in the hard heat. Blake was a tennis pro, stereotypically charming and good looking, with mischievous eyes and long lashes, chiseled jaw and full lips, long muscles and above-average endowment.

He walked onto the pool decking, then across tiles already hot. He dropped his bag at the pool's edge and dove into the inviting water, exaggerating the length of his dive's submersion. The water was just cool enough to curb his nausea, just chlorinated enough to wash the sex from him. He wanted to stay in the pool and hide from the day, from dealing with Charles.

Charles was the absurdly wealthy father of Blake's favorite student, Will. He was also insane, something Blake considered a real travesty, inasmuch as Blake adored the 13-year-old kid, saw a lot of his younger self in Will. Like Will, Blake had been a top-20, nationally ranked junior before his high school attention shifted to girls and booze and his all-consuming commitment to tennis began to wane.

Blake surfaced, quickly replaced his breath and sank again beneath the water. At the bottom of the pool, Blake thought about the curious call Charles had placed to him the day before. Charles had said he had a plan afoot, one he would implement at the next lesson. It was best if Blake didn't know the specifics. Blake just needed to follow Charles' cue, keep his mouth shut, and play along. Then Charles hung up.

Blake knew that Charles was convinced the best and most expedient method to instill confidence within Will was to ride him until he toughened up. In Charles' crazy, misguided mind, the only reason Will had lost in the quarters of Clay Courts to a pathetic pusher, a hack without half Will's talent, was because Will didn't have sufficient confidence, hadn't suffered enough. Will lost that match not because of a lack of confidence but because of the gratuitous pressure Charles ironically imposed upon him. Blake had tried to tell Charles this weeks ago, but Charles had balked, threatened to find another coach if Blake didn't do what he was told. And Blake needed the money he earned from the three lessons he taught Will each week, since he refused to be the kept man of any mistress from the club. He maintained some integrity. Blake also liked having Will in his life.

Blake pushed slowly off from the bottom of the pool, concluding, as he floated to the surface, that there was no reasonable way to extricate himself from Charles' machinations, any ludicrous plans. It was better to be an influence, even an imperfect one, than a nonentity. Then again, for the sake of the kid, perhaps it wouldn't hurt to try to reason with Charles one more time, get him to ease off the crop a bit. Any attenuation would help.

Blake climbed out of the pool. He needed to get moving before she woke. He had neither the time, nor the inclination, for morning sex. He picked up his bag and hastened to the cabana, where he located a towel and dried. He put on deodorant, and attired himself in tennis togs. He rubbed moisturizer with sunscreen into his face, squeezed a dollop of gel into his hands, and brushed his blonde hair into place with his fingers. He felt much better now, though he was a little hungry. Before leaving the estate and heading

to the club, Blake snuck back into the kitchen and silently rummaged a couple of pop tarts from the walk-in pantry. He would eat these on his way to work. He blocked Charles and Will, and Bob, and the girl upstairs from his mind, and went to his car a free, if not carefree, man. He'd get through the day.

Blake pulled past the dark green windscreens concealing courts 1-4 and parked close to the tennis shop, a freestanding cottage apart from the antebellum clubhouse and columnar golf shop. He walked along a side path that wound through a bed of still sprinkler-wet summer impatiens, caladiums and portulaca. Across the flowers and the fringed border bushes of boxwood and burberry, he observed newly imported cars stop beneath the clubhouse's gabled portico and thick-chinned male guests in yellow or green slacks hand their keys to valets and their golf bags to bagboys and caddies. He wondered if any of these men had any idea what their wives did, or planned to do, while they were on the golf course or out of town on business. How often did wealth breed ignorance?

Inside the tennis shop, Fran, the white-haired lady who governed the merchandizing with senatorial seriousness — constantly refurbishing the shelves and racks with the latest Fila and Ellese clothing, Prince and Wilson rackets, Adidas and K-Swiss shoes — was busy pricing a box of Tournagrip and talking to a foursome of young second-wives about to play morning-league doubles. Blake said hello to the convocation with expected tennis pro bonhomie and felt more than one set of predatory eyes on his bare, hirsute legs — particularly Kay's, now that she was in possession of larger, post enhancement-surgery breasts. He stepped behind the counter to the pneumatic stringing machine.

Blake needed to string a couple of his own rackets — Wilson mid-sizes regularly

presented to him by the fun-drinking Wilson rep. Since Blake had been busy with summer lessons, leagues, camps, men's workout, junior development, and more than the occasional tryst, he hadn't strung in weeks and some of the strings in each of his many rackets were broken. He could borrow a demo, but if he were to break its strings, Fran would get irrationally peeved and see to it that his day was more miserable than it should have been, coercing paperwork, billing, on-court obligations and the stringing of the demo.

Nowadays, Blake strung his rackets with Prince ProBlend — a hybrid consisting of 15-guage mains and 16-guage crosses — known for its endurance, not for the exquisite but short-lived performance of the 17-guage VS Gut he had used less than two years earlier during his tournament days when he had bummed around the satellite tour, sadly having more success off the court with varying female ethnicities than on the court against fitter, harder-working opponents, guys not up all night drinking and screwing.

He clipped the old strings out of a racket and locked the frame in place on the press. He set the tension at 63 pounds — three pounds less than when he competed. He threaded the main string from a new packet through the rackethead's two central grommets until the string's two ends were of an equal length. One half he clamped, the other half he pulled. Only 17 mains remained before he would begin weaving the crosses.

As he knotted one side of the mains, Kay came up to the glass counter and leaned forward over it. Her breasts craned like the binoculars of an ornithologist straining to see a threatened species.

"Is it hard?" she asked.

"Very," Blake returned.

"Stringing?"

"Oh, that," Blake said, a guffaw resident in his voice. "No, not really. It's just a matter of sliding it through the hole and keeping it taut."

Blake couldn't help himself. His shtick was ingrained. Kay pretended to be shy and benighted. She stuttered, then said, "Can I buy some balls?"

"For the right price, you can buy anything," Blake answered and grinned. His eyelashes batted like a puppy caught in wrongdoing. He stepped from the stringing machine to the counter and handed Kay a can of Dunlop balls.

She took the can, their fingers touching in the trade, and said, "Put it on my account." She turned to join her playing companions who had already exited the shop. Blake saw Kay's young legs retreat, perfectly tanned from mornings on the court and afternoons by the pool. He returned to his racket, laughing to himself, because he knew the league provided balls.

As he strung, his prurient merriment subsided. He began to wonder how, if not for his womanizing, he might now be gearing up for the U.S. Open like some of his more devoted contemporaries, guys he had more talent than and had even beaten on occasion. Soon, his future began to flash before him — a journeyman and gigolo moving from club to club, teaching the same strokes over and over again, saying the same things—"racket back early," "bend your knees," "swing low to high." He saw lined up ahead of him the affairs with married women to the point where all women became one. His end would be the contraction of skin cancer, treatment, dissipation, loneliness.



\* \* \* \*

Blake decided to head down to the court early. He asked Fran to send Charles and Will to Court #9. He exited the shop. With a freshly strung racket balanced on top, Blake wheeled a grocery cart of balls along the pathway and down the hill to the last row of courts. As he did so, he viewed more successful men than himself putt sparkling white balls across the putting green's dazzling surface. He could hear the coital thunks when the balls found their marks and dropped out of sight.

Left of the putting green lay a busy driving range where everyone seemed to be in competition trying to outdistance everyone else. None, it seemed, finessed chips to the closer-up flags. A caged tractor traversed the far-off distance, gathering up balls for buckets. A ball pinged off the tractor's side. A silent cheer went up, one set of raised hands, a solitary jig.

Right of the putting green, upon a knoll's small plateau, stood the first tee, where what looked to be a father and son readied their round, taking their last practice swings, visualizing immaculate scores. When they finally commenced, Blake watched their tee-shots deposit on the narrow fairway below, the older man's ball bouncing into the rough and nearly draining into the flanking stream. The older man sighed relief, thanked God with the heel of his club. The son patted him on his stooped, osteoporotic back. They drove off in the cart, the son behind the wheel. There was a smudge of black on the Western skyline. For them, a cerulean day held, crisp as the first bite of an apple.

Charles and Will arrived, stepping onto Ct. 9. Charles also wore tennis clothes, something that always amazed and irritated Blake, since Charles didn't, and probably couldn't, play tennis. Blake said hello. Before responding, Charles, in dictatorial tones,

told Will to run two warm-up laps around all the courts. Blake hated Charles' intervention. After all, Blake was the coach.

"You grandpas aren't coming with me?" Will rejoined as he faked a stretch. Blake admired Will's resilient humor in the face of Charles' mistreatment. How long would it last?

"Get going little man," Blake said. "I wouldn't want to lap you on only two laps."

"Yeah, right," Will said as he darted off.

"So what's this plan?" Blake asked.

"I told you not to worry about it. Just go about your business," Charles said.

"Fine."

"Look, I've got a short meeting in the clubhouse in a few minutes. For the entire hour today, and I expect you not to give him more than one water break, I want you working on that backhand. That's the stroke that keeps breaking down under pressure. You can't have confidence if your technique is off. Maybe he needs a bigger backswing, so he doesn't get so tight, so he can just flow through it."

"I don't think that's it."

"Well then figure out what it is."

"Don't get pissed at me for saying this Charles, but maybe you should cut back a bit on the heckling? The kid cringes every time you yell at him."

"Just stick to the strokes, I'll take care of the rest. All the great ones get molded through discipline. Look at Richard Williams and Earl Woods, dads who are hard asses, like Generals. This kid's got too much potential to ruin it with New Age coddling. Just because you blew your chance doesn't mean Will has to."

Blake wanted to lay him out right then and there. It would only take one punch. He hated Charles. Charles was nothing but a short, fat fuck, vicariously feasting on the genetic advancement of his son. Will's athletic genes and good looks had obviously come from his mother. Blake restrained himself; he stared above and beyond Charles at Will's distant form.

"Hey," Charles said, "look at me. If you don't want to participate in molding a champion, I can always find someone who will. Just remember, it's not as if you're not getting paid a god-damn premium for your time."

Blake didn't say anything. He wasn't used to Charles saying words like god-damn.

"Did you hear me?" Charles said, inching closer beneath Blake's chin. Blake noticed that Charles' bald pate continued to widen. He laughed to himself.

"I did."

"And?"

"And nothing. You're the boss. This is your show."

"Good."

Charles nodded and patted Blake on the shoulder. Blake wanted to throttle him. Charles snickered and walked off. Will re-emerged on the court, the sun, sweat and smile so healthy on his young, handsome face. Blake felt acutely guilty. But what could he do? "Ready Will?" Blake said.

"Sure, let's do it."

"What do you want to work on?"

"How would I know? You're the coach. I'm just the kid."

"How about you becoming less of a smart-ass?"

"But I thought you were teaching me to be just like you."

"You're a funny kid. You know that?"

"I know."

"Let's hit a basket of backhands, get you to cock the left hand on that two-hander, really emphasize and squeeze the left hand, way more than the right, almost like a left-handed forehand. I know it sounds counter-intuitive, but trust me. We need to get the topspin heavier, so we can get you better depth. Your backhands are landing a little short."

"No problema," Will said.

Blake and Will went to opposite sides of the net, Will at one baseline, Blake just in front of his service line with the full grocery cart of balls. Blake fed balls and tried to distract himself from Charles and Charles' sadism by exhorting Will with a barrage of supportive instruction, because maybe, if Will won every match with superior technique, Charles might lay off: "Little steps. I want to hear those shoes squeak. Come on, shuffle all the way back to the middle after every shot. That's it, step across with your right foot, good. Get a full shoulder turn. Really hit up and through, all the way. Don't truncate the followthrough. There you go, keep it crosscourt, the net's lower there, more margin for error. Sweet. Get the backswing back early, cock the left wrist, squeeze that grip, I want you prepared so far in advance that you have to wait on the ball, take a nap, just like Agassi — grip, prepare and rip."

Blake couldn't help but notice how, with Charles not in view, Will didn't miss a shot. His backhand was fluid, picturesque. The ball landed perfectly and penetratingly every

time, just millimeters inside the baseline. Unfortunately, Will's weakness was not technical.

The hour lesson wound quickly down. Maybe Charles wouldn't return. What a reprieve that would be.

But, with just a couple of minutes left, Charles appeared like a taunt. He waddled closer to the court, alongside the front of the bleachers to the court's entrance lateral of the netpost. For the first time all lesson, Will began rushing his stokes, hitting them short or in the net. In no time, tension became evident on his face. His jaw clenched. He so wanted to impress his dad. He yelled, "God-dammit."

"Concentrate and keep your fucking mouth shut. You understand boy," Charles bellowed.

"Yes sir," Will said.

"You keep acting like a pussy and I'll keep treating you like one," Charles said.

So that was the plan, Blake thought, turn the heckling profane, cuss the kid out, embarrass him into perfection. Blake considered demanding that Charles leave until the lesson was finished. This wasn't right. After all, he was the coach, not Charles.

Suspense drowned out the sounds from other courts — the grunts, whacks of balls, and mutterings of scores. Blake saw one of the other pros — Colin, a decent Australian bloke with an above-average serve-and-volley game — push his basket down the outdoor corridor between the top two rows of courts. Blake wished Colin were Will's coach. He'd know what to do. The air around Blake smelled of felt and sawdust. The summer sun shimmered with heat waves upon the Har Tru. Blake exhaled deeply in resignation. He

chose not to say anything. Charles stormed onto the court, his face beet red, still cursing at Will: "Time has come to stop fucking around, boy, time to step up, act like a mother-fucking man." Then suddenly, Charles clutched his chest and staggered beside the net.

"Ah," he croaked, as if a tongue depressor were in his mouth. He swiveled once, then collapsed. His body was too soft and short to make much of a sound when it landed. Blake and Will converged on Charles' supine sprawl. They knelt down on opposite sides of him.

"What's happening?" Will yelped, a boy now, no longer a man-child. The poor kid was panic-stricken, his face white as ash.

"He's having a heart attack," Blake said, his voice still like a teacher's, perhaps a bit more like a priest's.

"Oh, my God," Will uttered. He placed his hands on one of his father's meaty forearms.

Blake was almost sorry he knew CPR. Poetic justice, he thought. "Will, look at me. You need to run up to the shop and have Fran call 911. If necessary, I'll do CPR."

"No," Charles rasped. "Blake, you go up there. Will knows CPR. He learned it in school."

Blake looked at Charles, then at Will.

"Yeah, but I don't think I remember," Will said. "Blake you got to do something. Please."

"Boy, do it now," Charles labored. His eyes fluttered and closed.

"It's your call," Blake said to Will.

"We better do what he says. You run up to the shop. I'll stay here," Will said.

"OK. Start in on the CPR. I'll call an ambulance."

Blake cantered to the tennis shop. He stuck his head inside the door and told Fran to call an ambulance. Charles Winthrop was having a heart attack on Ct. 9. "Oh my God," Fran said. Blake trotted back to the court. He said hello to a few members along his route. He saw a rabbit scamper out of the furthest flowerbed into the adjacent woods. A little girl blasted a drive almost 200 yards off the first tee.

Back on Ct. 9, Charles was resting against the net, his porcine legs astraddle the doubles line. Will ministered to him, held his hand. He began checking his pulse.

"The ambulance is on the way," Blake said.

"My boy saved my life," Charles said. "He can do anything. He's a god-damn hero." Blake found it strange that Charles' voice sounded so hale, though perhaps Charles was just celebrating his return from the dead.

"Don't talk, Dad. Save your energy."

The three of them sat there quietly while they awaited the paramedics. They could hear the sirens approaching. The paramedics took no time in getting Charles onto a gurney. They wheeled him off the court, onto the path, and up the hill toward the parking lot. Will kept hold of Charles' hand as they traveled. Blake walked abreast of them, but paused when Charles turned his head sideways, and, of all things, winked at him. Blake stopped dead in his tracks. Of course. How utterly obvious. A charade. Jesus, what a crazy, fucking bastard. Blake didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"I'll phone your mom, have her meet you at the hospital," Blake called out to Will.

"Thanks Blake," Will said. Already, he sounded much older.

Blake hurried back to the tennis shop. He dialed the Winthrop home. He thought to

spill the beans, do the right thing. On the third ring, Mrs. Winthrop answered. Her voice was distant and hollow. Blake paltered and gulped. What good would it do to tell her? He'd be discarded, of no use to Will. Furthermore, he'd be out almost 200 bucks a week. So, he caved, perhaps like a coward, but perhaps not. Maybe he was just being rational. He told her of Charles' apparent heart attack and Will's apparent heroism, and reassured her that Charles was all right. She hardly said a word. Blake had no idea if she was in on it or not. After he hung up, he filled Fran in about what had happened — the after not the before — still the fictional version.

"That boy's a hero," Fran said.

"Yeah. Is Steve around?"

Steve was the head pro, an older man whom Blake respected, the kind of man who didn't cheat on his wife — the kind of husband Blake was convinced he would become if he were ever to pull the trigger on such an irrevocable decision. He often sought Steve's nonjudgmental counsel, even if he did not always heed it.

"No," Fran answered. "He's at ClubCorp meetings all day."

"Okay."

"Oh, your 11 a.m., Larry Feldman, cancelled."

Blake went to sit in the small office he shared with Colin and Sally, the affirmative action female on the staff. He was glad they were both on court, and he was left alone. But he was disappointed Larry Feldman had cancelled. Larry was a good player, one of the better ones at the club, a 5.0; their lessons were usually spirited — Blake was able to get in a workout, even rip a few winners. More importantly, Blake wanted to ask Larry something. Larry was even richer than Charles, served on even more hallowed boards.



And Larry adored Blake, was mesmerized by Blake's game — Blake's monumental serve, his touch around the net, his colossal forehand. Blake was going to ask Larry to sponsor him on the tour. He wanted one more shot. This time, he was going to work, give it his all, not take his talent for granted. He was only 26, in his prime. Agassi and Sampras had eclipsed 30 and they were still going strong. All Blake needed was a fitness regimen and one more chance. Just one more. Hell, he'd made the top 400 in the world three years ago without even trying.

He laced up his running shoes. He was going for a jog, time to run the cart path. No more procrastinating. He'd been promising himself all summer at the outset of every week that this was the week he would start. But the heat, and his busy schedule, had kept him from it. He took the Walkman from his desk drawer, rewound the Great White tape.

As he was finishing his few minutes of stretching, just before he was to initiate his run, make his comeback, Kay entered the shop. She looked at his legs then at him.

"Going running?"

"Yup."

"Good. Why don't you join me at the pool afterwards so you can take a dip and cool off? I'll buy you lunch."

"Maybe."

"Up to you."

"I mean, I might have a lesson."

"Whatever. If you're free, I'm down there. No big deal."

"Okay, thanks."

"Bye for now," she said and walked out. Her legs looked even tanner, a sheen of

perspiration on them, heaviest in the declivity where her hamstrings met her calves.

Blake started slow, a skating gait of sorts to loosen up. He moved past courts 9-12, then between the driving range and sylvan inception on his left and the flowerbed and putting green on his right. He veered behind the putting green, receiving a few waves as he went, future fans, he felt. He picked up a little speed, started actually to jog and kick out once he was clear of the first tee's artery and upon the cart path dividing the 10<sup>th</sup> hole from the 18<sup>th</sup>. He had chosen to run on the back nine rather than the front nine, for the fairways there were broader, his chances of being hit more remote, though perhaps that's what he deserved, what with his participation in Charles' perfidy. The heart attack had been staged, nothing but a bizarre, sick set-up to inculcate confidence in the kid. And Blake had done nothing to protect him. Blake was glad the run would clear his head. Great White's *Save Your Love* began to play, spurring him faster.

It was another warm day, in an endless succession of warm summer days. Beyond 85 degrees already before noon. Blake was grateful for the heat. It intensified his sweat, and the sweat validated his effort. If he could put in three miles every day, include some on-court wind sprints, some jump-ropes, sit-ups, pushups, he'd be in playing shape in no time. It was a matter of will — a pun he caught as soon as he thought it, but one whose significance he tried to push from his mind, suppress with his physicality. He concentrated on the scenery, scanned the stream, appraised the bird life: a family of mallards — mother and father, a line of ducklings — peaceful, predetermined. Beyond this family, on the skyline, a black smudge — perhaps the same black smudge from earlier — diffused, fanning into fading smoke tails as if from a dying campfire. The run was going well. All was good. The view was beautiful. Then, out of nowhere, a stitch

besieged Blake's side like a thunderbolt. He tried to breathe through it, but it did not abate. The pain was excruciating, unrelenting. How could he have let himself go like this, descend to this inferior condition? At the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> hole, the stream emptied into a small pond. Blake had intended to cross its weir, climb the ensuing ridge, ford the road to the 12<sup>th</sup> fairway. The pain continued to increase. It pierced and hammered away. Was he not going to finish his run, conclude even half the back nine?

His stitch screamed and his breath labored. Only 10 minutes into his run, he ached. Badly. He had no choice — or so a voice told him — but to pull up well short of his goal. The weir lay before him like a rubicon he had dared not venture. He stopped his music.

A young boy, younger than Will, fished with a cane pole and a bobber amongst the hyacinths and bulrushes. The boy tried to hide when he saw Blake. He was obviously not a member's child. Blake ignored him, left the pond, walked back the way he had come, limping at first to still the pain. Stray golf balls held his gaze. Bolls from cottonwoods fell around him like snow.

Prior to the clubhouse, at the base of the hill upon which the rich structure perched, rested the pool. Blake thought to walk past it, return straight to the tennis shop, but he did not. He emerged into its gilded realm. He strolled towards Kay. She reclined on a chaise-lounge reading a fashion magazine. Her legs were bent upwards, shiny with oil and invitation.

## WORRY

Stewart stood at the edge of the brick terrace, in the morning's indecision, trying to determine what the day's weather held. In front of him ran a stretch of grass sward, an esplanade machete clipped by the innumerable Guatemalan workers who canvassed the hotel's grounds behind a protective railing above a cobblestone street that wended along Panajachel's littoral. Stewart looked beyond this vendor-lined street at Lake Atitlan. The lake was still and glossy, like liquid in a saucer. He thought he could see the three volcanoes that towered above the far-off bank somehow reflected in tableaux upon the lake's mirrored surface. Above the slate-grey water and limned volcanoes, blue sky seamed through sporadic cirrus clouds, prophesying a good day.

With a traveler's optimism, Stewart concluded that the weather would remain tranquil — surely conducive to a day-trip across the lake to the Mayan village of Santiago — though he was aware from the guidebooks that the highland's weather could be capricious in the rainy season. He had read about the *xochomils*, the heavy winds, that could crop up unawares, and about the *chubascos* that could also roil the lake and make travel in a *plancha* more than hazardous. But, he calculated, if a storm were to hit, it would not be in the next couple of hours, and, by that time, they would have achieved the lake's one-hour crossing. They would be secure on Santiago's *terra firma*, where they could wait out any inclement weather, any transitory tempests endemic to this exotic place.

The plural counterpart of the "they" to whom Stewart referred was his towheaded girlfriend, Kelly. Ordinarily, Stewart would have given no consideration to the weather.

He would not have been cautious. But this girl was a keeper, perhaps the first in his 26 years, and he did not want to endanger her.

She was not only beautiful — long-legged and emerald-eyed — but she was also, and for Stewart this was unique, challenging, a competitive equal. She gave as good as she got, and she did so with élan, in cards, in word games, in drinking, even in the same sports Stewart liked: running, tennis and golf. He liked her very much, especially on this ebbing morning, after a night which had found them drinking Bordeaux wine in a candle-lit French bistro — of all incongruous places to exist in Pana — where, for almost no money, they had feasted on delicious and authentic goat-cheese salad and caprise salad, camembert with cranberry chutney, hot baguettes with fresh butter, pork medallions and champignons, lamb chops and risotto, flan and, finally, the piece de resistance, coconut mousse topped with blueberries. They had shared these courses, feeding each other like honeymooners and not the boyfriend-girlfriend couple they were on a summer jaunt from graduate school. They had even, for the first time, at length, and without stinting on the kinds of graphic sexual details and intimacies that usually gave way to seething jealousy, talked about former lovers. They had done so without enmity, probably because, in each other, they had found something more than sex's desultory slaking. It also helped that he was her best, her orgasms previously exiguous, or so she said.

Stewart started to turn around, to see through the open glass door behind him if Kelly had emerged from her post-breakfast shower, back into the terra-cotta-tiled room, but he was summoned by a loud voice from the street below — "Señor, porfa, porfa, un momento." Stewart moved across the grass, to the railing, in order to locate the source that called out to him.

Stewart was not a rude man. He had read much of the post-colonial canon: Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Miguel Angel Asturias. Below Stewart, a short, barrel-chested Mayan man, outfitted in American clothes and cheap blue-tinted shades, requested his attention, implored it really. And being the sucker that he was, refusing to be culturally insensitive, Stewart gave him his hearing, listened to his pitch, or tried to, as Stewart's Spanish was viable only for ordering food, buying handicrafts, and painstakingly translating grad. school language exams with the help of a large dictionary. In a mingling of Spanish and English, the man seemed to be offering Stewart a ride on a very fast boat to any of the towns on the lake, and at a very cheap price. As the man spoke, a crowd of other captains, with similar offers, converged like scavengers at a kill. Stewart made sure to focus his light gringo eyes on the man who had spoken first.

Stewart asked him how much he would charge for passage to Santiago, there and back, with a two-, maybe three-, hour interval for lunch and sightseeing and shopping. The man said 320 quetzales, which, with the almost 8 to 1 exchange rate, worked out to about 40 dollars, so \$20 each, not a bad price, but not nearly as "very good a price" as the man insisted. Stewart told the man to hold on a minute — "Un momento por favor, yo digo con mi novia." The other men, in admission of defeat, disbanded forlornly but respectfully, while the victor, Stewart and Kelly's potential captain, leaned jauntily against a light pole and began picking his nails with a penknife.

Stewart went back inside to discuss the day's projection with Kelly. He could have haggled with the man, gotten the price reduced by a few bucks, but even though Stewart wasn't wealthy — a grad. assistant with a divorced parent's occasional subsidy — he figured the native economy needed the overcharged money more than he did, especially

as tourism was down since the recent U.S. State Department Warning about the escalating violence in and around the barrios of Guatemala City. *Proceed with Caution*, the agency advised.

This caution was in the back of Stewart's mind when he broached the day's plan with Kelly. At breakfast, over Spanish omelets, refried beans, tortillas, coffee and papaya juice, they had talked about heading across to Santiago if they didn't get too late a start to the day, and if they did, they'd stay in Pana and shop on the main drag, maybe check out the nature reserve by the Hotel Atitlan, take a long lunch on some bougainvillea-filled patio, followed by a siesta and cuddling, then coffee and pastries, and finally dinner at another treasure-find restaurant. Stewart checked his watch. It was already 11. Maybe too late to go to Santiago. Plus, what did he really know about the guy outside, the condition of his boat, the afternoon's weather — mornings were the time to travel the lake, or so the guidebook recommended.

Inside the comfortably appointed room, Stewart found Kelly sprawled on the king-size bed, finishing Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*, a book Stewart had recommended to her.

"It's good, isn't it?" Stewart queried.

"Hold on, I'm on the last page."

Kelly was bundled in two towels, one around her torso, the other twisted like a turban above her head — drying her blonde tresses. Stuart sat patiently at the foot of the four-post bed and placed his hand gently around her ankle. Considering her body's hard athleticism, the softness of her skin amazed him. Nowhere was it ever coarse or stubbly — not on her ankles, not even atop her mons. He felt a tumescent twitching. He desired

to make love to her again, as they did last night, slowly, timelessly, swelling together in lubricity, in heat profound, and then, at the penultimate stage, when neither could contain it much longer, he would wildly dither her clitoris with his thumb, and, with his other thumb, and forefinger, violently squeeze a puce nipple grown high and hard as a shoot. But after six months of dating, and before that, 12 months of courtship, Stewart knew that sex for Kelly was vespertine, as mornings were reserved for edifying activities, like exercise and study, or in the day's case, exploring. Kelly was a girl who bounded out of bed, who needed to eat within 15 minutes of waking. She inspired him. She didn't let him sulk.

"Yeah, it's good," she said. "But I'm just not sure about the ending, it's kind of *deus ex machina*; I mean all of a sudden you've got the mother, with hardly any previous allusion to her, justifying all his dissolution. Seems to me, the denouement comes out of nowhere. You can definitely tell the author was searching for a way to end the book."

"Bullshit. Come on. If the character doesn't know, and if it's his story, how's the reader supposed to know? Plus, the scene with the bread. It's just pitch perfect, fucking genius if you want to know the truth."

"Maybe. I'm not sure, though. I need to think about it."

"All right, think on. We'll discuss it later."

"We will, will we?"

"Yes, in the meantime, we have to decide what we're doing today."

"OK, give me a plan. I'm ready for anything."

"Well, there's a guy outside who says he'll take us to Santiago, wait for us and bring us back for like 40 bucks."



"Kind of steep, isn't it?"

"A little. But you're talking about two hours of diesel and three hours of waiting."

"All right. Fine. But what about the waiter from breakfast who said he had a friend who would take us, said it would be safe?"

"What, are you scared?"

"No, of course not. But we don't know anything about the guy outside, do we?"

"No, but would we know anything about the friend of a waiter who we just met?"

"I suppose not."

"Look, if you want, we can wait till tomorrow. It's kind of late already. And we can research the boats this afternoon, ask one of those tour guide agencies we saw."

"No, it'll be fun, an adventure."

"You sure?"

"Bring it," she said, throwing off both towels and jumping on the bed, her symmetry confirmation of some cosmic design. Stewart sometimes wondered if indeed Kelly hadn't been meant to be a guy, for in action, not features, she made tomboys look like sorority girls.

While Kelly changed into faded denims and a worn cotton baseball shirt, Stewart returned outside to make final arrangements with the captain.

With the captain in front, the trio walked along the lakeshore cobblestone toward the harbor in the near distance, actually one long dock with many dories paintered to it. As they walked, they passed men wheeling ice-cream carts, beggars with stumps, thatched palapas with chalkboard menus out front advertising 20 Q lunch specials, Mayan women

and their children selling tablecloths and shell and bead necklaces, and an amphitheater and a beach where people washed and women grilled maize, served with salt and lime, no butter.

It seemed to Stewart that most of the people looked depressed, and with reason, for there was a paucity of gringos about. There had been more yesterday, shopping and eating along Calle Santander, but here, beside the water, and at the wharf, Stewart saw only a handful, a few college-aged Germans, Brits and Scandinavians, and an obese American couple with three ugly kids in tow. Stewart wasn't sure whether to take the gringo absence as presentiment. But he thought more of it when, just prior to turning onto the dock, an ancient hippie, with a Jesus beard and an iguana perched on his shoulders, bicycled toward Stewart, slewing casually past Stewart at the last second before collision, winking in congratulations or monition of something: Stewart's implicit peregrinations, Stewart's beautiful girlfriend, or something more mystical, something perhaps premonitory.

Kelly was ahead of Stewart, already on the dock. She didn't see the man. And it was too late to make her aware of him. Some things you have to experience by yourself, Stewart thought, even if you might be in love.

Most of the boats along the dock were similar: outboard dories and skiffs under 20 feet — like cruiseship tenders — the shells and canopies the same fiberglass material as the bench seats. And, reassuringly to Stewart, the one the captain pointed to was of that ilk, though the 160 hp motor looked bigger than some of the others, which made it better, and the deal he had assented to not so bad after all.

As they followed their fast-striding captain to his boat, Stewart found it odd that he

didn't talk to the other maritime men milling on or about the boats, smoking Rubios, chatting the day away. But Stewart decided to attribute the captain's haste to a thought process which must have reasoned, the sooner we get started, the sooner we return, the sooner I get paid, the sooner I eat and drink well.

Stewart offered Kelly a hand into the boat, but, laughing, she jumped in of her own accord. Then Stewart watched the captain unseat the stern painter; and, hoping it would be an ingratiating gesture, Stewart unhinged the thicker bow halyard. The captain nodded in appreciation. Stewart nodded back, as men do, looped the halyard around his flexed arm, dropped it neatly into the bow, beside the booted forecastle, and climbed into the keel next to his woman.

The engine started without a chug, and being that the boat was at the end of the anchorage roadstead, and the captain didn't have to maneuver around other boats, they were underway immediately.

Santiago the next stop.

Stewart and Kelly sat on the front bench, as that was the only way to see both ahead and to the side. The bow rode high out of the water, so much so that the captain, who hand-tillered the outboard, had to, from time to time, stand and lean out from the transom in order to get his bearings and avoid other boats that might be fore.

Behind them, in the hillside above the fading city of Pana, Kelly discerned a waterfall sluicing luminously, its spray iridescent like a rainbow. The perfect shower, if ever there was one, Stewart thought, like a print ad for some soap or shampoo product.

"I'm glad we came today," Kelly said, placing her hand in the crook of Stewart's arm.

"Me too," Stewart said. "I'm just a little worried about the weather."

"Suck it up. A little rain won't hurt this boat, nor your delicate skin."

"My worry was not about myself."

"Ah, that's sweet," Kelly said, squeezing him tighter.

The blue seams that earlier promised to disperse the clouds had failed in their task.

Now, the clouds —nimbostratus, Stewart feared — were heavy and beginning to enshroud the mossy green cliffs that circumscribed the lake's entirety: mountains, headlands and promontories almost perpendicularly steep. Occasionally, where the steepness mellowed ever so slightly, terrace farming lined the slope like a bowling alley turned on its side. Between one such plot and a small bay starboard of the boat, Stewart spotted a sleepy hamlet.

"Que es el nombre de la ciudad pequeña?" he shouted aft to the captain, trying to be friendly, making small talk.

"Allí está Santa Cruz, mi amigo," the captain said slowly, without irritation.

"Bonita," Stewart said.

"Sí, muy bonita." the man said.

Stewart and Kelly turned to their guidebook and indexed the town, about which not much was written. The boat continued forward, making good time despite the dark water's increased chop. And the boat seemed steady, well ballasted against the rising swells.

Stewart really wasn't worried, but when the chipi-chipi, the misting rain, began, he couldn't help but ask Kelly: "So, if this boat founders, do you think you could swim to shore?"

They were near the middle of the lake, a few miles from land.

"Of course. You?"

"Sure, it's just that you'd probably get tired, and I'd have to be chivalrous, be your hero, and drag you to shore, unless you panicked and capsized the both of us."

"No chance."

"Of what? You panicking or me having to drag you to shore?"

"Both."

"God, you're a cocky bitch."

"Yup. That's why you dig me."

"Sometimes."

"Aw, is someone's masculinity threatened?"

"A little."

"Here, let mama give you a kiss."

They both smiled. They kissed tenderly, as the oblique drizzle flecked into the boat between the gunwale and the canopy and wet their cheeks.

By the time they were close to the opposite shore the chipi-chipi had stopped. The view was clear, and, thanks to the boat's canopy, they were relatively dry. But something bothered Stewart.

He was puzzled by the absence of a town.

He rose from his seat and peered forward. Although he was able to make out a few spectacular vacation homes built into the granite cliffs and some fisherman below casting nets from traditional hollowed-out canoes, Santiago was nowhere in view. His imagination accelerated. Maybe the captain was taking them to a drop-off point where his armed, masked, brigand comrades lay in ambush, waiting to spirit he and Kelly away to a

mountain hideout, in the cellar of which they would languish and be constantly tortured until the ransom was paid. Kelly was too beautiful for such treatment. Her rape would be brutal, more barbaric than all others. Perhaps the rapists would videotape it. Perhaps they would ablate Stewart's pizzle and stick it in Kelly's mouth.

"Dónde está Santiago?" Stewart called back to the captain slowly, syllabically, not wanting to appear frightened.

"Derecha, detrás las montañas está un golfo y el Santiago."

Stewart squinted. He saw nothing. But then his eye chanced on a slight crease in the land — the aperture to what surely would be the bay on which Santiago was situated. He sat back down, relieved. They wouldn't become extinct like the Atitlán Grebe.

Stewart was happy. And he was now hungry. He looked forward to a good lunch and a couple of Gallos.

"You getting peckish?" he asked Kelly.

"No, not yet. You?"

"A little bit."

"We can eat first and then walk around if you want."

"No, let's walk around first and then eat. It'll taste better that way."

Kelly opened the guidebook to Santiago's brief dining section. The restaurant Bambú scored the best review. A Spanish couple with a penchant for gardening had opened a bed and breakfast on the shore below the town, where they tended ecologically diverse gardens, grew their own vegetables, raised chickens, slaughtered cows, all of which they cooked for wealthy gringo patrons willing to splurge — four \$ signs, so maybe 10 bucks each for a three-course lunch.

"Let's eat at Bambú," Stewart said conclusively, like a captain of industry.

"You buying?" Kelly chided.

"My credit card is."

They pulled through the channel, and there, straight ahead, in primitive resplendence rose the pastoral town of Santiago, its shacks, shanties and buildings pastel colored. The town resided vertically on the swaybacked foothills between Volcán Tolimán on the left and Volcán San Pedro on the right. And behind Volcán Tolimán, Stewart could see the highest of the lake's three volcanoes, Volcán Atitlán, which crested at more than 11,500 feet. Its fumarole was submerged in mist, and much of its sides were obscured by cloud forests, yet in the bay, and in Santiago, the sky was denuded and clear of torrent, and maybe, if they were lucky, the downpour would hold off for the entire duration of their tour and return trip.

"You sure there aren't gorillas around here?" Kelly asked, looking up at the mountainscape.

"Literal or figurative ones?"

"Yeah, I know I'm sitting next to the silverback, but isn't this the same coffee-growing climate as, say, Kenya?"

"It is. Why, you want to start a gorilla sanctuary?"

"Maybe."

"Look, over there on the left, on the lakeshore, there's a sign for Bambú."

"Nice."

A large stilted verandah and chimnied clubhouse peeked up above the bank's reeds, and beyond this A-framed social area, a parterre of cacti, grasses, bright flowers and

vegetables embowered the peach bungalows. It would be a prime place to take a lunch.

The guidebook was right Stewart enthused, "That's our lunch destination for sure. Done."

"Works for me," Kelly averred.

In front of the boat, sandwiched between corn and lettuce fields, was the town's jetty: two docks, rickety and in need of repair. Stewart, wanting to help out again, climbed onto the booted bow and picked up the halyard as the captain scudded perfectly alongside the nearest dock. Stewart tossed the halyard to a young boy who caught it and, almost in the same instant, secured it around a piling with some sailor's knot. Stewart hopped onto the dock, felt it shudder beneath his feet and hold. He was followed by a bounding Kelly. "Look, a trampoline," she said, bouncing the dock, quivering its length like a fold of flesh. Stewart shook his head at her and gave the boy a one-quetzal coin. Then he turned to face the captain.

"Regresaremos in dos horas. Bueno?" Stuart said.

"Sí, bueno, pero mi dinero," the captain said expectantly.

Stewart looked at Kelly, a little unsure what to do. If he gave him the 300 Q now, what was to prevent the captain from bolting and stranding them there?

"What's the problem?" Kelly asked, seeing the quizzical look on Stewart's face.

"He wants his money."

"Are you going to give it to him?" Kelly asked, testing Stewart's manliness.

Stewart ignored her and said to the captain, "Cien ahora, el cambio, doscientos, cuando nosotros regressamos a Pana. Sí?"

"Bueno," the man said accordingly.

Good, it was settled. Stewart handed him a third of the money. The rest the captain



would get when they made it safely back across the lake. Stewart guessed he probably needed some money for lunch and gas.

"Lista, mi amiga," Stewart said to Kelly, pleased with his Espanol bargaining skills, pleased to be a man.

"Yup, but we need to find a bank. I'm low on Qs."

"Me too."

As they walked up the dock, a sullen teenage boy accosted them, insisting that he stitch their names onto a pen sheath.

"No gracias. No gracias. No gracias," Stewart said, over and over again, his voice beginning not to conceal his pique.

He probably would have had to give in to the pain-in-the-ass kid had a man not walked up and shooed the kid away. The man was a Mayan, taller than most, almost Stewart's height, almost six foot. He wore native dress: sandals, gathered white-and-purple-striped shorts, a matching embroidered jacket and a sash cinched around his waist. He looked like a toreador. He looked proud.

"I your guide, un professional," the man said, holding up a laminated card that dangled from a silver chain around his bull neck. He wanted Stewart to read the card, to acknowledge his legitimacy.

"No gracias," Stewart said.

But the man persisted and walked with them, chatting gaily, even beginning to describe areas of the town: where the shopping was, where the church was, where the plaza was, where the good restaurants were.

Somehow, though the man's English was limited, he was completely comprehensible:

he chose only Spanish words that were similar to English, his gestures were as clear as a mime's, and whenever his message began to get convoluted, he had the right English word to save him. It was as if he were proof that all languages sprung from the same source. Stewart stopped and looked at Kelly. She shrugged.

The man, who seemed to think that this gig with Stewart and Kelly was preordained, said: "Es bueno. Es safer."

"OK, lead on señor," Stewart said, secretly pleased that this man would protect them from the town's riffraff.

"Compra ahora or más tarde?" the man asked as he turned them up a dusty commercial street.

"Primero, necesitamos un banco por favor."

"Sí, bueno," the man said, motioning them forward along the steep street.

As Stewart trudged up the street, peering into, but not entering, stall after stall of tipicos — masks, blankets, camisas, jewelry, paintings — pinpointing the stalls that looked promising, shaking his head at each proprietor's offer of adelante, he recalled that he had not set a price with the guide for his services, nor had he asked him his name. Stewart knew he was asking to be gouged. He was asking for trouble. He decided that, at the bank, he would send Kelly in to change their money while he talked to the man and settled on a fee.

At the top of the street, they turned left onto a narrower street and entered a chaotic realm of scents and sights. Here, indigenous inhabitants milled about oblivious to white incursion; here, they ate and slept, bought and sold, amongst only their own. They paid Stewart no heed, asked him for nothing. Women in colorful huipiles and halos stared

through him. They had the look of the perpetually hungry. Stewart felt uncomfortable, terrifically foreign. He felt nonexistent. He moved toward Kelly and took her hand. She looked at him and smiled. Contemptuously, he thought, for she let go of his hand far too soon. He fell back, dismayed by his show of weakness, his need for mothering. He stayed in the rear of their defile while Kelly stayed nearer the guide. It was the guide who forged a path for them.

Stewart smelled dirt, urine, and meat emanate from the tumult. He also smelled his contrasting cologne. This contrast disturbed him. He wanted to leave it, as well as this realm, and return to the street with the stalls for tourists. His urge was to run forward and catch up with Kelly and the guide. But he denied it, despite the lack of air his lungs found, for he knew he would have to recover his pride soon, or the day would be lost to him and thus them. Nevertheless, he was not sure how to effectuate this recovery. Breathing did not help. He wished it would rain.

Finally, Stewart was discharged from the morass, onto a broad, open street. He gulped deeply for air, like a skindiver who has stayed down too long. When he looked up, he saw Kelly and the guide far ahead on his right, beneath a building's portico. He was glad Kelly had not heard his inveigled intake, nor seen his wracked bends. He steadied himself, and when Kelly turned to find him, he sashayed onto the sidewalk that ran along the plaza and strode toward them with a grin on his face, nonchalantly checking out the view on his way.

The plaza was a pretty place, centered by a small square park. Within the park, the feathery bracts of tall ceiba trees shimmered from the morning rain and dappled the grass below. Kelly and the guide stood to the side of the park before a bank's entrance. On

either side of them, two stone-faced, uniformed men wielded big guns and guarded a glass door. Stewart attributed his earlier fear to a trice of claustrophobia. Nothing more.

"Nice of you to join us," Kelly said.

"Sorry," Stewart said, "just taking it all in."

"You coming in with me?"

"No, I'll stay out here. But if you don't mind, change a couple hundred for me. OK?"

"You give me the dollars. I'll get you the Q."

"I'm afraid my dollars are back at the hotel. I just brought enough Q for the boat, and to buy you a romantic lunch if credit cards weren't taken."

"Likely story. Two hundred?"

"Please. Did I mention that you're the most beautiful girl in all the Americas?"

"You know you still have to pay me back."

"I know."

Kelly knocked on the glass door. Another guard, an interior one with an even bigger gun, opened it and asked for her passport. She gave it to him. He inspected it, looked at her, then ushered her forward with the tip of the gun's barrel. Stewart was left alone with the guide.

Stewart initiated small talk, mentioned that he thought the park a pretty one. The guide agreed. Stewart asked if the guide were married. The guide shook his head, and said, "No, I be pobre. In Santiago, there be much poverty, y mi familia es grande, cinco hermanos y dos hermanas, y mi padre está enferma, no puede trabajar. I compro todo para mi familia. Y una esposa cuesta mucho." After he spoke, the guide gestured one hand in a money motion, his thumb flickering across his index and middle fingers.

Stewart wasn't sure if he was being played. Nonetheless, he thought he should try to lighten the conversation's serious tone: "Sí, mujeres — esposas, novias, hermanas, madres, niñas — todo cuestan mucho. Muy difícil para un hombre in este mundo."

The man smiled. Stewart had his opening to ask about the man's fee.

"Cuanto cuesta para su ayudar hoy?"

"No mucho," the man said.

"Sí, pero yo soy un estudiante? Yo necessito la cuenta aprender."

"Tiene dinero?"

"Un poco."

"Bueno," the man said. Then the man said, "Un momento por favor," and walked across the street to the park where he began talking to another local, this one also tall but dressed not in traditional attire — rather, nattily, in jeans, a dirty poncho and lizard-skin cowboy boots. He had a suspicious air about him. His skin looked oily. Stewart didn't like the way things were shaping up. And he wasn't sure what to make of the guide's refusal to give him a set rate. Either their guide was laid back and unconcerned, and would be appreciative of any money he earned, or he was going to try and screw the gringos in the end. Stewart wondered if he should tell Kelly of his foreboding. But he was loath not to worry her. Also, he did not want to reveal his own worry. Not any further.

Gray stratus clouds began to descend the mountains and settle in above the town like a ceiling. Stewart was sorry he and Kelly had journeyed to Santiago on this day.

Kelly emerged from the bank. Both her fists held money. As she walked to Stewart, she extended one of the sheaves to him. Stewart hurried to her, met her halfway.

"What are you doing?" he said, quickly grabbing the sheaf she held out to him and wadding it into his pocket.

"What are you talking about?" she said.

"Think about it. Gringos waving around money. Might attract attention."

"I don't believe I was waving it around," she said, adding "You tell me how else I was supposed to hand it to you?"

"Surreptitiously maybe."

"Jesus, you do worry too much," she said, her tone truculent, incipient of a fight.

Stewart noticed the guide beside him. He did not know how long he'd been standing there, whether he had observed the transfer, seen the money.

Stewart turned his back to Kelly and faced the guide. Stewart did not want to pursue the argument further.

"Ahora," Stewart said to the guide.

"La iglesia, muy importante," the guide said, pointing to an apse's cupola that could be seen across the park.

"Bueno," Stewart said, not wanting to look at Kelly, detect her disappointment over his excessive wariness.

The guide walked across the street, through the park, and up outdoor stairs to the church's guano-stained promenade. Stewart moved alongside him, still cold-shouldered to Kelly.

"Primero, donde the priest muerto, killed por el gobierno" the guide said, taking them to the right of the church, up another flight of stairs, then along a long cloister.

Stewart felt Kelly's presence behind him.

The trio passed a sacristy, then entered a room, maybe a vestry. It was gloomy and, apart from an *escritoire*, bare. It smelled of death. Dust motes floated, as if spectral witnesses to past barbarism. The guide pointed to a stain on the white wall. It was incarnadine, but Stewart could tell it had once been crimson. The guide said, "Blood of priest, cuando shot." He gestured them toward a paragraph of handpainted lettering on the far wall, which described the assassination, in that room, of the Oklahoma-born priest Father Stanley Francis Rother, by a fascist, government-sponsored death squad. The priest had openly supported the Indian cause, demanded accountability for the thousands who disappeared and had called for an end to the army occupation of Santiago. Stewart thought he could still smell the cordite from the army's spray of bullets on that day, July of 1981.

So long as the bananas and the coffee weren't nationalized, Stewart thought. Fucking CIA.

They exited the room quickly, and retraced their steps to the main church. Still, he did not talk to Kelly. And she did not talk to him. Why should he commence conversation, rapprochement?

Inside the nave, Stewart saw that the church was undergoing extensive renovations. On both sides of the central worshipping area, wooden scaffolding ran the lengths of the walls — axed saplings precariously holding up planks upon which men worked with trowels below stained-glass radiance. The guide led them forward, down the central aisle, and then upon the pulpit. To the right of the pulpit, Mayan women, five rows deep, kneeled below a white, crucified, blue-eyed Jesus. The women genuflected in unison. On the left of the pulpit, an array of sick people, brown as well, lay on mats listening to an

intermediary — a witch-doctor-looking man — who made monetary donations on their behalf through a slit in Christ's glass sepulcher. Stewart could make out Christ's prostrate, papier-mache form within. He thought Christ looked like a big fish, the coffin an aquarium.

"You should take a picture of this abomination," Stewart whispered to Kelly, who he now noticed stood beside him.

"That would be inappropriate," Kelly answered.

"They won't care," Stewart said.

"I would," Kelly said.

"You're an atheist for crying out loud."

"Agnostic."

As they exited the church, the guide pointed to a collection plate. Stewart shook his head. But Kelly stopped, removed a bundle of money from her purse and fluttered more than one bill onto it. God, she was unilateral, Stewart thought. He felt his groin twitch like it had done earlier in the morning.

Outside the church, in the dreary early afternoon, the guide asked, "Lunch ahora, o Maximon primero."

"Maximon primero," Kelly said.

Stewart guffawed, artificially, like a bad actor. He thought he saw Kelly purse her lips into the beginning of a smile. But he wasn't sure. She would have to be the one to begin their next communication.

Returning through the park, Stewart noticed the kid who had accosted them earlier talking to the man in the lizard-skin boots. The two were seated on a wrought iron bench.



Their conversation seemed hushed, conspiratorial. They did not look up when Stewart passed them. Stewart was not sure what to make of this tete-a-tete.

The guide took Stewart and Kelly down a series of dirt streets and turned them into dingy courtyard where the trees were withered and the flora stunted by too much foot traffic. In the courtyard, on a far wall, beside a truncated fig tree, Stewart was shocked to again spot the kid. This time, the kid was not with the man from the park. He was with a group of teenage hoodlums. They all seemed to be smoking spliffs. Had the kid been tailing him, Stewart pondered? Or was the kid's continued presence coincidental? After all, it was a small town. Kelly was probably right: he did worry too much. When he caught the kid's eye, he thought he saw the kid flip him off. Yet he wasn't sure, and, in the next moment, it didn't matter, for he had stepped inside a bizarre room — Maximón's shrine.

All Stewart could think was, "surreal." Balloons and streamers covered the low roof. Hundreds of santos lined the walls. Incense smoke wafted throughout, creating murkiness and a cloying smell. And there, in the middle of the room, rested the impish Mayan deity known as Maximón, or a wooden representation thereof. With idols, Stewart could never be sure.

Maximon was a unique sight. He was swaddled in colorful scarves from the neck down. He puffed on a cigar. He was masquerading as a Catholic saint. He wasn't pagan. He wasn't divine. He was both, and he was better than each. Stewart wanted to laugh out loud, immoderately, in appreciation, but Maximon's minister, a crevice-faced Mayan in cutoff denim shorts, was close by, ministering to a stricken man, an Indian, paler than the cloudcover.

"Su estómago está muy malo," the guide murmured to Stewart, rubbing his own stomach in charade as he spoke.

The minister held a smoked ham in his hands and chanted in a strange dialect.

Stewart wanted to pop the balloons in celebration of something, but instead he removed a hundred Q from his pocket and laid it respectfully on the collection plate at the minister's discolored feet.

When Stewart stepped outside of this pluralistic temple, he was again confronted by the kid, this time not by a middle finger, but by a lupine smirk. There was no mistaking the intended ill will. The kid bared his canines. Stewart thought he might growl. But Stewart didn't care. Maximón had restored his good mood, relaxed him, eased his worry. He paid the mutt of a boy no mind, though he did notice that the kid's chin and knees were muddied, as if he'd been drinking like a wolf at a shallow watering hole.

Punk, Stewart scoffed to himself.

Stewart walked out of the courtyard, into the street, and waited on his beautiful girlfriend, Kelly. He was hungry again. He wanted ham for lunch.

"Lista, almorzar," the guide said to Stewart when he and Kelly eventually rejoined Stewart.

"You hungry?" Stewart asked Kelly, his voice in doting husk.

"I could eat," Kelly said.

"Yeah? Same table?" Stewart joked.

"Same table, same bed, same everything."

"Nice. You want to forget lunch and get a room?"

"Trust me, you're going to need your food."

"Now we're talking. And I'm sorry about earlier."

"It's fine. Don't worry about the worry."

"Man, I like you," Stewart said.

"I like you, too," Kelly said.

The guide had pretended not to listen to their reunion. He was busy staring off at the hillsides. Stewart looked where he was looking. The hillsides were ashy with strati and threatening rain.

"Almorzar ahora está bueno," Stewart said, "a Bambús. Pero primero, cuando vamos a Bambús, regresamos a la calle temprano, primero, para compramos tipicos."

"Bueno," the man said, having no difficulty understanding Stewart's mangled Spanish.

They returned to the street they had entered when they first arrived. They walked slowly down it. They observed women weaving yarn on backstrap looms, and stopped in a few stalls so Kelly could scrutinize the jewelry. In one stall, she found a jade ring she liked very much — "I love it," she said, her voice giddy like a child's at Christmas. Yet, the ring's band proved slightly too big. "I'm sorry." Stewart said to her, his dejection commensurate with her own. "But don't worry, we'll get you a ring. I promise."

He was immediately surprised by the transparency of his double entendre. They both blushed. They exited the stall and continued down the street.

At the last stall before the docks, Kelly exhorted Stewart to buy a particular wooden mask, a large one, carved and painted in the shape and color of a jaguar's face. The detail was exquisite, and so Stewart accepted the vendor's 200 Q price. It was worth that. Still, Stewart knew he could have chaffered with the vendor, had the price reduced by at least

\$50 Q. The man had been desperate. Business was down.

Stewart wondered if Kelly thought less of him for again not haggling, for not playing the game. Stewart looked at Kelly but her look was inscrutable.

At the dock, the guide asked if they wanted to go the rapido way to the restaurant, along the lakeshore, or the long way, via actual streets. Before Stewart could answer, Kelly stated, "The short way. Rapido. I have hunger."

"Bueno," the guide said, setting out on a foot-trail lateral to the first dock, where Stewart was pleased to see their captain and skiff still waited. The scanty, serpentine path took them above a lakefront lettuce field, then through an expansive cornfield. The cornstalks were very green and very tall, and they covered the path in shadow. The corn seemed human, even more so when a breeze rustled the corn's hair-like tendrils. The eerie sound caused goosebumps to rise on Stewart's arms. And the stalks' proximity to the path — their near convergence over it, like a pergola — heightened his claustrophobia. He clenched the mask. He followed closely behind Kelly. He thought he might panic.

But up ahead, Stewart was relieved to see a small clearing. Although the clearing was within the cornfield, and only a small bivouacked space, Stewart knew the clearing held copious amounts of air. It would save him and make the rest of the crossing possible. And, once there, his claustrophobia would not recrudescence.

When they reached the clearing, the guide stopped them. Stewart inhaled deeply, but not too deeply to draw attention. The guide apologized for the stoppage — unnecessarily, in Stewart's view — and told them to wait a minute. The guide pointed at his fly and simpered in feigned embarrassment. The guide had to go to the bathroom. Stewart and Kelly smiled at him as if he were their son. "Tome su tiempo," Stewart said, as the guide

disappeared into the corn. But as Stewart finished speaking these words, his worry catalyzed, and his imagination fired. Why, he began to think. And just then, before Stewart's imaginings fully congealed, before they revealed their consummate creativity, a kid, the kid, stepped into the clearing. Silver metal flashed from his hand. Without hesitation, Stewart jumped toward Kelly. He pushed her left, downhill, into the corn. She screamed something, but he did not hear her, for he had already swiveled to face the boy.

Stewart brought the mask up like a bat, and crouched slightly. Should he strike preemptively? That was his mind's sole deliberation. He moved a step forward, forcing himself not to succumb to the fear he knew an attacker relied upon.

Before Stewart struck, he looked once more at the kid's face, and, this time, what Stewart saw, was not malice, not violence, but abject self-pity, harmless in its constitution. Stewart dropped his hands and loosened his death grip on the mask. And he noticed in the kid's hands, not the silver of a knifeblade, but rather the silver of a digging tool, a mattock perhaps. The kid ignored Stewart. The kid brushed past him, as if he had just been grounded and sent to his room. The kid did not look back.

"What the hell was that about?" Stewart heard Kelly declare from behind him.

He turned to face her. Her physiognomy was pallid and bemused. He went toward her. She pushed him away. Dirt clung to her shirt. She unconsciously flicked it off.

Stewart stopped and spoke. "I thought the kid had a knife," he said. "Remember, he's the one who got pissed at me earlier, at the dock, when we arrived, remember? Then I saw him following us around town, all fucking day it seemed, and I don't know, I thought maybe he was going to mug us. I guess I fucked up. I'm sorry. I don't know what to say."

Kelly started to speak, but hesitated. Stewart felt her green eyes inspecting him,

probing him beneath his skin. After a while, she said: "You really thought you saw a knife?"

"Yes."

"I see," she said. "You know it was only an implement, for work in the fields or something."

"I know that now."

"I see," she repeated.

"I'm sorry."

Again she looked inside him.

"Don't be," she said. "You were just trying to protect me. Only my parents have ever done that."

"Well, you can call me daddy if you want."

"Jesus, you're impossible. We were having a moment here."

"Sorry, but I am really hungry. This protection stuff gives you an appetite. Where's that guide?"

On cue, the guide appeared in the clearing. "Listo?" the guide said.

"Sí, listo," Kelly said, looking at Stewart, reaching for his hand.

Kelly and Stewart walked awkwardly on the narrow path behind the guide, shoulder-to-shoulder, hand-in-hand. The stalks touched them while they walked, but Stewart's claustrophobia did not rebound.

Above Kelly, and beyond the guide, their path's tunnel opened. Stewart saw the cactus garden and the flower-flanked restaurant. He also saw streams of blue sky gutter the clouds. And as they left the cornfield, in advance of the lovely restaurant, Stewart

wondered if he would always worry. He wondered if that was what love was.

As if in answer, a zigzag of heat lightening pulsed on the horizon.

"Did you see that?" Kelly asked him.

"I did," Stewart said. And then he laughed loudly.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing," he said.

They continued on to the restaurant.

Baked jamon was the lunch special. It proved very good.

## SUMMER'S LAST WEEKEND

The day turned promising. Gray clouds lifted, and the ascending sun restored the magnificent blue sheen to the lake's gently rippling surface. I sat outside on the deck of the lakefront cabin I had leased for a year, smoking a cigarette, finishing a midmorning cup of coffee, anticipating the lunchtime arrival of two close friends. I hadn't seen them in six months, not since soon after my breakup with Emma, the girl I had dated through high school, college, respective grad schools and beyond, until we were both in our late twenties, and she unilaterally decided she wanted more from life than I could offer.

Even after six months, I still caught myself thinking about Em' in fragments throughout the day, usually when I smoked and stared off into the water. It wasn't that I missed her continued presence. I just missed the imitative memory of her that of late had begun to fade. Without looking at pictures, I was no longer able to visualize her pert nose and her crooked smile, or, of all things, the exact shape and color of her front teeth, which she used to nibble the end of her tongue when she reflected on the future. My detachment had helped me get over her, but it had also kept her around, which is what I wanted. I refused to forget her, because I didn't want hypocritically to resign the past to the past, deny myself parts of my own life. Those who are able hurriedly to forget, to move on as if nothing has come before, may be happier, but they are happy only in their emptiness and their falsity.

After cleaning the cabin all morning, I had planned to take only a short break, with a final cup of coffee and a single cigarette, then drive across the spillway to the



convenience store for beer. But I temporized, guessing that Myers and T.J. stowed an ice chest chock full of Shiner for the long drive and their respite from city and family. And if they didn't, or if they had finished them en route, we could always make a beer run to the marina at the bottom of the lake in the ski boat they had supposedly borrowed and were towing with them.

I lit another cigarette and propped my feet on the rail of the deck. A few small baitfish broke from the water and skimmed above the shallows, just in front of the wooden retaining wall, likely being pursued by a large hungry bass. A cruiser boat on the horizon drifted out of view. A retired neighbor watered his roses, sending two hummingbirds flitting off in my direction. I observed them, but soon lost sight of their dizzying flight. I inhaled deeply on the cigarette and held the smoke patiently before releasing it a little guiltily to the limpid air. I had no doubt the peace of the weekend would be amusingly shattered as soon as the dangerous duo showed. They were coming to drink, boat, ski and barbecue, not to watch retirees work in their gardens, hummingbirds flit or majestic mallards, wood ducks and cormorants gracefully alight on the water and ascend from it. I was a little tired of watching myself. I was looking forward to displacing my introspection for the weekend.

Though I wanted my past to be fresh, I didn't want my present life to mingle with Em's and tarnish my memories. I didn't want to become the angry ex-lover, jilted and jaded, with no remembrances of our youthful and happy togetherness. That's why I left the city and, for the most part, gave her our network of friends. All our friends were held in common, so, finding it too difficult mingling with her regularly at weekend gatherings, dreading the day when she would debut some new boyfriend, I packed up my books and

my computer from the garage apartment I rented a few streets from her, and headed to the lake, a three-hour drive from the city. Our mutual friends were all married, and, perhaps not surprisingly, out of all of them, only Myers and T.J. had made an effort to stay in touch, occasionally calling, continually forwarding dirty jokes to my e-mail. I had known them the longest, in the years before they were married. They were the ones I had the most drinking mileage with, and it figured they would be the ones to make the effort, not that their loyalty completely compensated for the pain caused by the others' inconsideration or forgetfulness.

Myers had somehow finagled his boss's boat and Explorer, and they demanded my participation in their boys' weekend that was to begin promptly at noon on Friday. They informed me they didn't give two shits about the freelance article I had to have finished by Thursday of next week, the end of September. It was high time, they said, I reentered life. The three of us needed to regroup and utilize what could be the last warm weekend of the year to do so. They guaranteed that the booze combined with their on-the-road comedy act would ease the transition. I imagined they were right.

I heard the vehicle and the boat pull down the long gravel driveway from the subdivision's lone, macadamized lane. They were right on time. I stayed seated in the deck chair until the motor shut off, the doors opened and their feet crunched into the gravel when they descended.

"We're home honey," Myers shouted in his sonorous voice.

"Yeah lightweight, come give us a kiss hello," T.J. piped in, taking his cue from Myers as usual.

“I’m ’round back,” I yelled, not quite ready to stand up and face the day’s inevitable shenanigans. I listened to them rustle in the car for a few minutes, fiddling with their luggage, T.J. laughing at something Myers must have said at my expense. When they came into view, walking down the property line to the rear of the cabin, I couldn’t help but grin. They looked like two city slickers on their way down to the beach: they wore Ocean Pacific surfing-styled bathing suits and straw cowboy hats; they’d already taken their shirts off; they’d smeared sunscreen all over their faces, necks and shoulders; and they were overflowing with recreational cargo. Myers lugged a green ice chest — a football and Frisbee perched precariously on top — while T.J. struggled a few yards behind him to carry their overnight bags, a ghetto blaster and a humongous CD case.

“Relax,” Myers said, as he made his way to the deck. “Just sit where you are. Don’t move a muscle. We got it. It’s not as if we just drove three fucking hours to pay your sorry ass a visit.”

“Yeah, asshole,” T.J. blurted out.

“I’d get up and help but it looks like you boys haven’t been making all your appointments at the gym,” I said. “This is exactly what you desk jockeys need, physical exertion in the country where the air is fresh and the land not devoured by freeways and fumes. Friends and loved ones who see you day in and day out probably don’t catch the incremental weight gains, the unhealthy yo-yo diets so indicative of your disposable society. But, as an outsider, as a reminder to all things good and pure, I do, and I care too much to not allow you to help yourselves.”

I was obviously joking, but it did look like Myers had put on quite a few pounds. He was a big guy to begin with — about 6-foot-five with a blocking tight end’s build — so

for me to notice his weight gain meant he had probably packed on 20 pounds since I saw him last. T.J., on the other hand, was still rake thin, with neither fat nor muscle, nor an ounce of self-absorption, weighing him down.

They dropped their belongings at the edge of the deck and walked over to me. I finally rose to greet them, trying to downplay my excitement. Myers peered quizzically at me, extending his hand, saying as he did so, "I might have put on one or two pounds. Thanks for noticing. I'm sure the reason I've been eating and drinking so much is because I've been in mourning, completely depressed over you leaving us."

"That's got to be it, chubby," I said, shaking his hand, punching him softly in the gut with the lightly balled fist of my other hand.

T.J. came up to us, likely expecting a group hug, but settling for a handshake.

"Well, speaking of drinking," I said, "tell me that ice chest is stocked with chilly beer. I was so busy making sure this place was spotless for you ... Mr. Clean fresh ... not a spider in sight ... I didn't get a chance to make it to the beer store."

"We got beer, we got steak, and we got a boat," Myers said. "All we need you to do is put away that bratty, self-important little attitude of yours and partake in the good times that we are prepared to bestow upon your meager existence. Think you can pull that off for two days?"

"I think I can handle it. Now give me a fucking beer," I said.

T.J. laughed. He went and grabbed a Shiner from the ice chest, tossing the brown bottle underhand to me over the waist-high brick barbecue pit. I opened the beer, threw the cap back at him, and took a long pull. I hadn't had a Shiner in more than six months, as the closest convenience store didn't stock the beer of Texas — for some reason having

to do with a supplier's surliness — despite my urging. The signature taste registered immediately, slightly sweet, with enough body to be deemed a bock beer, verifying my unheeded protestations to the convenience store owner who I had come to know on a first name basis, driving to his country kiosk once or twice a week for beer, milk or eggs when I didn't want to drive all the way into town to the Wal Mart for a full-fledged grocery run.

T.J. found an electrical outlet on the deck, plugged in the jam box and threw on an Eagles' greatest-hits CD. I removed my shirt, still kind of proud that I hadn't let myself go and had retained a few abs. We each casually drank three beers outside, relishing the juxtaposition between the sun's warmth on our skin and the coldness in our throats, and caught up. I asked the inevitable questions about their jobs and family lives. They said as far as they knew everything seemed stable and good for the moment, but wait until Monday and that could all change. They told me Em' sent her best. Then, realizing we had not had nearly enough beer to tackle that subject, we started talking about something else.

When the CD finished, we went inside with the ice chest and their belongings. As they got squared away, I put marinade on the steaks they had thoughtfully brought. From where I stood in the tiny kitchen, dousing the thick, mammoth T-bones in Worcestershire sauce, pepper and garlic salt, I pointed out the rest of the first floor of the sparse A-frame cabin: the living area furnished with nothing more than an ancient color TV festooned with rabbit ears, a ratty sofa, a low-lying, water-stained coffee table, a wood-burning fireplace and a simple laminated oak table that served as both dining room table and desk. The tiny cramped bathroom was not much bigger than the size of an airliner's.

“How do you get to the bedroom?” T.J. asked, looking upward at the second floor’s balcony. I took two strides to the mouth of the kitchen, at the onset of the living room, and pulled down a ladder that led to the single room and closet upstairs.

“That’s the only way up?” T.J. asked.

“That’s it,” I said.

“What happens if you’re too drunk to climb or you need to use the john in the middle of the night?” he asked, obviously intrigued by my primitive living arrangements.

“That might be a problem for you amateurs. But don’t worry, if you’re scared of heights, you can be the one to sleep on the couch. The lucky one gets to bunk with me upstairs in the queen size. I’m counting on both of you being so drunk that even if one of you makes it up to join me, you’ll be too tired from the climb to molest me,” I said.

“This took you all morning to clean,” Myers said, coming out of the bathroom, sarcastically ribbing me about the size of my pad.

With the steaks basting in their Pyrex container in the refrigerator, our ablutions completed, we prepared for the lacustrine afternoon ahead. It was already getting late in the day and we didn’t want to waste what was left of the sun. There was no guarantee that tomorrow would be as clear. I quickly threw together three Turkey and Swiss cheese sandwiches slathered with hot English mustard, wrapped them in tin foil and tossed them in the ice chest. I dumped a few trays of ice from the freezer on top. CDs were chosen, as the ski boat apparently had a CD player on board, a few disco anthologies thrown in for helm dancing. Towels and sunscreen were bundled into a plastic grocery bag.

We secured our party provisions in the boat and boarded the Explorer to drive the short distance to the end of the subdivision’s jetty, to the private boat ramp. After ages of

reversing up and down the ramp in order to get the trailer aligned perpendicular to the water, as well as deep enough in the water, Myers finally got it right, then we were off into the wild blue yonder.

The day was picture perfect: no wind and sunny, hot but not scorching, just a trace of clouds to give the blue sky some perspective. As my tan was still entrenched and summer was beginning to ebb, I decided to enjoy the sun and all its rays and forgo a lathering in sunscreen — as Myers and T.J. kept doing — except for a dollop on my freckled nose. We toured the large reservoir for an hour, only circumnavigating its lower curvature, eating the sandwiches and washing them down with Shiners. We passed a few boats and waved, but, for the most part, we had the lake to ourselves. I assumed most people had already boarded up their summer homes and were busy taking the kids to football or soccer practice. In some of the marshy areas, where subdivisions had yet to go in, white herons fished, stalking their prey stealthily, oblivious to the noise from the passing ski boat's powerful motor and the music from the Yamaha speakers.

After touring, we all took numerous turns skiing, with either Myers or me driving the boat. T.J. declined to drive, citing a lack of experience. I was the only one to slalom, coasting in and out of the wake until my legs grew tired and I gave up or Myers intentionally spilled me, whipping me around in a figure eight.

We drank beer after beer, and, later, when the beer was almost gone, Myers broke out a flask of whiskey he had stashed in the boat's cubbyhole. He forced a couple swigs on us, fortunately keeping most of it to himself, and we got happily drunk. T.J. kept requesting Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive," which Myers and I didn't object to. The cockpit was big enough for the three of us to dance clumsily around the ice chest.

The sun soon began to sink and the temperature dropped, which was just as well. We were spent from all the skiing and dancing. Myers turned the boat off in the middle of the large and tranquil cove we had finished skiing in and let it coast. We sat back, with a Wallflowers CD turned down low, and took in the fading orange sunset, suffused with red and purple streaks. I lit a cigarette. Myers and T.J. each put big pinches of mint Skoal Long Cut in the corners of their bottom lips.

It began to grow dark, and I suggested heading back, via the marina so we could fill up with gas and be prepared for the morning. They tossed their dips overboard, and I stuck my cigarette butt in an empty beer bottle. Myers turned on the motor and soon had the boat out of the cove. He opened her up, racing into the main body of the lake, into the day's gloaming, skipping up and over the small waves.

He pulled in awkwardly to the marina, and I asked him if he wanted me to drive, but he said no, he was fine, he just needed a shower and a steak to fortify him. An old guy in overalls with a scraggily white beard filled the boat with gas, after which Myers asked him if he could bring us out a couple of 12-packs of whatever was cold. He came back with a case of Bud and a bag of ice. He said the beer was cold, but we might want it colder. I started to hand him a credit card, but Myers gave him a \$50 and told him to keep the change. "Appreciate it," the old guy said, peering into the boat and seeing a few empty bottles. "Looks like y'all been having a real good time. It was a good day for it, that's for sure. Don't forget to put your lights on. It's about to be night real quick."

We all thanked him, told him the night was young, and off we went, Myers again at the wheel. I sat behind him, on the rear bench with T.J., my head swiveled sideways, watching the marina recede from view into the rapidly emerging blackness.



Myers began to pick up speed, the boat's bow rising high out of the water. He traveled close to the shoreline. I cautioned him to move a little further into deeper water so we wouldn't strike a sandbar. "We're in no rush, bro," I added.

"Relax," he said, steering the boat away from shore. He turned up the volume on Guns and Roses' "Don't Cry," a song we had played over and over during our last year of college. I sat back and mentioned to T.J. that I had a pretty good bottle of wine back at the cabin that I'd been saving for a special occasion, and it should go great with the steaks. He was nonchalant about it and said he might have a sip but would probably just stick with the King of Beers. Myers turned toward us, bent down and began to put the beer and the ice in the Coleman. "Why don't you watch the water and let me do that," I said.

And then, as I took the bag of ice from him and he turned back to the wheel, it happened: a loud boom followed by the boat recoiling high into the air. I slammed sideways into the right gunwale, wrenching my neck, while T.J. crashed into my left shoulder. I thought the boat was going to roll onto its side and eject us, but at the last second, Myers must have yanked the wheel in the opposite direction and righted us. We came down with two separate thuds, stern side first, before the V-shaped bow slapped, hard, against the water.

Myers kept screaming, "Shit, shit, shit." But he didn't slow down, not until I got up and stepped around the ice chest toward him. I clutched my whiplashed neck with one hand and grabbed him with the other, telling him to pull back on the throttle.

I looked back to where the collision had occurred, but I couldn't see anything. It was too dark. All I saw was black night. As calmly as I could, I asked Myers what we had hit.

For what seemed an eternity, he didn't say anything. "We need to go back," I said, reaching for the wheel. But he stepped in front of me and pushed me backward, almost toppling me over the ice chest. T.J. sat on the bench, saying nothing, observing us.

"What the fuck are you doing," I said, once again facing Myers.

He squeezed his face with both his hands and said, "Trust me. We're not going back. It was nothing. Whatever it was, I don't want to hit it again."

"How do you know it wasn't another boat or something?" I asked uncertainly.

"There wasn't a light. Plus, if it was another boat, we wouldn't be in one piece, would we?"

"Were our lights on?" I asked, peering around, remembering that I didn't hear any screams leading up to the collision.

"Of course. A fuse must have blown when we hit. You heard the guy at the marina tell me to turn them on, and I'm sure I did. Let's just get out of here before the motor shuts down or we sink. Let's go and eat those steaks."

"You're the captain," I said. "You're sure it wasn't anything major?"

"Positive," he said. "Is your neck OK?"

"It'll be alright," I said, still rubbing it. I leaned down to finish putting the beer and ice, which lay scattered on the floor, in the ice chest.

I reversed the trailer down the ramp, listening to T.J. who stood waist deep in the water, giving me directions. The ramp was poorly lit, but, even in the dark, it didn't take very long to correctly position the trailer in the water. I just kept remembering, as I reversed, my neck aching, to keep turning the steering wheel the opposite way from

which I normally would. When T.J. and I had the trailer aligned, Myers punched the throttle and drove the boat right up to the winch. T.J. had only to rotate the crank once to secure the boat.

As soon as we parked the Explorer and trailer at the end of my driveway, I went inside the cabin and retrieved a flashlight from the small pantry. The three of us inspected the prow of the boat, then Myers and I crawled underneath the length of the trailer to see how far the damage extended. There was an ample dent followed by a gash about two feet wide that extended almost to the middle of the boat. Strangely, the foremost edge of the gash was flecked with a red substance that looked to be paint. Myers said it must have come from the hull's fiberglass latticework. I wasn't convinced, because the red flakes were on the exterior of the slashes that made up the gash.

"Thank god the boat isn't pierced all the way through," Myers said. "A little putty, some basic body work, and it should be good as new. The boss is out town until Tuesday and I should be able to get it fixed by then. He won't even know anything happened."

We carried the cooler and the towels from the boat and dumped them on the deck before going inside. While Myers showered, T.J. and I threw together a salad and wrapped three large yams in tin foil and stuck them in the oven, as I had no microwave.

We went outside, scraped the barbecue's grill and got some Jack Daniel's briquettes lit. Both T.J. and I were grateful to have something to occupy us so that we didn't have to communicate. Myers finally joined us on the deck, saying he felt a 100 times better and was famished, recommending we also take restorative showers. T.J. said, "nah," and started flipping through his portable CD collection. I needed to tend to the steaks.

I opened the good bottle of wine — not that it was any longer a special occasion. I

was just tired of beer. I needed a smooth drink to sip in accompaniment with the meat. Plus, my neck hurt, and, for some reason, I still felt anxious. We ate outside on the deck in the dark, the one outdoor light providing just enough illumination for us to see our food. The steaks were delicious, smoky and seared on the outside with a tinge of pink in the center. The yams were sweet and buttery, and the salad was crisp, splashed with balsamic vinaigrette. Myers kept trying to prod us into conversation throughout dinner, but T.J. and I were subdued and chose to eat quietly, listening to music. After we ate, Myers asked us if we wanted to go inside and play cards and smoke the cigars he had brought. We declined, opting instead to sit outside with the music. They drank a few more beers and I finished most of the wine. T.J. played Elton John's "Your Song," three times in succession. No one said a word. I smoked two cigarettes. We went to bed early.

When I awoke at dawn, they were already gone. I had not heard them leave. My head throbbed. My neck still ached. I climbed down the ladder and went into the kitchen. I forced down a large glass of water and three Advil and put on a pot of coffee. I turned the TV on to listen to the early Saturday morning news program that was about to start. I pushed the blanket and pillow aside that T.J. had used and took a seat on the couch, waiting for the coffee to brew. I spotted a note on the coffee table, written by Myers, which read, "L – Thanks for the hospitality. Sorry we couldn't stay but I need to get that boat fixed before the signer of my checks gets back in town. Later, Myers."

I put the note down, and rubbed my neck, grateful they were gone. I'm not sure I could have handled another day of hard drinking. I watched the news through the fuzzy snow of my 1970s television set. I couldn't believe what I was hearing from the station

70 miles away, but as I thought about it, it made sickening sense. The top story was about a hit and run on Lake Kiwani, the lake I lived on. The details were still sketchy. All they knew was a 28-year-old woman had been flung into the water yesterday evening after her canoe had been run over. A night fisherman who had heard her whimpering from his boat had found her draped over a plank. He had gone to the first house he had seen with a light on and pulled alongside its pier. The homeowner had called an ambulance, but the woman died before the EMS personnel arrived.

The news anchor promised to have the full story and the identity of the victim — which they could not release until next of kin were notified — in time for the station's 5 p.m. broadcast.

I didn't want to think about it, not yet. I couldn't think about it. I had to move. I unplugged the coffeepot, jumped into the shower, packed an overnight bag and got into my VW Sirocco. I knew Rusty at the convenience store would know more than the news anchor. The nosy old-timers in the area congregated there every morning for coffee, biscuits and gossip. As I drove, I began to put all the pieces together. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I found myself planning, scheming, covering our tracks, as if Myers had actually done — we had done — what I now knew we had done. I felt bile rise in my throat. No one would believe T.J. and I were only unwitting accomplices.

A woman was dead. He had killed her. We had killed her. At the last second before contact, when Myers turned around to face the wheel, he must have seen her. Even in the dark, he had to have seen her or the canoe. If we'd gone back, she'd still be alive. How long was she in the water? Why didn't she make it to shore and call for help? Was she unconscious? Was she incapacitated? Questions flooded my head.

And then another question came: Had either of my neighbors seen us inspecting the boat last night, crawling under it with the flashlight? If they had, Myers would be nailed. We'd be nailed. They were old but they weren't dumb. When they heard the news, it wouldn't take them long to put two and two together. Even though we were friendly, they'd call the Sheriff's Office and that would be that. But when I thought about the position of their houses in relation to the terminus of my driveway, I calculated that there was no way they could have seen us. Hell, they probably never even saw the boat pull in or leave. They may have seen the three of us on the deck or heard the music, but that was it, certainly not enough for them to get suspicious.

The one weak link we had was the white-bearded guy from the marina. I flashed back to my hand beginning to extend him my credit card before Myers, providentially, gave him the \$50. Other than being able to describe the boat and our appearance, there was no way he could identify us. Or was there? I caught myself working out every possible permutation that could implicate us and pulled over onto the shoulder of the two-lane country highway, a few miles short of the spillway. I stared off through the barbed wire fence at a herd of cattle grazing on the still-green summer grass.

What was I doing? A woman had died. Myers had left her for dead because he knew if we were to stop and render aid, and the wardens, the Sheriff's investigators and the DA investigator were to get involved, he'd go down on a Boating While Intoxicated manslaughter charge. The bile rose in my throat. I opened my door, leaned out, and puked last night's steak, salad, yam and wine onto the ground in peanut-sized clumps.

I wiped my mouth and sat back, my eyes still watery. My forehead was damp and the Advil had done nothing for my neck. Something spooked the cows — probably the scent

of my vomit — and they galloped off.

The odds were infinitesimally small that the guy from the marina would be at the convenience store, as I had never seen him there before, but I couldn't risk him spotting me. I thought about making the three-hour drive to the city and confronting Myers, but I didn't want to look at his face. Anyway, the woman was dead and I couldn't bring her back. I decided the safest course of action for the present was inaction. So I returned to the cabin.

I sat outside in my favorite chair on the deck and finished the four remaining Budweisers from the cooler they had left behind. The beer made my head feel better and tranquilized my neck. It dulled my thinking enough to where I didn't have to keep replaying each and every event from the day before, over and over, trying to lace the myriad threads together.

The sky was overcast and it didn't look like the sun would be strong enough to burn off the clouds. There'd be rain by afternoon. Maybe it would wash all this away. I thought about Em' and how she wouldn't have been surprised by my immediate reaction after I learned of what we had done. She always said I was disconnected from reality.

I waited, giving Myers time to drop T.J. off and return directly home. I was betting he'd go home before taking the boat to a body shop. His wife and infant son were visiting her family out of state and weren't due home until Sunday. He'd go home to plan.

I went inside and picked up the portable phone, carrying it back outside with me to my chair on the deck. I sat down slowly. I heard thunder rumble far across the lake. I dialed Myers' number. The answering machine came on. "I know you're there," I said.

“Pick up the phone. You need to talk to me.”

“Sorry, I’m here,” he said. “I just needed to make sure who it was.”

“What, did you just think this would go away and I wouldn’t find out? Are you aware of what’s gone down, what you did, what you made us do? Is it that your life is just that much more important than anyone else’s? Or did you think it was all a bad dream? Explain it to me. I don’t understand,” I said, though I knew I did.

“Look, you got to believe me,” he said, “I didn’t know anyone was in that boat. I swear to God. I didn’t hear about it until we heard it on the radio late this morning. I was getting ready to call you. I thought you’d still be in bed.”

“You’re a fucking liar,” I said. “And what’s the worst of it is that you disregarded us and didn’t let us choose for ourselves. Did you think the canoe snuck out and took itself for a ride because it was such a nice night? You saw her. I saw it in your face.”

“I didn’t see anyone,” he said. “And if someone had been on board, I didn’t think there was any way they could have survived. We were going too fast. Our boat was too big. What was I supposed to do? Go back and look for a dead body? Then wait for the cops to come and check our blood alcohol? I’ve got a wife and a kid. So does T.J.”

“Because you guys are married and have kids takes precedence over everything else,” I said. “I’m not even a consideration.”

“Someone had to make a decision. That’s what I did. I made it for all of us.”

“She was alive. If we had gone back, she’d still be alive.”

“You don’t know that,” he said.

“Yes, I do.”

There was a long lull in the conversation. I looked off into the water and lit a



cigarette. The clouds were black overhead.

“Are you still there?” he asked.

“I’m here,” I said.

“What are you going to do?”

I hesitated, still not sure. She was dead and we had killed her. And he was right, not then but now. It was done. I could have forced him to go back, but I didn’t.

“Did you stop anywhere on the way home for gas?” I asked.

“We filled up on the way in on Friday because T.J. had to stop and take a leak,” he said.

“You know the cops are going to be calling every body shop for two hundred miles,” I said.

“I thought about that. There’s a Mexican guy at work who speaks hardly any English and he’s got a cousin who’s got this little body shop in this barrio south of the city, in the middle of nowhere. I’ve used him before on my car. The cousin speaks even less English. There’s no way they’ll hear about this.”

“What about the guy from the marina?” I asked.

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to get out of there pretty soon. You can stay here if you need to. We can’t afford him seeing you somewhere and recognizing you, although I doubt he’d say anything.”

“Fuck. I can’t believe we’re doing this,” I said.

“We have no choice.”

“No, we’ve got a choice,” I said. “What about T.J.?”

“He freaked but I calmed him down. He’ll do whatever I tell him. He’s not stupid.

He's also got a family."

"So that's that. We get drunk. Someone dies. We move on. No big deal.

Unbelievable. I suppose you already scratched off all that red paint?"

"Yeah, I just got through doing it," he said. "Look, I should get the boat over there.

Don't do anything stupid. Your neck's on the line as well. I'll call you later."

"Don't bother," I said, pressing the off button.

It began to spit rain, the prelude to the gathering storm. I stood up from my chair. I pulled off my shirt. I kicked off my sandals. I walked through the high grass down to the water. I stepped in. It was warm. It was still. I swam forward into the deeper water and rolled on my back. The pain in my neck had disappeared. The drizzle hit my face. I floated, wishing Em' were beside me. I wanted to call her and tell her I was sorry, but I couldn't. Not now. Maybe not ever. I was completely alone, more alone than ever before. I knew I could never forget. The clouds opened, sending forth sheets of pelting rain.

## DESTINY

She is married now, yet she often wonders if it is with the right man. She loves him, but she has loved others. And she has caught herself loving others still, not any one male's all-encompassing wholeness, but rather smaller, elemental characteristics: one's curled tresses; one's beautiful hands; strangely, another's long, forcefully demarcated nose, so different from her husband's retroussé nose. These enchantments are not always physical. Sometimes, they are mental, and, often for her, the mental anneals to the physical, as irrefutable as a theorem. The physical introduces the mental and the two soon become joined, inseparable, predestined to live as one, with the man and so, too, with her. Her husband's best friend, the man with the empowered nose, more steep than bulbous — a nose that rests provocatively on the launch pad of his rectangular face — has, in her mind, a sympathetic soul, the kind that would never let a loved one go cold. Once, in college, she loved a teacher, even though they never spoke outside of class. For her, his hollow and sunken eye sockets marked his wisdom, setting her heart aflutter. These fantasies, these discoveries of a physical characteristic's mental paladin, always stir her like a breeze on a blade of grass, before her infidel reality shortens her dreamy swaying and truncates her starry pleasure in relentless, scythe-like strokes.

Katherine's looks are stunning. Men take deep breaths when they first meet her. She does not like her prognathous jaw, though others do. They say it makes her look like a model. She finds it emptying, a banal characteristic that depletes her; yet, it does not consume her. The mirror is her ally. Her complexion is flawless; still, makeup pleases

her. It is transformative. It soothes her sameness.

Unlike many gorgeous women who are too attractive to be seductive, she is unique in that she refuses to suffer limitations because of her appearance. Her sultriness is such that it will never disappear. Wrinkles will only dignify her. She is not stately. But she is protean, a chameleon capable of change but protective of her security. She grows. She does not lose herself. That she can't do. It is not in her nature.

She has just awoken from a nap. She always sleeps without clothes. She must clean and dress and spruce herself for the evening's small dinner party. She is slightly behind schedule, but most of the preparations she has already undertaken. She has only to find a face with which to enjoy the night ahead. She always has forebodings before dinner parties — hers or those hosted by friends, it does not matter. She is never sure what role she will assume until after the first bottle of wine.

She is pensive, but not unrestful. She feels stoical but not stern.

Jane, her closest friend, will arrive soon, before their husbands. There will be five people present at dinner: the four of them and the man with the attentive nose. His girlfriend recently broke up with him. He was sad for a time, but they didn't date long enough for him to mourn her by remembering her. The girlfriend did him a favor. She was dense. He could do better. At the last dinner party, the girlfriend asked why there were peas on the salmon, and, at a gathering before that, she insisted the Rockies were in California.

The three men are playing golf for the first time this year, since winter ended a fortnight ago and the greens dried. They will have had beers on the back nine and maybe a round in the clubhouse. They will be close, happy. They won't care who won. Their

place standings will simply give them pause to laugh at and with each other. By summer, when their games are again honed, they will take it seriously, and their drinking will be more than just social.

Katherine used to be an insomniac, but she has trained herself to drift, to moon, to follow impractical ideas into uncharted territories. She no longer gets claustrophobic on these journeys. The farther she travels the more peacefully she sleeps.

She splays the fingers of her left hand in the waxed V of her dark pubic hair. She thinks of bringing herself to orgasm before she leaves her bed for the shower. But she decides against it. Tonight, she will prefer a suspicion of tension deep within her.

Her husband is too handsome to be sexy. This does not mean he is not good in bed. It only means he can never be the best.

She has often thought of purchasing a vibrator, but she does not want to become reliant on one. She achieves orgasm solitarily and with her husband — though not from coitus alone, always with digital contribution. When she has her best orgasms, two fingers knead her clitoris, her fingers or her husband's, and her husband is far inside her with his cock. She concentrates on the frictional heat, the mounting contraction, the building pressure, the penultimate stage before the climax. When it finally comes, when she can withstand it no more, the release opens her and vents her. She is removed from herself. Her mind stops. Her body takes over.

Afterwards, she likes to nap, unencumbered, on her side of the bed. She doesn't clean herself right away. Her husband's semen drains from her while she daydreams. She doesn't mind the chalky streaks on her favorite sheets, the dark blue flannel ones.

Her husband was the first man she has had regular orgasms with. And, once they

learned how, they became remarkably efficient at producing her orgasm. They have a blueprint, a redoubtable sequence. Now, he doesn't labor. He doesn't need to. There is no sweat on his body, or thereby hers, when they are finished, like there was when they first began sleeping together. Sometimes, she misses his sweat on her.

She remains curious about the G-spot. She read details about it in Cosmo. On her own, she has tentatively felt for it. She has not located it, or, if she has, she has not known what to do with it. She never relays her curiosity to him. He is sensitive. He will feel inadequate. She wishes he would not react this way. But she knows he would. Men, she often thinks, are more fragile than woman. She feels sorry for them. They are the ones who are compared, and, usually, the ruler is of their own choosing.

Not long ago, she viewed a pornographic tape, her first time, with her husband. She could tell he was worried about his size in relation to the actors. She wasn't. Their parts had always fit together, better than her two other lovers, who she had dated before him. There were times when she could read her husband's mind more clearly than he could himself. While they watched, she could see that in his mind he kept comparing himself to the men on the tape. She wanted to say something, but she didn't. He was as big as some, smaller than others. He hated, not to the point of verbal recognition, that she got sopping wet watching the onscreen fucking. She couldn't help it. He hated that she, too, could be stimulated visually, though for her, it was as much the changing scenes, the settings she had not experienced — like the one that occurred on a tartan blanket in a clearing in the woods — as the graphic acts.

She had planned to bathe with candles, bath oil and a beer. If she starts drinking wine too early, she will feel miserable tomorrow. But she slept too long. She has half an hour

to choose and prepare her appearance before Jane enters her privacy. She showers quickly, turning the water's temperature to near scalding, so that when she steps from the shower, she will enter mist. She does not use soap. Instead she sloughs her skin with aloe baby wash. It is not abrasive. It does not make her skin so dry.

She pats herself with a downy towel and cracks the door slightly ajar, just enough to clear the mist but to leave a nimbus of fog. She applies a lamina of deodorant to her pits. She is lucky, for, despite her dark coloring, she does not have to shave regularly. When she does shave, it is not so much for propriety as for a reprieve from scratchiness.

Clothes, she likes, the fabrics more than the styles or the cuts. She wishes she could make her own clothes, so as not to be reliant on designers who do not live within her skin. She changes her clothes to change the feel against her skin. It all depends on her mood. The fabrics are endless. For that, she is grateful. She wears cashmere, chenille, gabardine, lace, leather, mohair, nylon, velour, velvet.

Tonight, with friends, with winter's fading, she will be young, informal, carefree. She will wear a cream-colored cotton skirt, perhaps a white T-shirt beneath a long-sleeved, royal blue Oxford shirt. She will not wear panties, nor a bra. She does not want to be constricted. On her feet will be suede Converse sneakers, no socks.

When she applies her makeup, back in the bathroom, the mirror is still vaporous. She prefers it that way. Makeup, Katherine believes, should help mystify, not conceal. She traces her mouth with wine-colored lip liner, more by feel than by vision. Within this outline she layers on bronze lipstick. She shades her eyes with black mascara and, ever so lightly, with eye shadow the same color as her long-sleeved shirt. She powders her nose. She does nothing else to her face, no foundation, no rouge. When she is not menstruating,

she infrequently masks her skin; she requires very little makeup to alter her visage, her outlook. She dries her hair with a fresh towel and her fingers. Her hair is thick. She does not require a blow dryer to achieve body. Also, she does not like to style it, which is not to say she never does. There are times when she desires ostentation. But, ordinarily, she prefers it natural, stringy, with ringlets at the ends. Tonight, she clasps it in a barrette. Finally, she sprays a vanilla-scented perfume in front of her; she lets it atomize, and, at the last second, she twirls herself within it.

There is no question Jane is Katherine's best friend. They are different but complementary. Katherine hears Jane enter the house without knocking and climb the stairs. Katherine doesn't lock the door when she is alone. Katherine meets Jane on the landing upstairs, as she exits the bathroom, dressed and composed, no longer pensive, calm, almost too calm. Jane used to knock until Katherine informed her she had nothing to hide and could be caught in a compromising situation but not by her. Katherine understands Jane better than Jane understands Katherine. Katherine knows Jane is the more attractive of the two of them. No one else would say so. Jane views Katherine's beauty almost reverentially, as does everyone else. Katherine sometimes finds this communal judgment cloying, though Jane's judgment is nothing but sincere. Men are often clueless when it comes to discerning beauty, Katherine thinks, as she looks down at Jane, who is the shorter of the two. If not for men, Jane would recognize her beauty. Jane is not unfamiliar with it, nor insecure; she is just not convinced of it. She can't be. Jane is the kind of girl who receives attention primarily from intelligent men. She is demure in her looks, her mannerisms and her speech. She is shy, but not a milquetoast. She is



introverted, but not withdrawn. She is reflective, but likeable, easygoing, a beautiful woman's friend, Katherine's friend.

Jane's husband is very smart, smarter than hers, Katherine thinks.

"You look cute," Jane says.

"Not as cute as you," Katherine replies.

"Right. Hey, did you hear about the airliner that crashed?" Jane asks. Jane is the kind of person who feels the pain of anonymous victims.

"No, do tell," Katherine says.

Jane leans against the banister's newel. "I just heard it on the radio," Jane says. "An airliner overshot the runway on its approach to Houston. Seventeen people died and they say it's miraculous more didn't die."

"Pilot error or technical glitch?" Katherine asks, more from expectation than curiosity. Katherine hates the news. It wastes her time. Only the names change. The events do not. She is not unsympathetic, but she is fairly certain she does not know the dead travelers or their families.

"The fog was bad, but it looks like human error played a role, at least that's what the preliminary report indicates. It's so sad, don't you think? That's why I hate flying, you have no control," Jane says.

Katherine looks back at her bathroom and wonders if her fog contributed to their fog. "You can't change your destiny," Katherine says. "You have to live within it."

"So it's going to be one of those kinds of evenings," Jane says. "Let's get a beer and have a smoke before the boys arrive. The fewer cigarettes Ted sees me smoke tonight the better."

“He’s not still hassling you about that, is he?” Katherine asks. “Surely a few cigarettes on the weekend can’t hurt.”

“My habit may be resigned for weekends, but it usually happens all in one evening. He knows I’ll smoke too much tonight, and then tomorrow he’ll have to hear me whine and wheeze about it,” Jane says.

“Then just don’t whine. Change your destiny,” Katherine says.

Katherine follows Jane down the stairs. Jane has a petite figure, no breasts. She looks like a gymnast. Jane has told Katherine that she makes love to Ted once a week, and provides him with fellatio once more during a week. He does not ask for more. Jane does not think he masturbates. Jane hopes he doesn’t. They have a routine. They are happy, though Jane has admitted her first boyfriend in college was more exciting. Katherine imagines if Ted wanted to he could fuck Jane in the air, his feet on the ground, hers wrapped around him, a reverse piggyback. He could thrust and recoil her along the length of his cock, like a hinge. But she doubted he did. It probably never occurred to him to try.

Katherine found James masturbating a few months back with a magazine: a naked girl, a pinup. It didn’t bother Katherine. She had assumed he did it.

Jane wants children. She and Ted will start next year, after Ted gets his promotion and his bonus. Jane makes as much money as Ted, but she will quit her job six months into her first pregnancy. Katherine is not sure she wants children. James wants a big family. Katherine wants to live for herself before she lives for someone else. Why do people think that makes her selfish?

Katherine opens the refrigerator and passes Jane two bottled beers: Amstel Lights. Jane asks if she can do anything to help. Katherine says no, not just yet, but thanks

anyway, it's almost done. Jane opens a drawer and takes out a cheap stainless steel opener, a convenience store model — one end bowed, one end pointed, both ends with spurs beneath. Jane takes a seat in the kitchen's nook, at the small six-chair table, lights a cigarette and opens the beers.

The table happens to be carved from white pine. It possesses a hue you can't find in makeup. But, for tonight, the table is concealed and already set, covered with a brightly-colored, woven tablecloth from Guatemala — more to protect the wood than for decoration. The motif on the tablecloth is one of Mayan temples. In the center of the table is a small vase filled with carmine tulips. The hand-blown, green-speckled glasses are from Guadalajara, Mexico. The plates are thick and heavy, more pottery than dinnerware. The faces of the plates match the color of Katherine's skirt. The plates' perimeters are rimmed in blue, the color of the Sea of Cortez.

That afternoon, Katherine decided they would eat in the kitchen, where the light is pellucid, and, perhaps during dinner, if the temperature permits, they will be able to intermittently open the door onto the backyard and smell the spring air. James will be annoyed. But he won't say anything. He will remember that she prepared the food and the evening while he played golf. James prefers eating in the dining room — where the light is cobwebby — with the good silver and china that his mom bestowed upon them as one of many wedding gifts. Katherine hates the pompous hound's-tooth design on the "good china," the embossed handles of the silverware. She finds it prosaic, elegant, yes, but expected. Katherine would rather have had each place setting be different, demonstrative of a particular place, accrued over time and travel.

Katherine takes out the appetizers — canapés with bruschetta and brie with Granny

Smith apple wedges, eaten, if chosen, on Carr wafers. The brie will be room temperature when the boys arrive.

After the appetizers and the beers or scotch, there will be a lingering main course with much red wine. She hopes James will open hearty California Zins and not washed-out Bordeauxs. James likes to be in control of the wine. It gives him a bailiwick, something to talk about. He will make a production out of opening each bottle. He may even pour an expensive bottle into a flagon. This will annoy Katherine. She prefers experiencing the wine accreting in her own glass.

Katherine is confident the meal will impress. Her menu is foolproof. It cannot be adversely affected by her alcohol intake. The potatoes have already been mashed, with butter and minced garlic. She has only to moisturize them with splatters of milk, stir them and plop the Pyrex dish into the microwave for reheating. The string beans have been topped and tailed. She has only to blanch them for four minutes before serving. The fillet has been trimmed of excess fat; furrowed with quoins of garlic; coated in Dijon mustard and black pepper; sprinkled with salt; and wrapped in bacon. She has only to broil each side for 10 to 12 minutes prior to serving, to sear the meat, to retain its interior pinky-red flavor. The baguette is fresh, bought from a bakery that afternoon, soft as peeled bananas. She made a salad no one will touch; it's a dinner party, they are there to eat and drink, not to pick. She doesn't know why she bothered. For dessert, she will serve a fruit salad, Blue Bell vanilla bean ice cream and Hawaiian coffee percolated in her Krups. In addition, she expects that James will open a bottle of South African port, recently acquired from his parents who spent New Year's in Capetown.

Katherine takes a seat across from Jane. Katherine's back faces a bay window, the

rear of the house, the tree-lined yard behind. Katherine bums a cigarette. Usually, she has a weekend pack of her own, but this weekend, she forgot to buy one. Katherine smokes for release more than for taste. Also, she likes the occupation it provides her lips and hands when she converses. Jane lights it for her and hands it to her. They drink their beers and talk, grateful to have an hour to themselves before the men appear, inevitably modifying the evening's content — not for the better, not for the worse, their amalgamation will just be different. Perhaps, after an hour, alone with Jane, beers coursing within, Katherine will be eager for the men's company, their possibility. The men will smell of beer, clean sweat, the outdoors. They will be thirsty for a new audience. Katherine will look at Gregg's nose more than at her husband.

"What would you do if you found out Ted cheated on you?" Katherine asks Jane.

"What kind of a question is that? You're joking right?" Jane asks.

"Hypothetically, of course. I mean would you leave him or forgive him?"

"I don't know. There are too many factors to consider," Jane says.

"I said cheated, not cheating, implying, in other words, a one or two-time deal,"

Katherine says.

"As opposed to?" Jane asks.

"As opposed to a long-term affair," Katherine answers.

"Why would it matter? Cheating is cheating."

"I thought you said there are many factors," Katherine says.

"Factors relating to us," Jane says. "Whether he still loves me, I still love him, he's contrite. Those kinds. I'm not so sure the nature of his adultery would really matter, unless he loves this other woman, which I can't see happening. We have too much past

for anyone to compete with, and we love each other.”

“But you’re missing the crucial distinction,” Katherine says. “I bet most people would prefer, if their spouse was going to cheat, for it to only happen once, a lapse in judgment, a one-time deal rather than something ongoing and torrid. But I would prefer that James care about the other woman, so that it’s not just about lust, because if it’s just about lust than that means he’s common, weak, ruled by his instincts. He may just as well have masturbated.”

“Uhuh. No way,” Jane says. “If he’s only following his instincts, his nature, getting his rocks off or whatever, then maybe it could be forgivable, but if it’s premeditated, then that’s got to be harder to forgive.”

“I didn’t think you believed in destiny,” Katherine says.

“Maybe there’s a difference between a chemical destiny and a mental destiny, which there’s certainly no way I believe in. I don’t see how you could live with a mental-type of destiny, like you seem to think you do. You have to have some control. You have to be able to change things,” Jane says.

“Just because you have a destiny doesn’t mean you know it,” Katherine says. “And even if your destiny is determined, it doesn’t mean you’re beyond censure or you have no choices within that destiny.”

“What time did you start drinking?” Jane asks.

“Not soon enough,” Katherine says.

Katherine hears the boys laughing when they come in the house through the front door. They dally; they fiddle with the stereo before making their appearance in the

kitchen, as if giving the girls time to put their clothes on. Katherine can tell that they are happy. Journey precedes them as they enter. The lyrics are sad, the melody is not. The order in which they enter is Ted, Gregg then James. Katherine and Jane are still seated. Katherine observes Jane take a long drag. Her smoking has become defiant. Ted hugs and kisses Jane on the forehead. He doesn't say anything about her cigarette. It was assumed. They are both relieved. Tonight, they will love each other. Next, Ted walks around the table, kneels down toward Katherine and hugs her with one arm. He is average looking, but confident, a gentleman. Gregg follows behind him and shakes hands with the girls. Katherine holds his hand; Gregg is the one to let go first. Gregg's hands are soft, supple, like cordovan. They stand in contrast to his cartilaginous nose. Katherine wonders why people greet each other with hands and not noses. James stands in the doorway, his arms stretched above him, his hands pressed against the doorframe. He is not conceited, but his good looks are greeting enough. Katherine feels sorry for him. She knows James would like to greet her with a kiss but he is not sure if that is what she would want. Katherine is not sure, either. That is for him to decide.

The boys grab beers from the refrigerator, cans — that's what they drank from on the golf course. They remain standing, dressed in khakis and plaid, collared shirts. They will put their sweatshirts on later, when the moon replaces the sun and their adrenaline wanes. They provide the highlights of their round, the double bogeys outnumbering the pars, certainly the birdies; they do not despair, they feel justified; the season is inchoate, the course is in immaculate shape. They are hopeful, confident. Sport is good for men, Katherine thinks. Katherine doesn't understand why some women get upset when their husbands play golf without including them. Maybe it has to do with kids and family. That

must be it. "Only The Strong" buffers their words. The three of them are funny, amusing, not ordinary. Their years of shared experiences makes this so. They have learned from each other. Like all men, they fight for attention, but they respect each other and know when to modulate. Gregg is the quietest of the trio. His comments are interspersions, dry, witty, well-timed. He is sarcastic, but not acerbic. He is kind. The men start in on the appetizers, saying they are famished, expressing their gratitude for the bounty. The mood is light.

Katherine stands, walks to the back door. She opens it and peers out. Her hands are akimbo. She is calm but tense. She rotates her neck, once counter-clockwise, once clockwise. She knows, immemorially, that all eyes are on her. She ignores them. Shadows canvas the yard. A neighbor's cat, a tabby, gambols across the freshly-cut grass, as if stepping on crepe paper. The day has begun to turn to night. Katherine looks for a sunset. She does not see one. Soon, she will put the meat on, but first James will want to select the wines and open them.

On cue, James asks from across the room if he should open the wine and prepare for supper. Katherine shrugs, but adds, turning to face him, "Sounds good." Her copper lips close back together. They are not pursed. Her face is unreadable, emotionless. It's not that James is a noncommittal man, it's just that he does better with reinforcement that is not negative. It's not easy being supportive, Katherine thinks. "Open Arms," the last track, begins to play. A different CD will soon be needed. Ted begins to tell a joke, an invitation for Katherine to return to them, the party's official decree. Katherine takes her former seat. Ted's jokes are cerebral yet comical; they are not predictable. Katherine enjoys them.



\* \* \* \*

Everyone compliments Katherine on the food. Apart from Katherine, they go back for seconds, the men even for thirds. Only Katherine knows the meat is overdone. She lets them help themselves, to use the microwave if they choose. Gregg eats like a woman, deliberately, slowly, the bites always small. He chews each morsel, robbing the food of every molecule of its flavor. He picks the right time to sip his wine. Katherine wonders if he has always been this measured, if he takes his time during sex. She would like to serve him, to cut the choicest leftover piece for him. She could find one that was not overdone. He would appreciate it. He would savor it.

Katherine is pleased that James is being gracious with the wine. He opens a Bordeaux, a Pinotage and a Zinfandel. He pours from the bottles freely. No one else pours the wine. Katherine recognizes that everyone at the table is aware that it's easier to let James pour, that it's important to him, that it allows him to feel magnanimous. Nearly every time he pours, he asks if a clean glass is desired. He is the only one to change glasses.

Katherine is imperceptibly quiet. She starts the conversations, makes the first precursive overlays, but then retreats to her visual observance — like a vigil — allowing the others to tighten the threads. Tonight, she prefers to see, not to speak. She does not want to hear Gregg say the wrong thing, to ruin the evening. Katherine has noticed that, most times, when he is on the verge of speaking, Gregg crinkles his nose and raises his eyebrows. The gesture makes him look fey.

At the conclusion of the prandial course, Katherine asks the group if they would like coffee and dessert immediately or if they would prefer to wait. They all say they are

satiated and need a break. They thank her profusely for what they have already eaten. They are sincere, dear friends. She knows that. If the food had been bad, they would not have said so, but they also would not have been overly complimentary.

Jane and James, almost simultaneously, say they'll clear the table, rinse the plates and stick them into the dishwasher. Katherine does not protest. She excuses herself. Ted and Gregg move in the direction of the stereo. Katherine steps out of the open back door.

The night is breezy, resinous. The air purls against her hair and face. She feels it funnel inside her skirt, enter her pubic hairs, pass through, down her legs. The air on her skin is cold but reassuring. Her goose bumps are hidden by the dark. She wishes she had brought a cigarette outside with her, for she does not want to go back inside to retrieve one. She stands there, a tremulous shiver about her. She crosses her arms and gently rubs her shoulders. She looks at the trees. The leaves are still gone, but she knows summer will deliver them far too soon.

Gregg walks up beside her.

"Aren't you freezing?" he asks softly, an apology for his intrusion.

Katherine does not look at him before answering. She is afraid to. "No," she finally says. "It feels good. Before we know it, it will be too hot."

"Yeah, but then before you know that, it will be too cold," he says.

Katherine turns to him. Her eyes are wide. She is taller than most men, the same height as her husband. Gregg is two inches taller, thin as a sapling. He has put on a fleece sweatshirt.

Katherine does not speak. What she is feeling is not verbal.

"The others sent me as their emissary to request your prompt return," Gregg says.

“They seem to think it’s not the same without you.” Katherine sees that he is more confident in private than in public. She longs to run her fingers from the space between his eyebrows, downward, to the tip of his nose.

“Ted has decided he wants to play charades,” Gregg says. “He said you have to be on his team. Something about you being his inspiration.”

Katherine cannot remember wanting a man as much as she wants Gregg now, in this moment, in this place. She wants to step out of her skirt, her sneakers, her shirts, to disrobe convention and follow him across the threshold of his choosing. She wants him to enter her, slowly, inexorably, to fill her. She knows that what she says now will stay with her forever. Or will it? She is not sure. She hesitates. Her mind is like sun on a frozen lake.

## SUNRISE IN BELIZE

Jake started to descend from the elevated poster bed. He stopped and turned to his sleeping bride, a woman as physically beautiful as she was sexually repressed. Despite his frustration from the preceding night, his inability again to achieve her pleasure, and, as a result, his own, he leaned his neck downward and, with his lower lip, tenderly brushed the freckle at the canopy of her cleavage. She stirred, moaned, and slept on. With the sheets tousled about her knees, he scanned her body. She was wearing one of his faded dress shirts, and a thong, which she must have replaced during the night. Apart from freckles, a few fey moles, there were no imperfections; she was tall, 5' 11", with a chorus girl's legs, and the god-given assets of a playmate who did not require airbrushing. She was amazing, inspiring — art personified. How, he wondered, could sex elicit her unease? How, he wondered, could she take it or leave it, a phrase he replayed over and over in his head, a phrase which she had confided to him on their first night together two years before, a night more passionate for the absence of intercourse, a night marked by the marriage of their mouths and tongues, a taste indelible.

He kissed the lid of her closest eye. He watched the eyelash flutter. Her iris was a green and yellow color; the word lupine rose to his mind before the eye closed and she nestled away. He felt like sighing. He was a 32-years-old now, a married man.

He descended from the bed, and stepped through the diaphanous curtain to the mahogany floor; he thought to walk to the bathroom, to urinate, but he did not want to miss his first Belizean sunrise.

Before he opened the cabana's front door, made of bamboo, he looked back at her — his wife, the second he girl he had loved, the one he had married, the two so wildly different. He thought to carry his new wife onto the deck with him, to cradle her in his arms over the threshold again, as he had done when they arrived at this resplendent resort, and thereby be more than other men, or at least separate from them, but he did not.

He opened the door, quietly closed it behind him.

The landscape was draped in albescence, languorous, still part of the night. He had not missed any of the sunrise, but he felt it close, like stage curtains about to open. He poured coffee from the white thermos that lay on a wicker tray beside the door, alongside pastries and fruit salad. As he poured his coffee, inhaled its aroma, he noticed the profusion of indigenous fruits inside the glass bowl: papaya, mango, guava, banana, pineapple, tamarind fruit. He felt his appetite stir, but he would wait to eat. Becca would want him to wait.

He moved a few paces forward, feeling the planks' roughness on his feet. He pressed his body against the bough-branched railing that was affixed to wooden stanchions by rope cords. Jake was tall, 6' 2", and taut of body, and so, to get comfortable, he moved a pace backward and placed his elbows on the railing, extending his body over it, using both hands to now cup the mug.

Beneath him, beyond the long narrow pool and the thatched poolside bar, a slight solitary woman stood at what appeared to be the intersection of the sea and the plage. Her hands were on her hips, yet her posture was not pensive; it seemed she, too, awaited the sunrise; her silhouette would accompany it, perhaps add to it. Her stance recalled a vision of Ann — already the second time he had remembered her this morning. The contrast

between the women was palpable, the paradox intriguing. While Ann was diminutive, shy, so reserved of personality, Becca was voluptuous, extroverted, a creature charismatic. In bed, it was the reverse: Becca was the tender one, Ann the firecracker.

He wished he and Ann were still friends. He would like to talk to Ann about Becca, how to get Becca to enjoy a union as erotic as it was loving. Yet when he and Ann broke up three years ago, a year before he met Becca, they ceased to exist in any capacity. Though it was Ann's decision to move on, it had been his decision to end all aspects of their relationship. She did not have the words to inspire him, and he did not have the foundation to ground her. Ex-lovers can't be friends — he knew that.

He had told Becca a few stories about Ann, not about the brilliant blowjobs Ann had repeatedly given him, not about the endless positions they had discovered, not about the way she had masturbated him with two hands, as if she were wringing a towel, but about her intellect and her shyness, and above all, paradoxically, her conventionality. Becca said she sounded nice, boring but nice, said she'd like to meet her.

After their relationship's end, Ann had gone to business school and he had begun a Ph.D. program in Comparative Literature — a juxtaposition that symbolized their contradiction outside of the bedroom.

These musings reminded Jake that he had promised himself to maintain his academic momentum, not let it slide too much, even if this was his honeymoon. Two weeks ago, in early December, he had passed his comps; his committee members were again his friends, excited about his dissertation topic: *Transcendental Fiction: a Reclassification of a Selection of Post-World War 11 Writers*. Jake would argue that Bowles, Genet, Kerouac, Lowry, Oë, and even Camus, found their philosophical underpinnings not with

the existentialists, but with Emerson and the transcendentalists. If Jake could just read for a few hours each day by the pool, he'd keep his focus; he'd have the first draft of the dissertation completed by the end of the summer, have it submitted by Thanksgiving.

The sun began to come up, egg yolk yellow, as slowly as if someone were hauling it up with a string. Light striations of purple and pink glissaded before extinguishing themselves to transparency. Even though Jake and Becca had chosen this time to come to southern Belize — the Yucatan's periphery — between the rainy season and the dry season, when the temperature was supposed to be ideal, Jake predicted the day would be warmer than usual, not torrid, just still and impassive, requiring many cool beers, many dips in the pool and sea. By lunchtime, even the few cirrus clouds that flanked the horizon would seek a breeze.

As the sun rose, animal sounds broke around him. He heard the rasps of howler monkeys in fig trees, the squawks of chachalacas, the warbling of parakeets. He espied a keel-billed toucan on a nearby gumbolimbo tree, though it made no noise. It was all he had expected, like the guidebooks promised. He scanned the resort — the red-tiled terra cotta roof, the green awning of the clubhouse, its wide wraparound verandah, the winding path to the individual chalets, a few completely embowered in jungle.

Becca had spent hours choosing the right spot for their idyll, searching for a common daydream. She had finally settled on this secluded oceanfront resort north of Placencia, toward the bottom of a 12-mile long peninsula, nearly the entire length of which was fringed with uninterrupted beach. She did not know that Jake had prodded her toward picking Placencia because he and Ann had been due to visit Placencia shortly before their break-up. Jake considered this trip both closure and beginning.

He turned to his right and looked to the rear of the resort. A sugarcane field emerged, then a citrus grove, then a breadth of lagoon, then forest — perhaps a logwood, mahogany, or chicle orchard — further beyond, at the edge of his vision's range, the piedmont and the foggy emergence of the Maya mountains. This was paradise. A cliché yes, but a good one.

He swiveled back to the pool and sea. The girl, the doppelganger of Ann's physique, became an umbra before the sun, blocking out a sliver of its midsection. Her outline bisected two palm trees, as if she had measured the precise middle of the trees' tangent. The beach around her turned from gray to gypsum white. The sea coruscated, dazzled as if the entirety of its surface had become a shoal of schooling fish. This dazzling made him recall the dovetailing orgasms he and Ann used to have.

He thought to walk down to her, introduce himself, stroll in the demure surf with her. He did not. He was married now, and Becca would be waking soon. He would like her to wake to a dream, not from a dream. He left the girl on the beach, the sun now her own, and returned inside with the tray.

Becca was stirring. He sat down beside her, the tray balanced on his lap. He listened to the night leave her. He wanted to ease inside her the moment she awoke, but her eyes flickered, opened, lingered on him. With his index finger and middle finger, he traced her face, from canthus to cheekbone to chin, with a touch light, like air. She took his hand, studied it for a moment, then, with the interior of her lower lip, she kissed the pleat between his thumb and forefinger. He loved her, very much. More than he had loved Ann.

"Hi," he said softly.



"Hi," she said, her voice still milky from sleep.

He leaned down, kissed her, tasted her dreams. He had made the right choice.

Jake spooned her fresh fruit, laughing when her mouth got too full. Becca giggled like a hoyden without comprehension of sex. Jake was happy, though he would have preferred spending the morning in a less naive state. Not surprisingly, Becca showed no amorous signs; for her, this was breakfast with a best friend the morning after a sleepover. Instead of twirling his chest hairs, investigating his body with the insatiability reserved for newlyweds, she filliped him on the arms and began planning their day, pushing aside the tray. She rose to her knees and overtook him, pinning him, straddling him, as a playground victor, not a libidinous participant.

With time, Jake thought. Be patient. This was the sort of interaction Becca adored, exercises that would ultimately make her trust him all the more, so that, one day, she would give herself freely to him, let herself go. It would happen. She was young, eight years younger. They had all the time they needed.

Jake silenced his critic. Today was not a day for confrontation. Today the weather would cooperate, as would their marital debut. According to Becca, they would spend a bright morning poolside, perhaps wade in the sea, work up an appetite, take an early lunch of conch, ceviche, cucumber and avocado salad, then full but not too full, they would boat to a caye for snorkeling and sundowners before returning to the resort for a lavish lobster dinner. It was to be "beautiful," Becca insisted, utilizing one of her favorite words.

Nothing should spoil her plan. "Sounds perfect," he said, toppling her, reciprocating her pin, demonstrating his superior strength.

"You big bully," she said, masking fear that Jake sensed was always tacit to their games' conclusions.

"I'm going to shower and get ready," Jake said. "I don't suppose you want to join me in the shower?" he added, not able to resist.

"Tempting, but then we'd need a shower after our shower," Becca said. "How about we play later, OK?"

"Sure. We have the rest of our lives to play," Jake said, stepping off her.

"I'm just going to finish my coffee. Leave the shower on when you're done, please?"

"You got it ... damn do you got it," Jake said, trying to leave her on mirthful terms.

Jake twirled his pencil, looked over the top of his book at Becca, poolside with him, supine on her chaise lounge, again asleep, a fashion magazine on the deck beneath her. She wore a beaded thong bikini. Her oiled skin glistened in the piercing sunlight. Her oiled scent mingled with the lime she had earlier squeezed into her already highlighted hair, a combined smell as intoxicating to Jake as the landscape — specifically, the blood-red hibiscus bloom at eyelevel behind Becca. How could she sleep under these circumstances? With so much mystery and magnificence about them? She must still be tired from their large L.A. wedding, and the long flight.

For the umpteenth time, Jake read *The Stranger*, a fresh copy, placing brackets around the key passages, asterisks beside the provocative sentences. He attempted to concentrate. The novel, like Camus' essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," revealed that Camus had taken the Myth of Narcissus, and the existentialism inherent within it, to another level, a transcendental one, in which the principle of creativity, cultivated in nature, saved

the individual from both societal conformity and loneliness. The existentialists had foolishly stopped with loneliness, Jake believed. They hadn't provided an additional stage, a clear solution to loneliness — to its attendant, back-breaking solipsism. Camus had, and his trajectory and solution might parallel the three-stage paradigm interpretive within Emerson: first, a person must escape uniformity by entering into the realm of nature; second, there, in nature, discover creativity and the self; and third, because of creativity, return to the state as a liberated individual, immune to both detachment and further homogeneity, yet still able to merge with the Over-Soul — “that Unity...within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other....”

Jake tried to build his thesis, establish his reasoning's beachhead, but he relinquished concentration. He put down the book. He needed a drink, a Bloody Mary to disarm him, to appease his argument's complications, as well as his sexual frustration. Maybe he would surprise Becca with some mango concoction. She'd like that.

He got up. A Blue Morpho butterfly flitted by. He walked over to the palapa bar where a Garifuna girl, in a starched khaki uniform, with a nametag reading Lucy, was washing glasses. Jake stood in the shade. At first, she didn't notice him. When she bent over to place a martini glass on a lower shelf, Jake could not help but see she did not wear a bra. Her breasts, which were of lighter tone than her public skin, were undersized and pointy. Jake speculated that her nipples, for the very reason they were small, were highly responsive to the touch, to the tweaking, soft licking, and sucking of a partner, whereas Becca's breasts, aesthetically perfect — round, ample, firm — were torpid, dead to herself and thus to him.

"Hello," she said, not catching his gaze. "Thirsty?" she smiled, her teeth as white as the beach's sand.

"Too thirsty, too early," Jake rejoined.

"Well," she paused, her accent British and Creole and Indian and lovely, "Might we help thee out then?"

"I hope so. I do need help," Jake said, feeling his bathing suit twitch, "Bloody Mary help, please," he added.

"And is this all the help you need?" she asked.

Jake smiled. "No," he said, dragging out the word. "I suppose I should get something as well for my wife. Any suggestions?"

"An elixir perhaps," she said.

"Make it a double," Jake said, intrigued by her wit, her background.

"I'll bring them to you," she said.

"Thank you," Jake said. "And maybe a menu, if that's possible?"

"Sure, anything you want," she teased. "Spicy?"

"Excuse me?" Jake asked.

"The Bloody Mary?"

"Um, yeah, please," Jake said. She began to prepare the drinks.

Jake returned to his chaise lounge, depressed the backrest a notch. He was done reading until after his drink's ritual engaged: its arrival and handoff, the stirring, the first eager sips, the rattling of the ice. He lay back in wait and looked around as the day's heat increased. One other couple rested at the pool. They were an older couple. The woman tatted skeins of thread with liverspotted hands, her arms resting on the sides of her

sagging breasts, while the man, his skin matted with silvery-white hair, read the obituaries in a large-print newspaper. Jake sensed they were bored with each other and had been for some time. To Jake's right, on the refectory's verandah, two middle-aged couples ate brunch together within the creeping gloom of jungle — the couples' quietude the consequence of too much booze the night before, not enough water, Jake guessed. Jake exhorted himself to drink water throughout the day.

Out on the beach, a family coexisted within parameters of vacation conformity, the parents and a grandparent reading paperbacks beneath umbrellas, two teenage boys tossing a frisbee, and two younger girls attempting to maneuver a paddleboat around a buoy line.

Lucy walked up, interrupting Jake's observations. She held the tray, on which were the two drinks, Jake's red one, hibiscus-colored, he thought, and a blue one, the same color as the butterfly he had earlier seen. She leaned over. She was testing him, he gauged. She wanted to see if he would, indeed, stare with the lewdness she was now permitting him. He did not. Instead, he took the drinks from the tray and placed them on a rattan and glass table, anything to keep busy.

Becca sat up.

"Oh, hi," Becca said, noticing Lucy. "What a way to wake up, the second time today. I think I like honeymoons. I think I should always remain on honeymoon, don't you agree, Lucy?"

"One was enough for me," Lucy said. "Though you might have yourself a good one here."

"You think?" Becca asked, instantaneous friends with anyone willing.

"He bought you a drink while you were sleeping? That's a start."

"But is it a good drink or a poisoned one?"

"I made it."

"And that means?" Jake chimed in.

"A lifetime of happiness for a gorgeous couple."

"Beautiful," Becca said, clapping her hands, smiling a model's lightening smile, though a smile more sincere, the smile of a duende, Jake thought.

"Here's a menu. I'll return shortly, and take your order," Lucy said, business-like all of a sudden.

"Thanks," Jake and Becca said simultaneously.

Lucy winked at their unanimity before turning, her business posture gone as quickly as it had arrived.

"She's adorable," Becca said.

"Yeah, she's nice," Jake said.

"Let's take our drinks and go walk on the beach. OK?"

"Sure you don't want to order first?"

"No, she likes us. Food won't take long."

Jake was glad for his drink, its cool reprieve from the sun. The beach was almost deserted — to the right soft water, and to the left dense jungle, no other resorts, waterfalls and jaguars, Jake imagined. He held his drink with one hand, and stirred it with the other.

For a while, he and Becca walked in silence, close to the azure water, where the sand was flattest. The tide retrenched on muted terms. For some reason, despite its darker hue

than the higher beach, the sand at the water's edge remained dry, warm, but not too warm that they needed to occasion the water. They walked parallel to the sea, their track straight, driftwood scarce. Jake could see the turtle grass swaying in the shallows. Where the water turned denser, a pelican bobbed heavily, as if about to founder. Overhead, frigate birds, terns and boobys slowly flew away from the beach, perpendicular to it, perhaps toward a rookery on a nearby caye, Jake thought.

After almost a mile, Becca stopped, and touched Jake's arm, saying, "I want to make a toast."

"Uhoh," Jake said, retracting the glass from his mouth, saving his drink's last sip.

"Shush," Becca said, taking his free hand, pulling Jake alongside her so that they both faced the calm yet sparkling sea.

Just then, as Becca began to speak, Jake heard the tearing of tendrils, the echo of laughter. He turned, but the sun glinted, obscuring the source of the noise. He blinked. His eyes quickly adjusted. There, out of the jungle's darkness, stepped a man and a woman.

It was Ann. The afterglow of sex was upon her. Her complexion, normally porcelain, had turned roseate, and would remain so for another hour, unless the shock of this bizarre coincidence whitewashed her.

Jake tried to clear his nonplused mind — the sunrise girl, how had he not known.

Remain relaxed, he urged himself. Acknowledge infinitesimal odds, conjure an image of civility, old-friendship congeniality.

He grabbed Becca and pulled her with him toward the reunion. Ann had stopped, paralyzed. The man stepped beside her, one leg in front of her, concern and confusion on

his broad salesman's face. He was stocky and splay-legged.

"Well, this is fucking funny isn't it?" Jake said, annoyed that his thoughts were often very much different than his speech.

"I beg your pardon" the man said.

"Uh," Ann said. "This is amazing, ludicrous, really surreal."

Still stringing adjectives together when she's nervous, Jake thought.

"Bob," Ann continued, "This is, um, an old friend of mine — Jake — a good friend. I might have mentioned him to you."

An old and good friend huh, Jake thought.

"I don't think so," Bob said pleasantly, more at ease now, "but damn good to meet you, a friend of Ann's and all that, you know how it goes."

"Yeah," Jake said. His voice rasped. He coughed. "Excuse me. Ann, Bob, this is Becca, my wife."

Ann's oceanic blue eyes widened. Bob commenced his round of handshakes, saying "Newlyweds, just like us." He extended his paw of a hand and squeezed Jake's hand a little too hard.

"Ann, wow, it's great to meet you," Becca said, her enthusiasm genuine. "Really is."

Jake could tell Becca wanted to continue. But she was being cautious, circumspect, waiting to follow Jake's lead. Jake was grateful for her insight, considered putting his arm around her.

"Thanks, you, too," Ann replied. She looked down at her feet.

Then silence. Then an awkward moment. When one of the girls looked up, the other looked down, a strange sort of symbiosis, Jake thought. Jake predicted to himself that



Bob, because his name was Bob, would break the silence.

"Well, shit," Bob said. "I suppose an encounter like this isn't that surprising, with Belize becoming such a hot spot for honeymoons."

"Good point, Bob," Jake said, assuming confrere compatibility. "Not a bad place to come."

"It's beautiful, isn't it, Ann?" Becca said, unable to contain herself.

Jake thought Ann would like to have rejoined, "It was," but instead, Ann searched for a word, and said, "Divine," a word Jake had never heard her say before.

"So what do you two do?" Bob asked.

"I don't do much, Bob," Jake said. "Becca, on the other hand, teaches English at a prep school. She's the bread winner."

"What about your Ph.D.?" Ann asked.

"He just passed his comps at the end of last semester," Becca said, too quickly. "All that's left now is the dissertation."

"Congratulations," Ann said.

"What about you two?" Jake asked, changing the subject.

"I own a direct market sporting goods supply company. We sell to youth leagues and YMCAs and clubs, employ, oh, only about 60 people, but we're growing. And Ann here is riding high on Wall Street, an analyst specializing in oil and gas."

"So, times are good then," Jake said, not asking a question.

Ann looked away.

"That they are. They are indeed. I'll tell you what, how's this for a suggestion," Bob asked, his eyes taking in everyone slowly, like a professional public speaker. "Annie and

I" — Annie, who the fuck's Annie, Jake wanted to interject — "are planning on taking one of the boats to one of those islands this afternoon, for a bit of snorkeling, and grabbing a few of those Belikin ales. They're good, aren't they, Jake?"

"They're great, Bob," Jake said, not sure if Bob mean the islets or the beers.

"How about you two joining us? It's our last day here. We've been here a week already, I know Annie's probably tired of me by now and would give her eye teeth for some different company, especially an old friend. Whattayasay?"

"Bec?" Jake asked.

"Sounds super to me," Becca said.

"Ann, does that work for you?" Jake asked.

"Of course," she said, too hurriedly. "It'll be good to catch up."

"All right then," Bob said. "How about you guys enjoy the rest of your walk, and let's say we meet at the pier in an hour ... make it an hour and a half ... 12:30 on the dot," he added, looking at his oversized scuba watch, which he probably bought the day before their trip.

Another awkward moment.

Jake wasn't sure from Bob's peremptory tone if Bob expected an answer.

"Swell," Bob said. "We'll get a lunch packed, wine and beer, the whole hog. How's that sound?"

"That sounds swell, Bob," Jake said, knowing he shouldn't have mimicked the word swell, shouldn't have used Bob's name again.

Ann flashed Jake a dirty look. Jake returned it with a contrite one.

"Good. We'll see you then," Bob said, gathering Ann's petite body to him, setting off

down the beach with trudging steps — a man of action, Jake thought, the most annoying kind — Ann almost running to keep up.

She hasn't gained any weight, Jake thought. She looks good, the same.

"This is wild, isn't it?" Becca said.

"Speaking of wild," Jake said, "how about we walk into the jungle, find a waterfall, and act like honeymooners?"

"We don't have time. We're due to have lunch with your ex-girlfriend, remember?"

"How could I forget?"

"She does seem nice. This might just be fun."

"For you maybe."

From the dock, Jake helped Becca shimmy into the bow of a 20-foot dory. Bob repeated this chivalry with Ann. The girls sat on the center thwart, side by side. Becca initiated their first private conversation, so a tete-a-tete with the husband's ex, Jake wanted to call out. But they seemed content, so Jake silenced himself.

The captain, a mestizo, Jake noticed, paid no attention to the girls, nor to anything to do with the couples' protracted cycle of disembarkation. He reclined astern, atop the cooler, his hand on the outboard's tiller, smoking a handrolled cigarette, staring out at the open water's indigo placidity. He wore a sweat-stained baseball cap, a faded T-shirt and denim cutoffs cinched up with a piece of rope. His feet were unclad. His manner suggested the lethargy, perhaps the complacency, of a skilled mariner, or a craftsman, who's been poor too long, for too many generations. His bearing was not malevolent, as Jake had originally thought, just imperturbable, maybe resigned.

Bob began to get into the boat.

"Are you going to need a hand, Bob?" Jake joked.

"I think I've got it. Thanks though, pal," Bob said, his leather-tooled espadrilles awkwardly feeling for the hull's fiberglass surface, unaware that Jake's statement had been uttered with good-natured sarcasm.

"Do you need help in?" Lucy said to Jake, as she walked up to the end of the dock lugging the picnic basket.

Jake and she smiled at each other.

"Always," Jake said.

Jake jumped into the prow with feline grace, and took the heavy basket from Lucy. Bob, in turn, took the basket from Jake, almost dropping it in the water during the exchange. "I'll find a spot for that," Bob said.

"Good food?" Jake asked of Lucy, ignoring Bob.

"I didn't prepare it, so it can't be as good as that Bloody Mary, but I bet you're easy to please," she said, quickly adding, "A big tub of fresh ceviche, plantains, shark sandwiches with homemade Hollandaise sauce, yup, the new chef might just stick, he's got some talent. He can cook, too."

Jake laughed.

"You should join us," Jake said.

"Can't. Got to make drinks so I can buy my own drinks."

"OK, will we see you tonight?"

"You will, I'm afraid, double shift."

"Sorry for you, good for us. See you then."

"Have fun, and Rodrigo," she said, raising her voice, getting the captain's attention.

"Don't drown our honeymooners."

"No," Rodrigo said, and that was all he said.

Lucy shook her head with friendly annoyance, untied the painter from a cleat on the deck and tossed it to Jake. Jake caught it, watched her return up the deck with runway elan. He liked the shape of her rear end, wondered if it was the same color as her breasts.

Rodrigo started the motor, turned the boat around in a gentle arc, headed in the direction of the Seine River. Jake sat down on the front thwart beside Bob, stowed the painter in a loop at his feet.

"Jake, my man," Bob said. "I told Rodrigo to take us along the shoreline to the river — you guys will like it, lots of wildlife and all that. We'll eat/drink in the boat and birdwatch, the flying kind," he chuckled, "and from there, it's a straight shot, no more than 30 minutes to the island for some snorkeling. How's that sound? It's going to be a great day."

"Primo Bob. Good plan."

Bob patted Jake on the back. It was apparent to Jake that Bob didn't know he used to fuck his wife — well. Jake needed a beer, but decided to wait until they arrived at the river's mouth and started lunch.

Jake was pleased they were touring a section of the coast before accelerating toward the nearby islet. Rodrigo stayed close enough to shore to enable them to have clean views of the landscape, yet far enough out for them to be safe, away from sandbars, outcroppings, hidden headlands. They passed a few other resorts, each fronted with palm trees, swept beach, and baking guests. Past these contiguous resorts, Rodrigo veered

around a bight in the shoreline and, again, Jake found himself, beside uninhabited land. Jake was captivated by its purity, oblivious to the girls' discussion, and to Bob's well-intentioned but stale one-liners.

This littoral landscape encompassed a pine savanna, then a sedge savanna, then a band of rainforest, as if they were exhibits, adjacent dioramas. Jake wished he owned a camera. Perhaps he trusted his memory too much.

Past the rainforest, the water muddied slightly. The current quickened. In the distance, Jake could make out the sea and the river's confluence, its steamy and turbid entanglement. Rodrigo slowed the dory, let it sluice toward the Seine. He yawned and Jake watched him with curiosity. Was this man, this stranger, confident or impertinent, Jake asked himself. Rodrigo slowly knelt down, lazily stood up, a small silver anchor in one hand, the anchor's frayed halyard tailing portside behind his bare feet. With his free hand, Rodrigo idled the boat in advance of the river's percolating entrance. He yawned again, as if stoned. He threw the anchor overboard — in a lasso motion — the line spooled out, seized — the fluke set. The dory spun on its new axis, then drifted calmly on the river's outskirts, still upon the smooth sea's silent goodbye. Lunch would not be buffeted. The dory was in perfect position, as close to the churning confluence as it could be without being part of it.

Jake scrutinized the riverine scenery, allowing himself to imagine it as much as preserve it: the emergence of the mangrove swamp, its cloistered denizens — peccaries, tapirs, ocelots, pumas, crocodiles, river otters, agoutis, coatmundis, anteaters, boa constrictors, fer de lances, parrots — like specters, an entire unseen, unsullied world. Jake wanted to swim from the boat, join it, lose himself within it. Instead, he joined the party.

"This is beautiful," Becca said to everyone.

"It is," Ann said happily, "the second time almost as much as the first."

Jake saw her glance at him, then look away at the scenery. He tried to decipher the line — the word 'almost' — and the look, but their combined meaning remained abstruse.

"I knew you guys would love it," Bob said.

"There's a lot to love," Jake said.

"You can say that again," Bob said.

"Jake, don't say 'you can say that again,'" Becca said.

Ann laughed. So did Bob. So did Jake. Jake felt better, though he did not know why. He still didn't have an answer for the look and the line.

"Lunch and beers it is," Jake said.

As if on cue, Rodrigo handed opened Belikins down the keel of the boat, then began unwrapping the butcher paper from the shark sandwiches, placing them on paper plates, and ladling out ceviche and plantains on the plates beside the sandwiches. Before he passed along the platefuls of food, he cut a large lime in half with a fish fillet knife and squeezed the two halves across the mounds of ceviche.

Everyone was quiet while they ate, lost to the food's freshness and the view's prominence, so different from L.A.'s choked freeways — a place where aqueducts are called overpasses. So much better here, Jake thought. When he got his Ph.D., those three pompous letters that overnight made you brilliant, he'd get a job at a small university in the Deep South, somewhere on the Gulf Coast, maybe the Atlantic, the Carolinas. Becca would understand. She could teach high school anywhere. She'd leave her family. They'd start their own. He wouldn't think of Ann again, wouldn't fantasize about her or his coed

students, or flirtatious girls like Lucy. He'd be a family man. He'd be happy. He'd be at peace.

He looked at Becca. Her skin was already turning brown, while Ann's was pale, covered with traces of creamy sunscreen. Jake took a long pull from his beer. Sadly, everything was a plan, every day was about the next day, or yesterday, never today. Sartre said that existence precedes essence. He should have said that creativity precedes essence, and explained that creativity can be found only by escaping into nature — leaving plans and people behind, at least for a time.

"On the bank, there," Becca said, pointing. "Aren't those black orchids?"

"They sure are," Bob said. "And I bet you didn't know they're the national flower of Belize?"

"Actually, I did," Becca said. "It seems, apart from planning the wedding, all we did the last few months was read up on Belize."

"Jake and his reading. The nonsense we used to read together," Ann said.

Jake wasn't sure if she was being cruel or diplomatic.

"You two used to read together, Annie?" Bob asked.

"Just poetry, Bob," Jake said.

Ann's eyes scolded Jake. Becca's eyes looked hurt. Bob's eyes were bemused.

"What do ya mean by that, Jake?" Bob asked, his eyes showing grainy in the sunlight.

"You see, Ann and I were in the same bookclub, and one of the other members made us, every now and then, all read poetry, which no one else wanted to, not even good poetry, stuff about lesbian butterflies and waterfall orgasms, remember, Ann? What was that weird girl's name?" Jake asked.



Ann almost laughed, then, playing along, said, "Beatrice, I think. She wore wool cardigans in summer. She used to put a filter on her menthols, remember?"

"Of course I remember. I remember everything," Jake said. "You know that."

Ann didn't respond.

Just then, a large form emerged from the wash not far from the boat. Jake recognized the type of animal instantaneously, but chose not to say anything. The animal stopped, just a few yards from the boat, and rolled as if saying hello. It wallowed luxuriously in the water's warmth.

"What the hell's that?" Bob said.

Everyone stood except Jake and Rodrigo.

Jake wondered who would answer first, Becca or Ann. He was sure each knew the answer. He looked at the girls collimated together, tall, short, dark, light.

"Looks like a goddamn cow," Bob said. You sound like one Jake thought.

Ann wouldn't say anything now, Jake calculated, she wouldn't upstage her husband, she was far too analytical for that.

"That's not an orchid is it Bob," Jake said with goading brinkmanship.

"Very funny," Bob said.

Becca looked at Jake, peeved.

Again a pause.

"It's a manatee," Ann said. "A river cow."

So, business school helped, Jake thought, made her more aggressive. Good for her. But was there an inverse correlation between her speech and her sexuality? Was the girl

who had been so demure still a firecracker? Was she one with Bob, or had she just been with him?

The manatee swam alongside the boat. Jake saw that its trunk was cicatrized, old gashes from propellers. Nonetheless, the docile animal seemed to nod hello. Jake thought to pet it, reconsidered; the animal smiled goodbye, rolled again, swam away from the boat, out into the sea, in search of food.

"Spectacular," Becca said, watching the animal depart, "really beautiful."

"It sure was," Ann said.

"Well, I'll be," Bob said.

Jake wanted the girls to hug. He wanted to watch. He wanted Ann to teach Becca.

Everyone sat back down. A black vulture scudded high above.

The sun soldered the water, sparks pinging upon its surface. It was time to swim, time to head to the caye, Jake decided. He waited for Bob to say the word, realize his itinerary, and, as such, theirs.

Jake looked back toward the river with patience. He gazed upstream, along the water-lilled banks. And, far up river, in an eddy, Jake noticed a white substance, like spent toothpaste, swirl about.

"Rodrigo," he asked pointing, "up there, on the right, in that pool, what is that in the water? Is it ambergris?"

Rodrigo looked, shook his head. "No, it is discharge. It comes from the shrimp farms. They say it doesn't hurt the river. They are wrong."

"I see," Jake said louder. "I'm sorry."

"It is not your farm. And money must be made."

"On that note," Bob said, "should we head to clearer water, go to the island?"

"Let's, I'm ready to swim," Becca said, reuniting the group.

Rodrigo started the motor, steered them the way the manatee had swum.

"Rodrigo, before you open up this bad boy, will you open me up another beer?" Jake asked.

Rodrigo removed his hand from the tiller, stood up and reached into the cooler. He pulled a beer out, flecks of ice dripping from the bottle's green exterior as he popped the top against an oarlock on the gunwale. The beer was passed down to Jake. Both Becca and Ann looked at him with concern. When the beer reached him, Jake took a long impudent draught. Head foamed out of the top; he drank again.

Rodrigo made good time, skimming the dory across the deeper water's sleepiness. Jake finished his beer, thought of depositing it overboard, but reconsidered, kept hold of it instead. Even with the dory's propulsion, the limpid air felt warm, embracing. No clouds were evident, just the sun and its refulgence. Jake watched the sun shine through the light blue sky onto the darker blue of the water, water which beheld a color he struggled to name. He thought cerulean, turquoise, royal blue, shellacked royal blue, yet these classifications were unsatisfactory, evanescent, for the color changed with each contacted beam from the sun. And although the water remained vitreous, sections of it were splintered, like hairline cracks on glass.

Jake thought of all the work that remained ahead of him, how specialized it would become, how in the forthcoming years he would spend most of his time with Emerson and a coterie of six fiction writers, and some English department's mix of meretricious egos. Could he brook such a life when perhaps what he wanted was to remain in Belize,

on primeval waters? When he wanted to fish for his food, forgo responsibility, make love to islanders and natives, be an artist, be Gauguin, not just another pedantic, captious, supercilious critic publishing books even his colleagues wouldn't read? Would Becca join him? Would she give up society's dreams? Would Ann visit?

Rodrigo slowed the boat, the sea still Jake's primary view, with no land, no change Jake could detect. Up ahead, arisen from nowhere, a road tinged lavender and viridescent snaked upon the water. Within it, clung flotsam of all sorts: cans, a truck tire, milk jugs, a bole, coconuts, netting, dead fish, plankton.

Rodrigo threaded the dory slowly through this pelagic junkyard, then picked up speed again. An image of the Gulf Stream appeared in Jake's mind, as did Hemingway's *Islands in the Stream*, the first third of which, the Bimini part, had always struck Jake as being the best thing Hemingway had ever written, even better than *The Old Man and the Sea*. Jake would have pursued a dissertation on Hemingway if every topic hadn't already been exhausted.

"There're the cayes," Becca said. "Wow, fucking wow."

Ann laughed. Had they become friends?

"Not bad, Jake, huh?" Bob said, slapping Jake's knee, demanding friendship commensurate with the girls'.

"Very special," Jake said.

They passed around a small cay, almost perfectly round, perhaps an atoll, Jake surmised, imagining a lagoon, Brooke Shields in a palm frond.

Rodrigo paused the boat a few hundred yards out from another cay.

"Will this cay be all right?" Rodrigo asked.

"I'll say," Becca said. She clasped Ann's arm, and shuddered. Ann looked at her with delight.

This caye's shoreline was jagged. Its palm trees bent leeward, toward the islet's interior. On the beach's ridgeline, before the scrub, and then the chaparral, Jake could make out two wooden cabana's perched on stilts, shuttered in disuse — a camp for flyfishermen to rest between catches and creels of bonefish and tarpon, he assumed.

Rodrigo stood up, scanned the water, appeared to take his bearings. He asked Jake and the other occupants to stay seated while he navigated the boat ashore. Jake crouched down, not wanting to obscure Rodrigo's view, and peered over the gunnel. The aquarium of water was so clear, he felt within it. Rodrigo wended the dory, expertly, delicately, through a gut in the colorful corral.

When the boat came near the shore, when all Jake saw were the wavy contours of sandy floor, Rodrigo gunned the motor, and the boat skidded gently onto the beach, half in the water, half without. Jake climbed out, and offered a hand to Bob, then Becca, then Ann, feeling the soft skin of Ann's hand for the first time in many years, skin which had once made him pulse with impossible heat. Jake watched the three of them congregate together in admiration of the lonely scenery. He then turned back to the boat.

Rodrigo hefted the cooler to Jake, then Rodrigo exited the boat carrying a canvas bag, which held the snorkeling gear. Rodrigo offered to take a side of the cooler, but Jake chose to carry the cooler by himself. The strain of the effort felt good, and he set the cooler high up on the deserted beach beneath the shade of a palm tree stand. With his self-appointed task completed, Jake removed a bottled water, and drank it quickly, discarding the spent bottle back into the cooler. He moved above the bank, strode upon a

mixture of grass and sand toward the caye's center, in search of a spot to urinate and regroup.

As he pissed on the exposed roots of a palmeto, Jake snuffed the scent of guano wafting from the far side of the caye. He looked in that direction, and on the tops of trees, he saw many nests, nests of different sizes — perhaps the nests of ibis, storks, egrets, herons. He wondered if their communities lived in harmony or in war. He promised himself, when he returned to the group, he would feign interest and happiness. To accomplish this, he would need another beer, many more beers.

Rodrigo lay in the shade beside the cooler, possibly asleep, his baseball cap's brim tilted over his face. Bob, Ann and Becca stood in the flats, waiting for Jake, their backs to him, each holding flippers, a mask, and a snorkel. Jake took another beer, drank it while he studied their shapes. Bob's was standardized, the lats and beginning lard of a thirtysomething male; Becca's was perfect, soft and hard — he wanted to ravish it; Ann's was petite, dimorphic to him — he wanted to rend it.

He drained his beer.

He picked up his snorkeling paraphernalia and walked into tepid water that immediately became warm.

"Nice of you to join us," Becca said.

Jake spat into his mask.

"Sorry, unlike the rest of you, I chose not to pollute the water."

"Interestingly enough," Becca said, "if you don't drink beer after beer, you don't have to use the restroom all that often."

Ann coughed. Bob looked away. Jake chose to let the subject drop. If she'd learn how

to suck his dick, he wouldn't have to drink so much, he thought angrily to himself. He busied himself by putting his flippers on.

"It doesn't get much better than this, hey Jake," Bob said.

"It's about to," Jake said, slipping on his mask, pushing off into the water.

He puckered his lips around the snorkel's mouthpiece and entered the silent world below.

He floated above barrel sponges of many colors, watched horse-eye jacks, angelfish, and blue tang fish flicker about the sponges. Two hermit crabs scampered along the sandy bottom, kicking up a cloud of dust. A spiny lobster seemed annoyed by the sediment's disturbance, the growing pother.

Jake crossed over beds of lettuce corral, star corral and brain corral, and saw permit, redband parrotfish, and a moray eel. He continued to move above deeper water, the bottom 20 feet down or more, but still pellucid, the elkhorn corral orange and white and pure. He hovered over gorgonian fans, among which grouper swam, then over a giant anemone, its fingers weaving in the depth's currents like wraiths.

After a time, Jake found himself far from shore, at the edge of a shelf. There, a coral wall began, then a pinnacle, and, finally, the pitch-black abyss. He stopped, pushed his mask onto his forehead, treaded water. He looked behind him, to where he had come from. Far off, much closer to shore, the other three snorkeled together. Behind them, Jake could barely make out the beached boat and Rodrigo's prostrate form.

He turned back around, unafraid of his isolation. He could see the barrier reef in the distance. Beyond it, spindrift rose in the air like smoke, as the combers crashed in completion of their long journeys. Farther out, upon the swells, he could see the blips of

fishing boats trolling for tuna, marlin, mutton snapper, king mackerel, wahoo, barracuda, whatever else was contained within these teeming waters.

He felt a breeze on his face. Suddenly, without warning, without sound, Jake saw a fin slice the water before him, not 20 yards away. A chill hit him, but he did not feel panic. He took his snorkel in his right hand. He held it firmly, as if it were a stiletto, or a makeshift blackjack. Go for the eyes he told himself. Whatever happens, be proud.

He stayed still. He waited.

The fin lowered into the water. Jake pushed down his mask, back over his eyes, and peered into the water. He would not be the victim of a coup de main. He would know his attacker.

At first, he saw nothing, just the water's tranquil clarity. Then a barrel shape emerged, speeding toward him — a gray blur, a slipstream upon it. Jake sank into the water and crouched. He raised the snorkel, and with composed anticipation, accepted inevitability. This is what Jake thought: the water is warm and fluid and beautiful, and I am ready.

The animal careered, continued forward. Jake timed his strike, clenched the snorkel.

And then, at the imminence of his stabbing blow, the animal slowed. It tacked around him. And all Jake could do was smile, loosen his white-knuckled grip, and shutter his eyes.

Jake rose to the surface and turned. He opened his eyes slowly, watched as the glorious animal leapt from the water, its saltation exultant and free. A bottle-nosed dolphin in salute. Salutation and goodbye. Jake breathed deeply the briny air, began to breaststroke back to shore. He wondered whom he would tell of this experience? Would it be Becca, or Ann? Or neither?



Jake stepped from the water onto the shore. He looked around. Rodrigo slept on, while the others sat on the beach, drinking beer, their feet dug into the sand. Jake felt serene, taciturn. A beer would be good, he thought, celebratory of something.

After grabbing a beer, he joined their semi-circle, sitting between Becca and Anne.

"So?" Becca asked.

Jake saw the dolphin dance once more in his head. He hesitated before speaking, took a sip of his beer. "It was beautiful," he finally said.

They all looked at him, but he looked past them, toward the horizon. The sun had softened, descended a bit. Jake drank his beer, and for a while spoke no further, though he listened to their chatter, idle and ambient as it was. He wasn't yet ready for inclusion. He would be soon.

Rodrigo deposited them at the end of the dock. Jake tipped him 20 American dollars, money over and above the resort's \$100 rental fee, which Bob had earlier insisted upon paying. Jake thanked Rodrigo. Rodrigo nodded and steered the boat, on water now cyan, toward a slip where he would wipe it down and secure it for the night before walking miles to his hut in the interior, stopping only to drink pulque and smoke spliffs, or so Jake envisioned. The group walked up the dock in single file, Bob in front, then the girls, Jake in the rear. Over their heads, above the resort, Jake glimpsed a cerise streak festoon the mountains' orange crown. He thought to stop, install the group likewise to his sunset, but he did not. He still felt apart.

Milling at the pool, Bob suggested everyone take showers before reuniting for dinner. Ann and Becca agreed. Jake said nothing. He listened to wood chips catch and draw in

the outdoor barbecue pit. He heard what he thought was the tapping of a woodpecker.

Bob and Ann disappeared into the darkening jungle.

"Are you coming?" Becca asked Jake.

"No, I don't think so. I'm not going to shower. I'll wait here," Jake said

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. You go on, freshen up. I'll see you in a bit."

"We could shower together?" Becca posed.

"I'm going to stay here," Jake answered.

"OK, then I'll hurry up," she said, toeing up to Jake, kissing him on his cheek. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

"Take your time," Jake said, looking past her at the bar.

"I can't wait for dinner," Becca said before leaving. "Did you hear the traps held beaucoup lobsters, and they're going to grill 'em all up for us?"

"Sounds good."

"Good? Great, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"Are you all right?"

"Sure."

"I had fun today."

"Me too."

"OK. See you in a few minutes. I'll bring you a jacket."

"Fine," Jake said.

"And don't forget, I still have that toast prepared."

He didn't watch her depart. He no longer knew what he wanted. He didn't know why he had married. He thought to go swimming in the sea. He didn't.

Jake took a seat on one of the ladderbacked mahogany barstools. No barkeep tended. Waiters set up tables on the pool's aggregate path, linen tablecloths, silver place settings, candle centerpieces, then lined the path with tiki torches. A young and eager chef, bedecked in an apron and chef's hat, barked orders and inspected the red-glowing coals. Night had arrived.

Lucy appeared behind the bar.

"Alone again at my bar, huh?" Lucy said.

"You're here," Jake said.

"Wrong side of the bar I'm afraid."

"You could climb over. It's not that high."

"What would your women say?"

"Women?"

"Becca and Ann. One becomes two. Lucy can tell."

"And that means?"

"Well, either I'm losing my touch, or you like that girl Ann more than might be natural for a brand-new husband, or you know her from before. It's the way you look at her."

"Not bad. You're right. Long before Becca, Ann and I dated."

"Dated or shared lives?"

"The latter."

"Sometimes, I think the world is nothing but coincidences."

"Yeah."

"Drink?"

"Scotch, Johnnie Walker Black, rocks."

Lucy poured his Scotch, placed it on a cocktail napkin on the polished counter before him, and said, "Be careful tonight, my friend. Remember, you can always take paradise with you." She left the bottle on the counter. She exited the bar and went to help the chef with the dinner's preparations.

Jake wasn't sure what she meant.

"Cheers," he said aloud to no one, swirling his drink along the walls of the glass.

Jake remained quiet at dinner, drank Scotch, spoke only when a question was addressed him. The others talked about the perfect day, the delight of the food: tuna sashimi to start, sliced straight from newly dead fish onto the patrons' plates, then an endless buffet of grilled buttered lobster tails, rice, salad, green beans, squash, cassava bread, and more plantains. Jake didn't eat much, but he did pretend to go often to the buffet table, so he could surreptitiously refill his Scotch at the bar. He was getting drunk, but he did not care. And it was a hidden drunk.

While the others ordered coffee, Jake excused himself once more, refilled his Scotch, and walked down to the beach. The chaise lounges and beach chairs had been stacked for the night, so he sat directly on the sand, not far from water he could hear more than see. The night was moonless but star-studded, pinpricks on velvet. Jake thought he spotted Cassiopeia and Orion's belt, but he was not sure, for he had never been very good with constellations.

He had been there a long time when he heard footsteps approach. He did not look to their source. He waited, his eyes still out to the sky. A figure sat beside him.

It was Ann.

"Hi, former lover," she said, placing her palms upon her raised knees.

She had always been funnier, more confident, within two-person intimacy.

"What's up?" Jake said.

"You tell me."

"Just life, man, his memories, the understanding sea, all that stilted bullshit."

"Have you been writing?"

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

"Yeah, right here in the sand."

Jake gritted his teeth, clenched his jaw, irritated that she felt entitled to question him this personally, this quickly.

"You know what I mean. Don't be a prick."

"No, I'm a critic now. I don't write. I read writers who do."

"You could do both."

"Anyway," he said, relaxing his jaw. "What about you, rich, happy, at peace with the world?"

"Trying," she said.

"Sounds boring," he said.

"Sometimes," she said

Jake looked at her. She looked at him. Even in the stygian night, her eyes gleamed blue.

Jake thought to put his hands on hers. He had never been so confused. He knew he should speak. He trusted his speech more than his actions. He paused, opened his mouth.

"Is he better than me?" he blurted.

Silence.

"Different," Ann finally said.

"What does that mean?"

"What do you want me to say, he's my husband?"

"I don't care. Say whatever the truth is."

"You already know it. You were there, remember?"

"Well, are you happier?"

"I don't know. More content, I suppose. No regrets."

"I see."

"Come on, you know we didn't work."

Jake didn't say anything. The ocean rustled.

"Do you and Becca work?" Ann continued.

"Not yet."

"Can you work?"

"I don't know. Only the dolphin knows."

"Say what?"

"Never mind."

"She's worried about you, you know. I think she went to the room looking for you?"

"Funny that you found me first then, huh?"

"Jesus, you haven't changed a bit, have you? Still a mercurial prick, playing semiotics with the world."

"Semiotics, nice word. You learn that in business school?"

Silence.

"You know I love you," Ann said. "And it seems, amazingly, so does someone else."

Silence.

"I suppose a blowjob for old-times' sake is out of the question?"

"Tempting. But I'm going to have to pass."

"Yeah, your mouth has probably gotten too small."

Ann laughed, then stretched her mouth so wide it cordoned her neck.

Jake laughed.

"I better go," Ann said.

"Yeah."

"You know, Jake, she's beautiful. She's nice, she's smart. She's way too good for you. I don't see why you just don't give it a chance, make the commitment?"

"I married her, didn't I."

"That's not what I mean."

"I know."

"Well then, I'll see you in the morning, OK? Coffee's on me."

"It's inclusive."

"I know."

Jake laughed.

Ann stood up, leaned down and kissed him on his head. She walked back toward the resort. Jake stayed seated on the sand, reflecting on what Ann had said. It seemed he had only to answer one question: what did he want? And he had better answer it now before their lives got away from them.

He opened the door to the chalet, tarried in the jamb. The lights from both nighttables shone. The bed's netting was open. Becca lay on the bed unclothed, her hair splayed on the pillow. Her eyes opened on him, not to him. It looked as if she had been crying. Jake swallowed and moved toward her, still not sure what he would say, still not sure what he wanted. A newt scurried across the floor.

He sat on the bed beside her, clasped his hands in his lap. She turned her head toward him. Her eyes glistened color, not tears. Jake did not touch her. She did not touch him.

"What was your toast?" Jake asked after a time.

"It had to do with forever," Becca said.

"I see."

Jake looked around the room, at the rough-hewn beams, the adobe walls and mullions, the throwrug's weft. He thought of Ann, and the dolphin, and the novel he had been reading earlier in the day, one he had read so many times before, but one he had never really understood until this moment — "And I, too, felt ready to start life all over again."

Jake breathed deeply, turned back to Becca.



## GIN MARTINIS

Paul sat on his leather couch in the downtown loft he owned, peering out at the ambient lights of downtown, lights, he often thought, that fed not on electricity but on the corrupt and clear-sighted vision of the city's wealthiest inhabitants. It was a Friday, early evening, and he was still within the afterglow of his daily and disciplined physical workout. He sipped champagne, good champagne, Cristal, and he wondered if, with each sip, the lights grew brighter or the gathering winter night just grew darker. He wore corduroys and a wool cardigan. Fur-lined slippers warmed his bare feet. He was freshly showered and shaved. His Brunette hair was still damp. The Living Arts section of the New York Times lay folded and unopened on his lap. As usual, he had worked out at home. No fancy Nautilus equipment. No Pilates. No juice bars. Twenty minutes of dumbbells and thirty minutes on the treadmill. Simple. Straightforward. Expedient.

He had much to celebrate. He and his associate had bought the land for a song, and compensated each poor family independently for their property's misconstrued appraised value and not for the land's bundled market value. But it was legal, a calculated series of aboveboard business transactions. No arms had been broken, no fingers pulled back. He had simply employed the preeminent tool of the trade: persuasion — the oral kind, not the physical kind. That was all. And, as a result, because of his spin, his verbal pyrotechnics, a decrepit neighborhood would soon be turned into a mammoth upscale apartment complex and the gentrification of the city's south side would continue

unabashed. It was progress. More jobs would be added. More lights would shine than ever before.

Paul could hear the clink in his own coffers and feel the moistened momentum of his early retirement. He was only 27, but if the economy stayed strong and his handshake firm, he could hang it up by 30. It wasn't a dream or even a goal. It was reality, his reality.

As his associate was his backer and his dad's best friend, it was no surprise that his parents had caught wind of the contract and his mom had called to arrange a congratulatory dinner at the restaurant of their careful and always precise choosing. He was supposed to have joined them at Jean Claude's tonight but, at the last minute, he had begged their forgiveness and postponed it a day, until Saturday, feigning a prior engagement he had forgotten about. He was sure his dad was furious over his lack of organization, but luckily, his mom had answered the phone. He felt bad for her because he knew she would be the target of his accelerated annoyance. But she, as usual, would find a way to placate and appease him, and, by tomorrow night, he would recover his good humor, though a few barbs would nevertheless still have to be endured.

Paul's prevarication left him with an open evening and three possibilities. He could meet friends out, like he did most Friday nights, in the WestEnd, at the row of interchangeable taverns that they and their young spouses favored. He could have Chinese delivered and scour the infinite array of satellite channels for an old movie. Or he could do something else, something different, something he had been meaning to do for a very long time. He pretended to compare the possibilities and calculate his limited options, even though he knew full well what he was going to do.

He corked the half-full bottle of Cristal tightly and carried it to the refrigerator, laying it flat on the bottom shelf, alongside white Burgundys and California Chardonnays. He went into the black-tiled bathroom and brushed his thick, single-length hair straight back, letting the middle cowlick direct his part naturally. He noticed a small overhead light was out above the vanity. He thought he might cancel his plan and drive to a hardware store for a replacement bulb. But that would have to wait until morning. He was going through with his intention, his so-called third possibility. He had to. He moistened his bushy eyebrows with a few droplets of water from the sink and touched them into place. He dabbed the tight skin of his cheeks with a sparing amount of light citrus-scented cologne. He stacked his slippers neatly on the floor of his large walk-in closet with his other footwear and put on heavy socks and brown loafers. He didn't expect to be outside for long, but not knowing if there'd be a valet service for his car, he put on a soft brown leather jacket over the cardigan.

At the front door, just before he exited, he remembered he hadn't brushed his teeth since he showered, before he drank the champagne. He returned to the bathroom. He brushed his teeth, his gums and his tongue. He wiped the sink clean with a wash cloth, squeezed it dry and threw it in the bamboo hamper. He washed his hands. He shaped his eyebrows once more.

He didn't see an attendant in front of the club, and, although the parking lot was relatively empty, he chose to park a block away, under a dimly lit street lamp, and walk the extra distance. He crossed the deserted street. The cold was sharp on his face and he was pleased he had put on his jacket. He walked along the cracked sidewalk, past a

vacant lot, in front of a small pizza joint. A young girl with sauce on her chin stared out at him. Her father looked up from his newspaper and, noticing her disorder, began cleaning her mouth with a napkin. She ignored him and kept looking out the window. Paul continued his forward momentum. The last establishment before the club was a liquor store. An elderly Vietnamese clerk read a magazine and ate a candy bar. The old man didn't look up.

Paul arrived at the club. There was a bouncer just inside the door, ostensibly to check identification and keep the atmosphere well ordered. He was not tall, nor was he stocky. But his neck and arms were thick, and, despite the cold draft from the opening and closing of the door, he wore army boots, faded khaki pants, a white tank top and nothing else.

Paul handed the bouncer his license then gave him the requested \$5 cover charge. "Enjoy yourself," the bouncer said laconically.

Paul walked beyond the club's inlet and scanned its interior. Hundreds of glass blocks lined the wall behind the bar. The other walls were composed of red brick. Sconces with art-deco lamps were hung every few feet at different heights. Not all the lights worked. The cement flooring was painted black. He had envisioned a dance floor but there was not one.

He removed his jacket and moved to the bar. He fitted the jacket on the back of a wooden, blue-painted high chair and took a seat. Large, brightly colored candles were spaced at random along the bar's granite countertop. Some were lit. Some were not. It was arbitrary, but then so much was, he thought.

He estimated there were no more than 20 people in the intimate club. But it was early.

There was space for twice that many to be comfortable and four times that many to jostle. The room was divided into independent seating areas comprised of eclectic furniture. The invisible partition closest to him had an overstuffed sofa, a naugehyde love seat and a crushed velvet armchair. Two middle-aged men sat stiffly on the sofa. An attractive younger woman with close-cropped blonde hair sat in the armchair. She spoke. They did not. All three drank huge martinis. He watched the woman pull one of the two olives from a plastic toothpick with her teeth and slowly begin chewing it, almost sensually, while still speaking. Tony Bennett sang softly from tiny speakers positioned throughout the club. Paul noticed a small mural of an angel on the ceiling.

Paul had never before been to a bar alone. An alcoholic friend of his from college had sworn by the tactic, always saying the only way to get in touch with humanity was regularly to leave the habituated confines of your friends. He hadn't talked to him in over a year, when he got a collect call from Guatemala at 3 a.m. on a Monday. His friend had been too drunk not to be sober. They had talked for an hour, about what he could recall but not define. They had disagreed — that was all. It was not uncommon.

Paul ordered a glass of the house wine, an Australian Shiraz. The plump and balding bartender wore an ill-fitting suit and appeared bored. Other than a brief conversation pertaining to Paul's drink order, there was no communication between them. The bartender was lost in his own thoughts. Perhaps he was hungover. Perhaps that was just his nature. The bartender didn't speak to the diminutive waitress who passed him written drink orders with her small fingers and patiently waited while he lethargically filled them and placed them on her tray. She remained at ease, indifferent to him, and went about her business with relaxed, pleasant confidence.

The bouncer came up to the bar, helped himself to a glass of ice water and quickly returned to his perch at the door.

Paul noticed his own distorted reflection in the glass blocks and saw that a shock of hair stuck out from his left ear. He ran both hands through his hair, sweeping it all back over his head, tucked above and behind his ears. It fell neatly into place. He sipped his wine, detecting hints of plum on his palate.

“You should really be drinking the gin martinis,” the attractive woman with the close-cropped blonde hair said, taking a stool next to him at the bar. “They’re the best in the city.”

“What about the vodka martinis?” Paul asked.

“Not bad. Maybe the third best in the city,” she said.

“That would mean that you’ve sampled at least two martinis, a vodka one and a gin one, from every bar and club in the city,” Paul said.

“Let’s just say I’ve done enough random experimenting to be confident in my rating system,” she said.

“Fair enough,” Paul said, turning to the bartender and asking for two of the large gin martinis with extra olives.

“Good choice,” she said. “One of those wouldn’t be for me, would it?” she queried.

“If you want more than one, I can order another,” Paul said.

They exchanged names, and, after a short while of comfortable conversation, Joan said, “A friend of mine should be here pretty soon, who I’d like you to meet. I think you two would hit it off.”

“I hope your friend gets here pretty soon, because this martini is as delicious as it is deadly,” Paul said.

“What more could you want? The perfect pairing,” Joan said, a twinkle in her eyes. “Look, I’ve got to get back to those two Joes before they get lonely with their own extinguished company, but as soon as my friend arrives, I’ll make the introductions. It shouldn’t be too long now. Until then.” She rose from the stool and began moving toward her former companions. After a few unselfconscious strides, Joan turned momentarily, raised her glass slightly and said, “By the way, thanks for the drink. You can never have too many olives.” With her free hand, she lifted the toothpick from the martini glass and slid the first of two olives off with her teeth. Paul watched her return to the two silent men, stone figurines, dead door stops.

Paul drank from his third martini — as crisp and chilled as the first two — and felt his cheeks flush internally. His intention, now fortified, became resolution. He could still turn back, but he didn’t want to. The time had finally come. His time.

He thought about the last tarpaper shack he had bought, the one that had sealed the deal. The family had not wanted to sell, claiming lineage, heritage and ties to the abode. The male minority homeowner had voiced a not-too-unfamiliar misgiving: “My great-grandparents built this place.” But Paul had convinced him that the apartments were going up regardless of whether he sold; and not only would he, his wife and his children have to put up with the noise and the pollution from the construction, but once it was completed, their land and home would be worthless because their single plot — a holdover to stubborn pride and not financial perspicacity — would by itself never be

large enough to develop. He told the man not to forsake his children's open future for his ambiguous present.

Words could get you just about anything, Paul contemplated.

The bouncer returned to the bar to refill his water. Paul doubted that, just because there weren't tattoos on the bouncer's arms, did not mean there weren't tattoos elsewhere on his body. Paul's college friend, the alcoholic, had had a small black question mark tattooed just above his right ankle the day before they graduated. Paul had copped out, claiming that his girlfriend and parents would have conniptions.

Paul chewed his fifth green olive, eating them more for the texture, the rough contrast to the drink's smoothness, than for the repentant taste. He was also hungry and they helped to belie his stomach's emptiness. Paul speculated that his friend's alcoholism was advanced by the lonely, experimental, uncompromising forays he had habitually made to the lowlife saloons scattered throughout the moribund industrial district not far from their college alma mater. Paul realized that his friend had never asked him to go along. It would have been an empty gesture even if his friend had asked him. His friend would not have wanted the company and Paul would not have wanted to go.

Paul asked himself if he was drinking more on this evening than on any other Friday evening or if his separation from his customary weekend drinking friends occasioned him to be conscious of the effects of every swallow of every drink. He tabulated his drinks and concluded that he was drinking no more than he otherwise would have drunk had he have been with friends. The primary difference was that now, on this night, he was forced, for reasons of inevitable public discomfort as a solitary figure, to think about his immediate surroundings, the most immediate of which was the martini glass.



The tributaries of this reasoning ended. He was tapped from behind on the cardigan's collar, at the base of his neck, just below his hairline. He swiveled the chair and turned to face the touch. It was Joan. She stood next to a young man dressed casually in jeans, an unbuttoned black wool blazer and a faded denim shirt opened to his sternum, his upper chest coated by a smattering of light hairs.

"Still drinking my martinis?" Joan inquired.

"I meant to ask your permission but you looked engrossed with the liveliness of your companions," Paul said.

"Well then, I should thank you for exercising your discernment and for not interrupting what was probably the most stimulating and frank discussion of my young life. I always knew money bred shallowness but those guys are the desert, and that's desert with one s and not two. I hated to have to again break away from them, but, as you can see, I'm a woman of my word and I promised to introduce you to my friend when he arrived, and he has now arrived. Paul this is Gene. Gene this is Paul."

Gene smiled with his thin lips closed. Paul and he shook hands.

"OK. Good. That's a start. Now I must return to wrap my mummies. You two kids enjoy yourselves and if you need anything, send the waitress over with a note and a martini. If I can, I'll come visit."

Paul watched Gene slowly take a seat to his right. Instead of looking at Paul immediately, Gene fixed his gaze on the bartender's periphery, until it finally registered and the frumpy guy rambled over. Gene ordered a House scotch with a splash of soda and asked Paul if he'd like anything. Paul said he was fine for the moment but thanks. Gene

nodded, adding, "Don't tell Joan I didn't get one of her martinis. She'd question my judgment."

As Gene paid the bartender with cash, a rumpled \$5 bill, Paul noticed that, despite having a strong profile, Gene possessed incongruously slender wrists. It was not so much that they were narrow, but in comparison to his large, sinuous, abraded hands, they were petite and elongated.

Paul and Gene's conversation was limited at first by their unfamiliarity, but Paul's inebriation being the greater, though still fairly rudimentary, he asked the questions that prompted the words. Paul soon learned that Gene lived nearby in an old warehouse and was a carpenter by day. Gene didn't particularly like the work, but he had not gone to college and it afforded him some time to pursue his real passion, which was sculpture. Gene said he used many kinds of materials — clay, bronze, metal — but brick, wood, tin, plastic, aluminum, the stuff he found around the neighborhood, seemed more honest to him and were his preferred choices. Paul asked if he sold his statues, if he had an agent or a gallery owner promoting him. Gene said no, he wasn't ready for that, he was only in his early twenties and just getting started, plus he had no clue how to dovetail art and commercialization. Paul replied that all art was commercial, even if it only commercialized the self, even if no one else ever saw, read or listened to it. Gene said there was probably something to that.

They each had another drink. Paul summarized his job in commercial real estate, leaving out the bit about the week's illustriously successful negotiations.

The place began to fill and the club got crowded and noisy. Paul became hungrier. Joan came up to them and bade them au revoir, wishing them well over the club's hum,

saying she had to leave and go to a private party with her two mummies.

Paul asked Gene how late the pizza joint up the street stayed open. Gene said it never closed and the owner never slept. Paul then told Gene he had skipped dinner and asked if he'd like to go with him and grab a slice. Gene said he wasn't really hungry but the pizza was pretty good and he'd tag along.

They walked outside. The bouncer said goodbye and closed the door, concealing the club's artificial light and delivering Paul and Gene to the frigid but dry night. Paul turned up the collar on his leather jacket and zipped it halfway up. He put his hands in the pockets of his cords and shrugged his shoulders once, acclimating himself to the biting temperature. He was grateful for the warmth from the martinis. Gene seemed oblivious to the cold. He walked just in front of Paul, his hands at his side, obviously at home in his locality, geographically and climatically, Paul thought.

Gene walked slowly. Paul kept a step behind. They didn't say much as they moved in the direction of the pizza joint. As Paul passed the liquor store, he noticed the same old clerk in the same position, still crouched over reading a magazine, this time reaching into a bag of potato chips. The man didn't look up. On dark nights like this, Paul considered, it was exceedingly easy to peep into illuminated interiors from outdoor vantages.

As they walked up to the pizza joint, Paul scanned for the young girl and her father. He couldn't see them. Gene opened the glass door, triggering a noisy buzzer.

Once inside the warm pizza joint, Paul gazed searchingly again, hoping that the girl and her father had not left and had only switched tables, moving further back toward the heat of the small kitchen. But the place was empty. Paul smelled Canadian bacon and garlic.

A gray-haired man in a white, red-stained T-shirt and a white half-length apron, tied around his portly waist, appeared in the kitchen from a back room. Paul heard the faint sounds of opera proceeding through the open door of the back room.

“How’s it going Gene?” the man asked in a deep voice.

“It’s going Frank,” Gene said.

“You boys hungry?” Frank asked.

“I’m good for a slice and my friend may need a couple,” Gene said. “Anything hot?” Gene asked.

“I just took a garlic, bacon and mushroom out the oven for myself. But there’s plenty for you two if you want. Or I can heat up a leftover pepperoni. Or put something new in for you. Shouldn’t take too long. Your call.”

“I’ll take a slice of the fresh one, if you don’t mind,” Gene said.

“What about you young fellow?” Frank asked Paul.

“Sounds good to me. Three slices if you can spare them,” Paul said.

“Believe me, I can spare it,” Frank said, patting his paunch and his back pocket.

Frank directed Paul and Gene to a two-seated table just in front of the kitchen, and came around the kitchen counter with a round Chianti bottle, a stubby white candle extending from its opening, petals of wax congealed all the way down its throat. Frank set the bottle down on the table, lit the candle with a metallic lighter and motioned them to sit down. He returned to the kitchen.

Paul and Gene took seats in plastic chairs. The small table was covered with a red-and-white checked vinyl tablecloth. Shakers of Parmesan and red pepper nestled beside a silver napkin dispenser.

Paul took a paper napkin from the dispenser and wiped two still-wet sauce splashes from white squares on the tablecloth. He wadded the napkin in a ball and lobbed it into a trashcan a few feet away.

“You boys want beers or something?” Frank yelled out from the kitchen.

“Do you want to share a pitcher?” Gene asked Paul quietly.

“Sure,” Paul said.

“Light or regular?” Gene asked Paul.

“Whatever,” Paul said.

“Bring us out a pitcher of regular, Frank, when you get a chance,” Gene said loudly.

While Gene lingered over his single slice, rearranging the mushrooms on its surface, Paul ate his three slices quickly. The pizza was smothered in garlic, but Gene had been right, Paul thought, it was good. Paul watched Gene’s long chapped hands rotate from their linear wrist joints.

The beer was lukewarm, but Paul did not mind because the restaurant was chilly even though they were in close proximity to the warm kitchen. He kept his leather jacket on.

Paul asked Gene what he wanted to accomplish with his art, questioning him as to whether it was worth his anonymous struggle. Gene said everyone struggled regardless of notoriety and therefore the key was in how you interpreted your everyday life, not in how much fame you accrued. Paul disagreed and said you could measure a person’s struggle by his or her success. Those who made it, those who garnered recognition, Paul continued, would surely struggle less in the long run than those who did not.

Frank came out from his back room, into the kitchen, and loudly asked if Gene and Paul needed another pitcher.

Paul shook his head and Gene piped up and said, “No, I think we’re good Frank. Just a bill.”

Frank brought the bill, along with two peppermints, and laid the three items in the middle of the table beside the Chianti bottle. He thanked Gene and Paul for their patronage and walked back toward the open door behind the kitchen. The music was silent. Paul grabbed the bill, telling Gene he would pay, because even though Gene enjoyed his noble struggle, he still needed a benefactor to the arts. Gene laughed and said he was on his way to becoming a sell-out.

Paul placed a 20-dollar bill on top of what he thought was an amazingly inexpensive bill. Paul wasn’t sure if Frank needed to raise his prices or if he was aware of Gene’s pursuit and was just helping him out. Paul placed one of the peppermints in his mouth, hoping it would defuse the garlic smell that would likely infiltrate his pores overnight. Gene ignored the other peppermint. As they stood to leave, Paul saw that Gene had a tittle of sauce on the back of his left hand. Paul took a napkin from the dispenser and placed it in Gene’s left hand, registering the spot with his eyebrows. Their hands touched for a moment. Gene looked down at the spot, looked back up at Paul then wiped the sauce off slowly with the napkin. Paul blew out the candle.

They exited the pizza joint, but stayed on the sidewalk just within the furthest reaches of the restaurant’s light. Paul shaped his eyebrows then put his hands in his pockets. Gene popped the knuckles on both of his hands. Neither spoke. Paul knew this was his time. He had to be the one to act. If he didn’t, nothing would change. He inhaled

the cold air through his nose and exhaled it through his mouth, watching the plumes of condensation drift away. He leaned over, his hands still in his pockets. He kissed Gene softly on the cheek. Gene did not pull back.

“That’s the first time I ever did that,” Paul said. “I’d say I’m sorry but I don’t think I am,” Paul said.

“Good. Don’t be,” Gene said.

“What now?” Paul asked.

“You tell me,” Gene said.

“No, it’s your turn,” Paul said.

“Alright. Well, ordinarily, I’d invite you back to my place,” Gene said. “But you might think I’m trying to show off my sculptures. Maybe this time, it would be better to take it slow. What do you think?”

“I guess that’s probably a good idea, though I do want to see your sculptures,” Paul said.

“I’ll be at the club tomorrow night, about the same time, if you’re free and still interested. We can go and look at them after a few drinks,” Gene said.

“I’ll be there,” Paul said, knowing he would have to cancel dinner again with his parents.

“I hope so,” Gene said, after which he fleetingly kissed Paul on the lips.

Paul tasted the beer and garlic on Gene’s breath through the peppermint taste in his own mouth. It was still fresh and warm. It hadn’t yet soured. It was delicious. He wanted more, but Gene walked off, turning once to wave, before disappearing into the dark. He

thought about following him, but thought better of it. Tomorrow evening was close at hand.

Paul moved excitedly to his car, past the vacant lot, mindless of the cold, jubilant for the first time in a long time. He crossed the street. He reached inside his jacket for his keys. Under the dimly lit street lamp, he found the largest key on the ring and began to insert it into the lock on the driver's side door. But, hearing footsteps behind him, he hesitated. Rather than hurriedly opening the door and climbing inside the safety of his car, like he knew he should, he turned, knowing he shouldn't, sensing something was gravely awry, but thinking, hoping, it might be Gene.

No sooner had he turned than he saw a baseball bat accelerating toward him. He tried to duck but it was too late, though his reflexes did save him from a direct blow. The bat glanced jarringly off his right arm. He staggered away from the car, his left hand squeezing his right arm, and observed the surreal scene. He wasn't scared. He just needed to know what was happening, what was about to happen, if there was anything he could do. Time slowed.

Two teen-age boys stood a few feet from him, each brandishing a bat. The bats were aluminum. The boys had long scraggily hair. One had a wispy mustache. He was tall. The other had long sideburns. He was shorter. Paul could smell the liquor about them. They wore jean jackets.

"You fucking faggot," the tall one with the vague mustache said, swinging his bat violently downward, against the concrete, a tinny rattle loudly sounding.

"You homos come around here, trying take over our neighborhood, moving in, bringing all your queer friends with you. You're disgusting, fucking perverts ... a bunch



of sickos who shouldn't be allowed to live here or anywhere. You should be killed so you can go to hell where you belong," the boy continued, his zeal intensifying.

"Yeah, freak faggots, butt bangers," the other one interjected, swinging his bat, knifing it through the air in the direction of Paul's face.

The tall boy moved a step closer to Paul. "You need to pay," he said.

Even though Paul knew he was in jeopardy, he was awed by the venomous tone behind the boys' words. There was no equivocation in their meaning. No layering whatsoever. Utter sincerity. Wrong, but evocatively definitive.

Paul couldn't help himself from saying it. It was a mistake — he knew that before he spoke — but he was curious to see how they would respond. He needed to know. "I guess this means you cuties aren't an item and aren't looking for a threesome," he said.

The two did not hesitate. They rushed him. Paul took a step toward the tall boy, the one closest to him, and tried to block the bat's momentum at the outset, before it gained any speed. But it was already moving and the middle of the bat slammed into the palms of Paul's two hands. Somehow, despite the pain, Paul was able to hold on to it. As he began to wrest the bat from the tall boy, as they struggled over it, he suddenly felt his wind go out of him. Paul had not seen the other bat, but it hit him hard in the left side. He heard the snap in his ribs, the jarring on his solar plexus. Still, Paul held on to the first bat, and drawing the batter closer to him, seeing the batter's chin above him, gauging an opening, Paul drove the tip of the bat upward, hard and fast, an unexpected burst, an uppercut. Bat against bone.

The tall boy staggered backward, clutching his jaw, leaving Paul with the bat. Paul had a chance now. But, as he rose upright with the bat and turned to face the shorter boy,

he glimpsed shiny steel. It was too late. There was no time to parry it. It was a blade. It was already inside him. Paul dropped the bat. He fell to the ground.

The shorter boy stood over him. Paul looked up at him. The boy was scared. His mouth was agape. He turned his head from Paul toward his friend, and spoke, seeming to Paul much farther away than he physically was. Paul heard him say, as if in a whisper, "Johnny, we gotta get outta here man. We gotta go." From his supine position, Paul watched the shorter boy help the tall one to stand. He put his arm around him. They shuffled away. Paul lay alone. He saw the light blur overhead. He thought he might faint, but he didn't.

He propped his torso up into a seated position, his legs extended before him. He was tired. Lightheaded. He looked down at his left flank. An ivory handle protruded from him in the area about his spleen. Blood dripped from under his jacket. A small crescent puddle began to form on the concrete. He grabbed hold of the handle with both hands. He clenched his teeth. He felt a burst of pain shoot through him as he twisted the handle and pulled the knife free. He held the knife on his lap. He guessed it to be about six inches long, a stiletto, the kind a homophobic young hoodlum would carry, he thought.

He listened to approaching footsteps. A figure ran up to him and skidded to a stop. He wore army boots. It was the bouncer from the club.

"Jesus," the bouncer said, seeing the blood on the knife, the blood on the concrete.

"Are you OK? Who did this?"

"It was two kids. It wasn't Gene," Paul heard himself say.

"Just hold on. I'll be right back," the bouncer said.

The bouncer sprinted in the direction of the club, the clop of his boots fading in the

air. Paul didn't want people to converge upon him and a crowd to gather. He let the knife fall slowly from his hands onto the sidewalk. He forced himself to his feet.

The key ring still hung from the lock of the car door. Paul turned the key. The knob popped up. He leaned against the door so his knees wouldn't buckle. For a reason he didn't understand, the pain came not from his wound or his ribs, or even his hands, but from the middle of his stomach.

He managed to open the car door and fall into the seat. There was a roar in his gut, a shudder in his face. He scooted gingerly into position. He struggled to pull the door shut.

He navigated the car from the curb and pulled into the street. He was grateful for the car's automatic transmission. He headed up the street to the highway that would carry him north, away from the city. On his right, as he passed the club, he saw the bouncer and the small waitress run toward the spot where he had lain, followed by a horde of people. He didn't see the bartender. The crowd did not espy him in the car.

Paul felt the blood run down his left side and off the seat. He heard it fall onto the floorboard. He pushed his left hand against the tear in his jacket. The blood did not staunch but it did slow.

He veered onto the entrance ramp of the highway. A car flashed its bright lights at him from the outside lane he was merging with. He tried to pick up speed but the car honked its horn and sped past him in the middle lane and drove off down the empty highway in front of him. There were no other cars. He checked his speed, thinking he may be driving too slowly. The gauges were dark. He had forgotten to turn his headlights on. With his left hand still pressed firmly against the rip in his jacket, he took his right hand from the steering wheel and reached down and across and pulled the lights on. His

front right tire grazed the shoulder but he was able to correct the car in time before he careened off the highway, down the embankment.

Fifteen minutes. That's how long the trip would take. He could make it. He accelerated some more. The buildings whizzed by him hypnotically. He had never taken drugs, but he imagined this is what it would have been like.

The buildings stopped and the trees began. There were large thickets of trees on both sides of the highway. He was close now. A few more miles.

He felt his head fall to his chest and his eyes close. He wanted to sleep. He wanted to drift away, but there was still something he had to do. He jerked his head up and peeled his eyes open. He took his left hand from his jacket and used it to open the electric window halfway. The cold air rushed in and helped revive him, at least for a time. Blood covered his left hand. He placed it back over his opening and leaned into the steering wheel. He used the pain to stay awake.

He was off the highway and on top of the hill. It was dark but he could make out the golf course's winding channels where the trees had been toppled and the fairways grooved. Everything was still and quiet.

He crested the hill and began his descent into a land of green privilege. The mansions were spaced far apart with flowerbeds, pools and expanses of manicured and sprinkled lawns, which served, he thought, to separate them in distance but to tie them together in fantasy. Though the inhabitants slept, their porch lights remained on. Two small roads to go. Two turns, that was all. He was almost there, a matter of yards, not miles.

He pulled up to the electronic gate. He opened the window all the way down with his left hand, and, with the same hand, punched in the security code. He used his right hand

to turn the car's lights off. He felt the blood drip down his legs. The gate opened silently inward, exposing the descending and winding cobblestone driveway.

He gave the car a little gas to get it moving again, put it into neutral and then turned off the ignition. He coasted slowly down to the bottom of the driveway, to the entrance to the matching cobblestone footpath. He put his hands over the steering wheel, over the horn, but retracted them. Instead, he placed both hands on the car door's handle. As he pulled the handle, he threw his shoulder against the door. The door opened and his momentum ejected him. He fell hard to the driveway. The pain made him gasp. He coughed blood.

He looked up from where he lay to the two rows of trimmed, perfectly level hedges on either side of the footpath — the one that would carry him to the house. He could crawl to the front porch. That would likely be easier, he thought. But he chose to stand and walk upright. He put his hands down at his sides and without stopping, without faltering, he strode forward.

He was at the front door now under the light. He was almost home. He shaped his eyebrows. All he had to do was ring the weak orange button and the doorbell would chime. Even a knock on the door would do. They were light sleepers. But he did neither.

He turned his back to the door, bent his knees and let himself sink slowly down. He sat on the welcome mat with his back against the door. He opened his jacket and pulled up his blood-soaked cardigan. His stomach was distended and covered in blood. The wound was jagged and deep. The blood continued to flow. Where it all came from, he didn't know.

He looked out into the incline of the yard. He could tell that the grass had been

mowed by the gardener late that afternoon, as it had been done every Friday throughout his childhood, always in time for the weekend. He slid down the door and let his head fall onto the edge of the mat. He was no longer cold.

He knew his dad would be the one to find him when he went outside early in the morning to get his Wall Street Journal. Paul conjectured his dad might step over him and only inspect the body after he had gotten the paper. But that would depend on what the market had done on Friday. He was grateful his mom would not have to be the one to find him. But she would be the one to grieve for him. He wished that wasn't so.

He was very tired. He longed to rest. He let his eyes close. The pain had gone. It was no more. He was glad he'd met Joan, and he wondered if Gene was still awake, working on his art. He hoped he was.

## TODOS CABO

This daytrip from Cabo San Lucas and the Sea of Cortez 50 miles north up the other coast to the small artistic community of Todos Santos and the rougher Pacific had been planned for her benefit. The family had been to Todos a few times before. For many winters now, they had vacationed nearby, in Cabo, their hotel perched in sight of the peninsula's southernmost tip; they had fulfilled their duties as tourists: gone marlin fishing, paragliding, horseback riding, taken day tours throughout the surrounding environs. Now, if given their druthers, if forced to be honest, they would choose to sit on their capacious balcony, replete with hot-tub, and read and sun, from time to time lifting their eyes to the water's perfect radiant blue. They would not rent a car and drive many dusty miles to lunch, no matter how picturesque the journey. But for her they had, and so her reservations lay not with them and her inclusion, but rather with their son, brother, brother-in-law — her boyfriend, the 35-year-old man she had chosen.

From the rented suburban's rear bench seat, she looked out at the cardon cacti and yellow damiana flowers that blanketed the land between the mountains and the sea. A few millimeters of rain had fallen on the previous day, and the Baja desert luxuriated in color. Her boyfriend's hand rested on her thigh. If not for his drying out, the strange obsessions that now besieged him, she would have reveled in his affection along with this view. His family — the entourage who sat forward — she liked, all of them without equivocation: mordant mother, refined, wealthy father, intellectual brother, charismatic sister, the sister's decent husband. And they liked her, adored her, found her as personable

as they did beautiful. For her, they would sacrifice.

They turned off the two-lane highway down a rutted dirt road. The father had wanted to show her some of the desolate beaches along the way, perhaps permit them to spot whales now moving in the opposite direction, on their way down from the Bering Strait then around the peninsula and up to calve in the Sea of Cortez's warm lagoons. The father stopped the suburban just before a boulder-strewn arroyo, where two combies of hippie surfers camped. The tide, though menacing, was down, and some hippies, instead of surfing, played guitars while others read or played bocce ball. She and the family walked past them, past middens of oyster shells — feasts long forgotten — to the water's edge. The surf here on the Pacific was grayer, harder, numinous like clouds, of which the sky held none. The swells would make it difficult to spot whales: humpbacks, pilots, or grays. Still, they all scanned the horizon, searching for breaches and plumes of spray. The father told them also to look for oil-like slicks, the footprints left in the wakes of recent surfacings. They saw nothing, only a lone shrimping boat. Spindrift moistened them.

Her boyfriend grabbed for her hand, his pathology now in periodic need of reassurance, so different than when he drank — mere weeks ago, as much from his own confidence as from the liquor he had made vanish like a marathoner does water. She took his hand — large and strong, even if two weeks ago she had seen it shake for the first time. She looked at him. He did not look at her, and though he stared ahead, she knew he saw nothing. His fixation was on himself. She could not begin to imagine his battle, one begun when the doctor said only six months of sobriety would cure his brutal insomnia, his overweening dependence on sleeping pills that, along with his dipsomania, barely brought him sustainable sleep. His profile was Romanesque, the nose aquiline, like a ski



jump. She found him breathtaking, the most tender, giving lover she had shared her bed with, though there had only been four others, and of those four, only one regular, the college boyfriend who was premature in so many ways. Now she wondered if this new man — yes, still new even after 11 months — was too much the converse. Was he too ripened? Would another efflorescence come? If it did, what form would it take? Similar to the man she had fallen for, or different, antiseptic?

At another beach, they stopped. The beach was stunningly wide. Apart from an emaciated dog which the sister insisted upon patting despite suspected mange, it was uninhabited. Again, they looked for whales. Again, he took her hand.

She wanted to know exactly from what he suffered. She wanted inside his head. He had mentioned "irrational mental games" and provided few clues other than a brief summation, which had gone something like, "Look, it's hard to explain. The subjects change, their persistence does not. At present, I must remember a litany of past sober episodes in which I was capable of speaking in public, that is to more than one person at a time. These memories I must use to protect myself. However, these images are constant, like strafing that never ends. To say that they are distracting would be an understatement. I can't really tell you more. I don't know how to explain it any better. I'm sorry. I suspect, given time, they will subside."

She admired his courage, his willingness to suffer in the short-term for a long-term perhaps ambiguous. At night, he sweated. Food ran through him. His headaches were intense. Yet these physical symptoms were irrelevant, he said. The mental games were the hard part. For weeks, she'd remained confused; she could not divulge any day's incarnation — some mornings robust, some desperate; she could not assist him, her

admiration notwithstanding. She wished he had sought intervention, professional help, but he was too stubborn, proud, like a wounded athlete. He was also brilliant, sober it appeared as well. But now he was shy, reclusive as an anchorite.

On the way in to Todos, they passed organic farms, beans and pumpkins lush and luminous from the rain and the town's nascent aquifer. Not far off, the Sierra de la Laguna towered above them like a beautiful virgin's older brothers. The weather was slightly cooler here than in Cabo. Mountain breezes and sea breezes conjoined.

They drove through town, beyond the church and square, then right along a road with galleries and restaurants. Everywhere, on every wall, flowers budded brilliantly, without need of human maintenance — sprays of poinsettias, bougainvillea, hibiscus, golden showers superior to any painter's palette.

They were early for lunch, reserved at 1 p.m. at Café Santa Fe, the preeminent restaurant on the Cape. The father suggested they drive down to the town's magnificent beach, where land could still be had for a song. Perhaps he would sell his five weeks of timeshare and build an estate to retire to in Todos. Where else could you buy five acres of beachfront for \$200,000?

She saw her boyfriend, his son, animate. Color came to his pallid cheeks. His attention crystallized. He was within the car, no longer lost to his stricken head, now a part of things. He was familial, even happy. The conversation picked up, and he participated.

She watched and listened to them interact, talk about idealized beach homes, architectural features they would choose — chipped mosaic-tile terraces, rounded adobe

walls, fireplaces in every room. She did not come from money, so she was amazed at how much luckier the rich are, how they can distract boredom with proposed spending. The father told a story of how, seven years ago, on the beach below Todos, he had seen dolphins frolic with a pod of whales. He could envision himself and his family regularly witnessing such spectacles from their own home rather than a hotel.

Admittedly, the place was beautiful, though remote. Banana trees bid them goodbye as they left the town's asphalt streets and entered dirt lanes that weaved like water through groves of mangos and papayas. They weren't sure of their route, but glimpses of the ocean helped direct them. Up, down, along they went, jounced by the maze's undulating irregularity. Soon, the ocean became audible, percussive. It drowned out the country music CD they had brought along. A palm tree orchard appeared, then a turn-off that took them onto a road parallel to the ocean. Between this road and the ocean were parcels of hectares supposedly for sale, some bare, some oases, all glazed by the bright sun, sparkling like polished fruit. They turned left down a dirt spine crosswise to the sea. Fronds and brush scraped at the vehicle's open windows. They could smell the vegetation then the brine. She felt his arm around her, his excitement pulse. She wondered if he thought this Pacific scenery might save him.

The suburban stopped at the foot of a tall dune. They disembarked, climbed up. At its summit, their intakes of breath were loud, not because of the climb's exertion. The beaches they had seen before paled by comparison. This one seemed as wide as the ocean, as white as talc. Unlike the other beaches, the sand here was hard, not desert-like, made for beachcombing, solitary jogs.

As if by telepathy, he left her and began running toward the water, eager as a colt, but

experienced and controlled, like a racehorse in the early furlongs. She watched his stride, mesmerized. Although he had once mentioned casually, in passing, that he had been an athlete in college, a four-year letterman, she hadn't given this accomplishment much acknowledgement, certainly no commendation. Now she gave him the credence he deserved. Take away the paunch, the sallow skin and tired eyes, and he had been an athlete, a glorious one. He had not always been bleached by booze. His gait was light, his arms and legs fluid and coordinated. He skimmed across the sand, the sun catching his long flaxen hair.

At one time, his physique must have been as invincible as his inebriated sociability thereafter became. As gratified as she was to glimpse him this way — his prime momentarily returned — so, too, was she disoriented, uncertain. Was he a man who knew only extremes? If so, was the extreme he held for her enough to withstand the other extremes, the pernicious ones — so social on one level, so solipsistic on another?

It was only noon, but already the waxing moon was up in the east, a cold counterpart to the polar sun's lovely heat. He had stopped at the water, taken off his shoes and waded knee-high into the frothy surf. They walked up to him. She did not rush. He was a strong swimmer if need be, too proud to be a suicide. She lingered beside an ossified fish, its teeth dominant like a piranha's, then, a few yards later, a newly dead pelican, fresh enough not to reek. Its death seemed preordained, instrumental to the setting.

Not far beyond her boyfriend — now retreated to a level ankle-deep — a series of bursts, like rain reversed, broke the water's surface. A clamor went up among the family. They hurried to the waterline. She did, too, not doubting her part in the family, apart from him. Gesticulations all around. Adults child-like. The father peered at the frenetic activity

through binoculars. Reluctantly but selflessly, he handed the single pair around.

Disagreement at first, arbitrary hypotheses, then grudging agreement, unanimity: a school of fish, each a black and white pane sprung from the water like skeet from a boat, stingrays chasing or being chased.

After the stingrays' departure, they walked the beach for awhile, behind the family, at a distance not to be overheard. The beach was endless, here and there a few villager shacks and wells pressed close. They walked beside a set of ATV tracks. He walked seaside of her, the hem of his wave-splashed khaki shorts drying. He carried his shoes, one in each hand, for which she was glad. This meant he would not now reach for her hand. She found the beach too lonely for his company.

"Don't you love it?" he said, his face still ruddy from activity, but perhaps simply reddened in the sun's glow.

"It?" she countered, though fully aware of the pronoun's meaning.

"This place, this beach. Majestic, isn't it?"

"Sure," she said, not wanting to pursue the subject.

They continued on in silence.

On the family's reverse from the dune's talus, a rear tire became stuck. It spun futilely in the sand, entrenched in a hole it only made deeper with acceleration. The father remained at the wheel, cursing. The others climbed out to lessen the weight. She stood aside with the mother and the sister. The men examined the predicament. The brother and the sister's husband went to a nearby canebrake and returned with rocks and bamboo, which they broke, and placed, along with the rocks, in the hole, wedged under the tire.

Her boyfriend followed them like a locker-room attendant. The brother and the sister's husband bounced on the rear bumper, prodding the axle, as the father punched the gas. The wheels churned, then caught. The vehicle broke free. They were delivered. Lunch was close.

Back in the car, she saw sand grains and sweat, dirt smudges on the brother's and sister's husband's cheeks. The boyfriend had internalized again, and grown pale. In town, they parked at the square alongside a row of ficus trees, waxy in the shadowed sunlight. She wanted to go directly to lunch, but the family stopped briefly at two galleries on their way. The first was a folk art gallery containing tin masks, silver cruciforms, glass-paneled pictograms limning the four life stages: birth, marriage, children, death. The second was a traditional gallery, the majority of the paintings seascapes, but there was a unique, exquisitely rendered still-life of two perfect apples placed side by side, one red and one green. Quietly, she inquired of the gallery owner the price. She did not want the father to hear her and buy the painting for her. The price was beyond her grasp. Outside, she could smell citrus trees close by — orange, lemon and lime trees intermixed.

The table was outdoors, on the restaurant's garden verandah, beneath a vaulted thatched palapa. Around them rose coral creepers and pomegranate bushes. Ugly, small brown birds twittered pleasantly. Apart from her boyfriend, they all ordered Pacifico beer, delivered with a plate of perfect lime wedges. He drank a lemonade and fiddled with his hands. His will power she found profound, even she required a few tongue-loosening drinks. For her, she knew the difference was that this requirement was ritualistic and controlled, rarely excessive.

They dined on scallop carpaccio, mussels in a ginger and garlic broth, fried calamari

and shrimp, lobster ravioli, mahi-mahi with organically grown vegetables, beets and green beans. Many beers were consumed. He was left out, like a foreigner who doesn't speak that country's language. Toward the end of their meal, as if in an act of personal redemption, he spoke up and suggested they play a game he called the "Word Game." His explanation was crisp and clear. He started the game by saying a letter. The next person in turn had to say a letter that did not spell a word but that could lead to one. When a word was finally spelled, the person who had no choice but to conclude it lost the round. Also, a challenge could be made if the ensuing person did not know, or did not believe, the veracity of that word's trajectory. They played the game through cappuccinos. It was very entertaining. He proved very good at it, which was no surprise, because, with his parent's money, he was able to live as a budding magazine writer and immerse himself in words. She was honored to be his boyfriend. She worshipped words as well; soon, within a year, at the age of 25, she would receive her Master's in Literature and begin teaching at an all boys' prep. school; later, she would return for her Ph.D.

After lunch and visits to a few more galleries, they departed Todos. At this return trip's outset, he did not speak. It seemed he had spoken his limit for the day. She did not care, or she thought she did not. She was languorous from the beer and the lowering sun that filtered through the windows. She looked out, saw buzzards circling over the cacti and a series of shallow headlands, like fingers on a hand, disappear into the water. It would be another cool night in the desert, perfect for open doors, sweaters, sleeping to sea sounds. She hoped they would stay in, order room service, watch movies. That would suit him.

She dreamed of their early dates, his magnificent wit, his effortless extroversion at the

bars — shaking hands with friends, patrons, strangers alike, buying rounds of drinks running entire pool racks. The dinners he cooked, the wines he knew — Tempranillos from Ribera Del Duero, Barberscos from Piedmont, Pinotages from Capetown. The first night she stayed over, consummated by three orgasms. When she woke from her dreaming, he lay curled against her, his glacier blue eyes open, but closed to her. She ignored him. She could not force his communication.

They were at the outskirts of the city, beside shanties piled up against an extensive garbage dump. She could smell coffee grounds and fruit gone bad. Instead of turning back onto the highway that led into the city, the father surprisingly veered up a steep road, the grade almost vertiginous. She felt in no way could the heavy suburban keep going, it must fall back. But make it it did.

In the hills above Cabo's main promontory is an exclusive resort called Pedregal, comprised of individual homes, belvederes all, etched into the rockface. Haciendas up high, infinity pools the norm. The father, to whom chutzpah was not extraordinary, waved at the guard at the gate. Without suspicion, he was ushered forward. The road was serpentine, zigzagging along the cliffside. They all looked on in awe, a circumstance peculiar for a family with their wealth. She could see the Sea of Cortez, the Pacific, and the bustling city of Cabo, all of it sprawled within view below and suffused with a lavender and pink sunset. There, at the furthestmost tip of land by Los Arcos and Lover's beach, apparently the only beach in the world connecting an ocean and a sea. She was smitten, in the realm of Gods.

"Now this is living," she said to her boyfriend.



"Why in the hell would you want to live here?" he replied, looking at her as if he did not know her.

"What do you mean?" she said. "This is the ideal place. A spectacular home. Sweeping views of the ocean and the sea. The lights of a real city, all just minutes away."

"A home on top of other homes? No privacy? No land? An inability to keep a big dog? No way. I'll take Todos any day."

"And live like hermits? I'd go crazy."

"What are you talking about? Todos is 20 minutes from those pristine beach sites we saw. It's got everything you need — a couple of great restaurants, a market, cultural activities."

"Yeah, I can just see it. A 5-person poetry reading over by 7."

"I've got an idea. How about I live in Todos, and you live here? You can dance at Squid Roe with the tourists, wave at the cruiseships."

"Maybe I will."

"Fine."

They didn't talk the rest of the way home, nor much the rest of the evening. She played hearts with the family. He read on a couch nearby or pretended to read. His games were obviously afire, his eyes lifting from the page every few lines. She could hear the sea lions' hoarse barking. She tried not to think about him or the two of them.

In the night, she lay awake. She knew he was awake, too, even though the room was very dark and his back was to her. She began to slide her hand along the sheet toward him. She thought to hold him, but for weeks, every time she had tried, he flinched. They

had made love only once since his drinking stopped, and it had been unsatisfactory. He had ground her, then gone soft too soon. Neither of them had finished. He had barely looked at her. Brief touches, holding hands, these were his limits.

She rolled back to face the opposite wall, moving to her side's edge. He was too old for her. She knew that now. Which was sad, because, perhaps if she were his age and they had screamed at life together since they were each 24, her patience would be unwavering, her commitment sure. She wanted him as he was, brave and defiant, not cowered by alcoholic defeat. She could foresee what would happen. Given time, he would end up healthy: a weathered face like a farmer's, deportment like a priest's. But he would be subdued, plainly boring.

She wanted to cry, but she did not. Her mind was made up. She would miss his family. She would remember him as she needed to do, as he would want her to do — tequila shots in the bars, impossible shots on the eight ball. He had been glorious.

## EL RIO DULCE

After a 10-minute wait in one of the two customs line at the Guatemala City airport — neither of which was demarcated for nationals or foreigners — I moved to the waist-high booth of a young immigration officer. I placed my passport and declarations form on his shelf, leaned forward, and looked directly, yet submissively, into his impassive face, hoping my solicitousness would conceal the nervousness I felt whenever I cleared customs, no matter where in the world.

I had nothing to hide, only my paranoia.

As usual, my fears of being framed and then languishing in a Third World prison were ungrounded. The officer barely registered my presence. He collected my form, stamped my passport with a 90-day Visa — though I needed it only for a week — and ushered me forward with a wave of the hand.

Soon, I could begin my vacation. I had only to collect my valise, within which were safeguarded another pair of jeans — other than the pair I had on — two dress shirts, boxers, socks, toiletries and boating attire: flip-flops, bathing suits, T-shirts, sunscreen, and a light rain slicker. The plan was to spend the night in the city with my best friend, Fernando — a rich Guatemalan who was my roommate all four years at Yale — then leave with him and his friends in the morning for a few days on the Caribbean side of the country, where he kept his 31-foot cruiser.

It always struck me as peculiar that, when I went through customs in Guatemala, clearance, unlike in the U.S., occurred prior to the retrieval of one's luggage.

While I waited for my bag to show itself on the carousel, I looked closely at some of the passengers from my flight. Two in particular caught my curiosity. Both had oily hair and were sweating profusely, their shirts stained wet beneath their underarms. I couldn't decide if they were recovering from a coke-fueled drinking jag in Miami or they had something hidden in their luggage. By the time my bag arrived, I had decided on the former, as it occurred to me that there was no such thing as contraband in Guatemala. I had been to Guatemala on numerous occasions before. If not for the horrific inequity between the haves and the have nots, and thus the constant prospect of crime, the country was a libertarian paradise, an anarchic nebula.

I stepped from the airport into the hubbub outside. Even though it was 8 o'clock at night, and the day's last flight had landed, the airport's exit was surrounded by peddlers, urchins, travelers' friends and family members. Traffic was a constant blare of competing horns.

I waited outdoors, within the safety of a small railed-in foyer, just at the edge of the external tumult. I was wearing a striped short-sleeved shirt with a zippered V-neck front. I wasn't sure if this was appropriate attire for the day's climate or not, for, in the valleyed city, the air has an ambiguous quality to it: cold that cascades from the mountains and warmth that rises from the tropical flora. I suspected that, though I was experiencing moments of chilliness, I would have been hot in a long-sleeve shirt. With a few drinks in me, my current clothing would be just right for an evening in the city. I knew I did not have long to wait for consumption of that sort. Fernando would be here soon with beers or cocktails in tow.

"Stewart, Stewart," a loud yet tremulous voice went up above the crowd.

I moved to make contact, holding my luggage tightly.

At the back end of the crowd, on the pavement in front of the throng of cars, I was surprised to see a beckoning Daniella, Fernando's wife. Fernando had informed me six weeks earlier, by phone, in a straightforward tone, that he had chosen to separate from Daniella to live the *dolce vita*, by which he meant he wanted to utilize his wealth, during the prime of his 30-year-old life, to drink and fuck with impunity. I had not passed judgment. First, I wasn't asked to. And second, I wouldn't have known how to. Yes, I thought it was sad — as they had two small children and what I perceived to be a reservoir of deep feeling for each other — but I didn't live with them and knew little of the intricacies of their daily lives together. Also, I knew that Fernando's separation would mean quality play time for us; specifically, a liquored-up, womanizing jaunt to Rio Dulce, the river on the east coast of Guatemala that ran approximately 15 miles between the Caribbean and Lake Izabel, a playland for adventurous tourists and wealthy Guatemalan weekenders.

Initially, as I walked toward Daniella, I was a smidgen peeved, as I saw her unexpected presence as a potential intrusion. Two weeks before, when Fernando and I planned the trip, he informed me that he had met a cool girl — Lupy — who he was convinced was perfect for me. She, and some of her friends, and some of Fernando's party confreres — those friends of his similarly undergoing woman problems and also on the prowl — had spent Easter week together at a house Fernando had rented in Rio Dulce. Fernando described her as different from most girls. I wasn't sure if this meant she had three breasts. I voiced my doubts, but he assured me he meant different in the best sense of the word. He said she was tall and thin, had blonde hair and green eyes, Latin

skin, was small-chested like I liked, and, most importantly, was too carefree and liberal to give a shit about money, which for me was a prerequisite, since I only believed in working when I ran out of money.

I wondered what Fernando's rapprochement with Daniella meant to the nature of our excursion. It was highly unlikely Fernando would introduce Daniella to Lupy and her group of single girlfriends, any of whom might be loose-tongued drinkers likely to spill hints of his recent X-rated exploits, that, for a newly reconciled married man, were better left in the sublime recesses of personal memory.

All of this selfish calculation coursed through my mind as Daniella and I warmly greeted each other with the reciprocal pecks on both cheeks that are standard in Latin culture. When I saw that Daniella was genuinely heartened to see me, I couldn't help feeling opprobrium at my arrant self-interestedness. I was her friend, too; I should have been glad to see her as well. And now I was; screw domesticity jeopardizing me getting laid — even if I hadn't gotten laid in the new millenium, about five long months. To value lust over friendship was a character flaw. I should have known better. I'm glad I caught myself when I did.

"This is a pleasant surprise," I said.

"You mean that?" she asked with a knowing smile.

"Of course," I said.

She waited for me to continue. I could tell she was expecting me to do away with introductory formalities, like asking about the kids and the weather, and immediately touch on the crux of what we were both thinking.

“I was sad when Fernando told me you guys were having problems. I’m guessing things are better.”

“They are better. We have an understanding.”

“One-sided?”

“I suppose.”

“Are you OK with that?”

“He is the father of my children. And I love him ... regardless. That means there are things I must accept.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Yes I do. It is the reality of our personalities.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re back together. I was afraid I wasn’t going to see you again.”

“You would not have called me if we were still apart?”

“The truth?”

She nodded.

“No, I suppose not.”

“That was another reality.”

“What’s that?”

“The friendships I would have lost. I value our friendship. Many of Fernando’s friends I would not have missed, but you I would have.”

“Why thank you,” I said, sarcastically, hoping to cut the conversation’s confessional seriousness.

“Even if you won’t cut your hair,” she replied, also recognizing that perhaps we were too sober to speak so frankly.

I fingered my ponytail, and then whirled it around like a head-banging rock star.

"It's a shame," she continued, "with short hair, you might be able to get a girlfriend."

"I keep forgetting I'm supposed to have one of those," I said.

She looked at me like a mother looks at a bratty child: annoyance and tenderness wrapped in one. About my hair, I could see her point. I wore my hair in a ponytail, not to make some kind of statement and be a 31-year-old poster boy for arrested adolescence and singles-bar scamming as I'm sure many assumed, but rather because I didn't see the point in paying for haircuts every two weeks.

Her hairstyle, on the other hand, was stately: held up on her head in an elegant chignon. She wore a classic black cocktail dress, and, as always, looked beautiful: dark hair and eyes, a delineated jawline, a patrician nose, and a petite frame that seemed even smaller than usual.

"Have you lost weight you couldn't afford to lose?" I asked. I doubted she went 95 pounds.

"Yes, from the nerves, from our separation."

A metallic-blue, new-model Mercedes sedan pulled up beside us, followed by an early-edition, military-styled jeep. A stocky man, wearing a jacket ineffectively to conceal his holster and gun, jumped down from the jeep and grabbed my bag. I recognized him as one of Fernando's bodyguards and said, "Gracias." He nodded. Then he opened both of the Mercedes passenger-side doors. Daniella insisted on getting into the backseat, despite my protestations. I therefore, in resignation, slid into the front seat. A smile and a proffered bottle of Dorado beer were waiting for me as I sat back on the soft leather and scanned the opulent interior of Fernando's new ride, his second



Mercedes, which he had just paid cash for a month earlier.

“How the rich doth prosper whilst the poor doth suffer,” I said.

“Nice to see you, too,” he said.

Fernando was wearing a sports jacket, a silk shirt and too much cologne. I thought to myself, where’s the neckerchief.

“You look good,” I said, even though it looked like he’d packed on more weight; I saw traces of a premature double chin.

“You don’t,” he said.

“Thanks,” I said, knowing he was commenting on my casual clothes, not my sinewy physicality.

Fernando suggested we go by the Mercedes dealership and grab some drinks before dinner. A cocktail party was being held there for preferred customers. I asked Fernando if he was the most preferred. He shrugged, and said, “By my dealer, and my best friend, not always by my wife.”

I looked back at Daniella. She just shook her head in aggravation.

Fernando drove up to the front of the dealership. He handed the keys to a valet driver who knew Fernando by name.

Two gorgeous hostesses, wearing stiletto heels, form-fitting short dresses cut way above the knees and beauty-contestant sashes, greeted us as we walked into the cavernous showroom. Fernando whispered to me that the one on our left was Miss Teen Guatemala, a 17-year-old, and a suspected virgin; Fernando added that for one night with her, he’d give her the pink slip to his new car. Looking again at her, this time more closely, that seemed like a fair trade. Her skin was like caramel.

In the middle of the showroom, men in suits chatted quietly and sipped from highball glasses. Waiters with white gloves on moved about these dignitaries with trays of appetizers and prepared drinks. I felt as if I were at an exhibit opening, and I suppose I was. New Mercedes were spaced throughout the showroom like sculptures; and above the crowd, suspended from the vaulted ceiling's rafters on cables, was a classy-looking sports car the color of burnished silver. Fernando pointed at it and said, "That is going to be model number three."

"I thought Miss Teen Guatemala was," I said into his ear behind a cupped hand.

Daniella shot me a dirty look. I put my hands up in supplication.

Fernando snapped his fingers in the direction of one of the waiters. Seeing Fernando motion for him, the waiter just about sprinted over.

Fernando asked if they had rum, but was apologetically told the choices were limited to scotch, vodka or white wine.

I asked Fernando if they had beer. He said no, and told me to drink scotch and like it.

I didn't mind. I happened to like scotch, a lot, but had learned from experience that if I was going to be drinking for three or four consecutive days, I was better off drinking beer, or rum and coke.

Fernando took a vodka-tonic. Daniella didn't like for him to drink scotch. When Fernando drank scotch, he tended to get antagonistic. Scotch only made me philosophical.

Daniella took a glass of wine.

I took a scotch and water.

Unlike the rest of the patrons, who were drinking for free, Fernando tipped the waiter

a 20-quetzales note, or about three bucks. I smiled. Fernando was good about that kind of thing. I wasn't sure if he was a lavish tipper because he recognized the importance of symbolic gestures of redistribution, or it simply stoked his ego. Regardless, his generosity always impressed me.

We tapped glasses and toasted my arrival.

I tasted the scotch. It was magical. I could tell it was Johnny Walker Black. Nothing but the best for preferred customers — and friends of preferred customers.

In circumspect preparation for the trip, I had not had a drink in almost two full weeks. I had oiled myself on water and exercise. Now, it was good to be back — I deserved to be back — off the wagon, amongst friends, in a gentle state of budding inebriation.

Fernando took out his cell phone and placed a quick call.

Apparently, two of his friends were going to meet us here at the dealership and then join us for dinner. One of them was going with us to the river. I knew neither of them.

My suspicions were borne out. Daniella, the kids, the nanny, and just one of Fernando's friends were coming to the river with us. No Lupy Chalupe this weekend.

I anticipated Fernando being on his best behavior, which was a shame, since I always counted on Fernando's confident extroversion to open up dialogue with prospective women. No problems. It would be enjoyable to have Daniella along. And she would have to go to bed some time.

I asked about Frederico and Javier, two of Fernando's other friends whom I knew and liked a lot. Frederico was in Nicaragua on business and Javier, who had recently married his second wife, was, according to Fernando, on a diet, still pussy-whipped. I wasn't sure

if by this Fernando meant Javier wasn't cheating on her, or Javier was trying to lose weight, or both.

I asked Fernando if Javier knew I was in town. Fernando said Javier knew and was going to try to drop by for a few minutes to say hello.

Knowing I was momentarily to meet two of Fernando's other friends, I powered down my scotch, hoping to get a witty buzz going and make a good first impression.

"Nice to see you're in form," Fernando said, following suit by draining his drink.

He snapped for another round.

Daniella excused herself to go to the bathroom, giving Fernando and me a chance to catch up in masculine mode.

"So what gives, my brother?" I inquired.

"About?"

"I wonder."

"Well, what can I say, I love my kids. It's that simple."

"And your wife?"

"Sometimes. Usually when my dick's in her mouth."

"Lovely."

"Oh, I don't know. I think it's better this way. I figure as long as I'm discrete, and my friends are," he said, elbowing me softly on the shoulder, "I can have the best of all worlds. I can be a man, a father and a husband."

"In that order?"

Fernando thought for a moment, and said, "Yeah, I suppose so."

"And Daniella's view on this lifestyle and this hierarchy of values?"

“Well, a) what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her, and b) what she does find out she knows to forget, that is, if she wants to live in the manner she’s grown accustomed to and continue to enjoy my puffy cock. Basically, I’m tired of having to make trips out of the country just to have a good time. And if she can’t handle me hanging with the boys every now and then, then I’m drawing up the divorce papers.”

“I’m not sure if it’s the boys she’s worried about,” I said.

“Let me tell you something, and this I’m sure of, it would be the same even if I didn’t fuck around. She seems to think that just because you have a family means you can’t go out and have a good time ... drinks, laughs, fucking life, man.”

At that moment, we were interrupted by the arrival of Javier and Fernando’s two new friends. Javier and I hugged. Then I shook hands with the two other guys. Their names were Manuel and Pablo. They clapped hands, rubbed them as if they were lathering them with soap, and asked Fernando where the damn drinks were. They spoke perfect English, for which I was grateful but guilty. Fernando snapped and the waiter ran over.

I found out what Manuel and Pablo did, and they found out what I did. They shook their heads in amazement when Fernando told them I had dropped out of Harvard Law School a few years back to retire to a one-bedroom apartment so I could read and write and teach the occasional tennis lesson. When Fernando explained I had a small trust fund that paid me 15 grand a year, in perpetuity, their amazement moderated.

Manuel and Pablo were childhood best friends and ex-brothers-in-law: Manuel had divorced Pablo’s sister a year earlier, yet they had remained best friends. They had recently opened a hot tub business together. Fernando imported all their parts for them, which they then assembled at their factory. Javier, their attorney as well as Fernando’s,

handled all their accounting and legal affairs.

After this basic introduction, Javier and I moved off a few feet to catch up and reminisce about our last trip together: a weekend in Vegas three or four months back. Fernando had rented a stretch limo and a suite at the Rio. He had flown in girls from LA he somehow knew. The rest was a blur we now tried to decipher.

After we analyzed the Vegas trip and assembled the jumbled highlights into a semblance of cause-and-effect sequentiality, I tried to talk Javier into joining us at the river. Although he said he would love to partake, he had his kids for the weekend, plus his new wife was playing ball-breaker, insisting he quit drinking for a while until he got in shape. Javier left a short time later. I didn't blame him. It was nice of him to come by and pay his respects. We were drinking quickly and I could tell it pained him not to join us.

Booze: the most tempting of all the vices.

Pablo, Manuel, Daniella, Fernando and I had a few more drinks. Before we left to go for a late supper, I watched a squirrely-looking guy come up to Fernando in a display of meretricious obeisance. Pablo told me the guy was Fernando's main competitor in the import-export business, but the guy was now shitting his pants because Fernando's political party had swept the recent national elections. Fernando's uncle was going to be the equivalent of the vice-president and his eldest sister was a congresswoman.

After the guy skulked off, we asked Fernando what went down.

"He asked me if I was going to play fair, and I said as long as he didn't piss me off."

We laughed. I noticed Daniella didn't.

We headed for the dealership's exit. The four males in our party couldn't keep our

eyes off Miss Teen Guatemala. In Guatemala, she was fair game.

I woke the next morning feeling surprisingly good. I had slept and had not had to resort to a 3 a.m. Sonata capsule. Also, toward the end of the evening, at the nightclub after our steak dinner, I had stopped going half rum, quarter coke, quarter mineral water — known as a Campechano — and for a while, drank coke almost unpolluted. I had been tired and congested from the flight and the fast start at the dealership, and I wanted to save myself for the river. Plus, the music was loud, conversation impossible. And so I just drank my G-rated coke, unobtrusively, and watched the dance floor and the coed intrigue.

It was a newly opened nightclub, a happening one. There had been a long line out front, but Fernando had been there before, and was once again a preferred customer. He threw cash at the bouncer and the doorman, and we were ushered in and shown to a roped-off VIP table just off the dance floor. Four waiters waited on us, as if we were royalty. And I suppose there we were. For that matter, I suppose anywhere you have major money, and are prodigal with it, you are. They kept the table plied with bottles of Bacardi Limon, Coke, mineral water, full ice buckets and ceramic bowls filled with freshly cut limes.

A group of teen-agers joined us. One was Fernando's cousin. The rest were the cousin's friends. It was obvious they revered Fernando. They kept telling legendary stories of Fernando's drinking accomplishments. To pay tribute taxes for access to these stories, they drank and smoked in front of him with temerity. It was like being an undercover reporter to some new-age cult.

At one point, a girl came up to Fernando with a leering manner about her. It was obvious they knew each other, but Fernando pretended not to know her. She stalked off. Daniella seethed.

I tried chatting with Daniella, to stop her from obsessing over what she already knew, but progress was limited by the loud music.

Pablo pointed out two stunning girls who were sitting on old men's laps. Pablo said for 200 bucks, I could have one, too. I decided you couldn't beat the rate of exchange.

Pablo was a good guy. Getting to know him at dinner, I could tell he was mischievous. He had almost no facial shadow on his sweet face, but he was impish: cocky and crude in a fun-loving way. Fernando told me his wife had left him for good this time, and was asking for a divorce. Pablo was supposedly broken up about it, though it didn't show. Fernando said Pablo's ex-to-be had already started fucking other guys — to exact vengeance on Pablo for his infidelity throughout their marriage. I asked Fernando if there was a lesson to be learned in this. He scoffed.

Besides watching the conquistadorial maneuvering on the dance floor, and the ersatz ingenuousness of the hookers, I watched Manuel make headway with one of Fernando's cousin's female friends, who, despite her youth, looked like a pro. Pablo told me the reason Manuel wasn't coming to the river with us was not because he had to work, as he insisted, but because he was intending to spend the weekend in the pants of this little chiquita.

After reviewing the evening, as I was prone to do, I flicked the sleep from my eyes and rolled out of bed. Only one thing from the night was troubling me: I wasn't sure if Daniella had brushed my leg under the table accidentally or purposely. I tried to replay



the incident, but it wasn't recorded clearly.

I decided I was being foolish. My egotistical imagination was getting the better of me. I needed to nip my ego in the bud, then and there. I figured it couldn't have been intentional, and even if it had been, it was surely a superfluous gesture, a symbolic rejoinder to Fernando's period of waywardness. She would never cheat on him. Neither would I. I would think no more about it.

I pulled back the curtains to reveal a bright day. The morning sun dappled the dewy greenery below. Fernando's teak-floored, antique-filled home was a belvedere, situated on a hilly perch above the valley. The city below was a mix of pullulating vegetation and urban structures, peaceful and bustling all at the same time.

I moved toward the kitchen. In so doing, I passed the main bedroom. I heard what sounded like arguing. Maybe it was the TV.

In the kitchen, the uniformed nanny was attending to the two girls, while the uniformed maid was setting out coffee, freshly squeezed orange juice, fresh fruit and scrambled eggs and frioles for the adults. I wished them "Buenos Días," and thanked them in butchered Spanish for their country and the desayuno. They giggled shyly.

Before pounding a glass of rehydrating OJ and then grabbing coffee and a plate of food, I said hello to the two girls. I think they recognized me, but without their parents around, they were bashful. The five-year-old was a precocious kid who took after her papi, the three-year-old an angel who took after her mama.

I took my food and coffee back to the guestroom and turned on CNN. I ate breakfast. There were problems in the Middle East.

I performed my ablutions, showered and put on a Target bathing suit — nylon shell,

polyester lining — a cotton “Cabo San Lucas” T-shirt and Sensei flip-flops. The plan was to leave the house at 10, pick Pablo up and head to the river, about a three-hour drive east. Fernando had informed me that the three boys were going to drive the Mercedes, and Daniella, the girls, the nanny, and one of the bodyguards, whose mother lived near the river, were going to follow us in the new Explorer so the girls could watch *The Little Mermaid* and not bitch like little bitches.

I looked at my watch. It was only nine. Fernando was always punctual. I still had an hour to kill. I kicked off my flip-flops stretched out on the kingsize bed, and read my book: James Jones’ *Go to the Widow-Maker*.

Pablo fell into the backseat with a small knit bag. He used the bag as a pillow and was asleep almost instantaneously. Fernando said Pablo had had a 7a.m. appointment to deliver a hot tub to a general, which meant he’d been on time. He had only gotten about four hours sleep — that on top of a shitload of booze.

We snaked out of the city, then onto the two-lane highway that ran to the coast. The 300-kilometer trip would take us through four distinct climatic zones: first woodland, then desert, then lowland agricultural, and finally tropical.

During the first stretch, Fernando was quiet. He seemed contemplative. Rarely did he try to pass the slow-moving 18-wheelers that transported goods back and forth between the city and the port in Punto Barrios. He drank from a large bottle of Fruit Punch Gatorade, and, from time to time, fiddled with the disk changer. I asked him if he was depressed, if he wasn’t eating enough salmon. He ignored me.

I stared out the window at the roadside shanties.

About an hour into the drive, Fernando perked up.

“You know what the difference between men and women is?” he asked.

“I didn’t know there was just one.”

He glared at me.

“Please, tell me. I wait with baited breath. But do me a favor, make it more refined than something like, ‘guys have dicks and women have cunts.’”

“Do you want to hear this or not?”

“I’m all ears.”

“It’s simple. Women will remember the outfit they wore two years ago at a dinner party. Not only will men not remember what they wore last weekend, but they won’t even try to.”

“That’s not bad. Not bad at all,” I said, scratching my chin in the pose of a Greek philosopher.

“You might actually be onto something.”

“But what’s the significance of this profound insight, other than that we’re different?”

“That I’m still working on.”

“Keep me posted.”

Pablo began to stir. He sat up and yawned.

“Much better,” Pablo said. “I’m back,” his voice growing louder. “Let the games begin,” he shouted at the ceiling, shaking his matted head like a dog after a bath.

Then he poked his head between the seats, and said, quietly, in a hushed confessional tone, “You know, I could use some pussy, but I’ll settle for some of that Gatorade.”

Fernando handed him the plastic bottle.

He took a long swig and handed the bottle back to Fernando, again protruding his head between us.

“Did you hear about Don Fernando fucking that 17-year-old Costa Rican girl the last time we were at the river?”

“He mentioned something about it. Was she as good-looking as he insists?”

“Good-looking? Picture this. Tits like coconuts, a waist the size of a chicken’s neck, an ass as hard as my dick, legs higher than the clouds, and tanned skin soft as velvet.”

“Not bad.”

“Not bad? I had to spend the weekend watching her dance around the boat in a string bikini and coat herself in baby oil every five minutes. I kept having to get in the water to jack off.”

Fernando and I cracked up.

“That hot, huh?”

Fernando gave me a sly smile.

For the next half hour we recited, each in turn, like a game of Australian doubles ping-pong, conquest stories. My favorite of Pablo’s — and Fernando’s too I guess — took place six weeks earlier during Javier’s bachelor party. Pablo, Javier, Manuel, and Fernando, carted four strippers from the city to the river, everyone getting fucked up the whole way there, the girls snorting coke in addition to slamming rum. Once on Fernando’s boat, the entourage paired off — boy-girl I asked, and was told of course and to shut up and listen — to fuck in standing doggy-style under the stars, somewhere in the middle of the Caribbean. “What about Rafael (Fernando’s captain)?” I asked. “I think he was too stoned to give a shit,” Fernando said. Pablo said when they were done screwing,

he was tempted to throw the four whores overboard. As it was, they sent the girls home on a bus.

“I guess I chose the wrong weekend to come into town,” I said. “If it hadn’t been for that surprise 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary party I’d planned for my folks, and already sent out invitations for, I’d have been there.”

“Don’t worry, gringo,” Pablo said, slapping me on the back. “We will have fun this weekend. I promise you.”

At about the roadtrip’s halfway point, Fernando pulled over into a Pemex station. Daniella pulled in behind us. All the gas stations in Guatemala are full serve. And so, while the four attendants filled up the cars and cleaned the windows, we walked over to the adjacent convenience store: a Super 24. Fernando held hands with his daughters. The nanny stayed close, in case Fernando got tired and wanted to return them. I noticed Fernando and Daniella didn’t speak.

Inside the Super 24, Fernando, Pablo and I headed to the baño to take leaks. The baño was clean. It smelled of ammonia. Fernando and I pissed in urinals beside each other. Pablo went into the lone stall.

“That’s a big cock,” Fernando said, looking down at my member.

“Thanks,” I said, knowing I was above average in that department and hanging well. “I wish I could say the same for you.”

“Cute.”

“I agree. You do have a cute little cock.”

“You know the only way I seem to be able to put up with you is when I drink.”

“Well, then I suggest we drink.”

“Now we’re talking,” Pablo said, coming out of the stall.

We bought chips and a case of mini-Dorado bottles — Fernando insisted that since we didn’t have ice, the small ones would stay cooler longer than the normal-sized ones. We also bought sodas and snacks for Daniella, the girls, the nanny and the bodyguard.

Before we pulled back out onto the highway, I conversed a bit with Daniella. I asked if she was hungover, if she needed a beer. She said she was fine. She was pleased I was in town, and asked if I was having fun.

“Always when I’m here,” I said, “in the presence of beauty.”

“Me or the landscape?”

“As if there’s a choice.”

For whatever reason, we always flirted together with banter of this sort. It was good to be back on familiar terrain.

“You know when you pass out tonight, I’m cutting your hair.”

“Promises.”

Back on the road, now beyond the insurgency of the desert’s stifling heat, we opened the windows for the flatland’s refreshing air. We cranked up the music. Fernando selected an Abba greatest hits, or maybe it was KC and the Sunshine Band. The first two beers went down roughly. After those two, they became nectar.

We passed melon and grape fields, and numerous fruit stands uniformly advertising “Uvas Frias,” hand-written on plyboard with red paint.

I felt lucky to have a wealthy friend. Men on the road’s embankment, in clothes threadbare but dignified, and straw cowboy hats stained by sweat, used machetes to cut the encroaching grass.

The road fell away more quickly now. All was right with my world. Fernando passed convoys at will, effortlessly. Daniella followed easily.

Pablo pointed out an establishment that from the outside looked like long-term storage stalls. He explained it was really an ingenious self-serve, bill-operated motel. You put your cash in the change machine, and the garage door your car is in front of opens. You drive in, and the sensor immediately closes the door behind you. In the stall is usually a queen-size bed and a full bathroom, and obviously room for your parked car.

Places of this ilk are sprouting up all over the city, Pablo said. They're extremely popular, for utilizing them makes it almost impossible for anyone to I.D. you. As a result, your wife won't catch you cheating. He wished they'd been around sooner.

When we entered the last stretch of highway — a humid zone — we put the windows back up. Fernando set the climate control for his side of the car at 70, and I set mine for my side of the car at 71. Outside, the air was a calm 85. The weather would be perfect on the coast. We were relieved. It seemed likely that the tropical depression in Honduras had stalled. Otherwise, the wind should have been up by now.

But for the occasional rubber-tree plantation, the foliage was dense. I could tell we were close now. Despite the prospect of a brilliant afternoon on the water, I was almost sorry the first-leg of our roadtrip was coming to an end. The journey to a vacation's destination is often the best. It holds only promise.

I thought about the rubber trees. It seemed amazing to me that anyone could be optimistic enough to plant and tend them. Young rubber trees cannot be tapped for a minimum of 15 years. That anyone has that kind of commercial foresight, that kind of resolute patience — for where there are rubber trees, there are often hurricanes — is

surely some kind of a tribute to something.

We crossed a swollen creek and turned down a road to the marina. Boats of all sizes were stored on trailers under tin-roofed stalls. A tractor was used to push the boats down the marina's concrete ramp, into the water, along the dock.

Fernando's boat was already in the water, tied to the dock, waiting for us. The water, though dark, glinted in the sunlight. Fernando's boat gleamed white. Rafael was on board, continuing to clean that which was already clean.

Fernando got out of the car and went to inspect his boat. Pablo replaced Fernando behind the wheel of the Mercedes. We were going to take the cars across the bridge to the lakeside resort and check in. Fernando would meet us there in 20 minutes. He was going there via the boat, so that, after we lunched by the pool, the boat would be ready and at our disposal. I wasn't sure why he hadn't arranged for Rafael to just meet us at the resort with the boat in the first place. I guessed he wanted to make sure Rafael had expurgated any and all incriminating evidence.

We pulled up through the bougainvillea-filled courtyard of the Banana Palms resort and stopped the cars on the circular drive, in front of the sunken yet still open-aired lobby. The bodyguard, the nanny and the kids waited with the cars. Pablo, Daniella and I descended the stairs, past a goldfish pond, and went to the front desk. We knew the lady working the desk from past visits. We said hello. Daniella told her we'd need two adjacent bungalows, one a one-bedroom, for Pablo and me, and one a two-bedroom for the happy family and nanny. Pablo and I looked at each other, both of us wondering if this housing arrangement would crimp our plans.

The lady looked at her computer screen and gave us keys and the remotes for the TVs



and wall-mounted air-conditioning units.

We went back up the stairs. We parked the cars in spaces at the foot of the hill, below the line of coriander-colored stucco bungalows.

Daniella gave the bodyguard some money and told him to be back here in two days. He gave her the gun, so that Fernando could bring it with us on the boat. A year ago, pirates had boarded the yacht of a family from Denmark, not far from here, about 20 miles southeast of Livingstone — the water-locked town at the intersection of Rio Dulce and the Caribbean. The pirates had shot and paralyzed the eldest child, a 12-year-old boy who would never make love to a girl, or to a boy, or to himself.

We really didn't have anything to worry about since we'd be traveling within the relatively safe confines of the lake and the river, and perhaps only a few miles into the Caribbean to Playa Blanca. Also, Fernando's twin inboard was too fast to be boarded. Nevertheless, Fernando liked to be careful.

Daniella offered to drive the bodyguard to his mom's place, but he said he wanted to walk. After he started off, Daniella said she thought he had a mistress in town he wanted to see first.

A bellhop appeared out of nowhere to help us with our minimal luggage.

The front-desk clerk had given us the last set of bungalows. She knew from experience that Fernando and his friends could get boisterous late night.

We walked up the shared stairs of our two connected bungalows. The stairs had balustrades made from bamboo. On the landing, I tipped the bellhop, and Pablo and I turned right with our two bags and moved toward our bungalow. Daniella, the nanny and the kids turned left toward theirs. Between the two bungalows were a deck and a hot tub.

Pablo commented that with all the business we brought this place, he and Manuel would surely have gotten this job if they'd been in business a year sooner.

The interior of our bungalow was comfortable yet predictable: two doubletwin separated by a bedside table with a Bible in the drawer, a round two-seater table, a small refrigerator, and a vanity area that led to the bathroom. Pablo hit the AC remote. A panel opened on the unit and cold air gushed smoothly out.

While Pablo changed into his bathing suit, I put on sunscreen and looked through the wall of windows at the lake below. There was not a boat in sight, only the indigo water's placid and reflective surface. The deep water revealed itself in swaths of shadow.

I stared across the large expanse of water at the far bank, at the uncorrupted verdancy of the opposite shoreline. Fernando had told me on an earlier trip that there wasn't a bridge to the other side of the lake. Hence, the reason it had not been developed. This was not to say there was much development on the Banana Palms' side of the lake. Except for the town, really a village, and the one section of river by the bridge, there was no electricity to the outlying areas. What houses and resorts there were in the outlying areas used generators. This included Banana Palms.

Before we headed down to the pool, I knocked on Daniella's room to see if they were ready. She said they'd meet us there in a jiffy, as soon as she finished coating the kids in sunscreen.

Pablo and I wound down the sidewalk, past mango and palm trees and the other bungalows. Then behind the lobby to the pool. The pool was on a knoll just above the lake, perpendicular to the resort's long T-shaped dock. We looked to see if Fernando's boat had arrived. It wasn't there yet.

In the dock's widest slip was tied an amphibious ultra-lite that Pablo and I looked at with a modicum of wonderment. Neither of us had ever seen a seaplane — albeit a kit one — at the Banana Palms before, or, for that matter, anywhere else.

We sat on two chaise loungers, our backs to the lake, in front of a table with an umbrella. Across the pool from us, two old hairy guys in Speedos lay basting, scrotum-side up. Behind them, the pool was fringed with a bank of bushes from which grew spectacular yellow flowers. I asked Pablo if he knew the name of this plant. He said he had no fucking idea, and knew only the names of plants you could smoke.

Off to one side of the pool was the palapa that housed the bar, kitchen and eating area. The palapa was constructed from thatch, Belizean-wood purlins and cordage. It was open. It was light. It was airy.

A waiter emerged from the palapa. He knew us ... exceedingly well. We shook hands. He liked us. We liked him. He always filled our drink orders quickly, and we always made it worth his while. We told him we'd be ordering lunch, but we needed to wait a few minutes until the rest of our group arrived.

"Don Fernando?" he asked. Sí, we said. He beamed. He really liked Fernando. Fernando tipped him the best.

In the meantime, we ordered two of his specialties: what can only be described as spicy Bloody Marys without the tomato juice but with Coke and soda water instead.

Our icy drinks were there in no time flat. They provided a perfect juxtaposition to the warm sun.

Daniella came down the walkway leading Ashley, the five-year old. Behind them was the nanny who carried Isabella, the three-year-old. The nanny adored Isabella.

Ashley wore a floppy hat, sunglasses, a one-piece suit, miniature water shoes and floats around her upper arms. Isabella had on the identical ensemble. They were cute as hell. The nanny still wore her uniform.

Daniella wore a black Lycra one-piece. Around her waist was wrapped a colorful sarong. Why she was always so demure about her swimwear I never quite understood. She had an undeniably great figure. She should have flaunted it. I knew the births of both her children required C-sections. Maybe she was self-conscious and worried about the scar revealing itself above the bikini line. It was more probable, however, that she was simply inhibited. Fernando said she liked it in the ass, but I knew that was nothing more than tall-tale guy talk.

“Looking good mama,” I said. She simpered. “Don’t get me wrong,” I continued, “I would have preferred a thong, but I’ll take what I can get.”

“I’m sure you would,” she said.

Fernando strolled up. He seemed happy. Before coming over to us, he said hello to the two fat Speedo guys. Fernando knew everybody.

I decided one of the Speedo guys must have owned the ultra-lite, and that was the reason they wore Speedos: because they were pushing the ultra-lite’s weight limit. It certainly couldn’t have been an aesthetic consideration.

“We’re set to go,” Fernando said, coming over to us. “The boat’s gassed. I bought beer, ice, rum, agua de mineral, and limes for my lime-loving gringo buddy. The weather’s perfect. It’s going to be a good day.”

“Where’s my drink?” he said, looking at our nearly finished drinks. “Bastards.”

He turned around for the waiter. The waiter was behind him. They slapped hands.

Fernando ordered three more of the drink specials, a beer for Daniella, cokes for the kids and nanny, plates of ceviche and fried river shrimp, grilled cheeses for the kids and nanny, and a hamburger to be sent down to the boat for Rafael.

“Let’s hurry up and eat so we can hit the water,” he said. “We’ll see what’s shaking on the river. Maybe we’ll go to Livingstone.”

“What about the girls?” asked Daniella. “They want to go for a ride in the boat.”

“All right. How about we take them for a quick spin on the lake and then drop them back here with Maria? Then we can head into the river, maybe up to Livingstone. OK?”

“OK,” Daniella answered.

Before we ate, Fernando ran up to his bungalow to retrieve his gun. He came back with it rolled in a towel. Even though no one in the city knew we were at the river, which meant we weren’t likely to be candidates for a kidnapping, Fernando would keep the gun close to him all weekend, until the bodyguard returned.

For about a half-hour, we tooled around the lake with the girls, not far from the Banana Palms. They laughed every time the boat jumped small swells created by our own wake. They cherished the moments when the spindrift hit their cheeks.

It was a half-hour pleasantly spent.

When we dropped them off, they seemed satisfied with the length of their ride. As we motored toward the mouth of the river, they waved at us from the dock.

The Banana Palms is located only about a mile from the calm confluence between Lake Isabel and Rio Dulce. And so our boat arced into the river in no time. The water changed from indigo to a color resembling faded army fatigues; and though the river is

muddier than the lake, the downstream current keeps it as healthy, as vital.

Rafael, not saying anything, inscrutable as usual, stood under the canopy and drove. The four of us sat in the stern, in the sunlight. I leaned back and let the rays dance prismatically on my eyelashes. I wanted to stop time.

Fernando opened a bottle of Bacardi Limon and mixed the three boys Campechanos. Daniella reached down under the bench seat and retrieved a beer from the cooler. Chipped ice flakes ran down the perspiring bottle's sides. I took the bottle from her and opened it for her. We locked eyes and she said thanks. I asked her if she cared for a wedge of lime. She didn't.

I looked at my watch. It was 3 p.m. The day was young.

Fernando had Rafael turn up the volume on the boat's amazing sound system. The song "Borracho y Loco" poured out of the 10 Bose speakers that circumscribed the boat's interior. The song was one of Fernando's favorites. Mine, too.

We passed the inlet to the marina, and past the Esso gas station where Fernando had stocked us up with gas and booze. We all waved at the young boy who worked at the gas station with his father. He was a funny, scrappy little kid; sometimes, Fernando gave him rides on the boat.

We crossed slowly under the high convex bridge. A bungee jumper was on the verge of leaping off, from, surprise, its acme. I preferred my conveyance to his.

Fernando pointed out a bar/hostel on the water called Backpackers. Now that there was finally a dock out front, we would definitely drop by late night, Fernando said. Wanderlust twenty-somethings from Europe, Canada, and the U.S. hung out there. Daniella gave an extended blink of her eyes. She opened another beer.

In the vicinity of the bridge, there were a fair number of boats about. I watched a teen-age boy try to impress all the onlookers with his slaloming prowess. He tried to jump the entire width of his wake. He fell, headfirst.

Two other punk kids riding jet skis attempted to use our wake as a ramp. They almost collided in mid-air. Fernando flipped 'em off, and exclaimed, "Stupid fuckers." Pablo started to get up to moon them, but remembering Daniella was there, stopped short.

Rafael picked up speed, and we left the bustle of the bridge. We headed upstream toward the Gulfeta.

In nearly every cove we cruised past, a yacht was anchored. From each mast, a country's flag was flown prominently, patriotically. We tried to identify them. There were flags from Mexico, France, Sweden ... and other countries whose flags were less familiar to us. I thought this all flag-flapping paradoxical, as how could you be jingoistic and a sailor?

In the middle of the Gulfeta, we rounded an island spackled white with roosting egrets. We waved at a ferryboat full of passengers. They ignored us. They were birdwatching.

Not far beyond the Gulfeta, a few miles before Livingstone and the Caribbean's aquamarine emergence, Rio Dulce narrows considerably. The river becomes embosked within a winding canyon: sheer-faced walls bursting with verdure.

Upon entering the canyon, Rafael decelerated the boat. He steered it slowly, sinuously, beneath the steep mossy cliffs. I looked up in awe.

Fernando said he looked into buying land here, but this area had recently been designated a nature preserve — a protectorate for jaguars and other threatened species.

He said that was probably a good idea, and he wouldn't fight the designation, though with his party now in power, he could probably get it overturned.

Fernando had Rafael stop the boat, so that we could take a dip and imbibe the view. I asked Fernando to put on John Denver.

I recognized that Denver sang about a very different landscape, but I thought his acoustic guitar and ecological sensibility might be appropriate under the circumstances. I suppose the booze had started to take effect. Fernando looked at me like I was crazy. He said the CD was in his CD case, which was below deck. "Come on," I said.

Surprisingly, he relented without a hassle. He slid open the hatch and descended the ladder to the cabin: comprised of a small galley, two two-person sleeping berths, and a toilet closet styled like a commercial airliner's.

I moved to the prow of the boat, to the boat's pulpit. Pablo followed me. I did a swan dive. He did a cannonball. The water was warm in some spots, cool in others.

I swam around, aft of the boat, and exhorted Daniella to join us. She hesitated. But then she stood up. She removed her sarong. Even though she was petite, and a tad on the short side, she had dancer's legs. I couldn't help thinking what it would be like to cleave them.

She unclasped a lanyard, and, holding it, lowered herself down the ladder into the water. I asked her why the rope. She said she didn't want to drift too far from the boat, there might be a current. In this protected canyon, I asked her. She said you never know. I told her I'd save her. She kept hold of the rope.

"Rocky Mountain High" came on. Fernando joined us in the water.

From the water, Fernando called out to Rafael to toss us beers. We had the beers in no



time. While Pablo and Daniella chatted near the boat, treading water and sipping their beers, Fernando and I floated further away, on our backs, our beers stationed on our stomachs. Fernando was better at this technique than me, this had something to do with his paunch and the buoyancy it provided him.

Just around the next bend, I could see an Indian seine fishing from a pirogue. I guessed he was fishing for Rubalo, a bony white fish, firmer than sole, softer than snapper.

Fernando, not seeing him, asked me, “You know what the difference between Guatemalans and Americans is?”

“No. Do elaborate.”

“It’s simple. We work to play, whereas Americans work so they can work some more.”

“And so, how do I fit in?”

“You don’t. That’s why you need to move to Guatemala.”

“Is that right?”

“Yup.”

“Careful what you wish for.”

“I’m not too worried. I think I can handle you. If you act up, I’ll just have you shot.”

“Do we get to come here every weekend?”

“Anything you want.”

We took deep pulls from our beers. A bird cried out, in somewhat concordant accompaniment with Denver. It sounded like a lovesick macaw, a parrot on the prowl.

“Incidentally, how does this theory apply to women, keeping in mind your theory from this morning?”

“Easy. It doesn’t. The women are the same in both places. Women nurture. Those that work, work only so they can nurture. And those that pretend they don’t want to nurture, feel guilty for not nurturing.”

“All women?”

“All women. Just look around this preserve. Nature is powerful.”

We moored the boat at the wharf in Livingstone, alongside a rusted barge whose shell had been lined with tires for just such a purpose. Fernando paid a guy on the barge for permission to park there. We clambered out of the boat, across the barge. The barge gave off a piquant smell, a mixture of diesel and fish.

We walked up a rise and turned onto the town’s main thoroughfare: a cobblestone street bordered on both sides by a hodgepodge of inns, bed-and-breakfasts, cafes, bars and tiendas. In Livingstone, everyone walks down the middle of this thoroughfare. This is because, since the town can only be reached by water, there are almost no cars. The few cars I did see were on blocks, and looked like Cold War relics from the USSR.

I imagined that, if not for all the tourists, and the constant refurbishment that must take place, the French Quarter in New Orleans would resemble Livingstone.

We passed a hippie couple who needed to hurry up and take showers. No excuses. Even if they couldn’t afford a shower, they should at least have gone for a swim every now and then, maybe even have sprung for a bar of soap instead that day’s weed. All I knew is I didn’t need to smell their rank BO. I mean they had a fucking choice between

an ocean and a river — each only a few hundred yards away. Eeny, meeny, miny, mo.

An elderly black lady, holding pictures of successful hairdos past, asked if she could braid and bead my hair. I was tempted, but still too sober, too self-conscious. I told her thanks, maybe when we left. I thought about paying her anyway, but decided such a gesture might offend her.

Next, a shirtless Rastafarian guy, with stomach muscles like lines on a map, came up to me. I think my ponytail belied my mode of addiction.

The guy was so casual you couldn't help but feel comfortable around him.

"You need anything, mon?" he asked.

"I'm good," I said.

"You sure now?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. I'm afraid I'm a drinking man."

"That's cool. But you don't know what you're missing, mon. No hangovers."

"Cultural conditioning, I guess."

"Das true mon, too true."

We shook hands, pro athlete-like. Then he walked off.

During this exchange, Fernando, Pablo, and Daniella had taken seats at the outdoor café we usually ate at. Fernando knew the proprietor. When I came up to them, they asked if I'd scored any wacky weed. I said nope, tonight's for drinking.

We looked around for the proprietor.

Daniella, back in her sarong, excused herself to go to the bathroom. She wanted to wash her hands. While she was gone, Pablo told the story about the last time he and Fernando had eaten here. They'd gotten so drunk that Fernando had begun firing his gun

into the air. The proprietor had been pissed.

The proprietor, a half-Guatemalan, half-Chinese guy, as if on cue, came out of the kitchen to greet us. He'd been napping in his pad upstairs. He mimicked Fernando playing Fernando the Kid. Then he pretended to pat Fernando down. We all laughed. Fernando assured him the gun was on the boat. Everyone was everyone's buddy.

We ordered a bottle of rum and a platter of conch.

I looked at my watch. It was only 7 p.m.; Fernando suggested we chill for an hour or so, and if Livingston didn't start hopping with tourists, we'd head to Backpackers, where there might even be women desperate enough for the two of us.

And his woman situation for the night? we asked. He said that unless we could figure out a way to ditch Daniella, it was home cooking again.

Daniella returned to the table.

We drank and ate, and listened to a group of street musicians play nothing but Bob Marley. Daniella and I danced to "Buffalo Soldier." I guess I was rapidly losing my self-consciousness, though, when we left, I wasn't so drunk that I opted for the hair beads.

We coasted up to Backpackers at about 10. The sun had dropped. It was a jungle night. U2's "Sunday Bloody Sunday" swelled from the boat, announcing our presence like the introduction of a prizefight.

The place was brightly illuminated, a drinker's beacon. It showed promise. It was a two-story, green-painted wooden structure on stilts. The word "BACKPACKERS" was inexpertly painted in large white letters between the first and second floors. The second floor had screens for windows. It had to be a dormitory. The first floor didn't appear to

have windows. It was the bar.

Pablo and I jumped from the stern onto the well-lighted dock. I tied the rear lanyard around a cleat. Rafael, despite steering us in, cleated off the bowline. He had his knot completed before I did.

Fernando told Pablo and me to check out the scene, to conduct reconnaissance and see if it was worth staying.

"It looks like there're quite a few people inside," I said.

"Just do it," he said. "I don't want to go in if it's a waste of time. There are other places."

Pablo and I, propelled by hypersocial rum buzzes, strutted into the bar. There were eight to 10 people milling at the bar, and two groups of two at two tables near the bar. The boat had piqued their aggregate curiosity. I sidled right up to the bar proper, and with the perfect combination of invincibility and sincerity, said, "How's everyone doing?"

I could tell they weren't sure how to respond.

"Well, what if I said, a round of drinks is on us?"

I could tell they seemed to think that was a good idea.

I told Pablo to go fetch Fernando and Daniella. He nodded in affirmation. He also wanted to stay. More than half the assemblage was made up of 20-something-year-old girls, a few worthy of our further scrutiny.

I shook hands with the two guys closest to me, and asked, "How does rum sound?"

They seemed to think that would work.

There were two 20-somethings tending bar, a guy and a girl. The guy was lanky and had crazy curly hair. He was in need of a good shearing. The girl was a little pear-shaped,

but she had a beautiful face, a sensuous face. You could tell she gave great head. Luckily, she was the closest of the two to me.

Everyone at the bar listened in as I asked, "Do you know how to make a Campechano?"

"No, I'm afraid not," she said. She had a French accent. I fell in love.

"The owner is gone until tomorrow. We are just helping out, pitching in as you say."

"That's nice of you," I said. The other bartender-for-a-day kind of smiled, but didn't say anything. He was the shy type.

"You have rum, right?"

"Yes."

"Mineral water?"

"Yes."

"Coke?"

"Yes."

"Ice?"

"Yes."

"Limes?"

"Yes."

"Do you always say 'yes' this easily?"

"No." She laughed. I was in there.

Fernando and Daniella came up to the bar. I informed Fernando he was buying a round of drinks for everyone. He didn't bat an eye.

However, it was a few minutes before I was able to demonstrate the perfect way to

make a Campechano, as a minor brouhaha delayed my demonstration.

Almost comically, the bartenders couldn't decide what to charge us for a full bottle of rum. They specialized in ringing up beer tabs. Also, they were a little reluctant to part with what turned out to be the bar's last full bottle of rum. They conferred, back and forth, in English. The guy had a German accent. Fernando, growing peeved, seeing the situation for what it was, jumped into the fray. In expeditious Fernando fashion, he allayed their angst. He threw a wad of big bills on the counter, and promised to donate an unopened bottle of better rum from the boat. "Speaking of which," Fernando said, "seeing my rum will taste a hell of a lot better, and everyone will enjoy it more, why don't we just drink my rum, and you can save your bottle. And not to worry, I'll even pay this amount," he said, pointing at the bills, "for every bottle of mine we open. I don't mind paying for them twice, three times, whatever."

The bartenders weren't stupid. They accepted this proposal.

Fernando told Daniella to tell Rafael to bring us a few bottles of rum. We had the rum in no time.

I poured out a round of Campechanos for everyone. They took sips, and said they were suitably impressed with my mixing ability. I was heaped with praise. I wanted to bow.

I struck up a conversation with Celia, my French fantasy babe, and the two strangers I'd shaken hands with.

The closest to me, geographically, was a 23-year-old from Frankfurt, Germany, named Axl. He had on cut-off jeans shorts, Daisy Dukes, which revealed tree-trunks for legs. I surmised he had played a lot of football in his day. Even though he wore Daisy

Dukes, he seemed like a good guy. He asked if that was U2 we were playing when we drove up. I confirmed what he already knew. I asked who his favorite group was. He said the Boss. He'd seen Springsteen three times in Europe. But sadly never in the U.S. That was his dream. He asked if we had any Springsteen on board. I said probably.

I asked Fernando to ask Rafael to bring in the CD case, knowing that Fernando would have Daniella go and tell Rafael to bring it in.

We had the case in no time. There wasn't a Springsteen CD in it. Axl was bummed. I told him to pick something else. Instead of the Scorpions, he chose early John Cougar.

There was a compact disk player behind the bar. Celia put the disk on.

The other guy in my conversational clique was a 25-year-old from one of the Nordic lands. I usually liked Nords, but I disliked this clown almost instantaneously. He wore a muscle T-shirt, he had a pail for a jaw, and those runway-model indentations in his cheeks. I could tell right away that he thought he was God's gift to women. And he probably could have been, if his breath didn't smell like bunghole and someone else did his talking. He was the last of the Vikings. He tried to tell me birling was the greatest sport in the world.

I tried to ignore him as best I could, but he kept interjecting, interrupting my flow with Axl and Celia by saying stupid, self-serving things. He drove me to drink more heavily. I had to open another bottle of rum.

I came to find out, from the three of them, that nearly everyone in the bar had come to Rio Dulce from a foreign country to donate their time and expertise at a nearby orphanage. They frequented Backpackers because a percentage of the bar's profits went to the orphanage. They pointed out all the other do-gooders and told me where each one



was from: one from Oklahoma, three from Canada, and another from Germany — besides Axl and the bartender, Tomas.

The Viking said he supposed helping the kids was good, but his main reason for coming here was so he could learn Spanish and get a job with his country's State Department. I said I hoped the children spoke only their very best Spanish around him.

Celia spoke five languages, six if you counted her rudimentary Spanish. Spanish would make four for Axl. The Viking spoke 15 or 16.

I asked Celia which language was her favorite. While she thought about it, she moistened her lips with her tongue. I thought I'd faint.

After a minute of musing, she responded, "Speaking, I think, is best in English. There are many, many choices ... many, many ways to express the thoughts, yes, the feelings inside. This is not so good in French. Yet, when I write, in the night, in my diary, I prefer to write in French. It is the easiest. And I think it is also the best to be disciplined when you write. Yes? Don't you think?"

I told her I had no way of judging. I didn't speak French. I was an ugly American, but Beckett would have agreed with her.

She said, "Who?"

I fell out of love.

She went to get a beer for a really tanned middle-aged guy.

Axl and I talked about football. He agreed with me that the English Premiere League was better than the Bundesliga. He was a Manchester United follower. I said I was sorry that Arsenal was such a superior side. He laughed. The Viking said if he had to watch a sport besides birling, he'd watch automobile racing. I asked him if he knew of

any birlers who could drive.

I scanned the bar. Pablo was trying to make time with the hippy girl from Oklahoma. He didn't have a shot. She looked like she'd put the Bible in the Bible Belt.

Between the tables, two of the Canadian girls danced with each other, barefoot. Their moves were slow and synchronized. It was like the film version of Egyptian hieroglyphics. One of the dancing duo looked like a dike. The other one didn't. She noticed me noticing her. She thanked me silently for the drink.

She was a tall, slim, stringy-hair blonde. I kind of dug her, even though she did wear fucked-up hippie clothing and her feet were a little long for my liking. I prayed she was hygienic. I looked over at Fernando and Daniella. Daniella was looking at me. For some strange reason, I got the sense she was jealous of my extra-curricular attentions.

As I started to move toward Daniella, to say waz up, the middle-aged guy who had gotten the beer came up to me. He introduced himself. Patrick was his name. He was an Australian guy, the color of antique copper, a sun and sea worshipper with cracked lips. He said he liked Americans. On behalf of my country, I thanked him for his compliment. He proceeded to tell me his story, how he had come to be in Rio Dulce.

He was a peripatetic sailor, a deckhand for hire. This was his bailiwick. It let him travel around the world. You see, he said, as long as he was near water, he was happy. I asked him, aren't most of the towns in Australia near water. He liked that. Anyway, he said, a few months back he was helping this filthy rich Costa Rican guy sail his brand-new yacht near the Blue Hole. Everything was great, until the guy caught Patrick in bed with his 22-year-old wife. Fearing he was going to be shot, Patrick jumped overboard under the cloak of night and swam ashore. Luckily, it wasn't a long swim. They were

anchored in a roadstead in a Belizean bay. He had gone ashore and found a job in a shipyard in Placencia. Again, everything was great. Every night, he drank Pelican beer and ate fresh grilled lobster, that is until immigration found out he had slipped into the country without bothering to check in. He had to sneak out of Belize on a fishing boat. He was dropped in Livingston.

He asked if I knew anyone looking for an experienced hand. "Sailing or fucking?" I asked him. He liked that. Sailing, he said. I said I didn't. He said, thanks anyway, mate, see you around. He went back to his table.

Axl perused the CDs in Fernando's case. He fingered disks by Tom Petty and Jackson Browne. I was about to ask Axl if he only listened to eponymous music, but then he pulled out a Lynyard Skynard greatest hits. He wanted to hear "Freebird." He had Celia put it on.

Once again, I started to move toward Daniella. She and Fernando were sitting at adjacent barstools. They weren't speaking. Fernando looked bored. I could tell he wanted to be prowling.

Before I got to them, the non-dancing Canadian girl walked up to Fernando and said hello. She was average looking, an easy lay. Fernando made the grave mistake of waiting a split second too long to introduce her to Daniella, and when he did, he said, "This is Daniella." Not, "This is my wife, Daniella."

Daniella picked up on the faux pas right away. She was pissed. She sulked. I stayed away. I poured myself another drink and watched *my* Canadian crush slither to the music.

I had almost worked up the nerve to go and talk to her, when Fernando tapped me on the shoulder and said we're out of here. I said, "What? No way. I'm just getting started."

He said, "Sorry, we're gone. Now." There was no point in arguing with him. You didn't argue with Fernando.

I said goodbye to my new friends.

Fernando, Daniella, Pablo and I climbed into the boat. Rafael drove us away, back toward Banana Palms.

No one said much. I looked behind the boat. The night was dark, but I could see the phosphorescent tips of our wake. It looked like a giant manta ray was following the boat.

Pablo came over and sat beside me. We talked in hushed tones. He was also highly annoyed by our premature departure. He was convinced the Oklahoma girl craved his manhood. I didn't want to break the bad news to him, that a ring was the prerequisite to that anticlimactic prize.

We hatched a scheme to return to Backpackers as soon as Fernando and Daniella closed the door to their suite. Rafael lived near the Banana Palms. So he slept at home, not on the boat. As soon as he dropped us and had the boat battened down for the night, he'd walk home. The boat would remain at the Banana Palms dock, just waiting for Pablo and me to put it to good use. I asked Pablo if he knew how to drive the boat. He said sort of.

Despite the good drunks Pablo and I had on, we made our way slowly, deliberately. We weren't worried about our own safety, just the boat's. We crept from the lake to the river. So far, so good. Pablo was doing fine.

A few lights shimmered along the banks of the river, but not enough to guide our way. Thankfully, I came to find out, Pablo knew how to read the console's GPS

navigational screen. He said it was just like playing a video game. I asked him how many lives we got.

I stood on the pulpit and shined a spotlight on the peaceful water in front of us, to make sure Pablo was on course, that he was playing the game well. He wasn't bad at all, a good player. I could tell he'd be the kind of father who'd monopolize his kids' Nintendo.

I looked out for trotlines and pirogues, either of which could make for a messy tangle. Occasionally, a burst of heat lightening would illuminate the river.

Getting back to Backpackers didn't prove to be too difficult. We came in sight of it within an hour of leaving it. Parking the boat, however, proved to be tricky. The boat has two motors, two props, two rudders. You just can't turn the wheel. You have to work the throttles in conjunction.

From the series of passes Pablo made at the dock, I could see that the bar had cleared out. There were only a few people left.

I was thrilled to see my Canadian crush come out on the dock. She called out, "Come on in," and motioned to me with a reverse wave.

"We're trying," I said.

"Throw me a rope. I'll help pull you in."

I told Pablo the next time he got us close to the dock, to reverse the throttles for a split second and shut off the motors. I was going to throw her the rope and she'd pull us in.

That's what we did. It worked.

"I'm glad you came back," she said to me.

"Me too," I said.

"I'm Elaine."

"Stewart. That's Pablo."

"I owe you a drink. How does a nightcap sound?"

"Lead the way. Hey, where's your friend?"

"She's at the bar. She's in love with Tomas."

"The guy bartending?"

"That's the one."

"Not you?"

"No. We only dance together."

We walked into the bar. Tomas and Elaine's friend were the only others there.

Pablo was crestfallen. The virgin mary from Oklahoma was gone.

We said hello to the other two. Elaine's dance partner went by the name of Cas. I couldn't believe she was straight, yet she was all over Tomas. He was totally uninterested.

Pablo ordered five beers. We were rummed out.

"Where's everyone else?" I asked Elaine

"They all went back to the orphanage."

"You mean, after we left, there was no point staying,"

"Something like that, but I didn't give up hope, eh."

"You guys don't sleep here?"

"No. Only when we pass out, eh. We get lodging at the orphanage."

"Big orphans and little orphans, huh."

"Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference."

Pablo drank his beer without saying much. Cas just about threw herself at Tomas. He wasn't in the market, but he was too shy a guy to tell her he wasn't interested.

I drank my beer and talked to Elaine. She was excellent: smart, sarcastic and sassy. I liked her eyes. And she smelled clean, like she had just bathed in the river with soap. She was an Irish Spring commercial.

After we finished our beers, Pablo asked if I wanted to take off. I told him we'd just gotten here. He said he was tired, he was fading fast.

Elaine whispered in my ear that I should stay.

I asked Pablo if he minded if I stayed ... if he could get back by himself. He said sure, no problem ... there'd be a night watchman who'd help him park if he needed help. I asked him if Fernando was going to be pissed that we had taken the boat out without permission. He said no, as long as the boat was unscathed, Fernando would be cool. By morning, he'd be back in a good mood. They'd come get me at 10. We'd go for breakfast. We did a high-five without the follow-through. "Tomorrow amigo," he said, winking at me.

Elaine and I had another beer. My buzz turned soft, reflective. Because I had spaced my drinks throughout the day, in harmonious administration, I felt more lucid than I did when I was sober. I was happy, contented.

Elaine and I talked. There was not an awkward moment.

Before she came to the orphanage, for her stint of charity, Elaine had been a full-time waitress and a part-time student in Toronto.

At one point, she said, "You know, I just don't think I care about anything."

This line I relished.

“A nihilist with a heart?” and not a dogmatic one at that.

“Where does the heart come in?” she asked.

“Well, you’re working at the orphanage, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, that’s true. I tell you, being there is amazing, eh. In my whole life I don’t think I’ve had a more satisfying feeling than when one of those kids, starved for affection, just basic human touch, asks for a hug. Nothing else. It’s incredible, eh?”

“Lucky kids.”

She smiled.

“What do you do for a living?” she asked me.

“Nothing,” I said.

“You’re one of those, eh?”

“Just an orphan in need of a hug.”

I really liked the way she said “eh.”

We decided we’d had enough to drink. We said goodnight to Tomas and Cas. We moved past the bar, past the coed bathroom — really a locker room — up the steep stairway to the dormitory. It was dark, yet I could make out the long horizontal row of bunkbeds. On the far wall, on the last lower bunk, I could see someone sleeping. Whoever it was didn’t snore, for which I was most appreciative.

Elaine and I chose the two lower bunks closest to the stairwell. We stood between them. She undressed to her underwear. I removed my shirt and sandals, keeping on my bathing suit. We lay down in our separate beds, only a few feet apart. We talked quietly.

After a few minutes, I said, “You know this conversation would be far easier to conduct if we were in the same bed. Do you mind if I come over there?”



"No," she said. "I was wondering what was taking you so long."

I got into her bunk. It was a tight squeeze. There wasn't much room for two.

We turned onto our sides, facing each other. That was better. In fact, it was perfect.

We intertwined our legs. We were comfortable, so very comfortable. One, not two.

And what had seemed inevitable to both of us, only moments earlier, no longer was. It was as if we'd skipped all those earlier stages, all that wearying artifice and brinkmanship, and become a couple who needed only to hold each other.

Before we slept, I thought about Fernando and Daniella, Pablo and his wife, Fernando and his first wife, Manuel and Pablo's sister. Was this how they all started? Surely not. Maybe that was the problem. I had to believe so.

In the morning, we didn't know each other. The only thing I knew was my pounding head. I regretted sobriety. We sat at a table downstairs and made polite conversation. We were strangers. The morning sun hurt my eyes. It glinted off the water like laser beams.

Elaine ate breakfast from the sparse buffet. I drank coffee. I didn't eat. My stomach was queasy, my bowels loose.

Patrick came down from the dorm. I guess he had been the one sleeping there when we turned in.

He got a beer from behind the bar, then came over to our table. He sat down without asking if we minded. I was grateful for his presence.

"Morning, Elaine. Morning, mate," he said. "It's Pete right?" he asked me.

"That'll work," I said. Elaine suppressed a chuckle.

"Interesting breakfast selection," I said to him, trying to be more polite.

“The breakfast of champions,” he said, holding up the beer bottle like a trophy. “You should join me,” he added. “It looks like you could use one.”

“I think I’ll pass,” I said, though it was damn tempting. I would have felt better, but I wouldn’t have been able to stop at one, which meant the morning would have been fine, but the afternoon would have been shot.

I got up to get another cup of coffee.

“Do you mind?” Elaine asked, holding her cup out to me.

“Sure,” I said. “Milk?”

“Just black.”

“I think I can remember that,” I said, though in the condition I was in, I wasn’t sure.

“Thanks hon,” she said.

I curtsied.

She was cool, a realist.

After my second cup of coffee, the boat rocked up, Bee Gees on the stereo. Rafael was behind the wheel. Fernando and Pablo disco danced with Fernando’s daughters. The girls wore big optimistic grins on their cherubic mugs. To be young, I thought, and uncomplicated.

Elaine and I said goodbye. She said, “Same time next Friday?”

“If I’m around, absolutely,” I said, both of us knowing we’d seen each other for the last time.

“Give the orphans a hug for me,” I said.

“Guaranteed,” she said.

I turned and walked to the boat.

As I was getting on the boat, Patrick tapped me on the shoulder and asked, “Hey mate, how about a lift across the way.”

“Sure,” I said. “Come on.”

We got on board. I introduced him to Fernando and Pablo and the girls. I think the girls liked his accent. They giggled.

We dropped him off at the yacht club. We — and with Fernando’s prodding, the girls as well — waved to him and wished him good luck.

I asked Fernando if we were going directly back to the resort. He said yeah, relax.

I sat back under the shade of the canopy and prayed we got to the Banana Palms as quickly as possible, so I could use the john, knock back some water, take two Advil, two Tums and a shower, crank up the AC, close the curtains and sleep. Two hours of sleep, a greasy lunch, and I’d be good to go, ready for round three.

Before we reached the resort, both Fernando and Pablo, out of earshot of the girls, came up to me, individually, and asked if I’d nailed her.

They were incredulous when I told them I hadn’t.

When we tied up at the Banana Palms, Fernando said he was going to play with his kids for a little while longer, a half hour tops, and then hand them over to Daniella. He and Pablo were going to that finca up the lake for brunch, the one we’d been to before. I should join them. It would be fun. Fernando wanted to use the hot springs while the chicken was being plucked and prepared.

Sitting in the hot springs, looking at the waterfall, waiting for the owner’s wife to catch a range chicken, behead it, and prepare it for you, was a tempting proposition, a treat; however, I was bushed. I declined. I said I’d meet them at the pool when they

returned. I needed a nap if I was to be worth anything later in the day.

They called me a pussy.

I told them to have a good time, save a breast for me. Then I trotted up to the room, my bowels commencing countdown.

I did my hangover-retardant number. I shat, showered, brushed my teeth, popped my pills, and drank deeply from a courtesy bottle of Evian. Relief was near. I climbed into bed, under the sheets, my head on the soft pillow. The room was cold and getting colder. I drifted off almost immediately.

I was awakened by a familiar voice. I opened my eyes and looked up from my pillow. The voice belonged to Daniella. She was sitting on the bed. She reached across me and turned on the bedside lamp. She was wearing a terrycloth bathrobe. Her hair was wet.

“Sorry I woke you,” she said.

“That’s OK. What’s up?” I replied, not knowing quite what to say, recognition registering.

She hesitated.

“Did you sleep with that girl?”

I hesitated.

“Well, I slept in the same bed as her.”

“You know what I mean.”

Again, I hesitated.

“No, I did not not sleep with her. We didn’t have sex.”

Again, she hesitated.

“I knew you would not.”

“Then you knew something I didn’t.”

For a moment, neither of us said anything.

I could feel her tense up, her inhalation of breath.

“Will you be with me?” she said.

She opened the robe’s belt and removed her arms from the sleeves. The upper portion of the robe fell to her waist. She was beautiful, C-section and all. Just then, the door opened, and the main light was thrown on. Our eyes went to the doorway. There stood Fernando.

Daniella remained still. She didn’t move. Nor did I.

“Motherfucker,” he said. And that’s all he said. He turned around, and headed down the stairs.

I got out of bed and went to the open doorway. Daniella stayed where she was.

I watched as Fernando ran down the hill toward the boat. I knew what he was going for I just wasn’t sure why.

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