

1-1-2006

Permanent Record

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.25669/r6c9-lgmt>

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PERMANENT RECORD

by

Jonathan Bauch

Associate in Arts
The College of Staten Island
1990

Associate in Applied Science
The College of Staten Island
1990

Bachelor of Arts
The College of Staten Island
1990

Master of Arts
The College of Staten Island
1992

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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

**Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
August 2006**

UMI Number: 1440231

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Thesis Approval
The Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

April 14, 20 06

The Thesis prepared by

Jonathan Bauch

Entitled

Permanent Record

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

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ABSTRACT

Permanent Record

by

Jonathan Bauch

Dr. John H. Irsfeld, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of English
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Permanent Record is a collection of loosely connected short stories, told primarily in the first person (framed by a prologue and epilogue in other points of view), taking place on Staten Island, New York, during the 1980s. Tracing the character's development from his bar mitzvah through college, the stories deal primarily with a young man's attempt to reconcile his feelings of rebellion—against his parents, teachers, tradition, etc.—with his growing awareness of the Judaism instilled in him as a child. As much as the character tries to distance himself from his parents and their religious values, he becomes increasingly aware how much his own beliefs were influenced by being brought up Jewish in the specific milieu of Staten Island. Through his interaction with family and friends—most specifically, girlfriends, both Jews and non-Jews—he gains a greater awareness of his own prejudices and need for reconciliation.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Keith Menter and Andrea Gregovich, for their invaluable insights on the early drafts of these stories, and bearing witness to the madness of our program.

To Dr. Richard Harp, for introducing me to Irish Literature and the idea of publication, and whose unheeded advice has haunted me like the banshee.

To Dr. Ralph Buechler, for agreeing to serve on my committee and for reading my manuscript on such short notice.

To Professor Douglas Unger, for helping me find my voice.

To Dr. John Irsfeld, one of few people on whose orders I would charge or retreat. Thank you for believing in me when I didn't believe in myself, and for helping me distinguish between windmills and giants, even if I sometimes got it wrong.

To Dr. Joseph McCullough, for whom "Distinguished Professor" is an understatement. Thank you for reminding me why I started studying literature in the first place, and for inspiring me to continue.

To my wife, Elisa Fraidkin Bauch, for things too many to mention. Thank you for giving me enough rope to get myself lost—and waiting while I found my way back.

PROLOGUE:

WE WERE WORRIED ABOUT YOU

I went down the stairs in my underwear, socks, and t-shirt, holding the banister for balance. It was cold. My wife liked to keep the heat off when we went to bed. She said it helped her sleep and I was fine with this, though it was still a bitch at two in the morning and I had to get up. I scratched myself before entering the kitchen. My son Jonathan stood at the counter, making a sandwich.

“Everything all right?” I said, squinting in the florescent light.

“Everything’s fine,” he said, running a knife around the mustard jar.

Though just a few minutes since I heard the lock click, his leather jacket was draped over the chair, the bread sliced, everything laid out before him. The jacket stunk of smoke.

He didn’t look at me, but he had a slight smile on his face. I knew he was stoned again. Who but a stoned seventeen year old stands in his parents’ kitchen at two a.m., intently concentrating on a half loaf of Italian bread and Genoa salami like they held the secrets to life’s eternal mysteries?

“You have a good time? Where’d you go?”

“Just hangin’.”

And who but a bunch of stoned teenagers can hang out all night when the temperature is in the mid twenties? I was going to ask who he was with, what they did, but I already

knew. He was *out*, with *people*. They went *places* and did *stuff*. My son, the secret agent. All information would be on a need to know basis. As far as he was concerned, I didn't need to know.

"You could've called. Your mother was worried." She had been pissed off, too, took it out on me, asking what I was going to do about him. Like it was my fault he turned out bad. It didn't help to say I'd take him out back and shoot him.

"Go ahead and joke," she said. "Your son could be lying *dead*—in the *street*."

He was *my* son whenever he screwed up, *our* son the few times he did something good. Like his bar mitzvah, when his mother inscribed a paperback copy of the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew bible, "to our son." Dead in the street was a little melodramatic. Worse than lying dead on a grassy riverbank. In the street, he'd be shoeless, possibly footless—nothing but a bloody stump—with dogs and vultures tearing his flesh. Jewish mothers always think of the worse case scenario. They figure that saying it protects them. It's safest to think of everything, no matter how morbid, so they're always prepared.

Though I didn't show it, I also worried.

My senses returned. I knew he didn't feel like talking, but I wanted to hang around, see how he was. He had left in a fit after talking to his girlfriend, took it out on us when we asked what was wrong. Though I only met the girl once, in the street, I knew she made him crazy. I made the mistake of suggesting he'd be better off without her.

"Stay outta my business. It's got nothin' to do with you," he said, sticking his neck out in a posture that reminded me of a chicken. "What do you know, going back and forth to your stupid job everyday like a damn lackey." *Lackey*. Must've been one of those SAT words. Did this mean he studied?

I made a move toward him, maybe to strike him, I don't know, but his mother stepped between us. Good thing, too, because I don't know what I would've done. For a moment, I couldn't speak—all my thoughts collided and got jumbled on my lips, like pieces of a puzzle when they tumble off a table. I wanted to grab him and shake him, call him an ingrate—didn't he know I did it for *him*? Did it because it paid well enough to keep him in new high top sneakers and the black leather jacket? I had to talk his mother into the damn jacket, too. She said it would make him look like a hoodlum, but I knew that was exactly what he wanted. Everything I was going to say sounded like it came directly out of a bad TV show or a book, like *Twenty Things You Swore You'd Never Say To Your Own Kid*. Instead, I kept quiet. He walked out of the house, slammed the door.

Now he placed the glistening slices of Genoa salami in rows across the bread, taking his time to do it evenly. He had a thing for Italian salami. Though I had raised him on the kosher stuff, even taught him how to fry it up, he insisted on Genoa, with Provolone cheese. I told him it would make him break out. He said he never knew what he was missing eating “Jew food.” Opening the bag with the cheese, he pulled off two round slices, laid them on the bread. It smelled like feet, but I didn't say anything. My father rolled in his grave.

As a kid, I never would've mixed meat and cheese. My father would've broken my arms. In those days, breaking a dietary restriction was a sin but child abuse was okay. We had separate dishes for meat and cheese, another set for holidays. We even had different silverware. I didn't mind growing up in a religious house, didn't know anything different. It wasn't until I started dating my wife that I found out there were Jews who ate bacon.

My wife's mother made it for me. She asked if I ate *chazzerei*—Yiddish slang for unfit food. I wanted to make a good impression, said yes because they obviously did. I was nervous sitting at the kitchen table, with the red and white checkerboard cloth, in the tiny apartment in Coney Island, overlooking the amusement park. From the open windows, I could hear people screaming on the Cyclone roller coaster, the rattle of its metal wheels on the tracks, the *whoosh* as it flew down its famous drop. Then I heard the bacon sizzling in the pan and could see the grease popping up, splattering my future mother-in-law's apron. I wondered if, across Brooklyn, in Crown Heights, my father could pick up the scent.

"Vhat the hell is that?" he'd say in his Yiddish accent, bushy eyebrows raised, nose twitching over his neatly trimmed mustache. Brushing his silver hair back on his head, he'd remove his tortoise shell glasses and stand there, the curled end of the frames clutched between his teeth. In graveyards across Eastern Europe, centuries of dead ancestors rattled their coffins. My wife's mother laid the bacon on toasted Jewish rye, with lettuce, tomato, mayonnaise. At least the bread was Jewish. I crossed an invisible threshold. There was no going back.

My father warned me against non-kosher food. He wasn't happy I was dating a nonreligious girl.

"You goin' to *fressen mit a chazzer's*?" he'd say, literally "eat with the pigs," though always with a smile, to soften the insult. "Have a nice time, but you stay away from *treyf*." He'd wag a boney finger at my chest. *Treyf* was any animal that was torn apart, not painlessly slaughtered according to tradition. It also meant any non-kosher food. I used to wonder what he'd say if he knew I didn't just eat *with* the pigs.

Jon—the name my son preferred—contemplated his sandwich before cutting it, admiring the artistry. First he placed the knife dead center on the bread, then moved it to cut on a diagonal. Years before, when he was a kid, he insisted that I make him a sandwich. “Poof,” I said, sticking a finger on his forehead, “you’re a sandwich.” He said I made them better than his mother because mine were better looking. One Sunday morning, after my wife and I returned from food shopping, I had him watch me, so he could learn himself.

We stood over the blue counter top, with the white cutting board. Since it was Sunday and I had time, I’d fry the salami. It was something my father had taught me. Using the sharpest knife, I picked into the red wrapping of the kosher salami, unfurling it with a circular motion of my wrist, exaggerating the movement a little.

Cutting the end piece, the best part—with its sunburst pattern of indented wrinkles from where the package was twisted shut—I handed it to him, told him that, traditionally, you didn’t fry the ends. At the stove, over a frying pan filled with crackling slices of salami, each about an eighth inch thick, I made him stand behind me so he wouldn’t get hit by the grease.

“The trick,” I said, “is to keep them burning at an even rate. The pan’s hottest in the center, so as the middle ones get done, you want to move these pieces in, like this.” I moved a few pieces from the center to the outside, sliding some of the outer ones to the center.

“That was a good one,” I said after an especially loud pop splattered grease on my arm, singeing the hair. “Maybe we should lower the flame.” I turned down the knob.

After flipping the salami, frying until the other side was browned, I shut the flame, keeping an arm out to block him from the still sizzling pan. Then I placed a folded sheet of paper towel on a plate, laying the slices on the towel to drain the grease. Granted, it was a fairly unhealthy way to eat, but it was so good. I slathered mustard onto the thick slices of seeded rye bread, adding a second layer after the first soaked in.

“You want to keep things in proportion,” I said, positioning the salami down the bread. “The amount of meat has to be based on the thickness of the bread. Too much of either will wreck the balance.” Cutting the sandwiches diagonally, I explained, “The pointed ends fits in your mouth better, plus it looks nicer. Your mother throws it all together. You wind up with too much meat or too much bread. It has to come together in your mouth at the same time.”

He took a half of sandwich in his hand, tilted his head to take a bite.

“This was your grandfather’s favorite thing in the world,” I said, reaching for my own half and watching him chew. “You know you’re named for him, right?”

“He was named Jacob?” He asked, chewing.

“Everybody called him Jack but his Hebrew name was Jacob, same as yours.”

That same year he came home from school, insisting we call him Jon. Said he always hated Jonathan, that he would change it himself legally when he turned eighteen. He never said why. I figured some kids must had given him a problem about being Jewish. The school was all Italian, but it was one of the best in the district, one reason we moved from Brooklyn.

Now he took the sandwich to the table, sat with his back to me and opened the newspaper. Pushing his long dark hair back off his head, he tucked a few strands behind

his ear. The “S” shaped cowlicks framing the natural part of his hair reminded me of the side-view lions often seen holding the Ten Commandments. He hated the cowlicks. I once told him that if he cut his hair short, they’d be less visible. His hair was thick, like mine used to be. Almost black, it even had the same bluish highlights in the right light. I once heard that blue highlights were a product of true black hair and that Asians and Native Americans were the only ones who had it. Though individual strands of his hair were brown, when it all came together, the blue was unmistakable. I poured a glass of orange juice.

“You hear about the game?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“The Giants blew it. Up by six with under two minutes and they fumble on the fifty. All they had to do was sit on the ball and let the clock run out.” That had been a few minutes after he slammed the door. “They don’t have balance. When the offense is on, the defense screws it up. When the D’s good, they can’t score.”

Sundays had always been our time together. Since he was little we’d watch the games, eat sandwiches. Neither of us would talk much, but it was fun. At least it had been, before he started with that girl. What a couple—a couple of what, I didn’t know. She was pretty, with blue eyeliner flaring out about a half inch past her eyes, pink lipstick. Short, pixyish dark hair dyed three or four different colors like a patchwork quilt, the motorcycle jacket covered with spray painted hieroglyphics, and the untied high top sneakers with different colored laces (one black, one purple). I didn’t say anything when he started wearing his sneakers the same way, but drew the line when he threatened

to spray the jacket. I told him I'd break his arms. I'd be damned if he was going to spray paint a \$250 jacket he swore he had to have.

The first time we met her—running into them in the park one night when we were out walking—she was dressed in black and white, like the yin-yang symbol. As my wife later pointed out, *Love* and *Hate* written on her sneakers. Everything about her emphasized opposites, extremes, and we feared she'd lead him out past where he could come back.

Then he came home with his ear pierced, a blue feather dangling to his shoulder. I thought it was a joke, a clip on for shock value, until I saw it went all the way through. When we asked why he'd do something like that, he said, "It's revolution. I'm revolting."

"Oh, it's revolting all right," I said, walking away before I could rip his ear off.

Now, in the kitchen, I could see that his eyes were red and glazed. I was torn between saying something fatherly, about the dangers of pot smoking, or something more threatening, like the old standard, "So long as you live under my roof," but it wouldn't do any good. He wasn't lighting joints in the living room. What could I do, quit my job and follow him, pop out of the bushes every time his friends passed it his way? Maybe I should follow them to the dealer, act out some fatherly revenge fantasy where I beat the hell out of the guy, burn his stash, threaten his life if I caught him selling to my kid again.

Once, I did follow him. It was after my wife found pot in his room. She said she came across it cleaning, but I didn't believe that any more than he did. I figured he was smart enough to keep it hidden. If she found it, it was because she was looking.

She had been waiting for me at the front door with a pack of cigarettes in one hand and a box of condoms in the other.

“Am I getting lucky tonight?” I said, smiling, though I knew what was coming. I hadn’t even removed my jacket when she got right to it, like she had been waiting there for hours.

“You see this?” she asked in her shrill tone, as if I was the one who did something wrong. “You see how your son spends his time?”

“So, he smokes after sex. What’s for dinner?”

“Look at these,” she said, opening the cigarette pack. “Marijuana cigarettes.”

“I think they’re called joints.” I caught the scent of mustard, figured she was making roast beef from my father’s recipe, cooked smothered in the stuff. “Is that a roast?”

“Your son’s a druggie,” she said. “You want him driving when he’s high as a kite?” She made a face, rolling her eyes and opening her mouth. “Oh, I’m so stoned,” she said in a zombified voice she imagined a stoned person would speak with. “I can’t think, I can’t see straight.” She had never smoked pot herself, had no idea what it was like.

I made the mistake of laughing.

“It’s real funny,” she said, turning to walk up the stairs. “Real funny. What kind of father are you?”

“A hungry one,” I whispered to my reflection in the mirror, after she turned the corner.

The question stayed with me, throughout dinner and into the news, with its stories of drug deals, shoot outs, good kids caught in the crossfire. Made me wonder. I didn’t know much about his life, what he did outside all night. I only knew him in the house,

hiding in his room, music blaring, grumbling whenever I asked about school. Some days I'd only see him after midnight, if I got up to take a piss and saw the light on in his room.

One night, after he went out, I caught up with him and his friends in the park. They didn't see me, though I had them in sight as I walked down the path, past the tennis courts and community pool. Ducking behind some trees, I stood there, hands in the pockets of my overcoat. They were in the handball courts, three of them sitting on the ground with their backs to the wall. The moon was full. I could see their shadows clearly. Jeff, the tall one, stretched out his legs. Kenny, the nervous one, sat cross-legged, looking around. To his credit, I didn't see Kenny smoke anything. Jon sat between them, back to the wall, knees up.

Holding the joint between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, he put it to his mouth. I could see the end glow as he took a few hits, leaning his head against the wall, exhaling toward the moon. Extending his right arm across his body, he handed it to Jeff, sitting to his left. After Jeff took a few tokes, he held it up for Kenny who waved it off. Jeff took two more tokes.

I was about to step forward, break up their party when something interesting happened.

"Come on, Ken." Jeff said, waving the joint in Kenny's face. "Just one toke."

"Get that shit out of my face," Kenny said, jerking his head back. "I'm an individual."

"Yeah," Jon said, laughing. "Mr. Individuality. He'd smoke if there were girls around."

“You should talk, *kemosabe*,” Kenny said. “You look like a fucking idiot with that thing. I only tell you this as a friend.” Kenny’s lisp had been cute when he was ten. At sixteen, it wasn’t cute anymore and I worried for the kid.

“You’re just pissed that Julie pierced my ear and not yours.” Jon tilted his head as if proud of his feather. “Besides, you don’t have the balls to wear a feather, so fuck you.”

I felt like an anthropologist in an undiscovered rainforest, watching the bizarre rituals of a native tribe. While I, too, would have preferred he lose the feather, there was something impressive in his insistence on wearing it, a nobility in his individuality, even if he did do it for a girl. It was one thing to do it because his mother and I objected, quite another when his own friends disapproved. After all, I always told him to be a leader and not a follower. In his own perverse way, he was.

“Come on, man, pass that back,” Jon said, hitting Jeff with an elbow. “What are you, a fuckin’ *chazzer*?”

I didn’t know which was more impressive, that my son was such an individual or that he was actually speaking Yiddish, albeit with a very American pronunciation. While it certainly wasn’t lost on me that I was watching my son smoke pot and I freely admit that a part of me wanted to kick their asses, I was fascinated, like I was seeing him in a whole new light.

“What the fuck’s a *hazzer*?” Jeff said, laughing, leaving off the hard “ch” before passing it back to Jon.

“A *chazzer*,” Jon said, emphasizing a guttural sound from deep in his throat. “You’re hoggin’ up the joint. Don’t your parents speak Yiddish?”

“My grandparents did, but they’re dead. I haven’t heard it since I was a kid. Since when are you such a Jew?”

“I’m not but it’s still a cool word. What about you, Ken?” Jon asked after a toke, the joint cupped in his hand. “Normie speak Yiddish?”

“Are you kidding? My father’s still not weady to admit he’s a Jew.”

Kenny’s father, Norman, was a mechanic. With a gravelly voice like a growl, he seemed perpetually annoyed. A Vietnam vet, covered in tattoos, he was a nice guy, though we didn’t have much in common. He had enlisted for Vietnam in the mid-sixties, at about the same time I joined the reserves, hoping to do my time before things got bad. Over whiskey sours at Kenny’s bar mitzvah, Norman told me he did it to escape his South Bronx neighborhood, overrun by blacks. A skinny Jew didn’t have a chance, he said, though he learned to take care of himself.

“These kids,” he said, motioning to our sons, standing together on the edge of the dance floor, their eyes locked on a twelve year old girl dancing with an old man. “They don’t know from nothin’, don’t know how good they got it. We work our asses off so they could have it better, but I think it makes them soft. I might send Ken to military school, toughen him up.”

Standing in the park, under cover of some trees, watching my son and his friends in the handball court, I thought that they did have it easy, but that was exactly what we wanted. It was also what my own father wanted when he came to America, sixty years before—or at least what his father had wanted for him, when he put him on the boat at Antwerp, Belgium, after a month long trip from their *shtetl* in Galicia, the name of which I can’t remember. I pictured my father in the one photograph from that era, just after he

arrived, in a cap with pull down earflaps and a heavy overcoat a few sizes too big. A baseball mitt tucked under his arm. He was about thirteen, didn't speak English yet. For a kid in a foreign country, unable to speak the language, he didn't look scared. I guess growing up with pogroms would do that.

Years later, at their high school graduation, as my son and his friends stood together in black gowns with square hats and frilled tassels, I'd remember this moment in the park when I worried about each of them, especially Jon, wondered why he dressed like he did, why he hated us so much. He didn't understand us, never thought we could understand him. On the walk home, I considered telling my wife what I saw, but decided against it. She'd want to call his friends' parents, probably cause a rift we might not be able to bridge, not anytime soon. Nor would it stop him from smoking. He was a lot of things, my son—most of all stubborn. If the average teenager would “cut off his nose to spite his face,” he'd strive to be the world's foremost nose cutting face spiter, even if it meant winding up without a nose. In a way, I admired it, but I worried he would slip too far.

In truth, I just didn't think his smoking was a big deal—or at least not the thing I feared the most. I'd smoked a few times back in the army, twenty years before. Didn't do much except make us all laugh, which is what he and his friends were doing when I walked away.

“Marijuana's a gateway drug,” my wife said one day, sitting in the kitchen, looking up from a *Reader's Digest*. “Almost every heroin addict starts with marijuana—every one,” she added, in case I missed it.

“And I'm sure they used cough medicine as kids, yet that statistic never shows up.”

“What are you saying? That it's okay your son's a pothead?”

“No, just that maybe it’s not the biggest thing in the world. Also, what the hell else is there to do when you’re seventeen in the suburbs? You won’t let him drive yet, remember?”

“So it’s my fault now, too?” she said. “I didn’t want to move out here. I wanted to stay in Brooklyn.” She stormed up the stairs.

It was her idea we move. One day, walking home from shopping, on the corner of Nostrand Avenue, under the el, she saw some black kids. After all those years *schlepping* past the mah-jongg playing *yentas*, the old couples in folding chairs, sunning themselves outside the row of storefronts, saying hello in Yiddish or chit chatting in Russian, Polish, or some other Eastern European accent, she freaked out. As the older folks retired to Florida, the neighborhood shifted to minorities, blacks and Hispanics. Maybe I was sheltered, but I never knew Jews were a minority. I believed the whole world was Jewish—at least all of Brooklyn was, and Brooklyn was the world. Somewhere past Staten Island to the west and Queens to the east, one fell off the planet. I never figured I’d one day live on Staten Island. For years, it was nothing but a destination for the Brooklyn ferry, back when there was a Brooklyn ferry. Before we were married, my wife and I would drive my father’s Pontiac Tempest onto the ferry, sit there with the radio on, kissing and whispering, enjoying the saltwater breeze. Right down the line, I’d see other guys in the driver’s seat of late fifties, early sixties cars, with the bulbous fenders, kissing their girlfriends, copping feels amid the metallic groans of the ferry, the New York Skyline and Statue of Liberty in the background.

On Staten Island, we’d drive until we got lost. It was mostly dirt roads and farms, except for the occasional town with a main street and train station, looking like

something out of the South. We couldn't believe it was part of the City. Taking one of two main roads, Forest Avenue or Richmond Avenue, as far as one could go, we'd turn off a side street toward the marshes on the New Jersey side, watch the barges float by or track the flight plan of seagulls, joke about missing the last boat back to civilization.

Later, we would drive down the Belt Parkway to the army base at Fort Hamilton, outside Bay Ridge. This was 1963. We'd grab shrimp and lobster sauce from a Chinese takeout—after the bacon, it was easy to drop the prohibition against shell fish—and watch the workers build the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, then the world's largest suspension bridge, welcoming Staten Island to the world. Blue steel girders rising from cement slabs that seemed to float on the water, the thick steel cable, three feet in diameter, swinging down from atop the elongated, u-shaped frames, holding up the double-decker road below. Overlooking New York Harbor, in her heavily sprayed, bouffant hair, thick black eyeliner, and blue eyeshadow, she looked like an Egyptian princess, a daughter of Ramses surveying the Nile, waiting for Moses to float by in his wicker basket. It was tough to imagine that the bridge was built to sway in high wind. We wouldn't believe it until we'd drive it ourselves during a storm, stopping at the halfway point during light traffic and we actually felt the sway—until she freaked out, said, “Get me the hell off this thing!” laughing all the way home.

My son was well into his sandwich now, as well as an article about free trade in the Netherlands or something. He was engrossed in it, not because it was anything he was interested in, but more likely he liked the movement of his eyes over the page. It kept him from looking at me. I took my time with the juice.

Despite my wife's fears, I didn't worry about him driving. As punishment for her finding the joints, he wasn't allowed to use the car, though he did take the road test and passed his first try, more than could be said for his friends, some of whom took the test four or five times. I was proud. All those hours, teaching him how to parallel park in a station wagon. "Back up, back up. Easy does it," I said over and over, until he hit that perfect spot and I'd yell, "Cut the wheel! Cut the wheel!"

He was a good driver, though he scared me when he pulled up after the test, sat there shaking his head as the instructor lectured him. He had that look he'd get when angry, like he was about to do something stupid, cut off his nose to spite his face—if not punch the driving teacher in his own face, which may or may not have been the better route. I was convinced he'd failed. When I got in the car, he stared straight ahead. He let out a sigh, ran a hand through his hair, thrusting his head against the headrest.

"What happened?" I asked, disappointed. "Was it the parking? You had that down."

A smile broke through his pursed lips, giving way to a full-blown laugh. He flipped the paper at me. "I nailed it," he said. "I fuckin' nailed it!"

Though I had to wake up in four hours to catch my bus into the city, I stood there with the refrigerator open, sipping the juice. I wanted to ask him if he had given any thought to the college applications I had had sent over from the school. Though he certainly didn't have the grades to go away anywhere, I wanted him to at least start taking classes next year. "You never know," I had said, "but you might find something you like. Give yourself options." He hadn't been keen on the idea, said he wasn't going.

“Why?” he asked, “So I can take the same meaningless classes over and over again, just so I can get a degree and wear a suit? Spend my life sitting on a bus or the ferry like another goddamned sheep going off to the slaughter.” He paused a moment, then thought better of it. He hadn’t used the lackey word, but I knew what he meant. While I bust my ass to make a living and afford this house with the good school, the park “he could play in,” as his mother had said when we bought the place, he seemed to want something he couldn’t articulate. Maybe that was why he spent his nights smoking pot in that park—he was waiting for something, I never knew what.

I didn’t have his options. My father was a tool and dye maker and my mother had a small store in the garment industry selling buttons, seamstressing. I used to go with her sometimes, where I got my first taste of patternmaking, cutting, sewing. We couldn’t afford college. I worked for a kosher butcher, cutting and cleaning cuts of meat, attending night class, studying garment industry production. Then it was the army. It was simple—there were jobs in the industry at a time when I needed to work. I wanted him to go to college, be a lawyer, something nice like that, something that, with his mouth, he’d be good at.

He wasn’t a stupid kid, he just didn’t care about they wanted to teach him. Years earlier, when helping him with math homework, he had asked me how often I use trigonometry in my job or how often I had to calculate when a train that left from New York would meet a train that left from LA, using the times they had left and average speed. He was still in his Little League uniform from an afternoon game I had missed, the front smeared with dirt from when he stole second base, he told me, sliding headfirst.

“You never know,” I said, seeing his point. “You might want to be a conductor.”

“They could at least make it interesting,” he had said, pulling on his still short hair, probably hoping to stretch it out. “Put them on the same track so they’re going to crash into each other, killing everyone on board.”

He was about twelve years old then. My wife asked if we should take him for counseling. Maybe it was cry for help. I told her that I didn’t think he was nuts, he just did it to get a rise out of her.

“It’s that music he listens to,” she said. “That heavy metal music, with all the demonic symbols everywhere. It’s putting ideas in his head.”

“You watch too much TV,” I said. “Go back to bed.”

The music was a phase. He knew we didn’t like it loud, so he played it loud. Had he come home one day and seen his mother and me in the kitchen, decked out in leather, banging our heads against the cabinets, he would’ve rushed out and bought the first Perry Como album he could find.

He never did have a head for numbers. Though I spent my days calculating production costs, figuring how to produce the best quality for the least price, my son counted on his fingers well into college and even graduate school. Like the time I’d stuck my head into his room at five in the morning, wondering why he was up, what he was doing, only to find him counting syllables in front of his word processor, writing poetry. With the first rays of the sun streaming over the garbage dump across the highway, he’d try to explain the mathematical precision of a sonnet—something about stresses and syllable counts. I wouldn’t have any idea what he was talking about, would just be glad that he found something he loved and was safe at home, even if it did keep him up nights.

Looking at him in my kitchen, with that hair and the feather, ripped jeans and dirty sneakers, he was a long way from the kid in the little league uniform, though even then, his thick dark hair hung out from his hat in a kind of bird wing fashion. I used to take the bus from work directly to the field, get there about the fifth inning. I once arrived just as he caught a pop fly at third base. The runner started home, too far to make it back. I ran down the left field line in my suit, tie flapping in the breeze, yelling, “Touch the bag! Touch the bag! Double play!” The other parents thought I was a lunatic, but I didn’t care, didn’t care about anything but that smile as he stepped on the base, the ball still balanced in the web of his mitt. When the umpire threw his thumb in the air, yelled “*Out!*” and his teammates slapped his shoulders, pulled the beak of his cap, he smiled, pumping his fist at me.

Then he was a little kid who thought I was a hero, just grateful that I could be there in time for his big moment. He was proud of himself, and knew I was proud of him. In my kitchen, now, fingers clasped around the heel of his sandwich, he was a young man who thought I represented everything that was wrong with the world, everything he didn’t want for himself—a shining example of mediocrity, a guy who had sold out something a long time before and didn’t even remember what it was. It scared him. He didn’t know it, but it scared me, too.

SEVENTH GRADE SQUEEZE

On the last day of seventh grade, as we made our way downstairs from our third floor classroom, I accepted a dare from a kid whose name I can't remember to reach down and squeeze Keri Sprague's ass. We were coming from Mrs. Vitale's homeroom, the usual excitement of going home infinitely magnified by the thought of more than two months off. For me, the end of school took on an even greater importance, because it was only three weeks or so before my bar mitzvah, which meant this was to be my first summer as a man.

The stairwell windows, like all the windows in our school, was lined with thick, wire-mesh grates that made me think we were caged animals or POWs in a black-and-white World War II movie. The stairs themselves, like the hallways, were marked with red tape, indicating which direction we had to walk. We were supposed to stay on the right, but on this day, we couldn't be stopped. Spread out across both lanes, thirty some odd laughing kids defied all authority. The fact that there wouldn't be anybody coming up at that hour—or that, since it was the last day of school, we couldn't get in trouble—didn't detract from our rebelliousness. Free at last, we were far more concerned with the official start of summer vacation than we were consequences.

The kid whose name I can't remember sat next to me in homeroom. Though we talked here and there, we weren't really friends. On this day, however, there was a lot to talk about. Just that afternoon, the principal had announced that, starting next year, he

was going to ban tight jeans. This could've had devastating consequences for us because we were fortunate enough to have Angela Russo in our homeroom.

Angela Russo had the best body of any girl in the seventh grade, probably the whole school. If she didn't, she at least wore the tightest jeans, which was all that mattered. They were so tight that they created these little points that jutted out from underneath the roundness of her ass, which was a really big deal back then. Angela also wore a lot of make-up, had her dark hair flipped like Farrah from *Charlie's Angels*, and dated mysterious older guys in high school, with cars. She was larger than life, or at least beyond seventh grade.

To protest the ban, we decided to end the year by each squeezing some girl's ass on the way down the stairs. They might complain, and there could be ramifications, but in the interest of justice and social protest, it was a risk worth taking. And who knew, but maybe we could inspire others—thousands of young men quite literally taking their futures in their hands, saying no to tyranny and yes to democracy. In history class, Mrs. Coppitelli was always talking about how America was the ninety-eight pound weakling of the world, until we got fed up with the Brits, tossed out some tea and kicked butt at Bunker Hill. All it took was a small group with right on their side to topple an empire.

The kid whose name I can't remember first dared me to squeeze Angela's ass, but there was no way, not for any double or even triple dare. Angela wouldn't hesitate to punch me in the nose, and there was bound to be some guy downstairs in a car who would kick my ass. Social protest or not, I was not quite ready to play Nathan Hale.

Keri, however, was a different ball game. With her shoulder-length brown hair, also flipped in that Farrah style, and ever so slight chubby cheeks, highlighted by a hint of

blush, she was more cute than beautiful. She was too seventh grade to appeal to the older guys, so there was no danger of physical reprisal from some Neanderthal high school football player. She had the reputation of being a nice, even shy girl, who would politely ask that I not touch her ass again, in which case I would've felt worse than if I got beat up. Also, though I didn't admit this to anyone at the time, I had a crush on Keri, so, at the very least, grabbing her ass could've been just what was needed to kick start a relationship, if not an entire rebellion, or at least let her know that I existed. I accepted the dare and the kid whose name I can't remember promised that he would grab any girl of my choosing.

Approaching the second floor landing, I slowed to casually let a few kids pass by. Timing was everything. I had to fix it so that I was walking next to Keri. Without looking at her, I switched my notebook into my right hand, letting my left hand dangle at my side. From the corner of my eye I could make out Keri, holding her books before her, staring straight ahead.

After a snap of my wrist and a few pumps of my hand for practice, I reached over and grabbed her, my hand covering her back pocket and my thumb pressed into the magical point, which was, admittedly, not quite an Angela point, but a point nonetheless. Keri stood straight up and let out a small cry, but I was most interested in how she tightened her butt cheeks. I barely had time to wonder whether that was her way of giving in, surrendering her ass to my squeeze, when she half-heartedly pushed me against the wall, called me a jerk, and cracked up laughing.

It was exhilarating. I had never felt so alive. It was like the world stopped and, though I could see the wave of my classmates filing down the stairs, and caught glimpses

of the shocked faces of the two fat girls behind us, and heard the hoot and holler of the kid whose name I can't remember, who really started moving downstairs in a hurry, it was all taking place in slow motion. Somehow, I had tapped into some hidden energy source and sucked it by hand right through the denim of Keri's pants. The push had to be a play for the benefit of others, mock coyness to preserve her innocence. To hell with revolution, I was thinking maybe she liked me.

On the final flight of stairs, after the squeeze-inspired madness subsided, I grabbed her again, but this time she didn't back away or even flinch. I didn't get a real squeeze in, just kind of cupped my hand over her back pocket and the slight mound of flesh it covered, and kept it there a few seconds, until we reached the door. Approaching the light, Keri turned to me and smiled. She had beautiful brown eyes.

I walked her as far as the gate, where we paused awkwardly. We each had to go in different directions to our buses. She still held her books before her like a protective shield while I tried to look cool with my hands in my pockets, notebook tucked under my arm. A light breeze played with her hair while I studied her face, trying to find some hint as to what I was supposed to do or say. When she noticed me staring, she looked down at her white sneakers.

As the last of the kids filed out of the school and the buses revved their engines, Keri glanced over her shoulder and said she should probably get going, but stood there, waiting. I was caught off guard and didn't want to screw anything up, so I wished her a good summer, said I'd see her in September, and did my coolest movie character backward three-step for a last glance at her ass, something to tide me over, before turning toward my own bus and a summer that now seemed like it would last forever.

Three weeks later, I stood at the podium in an Orthodox temple in Brooklyn, dressed in my brand new navy blue suit, with a white talus draped over my shoulders, a funky red yarmulke on my head, and little square boxes with leather straps tied around my head and arms. My father, looking equally ridiculous, stood next to me. Despite the seriousness of the occasion, neither of us could stop laughing. I had never before worn *teffilin*, or even knew what it was, but since it was an Orthodox temple, I had to play by their rules.

The temple was one of those places that time had forgotten. For some reason, a microphone wasn't a twentieth century intrusion but women had to sit separately from men, in the back, behind a wall, and look out one at a time through this little wooden square. Although we weren't religious, my parents agreed to this particular temple to please a few of the real Jews in the family—and I think they may have gotten quite a deal on the place as well. My father's uncle so-and-so was a regular there and was friends with the rabbi.

And what a rabbi he was. Dressed in a somber black suit, with sleeves that were two inches too short, with his own black and white talus, he had a white beard that fell halfway down his chest and he stood hunched over and walked with a cane. He was something out of central casting—if some movie producer called for a stereotypical rabbi, he was their man—and didn't just look like he knew the scriptures, but may have been around to write them. He also had this no nonsense kind of face, like if he didn't like you, he would hold out his cane and the walls would part, unleashing the power of God. Worst of all, he had this thick Polish accent, so that I couldn't understand a word he said. I just nodded my way through our introduction. He stood next to me in silence,

hands clasped behind his back, waiting for all the guests to take their seats. Standing on my other side, my father smiled and waved at the guests.

For years, I had been afraid of my father, more because he wasn't around much when I was growing up than anything else. Though there had been the times, after I screwed something up, that my mother would issue the warning, "Just wait until your father gets home," usually while she called him at work. I'd hide in my room, hoping that, after dinner, he'd be less inclined to hand down whatever judgment he deemed I deserved. By the time I started seventh grade, however, my father would just enter my room in his white undershirt, having taken off his shirt and tie before dinner. Suit pants wrinkled from sitting on the bus, he would stand in the doorway, shake his head, and tell me not to be stupid. Mostly, he'd just come by for these little chats and offer fatherly words of wisdom, *mano y mano*, and forgo punishment. Like the time I got a charge slip for not doing my homework. My mother flipped out that I was going wind up in prison, while my father told me that he said he did what he did all day at that job he hated so that I could have options. I should play the game they wanted me to play—do the right thing, as he put it—go to college, and eventually, I'd have the last laugh.

"Nervous?" my father now asked, waving at his cousin Joel and his family, who were making their way to their seats. They were some of the few relatives I knew because they lived near us and I went to school with Joel's son, Cary, whose own bar mitzvah was two weeks away.

I don't think either of my parents expected such a big turnout. Though they had sent out a lot of invitations, many people like to skip the temple and just show up for the party, where they'd at least get a meal and all the booze they could drink. Plus, it was a

rainy Thursday morning, and the party wasn't until Saturday night, so it would've been easy for the non-essential relatives to make their excuses. Instead, it seemed that everybody from both my parents' families was there: the extremely religious contingent, mostly from Brooklyn, who truly thought that, by the end of my speech, I would really be a man, and the lapsed crowd, from the suburbs, who could just as easily accept Christ as their savior if it kept them in good standing with their rich Christian friends. Like me, most of them viewed this as a formal exercise we had to suffer through in order to have a big party that would, in the words of one of my aunts, "bring the family together," whatever that meant.

In addition to the family, however, a couple of old timers who hung out in the *shul* all day arguing over minute points of *mishnah* and *midrash* had taken a real liking to me earlier when we came in, and had insisted on staying to watch. They thought it was the greatest thing that some reformed-to-the-point of atheist kid from the suburbs would come down to their temple and become a man before their eyes, and they couldn't thank my father enough for the incredible *mitzvah* of our mere presence. They were so happy—probably because it was getting increasingly rare for anybody to read in Hebrew and not the phony English phonetics popular amongst reformed Jews—but you would've thought that these guys had stumbled onto their long awaited messiah, making his first appearance in the world, and that I was destined to lead them all out of Brooklyn and into the promised land.

"Still not nervous?" my father asked, intentionally trying to make me nervous.

“Look at me,” I said, holding my hands out to my sides. “I got blocks on my head and this little hat keeps sliding off whenever I move. No matter what happens, I can’t look like a bigger idiot than I do now.”

I never did have a head for yarmulkes. It’s either too round or not round enough, because they would never stay on. My father said it was because I had thick hair and should be thankful, but that didn’t change anything. Some guys used little bobby pins, but I was too cool for that. Instead, I’d place the yarmulke on top of my head, rather than on the preferred back curve, thinking this would give me more time to catch it, and walked real slow, like I was balancing a crate of eggs. Inevitably, it would fall off, usually right in front of somebody religious enough to care, and I’d suffer the humiliation of having to kiss the damn thing before putting it back on.

I really wasn’t nervous, but I was a little anxious. It had already been over an hour since everyone had gathered outside in the warm, early summer drizzle to greet each other and wish me good luck, but as happens when families that live within driving distance but never see each other finally get together, nobody would shut up. They had all just stood there, some in the rain and some under the overhang, talking and laughing like, well, long lost relatives. Even my usually reserved grandfather was talking to the old rabbi, who, it turned out, came from the same Polish village he did and who, I found out later, was actually younger than my grandfather.

There had been all kinds of chitchat like that going on and all these people that wanted to congratulate me. Some of them just wanted to appear close to me, as if that would elevate them above the other relatives—like, “Look how special I am, I know the bar mitzvah boy.” Some people took this stuff way too seriously, like my mother’s crazy

cousin, who told me I should take my time and really think about what I was reading, what it all meant; that a thirteenth birthday was an important thing in Jewish tradition, and that I should remember this moment forever. I didn't have the heart to tell him that my real birthday was still two weeks away and that I wasn't going to be reading anything because I had the whole damn thing memorized.

For months I had suffered through once-a-week tutoring sessions with a rabbi who'd get angry at my mispronunciations of words that weren't just written in a foreign language, but an entirely different alphabet, read from right to left. I didn't know what the words meant, but he insisted I say them correctly, so that I could then sing them before an audience of family and friends and, as it turned out, a couple of old school Jews who thought I was some link between generations, taking my place in a line that started with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I couldn't guess the number of ball games I had missed because of those lessons, and that hired gun of a rabbi. About halfway through the lessons, however, he gave up and told me to repeat what he said, so I did, and before long I could at least make all the right sounds in all the right places and get through the two pages of text that looked like nothing more than bleeding black ink.

Once everyone was seated, the rabbi cleared his throat. After a few prayers in Hebrew, which he had me repeat—*Baruch atay I-don't-know-what-this-means*—he gave a little speech that was, from what I could understand, about the importance of this *simkhe*, he said, switching to Yiddish, as he knew nobody spoke Hebrew, this joyous occasion, when Yaakov ben Yitzchak would become a man in the eyes of God. Hebrew names fascinated me. I always felt like they were a secret identity, like I was spy, and I'd

pretend that if I ever got in trouble, I could just blame it on this mysterious Jew with the funny name, who was and also wasn't me.

I snuck a few glances back at my mother and grandmother, who took turns waving and smiling from the little wooden window, and turned to face the opened cabinet that usually contained the Torah, which was now rolled out before me. I had never seen it up close. It was a little scary, with silver handles and harsh looking black type on crisp white paper. I kept both hands on the lectern and made sure not to touch it, lest I be struck by lightning. Thankfully, since it was an Orthodox temple, I had to face the cabinet, my back to the congregation.

There was an irony to all this pageantry that seemed lost on everyone but me. Here I was, about to read from some sacred book a passage I didn't understand, in a language I couldn't read, to mark my thirteenth birthday, on a day well before my real birthday, in front of people who were little more than strangers. Personally, I couldn't see how any of it was going to affect me, and I certainly couldn't imagine God, if He even existed, giving a damn one way or another. I was thankful that all I had to do was sing—at least they weren't going to start carving away at my private parts again. That was one tradition I was glad I couldn't remember.

Using his silver pointer, that actually had a little pointing hand on the end, the rabbi indicated where I was to start and mumbled for me to begin. My father, looking over my shoulder with his hand on my back, gave me his usual closed mouth smile, the edges of his lips barely raised, and nudged me with his body.

Although I knew he recognized some of the irony, I also knew that he was proud of me. Earlier that week, he had told me no fewer than three stories about his own bar

mitzvah and, that morning, after he tied my tie for me, he gave me this little black fold-up magnifying glass, in its weathered leather case, that his father, whom I was named after and who he swore I looked more like every day, had given to him on his bar mitzvah. It was kind of nice, because I think it was the only gift I ever got that came from him alone and wasn't a joint effort with my mother.

I gave my father a quick wink and started singing, hamming it up as much as I could. I knew I couldn't sing very well, but was confident that I knew the material, so I might as well show off. I even considered grabbing the microphone and doing an Elvis impersonation, but didn't want to be responsible for the heart attack I was sure that would give the rabbi. Once I was fully into the rhythm of the piece, I allowed my mind to wander, though I was sure to keep my eyes on the page, lest the rabbi find out the truth.

I thought about school and how I couldn't wait to get back and see how things went with Keri, playing out an infinite number of scenes about what I could've said, what I should've said, as we stood at the school gate. In one scene, she dropped her books, threw her arms around me for a prolonged, opened mouthed kiss, our tongues sliding all over each other's faces, like in the movies. And then my mind wandered back to her ass and how she forced it into my hand and how damn good it felt to actually grab onto a girl—and not just any girl, but Keri, who I could remember liking as far back as sixth grade, when I saw her in homeroom on our first day in junior high. And I thought about how I didn't care that the kid whose name I can't remember ran away after I squeezed Keri's ass and never held up his end of the deal. And before too long, the rabbi, who had been smiling earlier and nodding his head, wasn't smiling any more and was tapping his pointer on the first word of the third and final section of my reading, and it suddenly

dawned on me how quiet the room was and that I didn't have a clue what that word was. I could hear the wooden square creak as some woman, probably my mother, leaned on the ledge.

Staring down at the page, I tried to recapture a few words that might get the beat back in my head and, hopefully, let me recall how this section started. I turned to my father, who nudged me again. It seemed his smile was fading, though his eyes told me that he found this hysterical.

"Don't look at me," he whispered into my ear while patting my shoulder. "You're on your own, kid."

The rabbi was tapping more forcefully now and saying something that I couldn't make out. He looked at me with disgust and kept mumbling the word, but with his accent, it didn't sound anything like what the other rabbi had me repeat. I whispered "Hang on a second," not realizing that I said it into the microphone, which made everybody in the place chuckle, especially my father, and I was sure I heard a couple of whispered *Oy vehs*. All I could think about was Keri's ass, framed by those cute little points like less than or greater than symbols in a math equation, how her dark designer jeans had worn spots on either side of the main seam, and the electric charge I got from grabbing her with nothing but a few millimeters of denim between us. I could hear the old Jews shuffling in their seats and the creak of the ledge again as my mother and grandmother traded positions.

Finally, after I don't know how long, but it had felt like forever, I mumbled a few nonsense words that I hoped sounded like Hebrew, eventually catching the rhythm I needed to keep going. I didn't care how many words I skipped or whether or not this

meant I would only partly be a man. I was just glad to be singing again, the rabbi's pointer moving along at a steady pace, and that he was again nodding his head to the beat.

When I finished, the rabbi shook my hand and hugged me, welcoming me into the royal order of manhood. Three times he hugged me, saying something I couldn't understand but that my grandfather, who had come up to congratulate me, translated.

"If you studied a little, it's easier to learn Hebrew than to memorize this speech, and then it would mean something," he said. My grandfather smiled and nodded his head. "There's more to being a man than just going through the motions, so much you have to learn, but you have time yet." Then the rabbi added that one day I'd understand, which for some reason sounded perfectly clear without the translation. After a wink, a big toothy smile, and a handshake, in which his sleeve rose up just enough so that I could make out the tiny numbers tattooed on his arm, he hobbled off to congratulate my mother, finally allowed out of the little back room.

The old Jewish guys couldn't stop shaking my hand and *mazel toving* me to death. They even made a few jokes about my "one little slip up" that didn't mean anything because "even God has a sense of humor." I didn't know a whole lot about Judaism, but I'd seen *The Ten Commandments*, and I didn't see what was so funny, except for maybe Edward G. Robinson, as that Dathan guy, a traitorous Jew, with his unmistakable voice like a cartoon rat, continually asking, "Where's your deliverer now?" For me, the whole bar mitzvah thing was what was funny, some stupid tradition that maybe once meant something to Tevya the dairyman in *Fiddler on the Roof*, but sure didn't apply to me.

Mo, Larry, and Curly, the affectionate names I would give the three old Jews, invited me back to the temple any time I wanted, to keep up my studies and argue over scripture. They said that, God willing, they'd all be there for my wedding as well, as soon as I found a nice, good looking girl, a *sheyna maidila*, Jewish, of course.

Although I didn't speak Yiddish, this strange language like a secret code between Jews, as they all seemed to know it, no matter where they came from, I understood some words. After years of constant exposure—it was the language my parents and grandparents had used when they didn't want me to understand them—I knew enough to get the gist of what they would say, which was my own little secret, and I never let on that they weren't getting anything past me.

I didn't tell Mo, Larry, and Curly about Keri, who I had been trying not to think about because seeing her again was so far off, but who had certainly jumped into my thoughts that day. Besides, what would I say? That she was a *shiksa*, with a beautiful *shmaykel*, whose *tuchis* I *khapped*? I had decided to pursue her with a passion as soon as school started, not to marry, but to make her my girlfriend, which would give me real status as I started eighth grade, my senior year in junior high.

Eighth grade officially started with me sitting before the Principal, Mr. Joseph Fisher, in his cube of an office, with the old-fashioned wooden door and its glass pane that had "Principal" stenciled on it in big block letters. Dressed in a light gray suit and pink tie, the long strands of his oily black hair brushed to one side of his head, he explained my responsibilities as an eighth grade student at Totten Junior High School, one of which

was to act like a mature young man, which did not include walking through his stairwells, grabbing on to girls' "posterior regions."

He had an opened manila folder in front of him, in which I could see all kinds of forms, with columns and checkmarks and lines on the bottom for "Additional Comments," in bold type, that I could easily read upside down. My official permanent record—vital information and statistics, including every charge slip or major referral received, along with my teachers' comments on my overall "Abilities" and "Attitude"—said to follow me around for the rest of my life. I didn't believe this for a second.

Fisher traced a column with his finger before settling on one particular mark. After what seemed like ages, in which he checked down to read the corresponding note, he finally looked up at me over the silver rims of his reading glasses.

"Before we get to the sordid business at hand," he said, studying the skull mascot of the rock band whose t-shirt I wore, "I want to address your performance here at Totten. For the most part, you are an average student, whose teachers have agreed doesn't apply himself and shows no interest in improving. In other words, you seem to be content to receive B's in your classes and satisfactories for your behavior, and I must question why you don't strive for something better."

I wondered if he knew he had a stain on his tie and came pretty close to asking, especially since he obviously wasn't too keen on my t-shirt, but since he kept clothes out of it, I figured I'd do the same. I didn't know how to answer—my grades were decent, so what did he want? I mumbled an "I don't know," shrugging my shoulders, wondering where this guy got off asking anything beyond my name, rank, and serial number, which Mrs. Coppitelli had told us was all the enemy was allowed to ask.

“Well,” he snorted, once he realized I was up on the Geneva Convention and couldn’t be tricked that easily. “Colleges are getting more and more competitive. A wise student starts preparing early. Studies have shown that a student’s performance in high school can be traced back to their final year of junior high, so it’s time for you to get on the ball.”

I had heard this before. Teachers were always saying how everything we did in school was going to determine how far we went in life, how much money we’d make, whether or not we’d have happy marriages or die young and penniless on the street with no one to claim our bodies. My interests were more immediate, like getting the hell over to first period to see if Keri was there. I didn’t offer anything. I would only respond to questions.

Fisher held his glasses before him at the loose hinge of the frame’s arm, letting them swing out toward me and back again, like a pendulum. As I stared through the lenses, waiting for him to continue, I was mesmerized by how his perspective shifted slightly in the glass—up and down, up and down—and wondered how I appeared to him.

“It has come to my attention through unnamed though reliable sources that, on the last day of seventh grade, you proceeded to grab the posterior region of one of your female classmates, not once—” here his voice grew louder, as if this was my real sin against God and humanity—“but twice, including one time after the victim had already indicated that she did not welcome your advance. Is this correct?”

Was this some kind of a joke? *Unnamed though reliable sources? Posterior region? Victim?* It took me a few seconds to process and I was filled with questions. Did this come from Keri? Did she complain? That wouldn’t make sense, considering how she let

me do it the second time, even smiling with her beautiful brown eyes, and walked out to the gate with me. Why would she complain? Didn't I at least get a phone call or a lawyer or something?

"Should I repeat the question?" Fisher stared at me with this gruesome smile, like he was getting a lot of satisfaction from grilling me. This was a question, and I knew I should respond, but I didn't know how. He put his glasses on and the desk and turned his attention to a bent paperclip before continuing.

"Now, I suppose you should know that I have not spoken to the alleged victim. Whatever her reasons, she has not come forward, so however far this proceeds is entirely up to you. If you deny these allegations, I will have no choice but to question the other student involved. Personally, I hope we can get this squared away immediately, keep it just between us men."

Suddenly, everything made sense. His "reliable source" had to be his own daughter Kathy, one of the girls on the steps during the "alleged incident." She was probably just pissed off that nobody had ever grabbed her ass. She told her daddy, hoping he'd put a stop to all ass squeezing everywhere so that she didn't feel left out—no doubt part of his larger scheme to ban tight jeans. If I denied it, he would use me as the poster child for a kid gone wrong from constant exposure to too many perfect little points. Better to give him what he wanted, get this over with as quickly as possible. I had visions of a meeting between my parents and Keri's. My mother wailing as I'm led away in handcuffs, Keri calling out, "I wanted it, I liked it!" sending her mother into a fit of tears as our fathers beat the hell out of each.

“Yes. I did it and I am very sorry. In fact, this has been bugging me all summer. I know what I did was wrong, and just being here has taught me a very valuable lesson.”

“I’m glad you see it that way,” Fisher said, slowly tapping the tip of the paperclip with his forefinger. He seemed pleased. “I like to think our school is a microcosm of the—” here he made his long fingers into quote marks and flexed them repeatedly—“‘real world’ and that all our students are young adults, that we’re preparing for full and productive lives outside of school. As I’m sure you know, there are consequences for our actions, so I’m adding a referral to your file, though I know how things get for boys—I mean young men—your age, when the weather gets warm, the birds singing and the bees buzzing.”

I smiled at him, which seemed to go over well, as he smiled back, probably filled with his own memories of lifting up girls’ poodle skirts. My mother had told me stories of the old days, when everybody wore white socks and black and white shoes and the whole world was a dull gray, or at least it had always looked that way in movies.

After a little speech about how I was a good kid with a lot of potential, how he was sure I’d be a real *mentsh*, he winked at me and said he knew I would act accordingly. It was like we were part of an exclusive club or organization, with a special handshake or secret password. For a second, I thought he might reach into his desk for a bottle of Manischewitz wine so we could toast our understanding, drink *l’khayim* to life. Though I still had reservations about the whole bar mitzvah thing, at that moment, I was glad I was a Jew, because this could’ve been a lot worse.

By the time lunch rolled around at fifth period, I was convinced that something weird was going on. It had started in my first class, when I noticed a few people whisper when I came in late, and then later, when a couple of girls I didn't know said hi in the hallways. The kid whose name I can't remember told me his latest information revealed that, since my morning talk with Fisher—for which he was extremely thankful that his name didn't come up—three guys had been called down for squeezing girls' asses. The revolution had begun.

In each class that followed, somebody had the latest word on the number of kids called down, which some reports exaggerated to twelve, but the more conservative and probably accurate estimate was five. By eighth period, it had grown to seven. Fisher's secretary had gotten on the loud speaker to announce a special assembly for the next day. Rumors circulated that I stood up to Fisher, told him that we would not accept his dress code. I didn't say anything, which seemed to perpetuate the rumors and add to the mystique. In eighth period, Angela Russo smiled at me.

All of this gave me an incredible surge of confidence when I got to homeroom. Between conferences with my closest friends and trusted advisors, whispered conversations in the hallways and in notes passed through class, it was agreed that I might never achieve a greater level of popularity. If I was going to ask out Keri, this was the time.

When the dismissal bell rang, I slowly gathered my books. I met up with Keri outside the class, as she came out with Angela.

There was something different about Keri. At first, I couldn't put my finger on it. The pants were tight and she appeared taller than she had been. It must have been the

heels on her black shoes. The eyeliner was new, the blush a little heavier. I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed it that morning, but, after all, I was only there for a few minutes before I was called down to see Fisher. She told "Angie" she'd call her later. When did they become friends?

"Hi," she said enthusiastically, a good sign. "I heard what happened. I was looking for you. I wanted you to know that I had nothing to do with it and I even cursed out Kathy Fisher in the hall. I hope you didn't get in too much trouble."

"Just a referral, no big deal," I said, cool as possible, like I had a file full of referrals and the bastards couldn't touch me. I didn't know what else to say. I was so shocked by this new, talkative Keri. In five seconds we had spoken more than we did in two years. It was nice, but unnerving. The more we talked, the more chance I had of screwing up.

"I was glad that it wasn't you," I said finally, as we approached the second floor landing, the site of the infamous squeeze. "I thought maybe you were mad at me or something."

"Are you kidding? It was such a nothing thing. I can't believe Kathy had the nerve to get her fat ass involved and blow it so far out-of-proportion."

A nothing thing? Out-of-proportion? What did that mean? I needed a change of tactics, so I asked about her summer, making small talk the rest of the way down and out into the yard, where I again walked her to the gate, but this time, I kept going down the tree lined street, where all the buses waited with their engines revving. I had learned my lesson from last year. She wasn't going to get away so easily.

"Isn't your bus the other way?" she asked, looking over her shoulder.

“Yeah, but that’s okay.” The new and improved cooler me couldn’t worry about catching a bus any more than I could worry about referrals. There were far more important things about to happen and I was running out of time. Three buses to go, two. . .

“Keri, I— “

“Oh, there’s my ride,” she said, cutting me off, skipping toward the waiting car, parked beyond the buses. After a few paces, she turned back. “I’m sorry, did you say something?”

And then I saw him, sitting in the driver’s seat, staring at me. He had short brown hair pushed back on his head and wore a tank top with a thick gold chain around his neck—it must’ve been massive if I could see it from that distance. I’ll be damned if he didn’t have a mustache as well. Since he was driving, he had to be at least sixteen or seventeen, maybe even older, and I had to keep myself from staring back.

“No, forget it. It was nothing.”

“You sure?” she asked, smiling that smile, her brown eyes more beautiful than ever. The wind blew some strands of hair across her eyes and, as she brushed them away, I wondered if God was exercising his famous sense of humor.

“Yeah, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She looked puzzled, like she had no idea what was going on, what had been going on. I wanted to explain the whole stupid, sad story, no matter how bad I might look, but there wasn’t enough time. She smiled, turning back to the car. “See ya” she called out over her shoulder.

Watching Keri get in, I suffered the torment of seeing her kiss him. Again, I had to force myself to look away, partly because I couldn't take it and partly because I didn't want to piss the guy off. I was too far out to be going to any of the buses, and I was sure she was explaining who I was, why I walked with her. Not wanting to antagonize him, I leaned against the fence like it was my intent all along, returning Keri's wave with the coolest nod I could muster.

As soon as they were out of sight, I made a move to run to my bus but it was too late. The last of them were pulling out. Had it all been a figment of my imagination? All my advisors agreed that it was done deal, mine for the asking. Now I was certain that God really did have a sense of humor, or else he was pissed at me for screwing up such a sacred thing.

No. It wasn't God. As much as I wanted to think it was, as easier as that would've been, I knew I screwed up. I had let Keri get away and I'd remember it every time I saw her for the rest of that year and on into high school, where she'd become even more beautiful and popular than Angela, and my heart would swell every time we'd pass in the hall and she'd stick out her hip, smile that smile, and say hi, winking one of her beautiful brown eyes like we shared a secret.

Glancing back at the school, I contemplated going in, telling a secretary I missed my bus and had to call my mother. In a window, I caught my reflection. For a second, I felt like a character in a movie, when the camera zooms in from outer space, through the clouds, getting closer and closer to earth until it was focused in on me, alone on that tree lined street. A slight breeze rustled the orange leaves, a hint of brown burning the edges. Fuck it, I said, hands in my pockets, books tucked under my arm. I might as well walk.

CRASHING CHRISTMAS

One Christmas Eve, while sitting around with nothing to do, my friends and I decided that it was time for us Jews to exert some power. We would get back at Christians for all our historic suffering. Like most Jews at Christmas, we felt that the whole world was having a party and we weren't invited. We figured we'd take matters into our own hands. We'd crash their party, teach these people a lesson once and for all.

There were four of us sitting around the coffee table in my parents' den: me, Jeff, Kenny, and Mike. Though it was only about eight o'clock, my parents had gone to sleep early, probably because everything on TV had something to do with Christmas. Jeff picked through a box of old clothes—hats, scarves, jackets, and assorted other items—that my mother had taken out from the attic to donate to the nuns who came around on Christmas Day. It was my job to leave the box outside the door before I went to bed.

"Funny how Cwist himself was a Jew. Because of him, we're stuck here." Kenny sat cross-legged on the couch. He had a slight lisp, which made some people think he was stupid, which he wasn't, though he always tried to speak with an authority that he didn't have. "Think about it," he continued. "If Cwist were alive today, he'd be sitting here just like us while the rest of the world celebrates his birthday."

"If the Jews didn't kill him in the first place, there wouldn't be any reason to celebrate." Mike stroked his hint of a beard. He flipped his long brown hair off his

shoulders after every sentence like he had to remind himself that it was still there. “We made him into a martyr. Now we suffer for it.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Kenny said. “The Jews didn’t kill anyone. We’ve always been a peaceful people. It was the Romans who killed him because he didn’t pay his taxes.”

“All right, relax,” Mike said. “It’s just something I heard. What do I know about something that took place like, what, five thousand years ago?”

“Closer to two,” I said. I was usually content to sit back and watch Kenny and Mike argue, as they always did, because it was so entertaining. But I couldn’t let that one go. I was going to explain to Mike the idea of BC and AD, but remembered that Mike had never actually learned how to tell time, let alone use a time line. Years before, as the story went, his parents bought him a digital watch so he never felt the need. Besides, I figured Kenny would explain it. Of all of us, they were the closest, friends since first grade. They didn’t become friends with Jeff until the fourth. I was a late addition to the group, not having moved to Staten Island until sixth grade, about four years before.

“See, that’s the fuckin’ pwoblem. Nobody knows their history. People bewive that stuff. That’s why the whole world hates the Jews. Plus we’re smarter than everybody else. At least some of us are.” Kenny shot a glance at Mike, shook his head in pity.

“Hey, leave Mike alone,” Jeff said, flipping around his neck a black scarf from my mother’s box. “If he lets that beard grow, with his hair, he’s really gonna look like Jesus. Myra says he does already.”

Myra was Jeff’s mother. Since we all liked the name so much, Jeff would always refer to her as Myra, though he wouldn’t dare do that around her. She was this big, no

nonsense kind of woman who had a sense of humor equal to her size. Just as she had nicknamed Mike “Jesus” because of his hair, she used to call me “The Spick” because she said my mustache made me look Puerto Rican. Myra was great to kid around with but you didn’t want to make her mad. Once, when Jeff and I were walking home after cutting school, Myra happened to drive past us and screeched to a stop. She blocked two lanes of traffic so she could stand in the street screaming at us, telling all the drivers who honked to go fuck themselves, and then she dragged us both into the car. She drove us back to school.

“Maybe Mywa wants to fuck him, like everybody else,” Kenny said. He giggled in his uncontrollable way, a sound like a cross between a madman and a cicada. “That’s why Mike’s always wearing those tight jeans. Right, Mike?”

Kenny was always kidding Mike about the number of girls who wanted him, probably because he was jealous, though he was also genuinely proud of Mike, who was liked by a few girls, though not to the extent Kenny imagined. Mike was a pretty amazing guitarist, which contributed to his popularity. I guess Kenny hoped some of it would rub off on him. Not that Kenny was himself a bad looking guy—girls loved his watery blue eyes—but with the lisp, also the fact that his older brother was such a ladies’ man, Kenny didn’t have much confidence. Around girls, he tended to make himself out to be an object of pity in the hopes they’d at least be his friend. My mother used to call him a *nebbish*, a really nice guy who was also a little pathetic, though that’s probably why she, like all our mothers, liked him so much. They knew that we were least likely to get into trouble with Kenny, who was so afraid of everything.

No doubt Kenny was right—everybody hated Jews because of the misconception that they had killed Christ—but I couldn't help thinking this was a little simplistic. After all, it didn't account for Jewish suffering prior to Christ, like in the Book of Exodus, or all the fighting in the Middle East that had been going on for God knows how long. Plus, how many Christians really blamed the Jews for something that, even if it were true, was committed by a few hundred people two thousand years ago? Most Christians I knew weren't religious anyway. I said all this to Kenny but had no idea it would rile him up as much as it did.

“We're smarter than they are. Even back in biblical times, we were the first ones to invent God. It was a God that actually did stuff for us and talked to us. All their fuckin' statues didn't say or do anything. It's jealousy, man. God gave Moses the Ten Commandments—he didn't give it to the Italians or the blacks, did he? How many Jews commit cwimes today? How many Jews live in slums and wite gwaffiti in their own neighborhoods like all the fuckin' niggers do? Look at the guinea bastards we go to school with, walking around, all tough with their ‘How ya doins,’ like they haven't fully evolved. They're missing links. We're all fuckin' doctors and lawyers and shit. They're all into constwuction.”

We cracked up at Kenny's outburst. No matter how long we knew him, it always seemed strange when he'd go off like this, because it was so contrary to his personality, but it usually took more to get him going. Still, he did express a few things the rest of us felt.

Growing up in a predominately Jewish neighborhood on predominately Italian Staten Island, we were fully aware that we were a minority. One visit to our eighty percent

Italian high school proved that. But it wasn't like we had to endure much overt anti-Semitism. Our Italian friends accepted us. Hell, most of the time, we felt perfectly assimilated and prided ourselves on not being religious, which was really a way of covering up our beliefs—*passing*, so to speak. I'd relish the times spent with my Italian friends in their neighborhoods, eating prosciutto and mozzarella cheese sandwiches with roasted peppers and oil on fresh-baked Italian bread, though I'd never tell them how sick I'd get afterwards, probably because, as my mother said, Jews don't have the cast iron stomachs of non-Jews, so we couldn't handle their food. On excursions into Brooklyn or Manhattan, when we'd see Hasidic Jews in their black coats and hats with their funny beards and twirled hair, I'd join right in with the jokes about these people who, to me, went out of their way to be different and so deserved the jokes. I was also perfectly willing to take my Italian friends at their words when they'd joke about Jews because they'd always follow it up with, "No offense. You know we don't mean you."

Christmas was a different story. There was no way around the fact that, on this day, we were outsiders. As a kid, I'd watch the cartoon specials about Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer and how he'd save Christmas for all the good little boys and girls. I knew he wasn't doing me any favors. While the rest of the world was sitting around their fireplaces with big bright smiles and red felt hats, eating fattened ham and drinking eggnog, whatever the hell that was, my friends and I were stuck in my den because there was nowhere else to go. Perhaps nothing emphasized the extent to which we were outcasts more than the fact that the whole damn world shut down and left us with nothing to do.

After the laughter subsided, we looked at each other in silence, as if we all started to realize just how bored we were and the night wasn't going to get any better. My mother had cut out something from the newspaper about a Teenage Jewish Singles' Night at some temple somewhere, but no matter how desperate we'd get, there was no way we'd go. Still, I figured I should at least mention it.

Kenny seemed intrigued by the idea and adjusted his position on the couch. Sitting up a little, he said, "I don't know. What do you think? At least there'll be girls there."

"I'll go if you guys go," Mike said, looking back and forth at me and Jeff. "My mother told me about it, too. It's like they got together and planned it."

"Yeah," Jeff said, still searching through the box of clothes. "Myra left it on the refrigerator last week." Looking at me, he added, "She told me to tell you to shave—they might not let any Spics in." He traded the black scarf he was wearing for a bright red one and wrapped it around his neck. "I don't really care, though I can't imagine that there's anything cool about it. I say it we leave it up to the Spick, since it's his house and all."

"I'm not fuckin' going," I said. "I mean, you guys can, if you want, but it's gonna be the biggest losers on the Island. It's a fuckin' Teenage Jewish Singles' Night, for Christ's sake. What the fuck is *that*?"

I didn't mean to sound as negative as I did, because I really wouldn't have minded if they went. I wasn't going. I could just imagine the place filled with fat, ugly, hook nosed JAPs, desperately whining for a guy to pay attention to them, figuring they'd have half a shot because all the good looking Italian chicks were home with their families. Plus there was no way I'd give my mother the satisfaction of knowing I went somewhere she recommended.

In truth, I was having a hard time with my religion. I felt that it was something imposed upon me by my family, not something I would have chosen. Considering the amount of persecution Jews have suffered, who in their right mind would choose to be Jewish? I was not going through any such persecution, of course. But it bothered me. Much of this probably stemmed from the fact that I found the Italian girls at school so alluring. Think about it—they all had raven dark hair and razor sharp nails, wore a lot of eyeliner, which made them look exotic, like Cleopatra, and dressed in skintight clothes that showed off every curve. They practically exuded sex, whether or not they actually put out. Plus they had mysterious fathers with old world accents and last names that appeared in the papers connected to organized crime. Like most kids my age, I grew up on the *Godfather* movies. I couldn't help but be attracted to that power. And I always knew that, as a Jew, the best I could hope for was to be their lawyer or something.

This is not to say that there weren't good looking Jewish girls. There were a few, and one in particular, Audrey Jacobs, stands out in my mind even to this day. Audrey had long, light brown curly hair and this absolutely stunning body—with all its curves, it reminded me of a *shofar*, the ram's horn the rabbi would blow on Rosh Hashanah, also allegedly used by Joshua and his priests to knock down the walls of Jericho. Audrey wore a lot of makeup. Aside from her name and the slight hook in her nose that she'd later have fixed, which made her just about perfect, she was a lot like the Italian girls, with the noticeable exception that she whined. Every time she opened her mouth, each syllable was elongated to the point where a simple sentence like, "Do you have an extra cigarette?" felt like it took ten minutes. Of course, you had to factor in the thick red lipstick, which softened the blow because it gave you something to focus on while she

stretched out each word. Kenny found the whine sexy, which was true. But I couldn't get over the fact that she was, consciously or unconsciously, emphasizing the JAP stereotype, even if it was to her advantage. I was especially aware of stereotypes. It was one thing if one of my Italian friends was a little cheap and didn't have a few bucks to chip in for beer or pot. As a Jew, I didn't have that luxury. If for whatever reason I didn't pay my share, they'd think it was because I was cheap like all Jews. So I'd bend over backwards to compensate, which on more than one occasion left me shortchanged.

A Jewish Singles' Night could be cool if Audrey and her other good looking Jewish friends would be there. But there was little chance of that. Just as I had a thing for the Italian girls, the really good looking Jewish girls had a thing for Italian guys, with their slicked back hair, gold chains, and their perfectly tailored sweatpants to "show off their piece—you know, the *package*." If black guys were known for having especially long cocks, the Italians prided themselves on having thick ones, "like sausage." Plus they all drove these fancy cars with stenciling in their rear windows, like *Joey G., Dancing Forever*, which girls found appealing, though I never understood why. Now that I think back on it, I liked Italian girls so much because I desperately wanted to prove that I was assimilated. Audrey and her friends probably had the same need. That's why I figured I didn't stand a chance.

The need for assimilation wasn't personal. There was a lot of it going around, on different levels, of course. Some Jewish guys went to the extreme of imitating the Italians, but they made themselves look stupid by trying too hard. One guy, Ira Levine, had the whole Italian get up going, complete with the gaudy car, with these ridiculous Playboy bunny stickers and especially large fuzzy dice hanging from his rearview mirror.

At school, he avoided all contact with us—the Jewish guys from the same neighborhood—but if he saw us in the park, he'd be our best friend. We talked about him behind his back. I can only imagine what his Italian friends said when he wasn't around. The guy's name was Ira Levine, for Christ's sake. No matter how fitted his sweatpants or how he did up his car, there was no getting away from it. His name was like a neon sign on his forehead flashing *Jew*, replacing those devilish horns of years ago.

Although Kenny seemed disappointed that we weren't going, he tried to make light of it by saying he was swearing off girls, for a while, anyway. "Bitches," he said. He leaned back on the couch. "They're all bitches."

"What's going on, Ken, man," Mike said, laughing. "First you go off on how everyone's jealous of the Jews and now all women are bitches. Somebody's still a little pissed off about Brackner and Barbara what's-her-name. Come on, Ken, let it out!"

Mike was referring to two recent, totally unrelated incidents that had apparently affected Kenny more than we knew. The first was the fight with Mark Brackner during what was supposed to be a touch football game. Mark accused Kenny of holding him, which prevented Mark from catching what would've been the winning pass. Mark pushed Kenny a few times and called him a kike. Kenny wouldn't fight until, after he couldn't take it anymore, he finally pushed back. Mark punched him in the nose. Blood was everywhere. We thought we might have to take Ken to the hospital. Luckily, after an infinite number of cotton balls and an hour with ice, there was nothing left but a bump, which eventually subsided.

Then just before winter break, Kenny got up the nerve to ask out Barbara Mueller, one of the hottest girls in our school. This was after months of talking about her,

admiring her from afar, but not doing anything to lay the groundwork. I don't think he had ever said more than two words to her. He got it in his head to ask her out, out of the blue, as part of what he called, "the New Ken," his plan to be more assertive. He figured girls like Barbara would like a man who took chances instead of playing "those high school games." I tried to tell him that the games were an important part of the mating ritual. He wouldn't hear it. He said his brother *told* girls they were going to go out with him and they did. Of course, I reminded him that Louis was six foot three, built like Hercules, and was pre-med at an Ivy League school. It didn't matter. It was all attitude, he said. Of course, Barbara just looked at him with this slight smile and said, "No, thanks." Despite the fact that she was clearly out of his league—it was rumored that she had signed a modeling contract and would date only rich professional men far beyond high school—Kenny thought it was because he was Jewish. We let him think this because, frankly, it was easier to let him imagine Barbara as an anti-Semite, neo-Nazi bitch than to tell the poor guy he had never had a chance, though I think he knew anyway.

The Brackner incident had really made Jeff mad. As he said repeatedly, had he been there, he would've beaten the hell out of Mark. Much of this was bravado. Like the rest of us, he knew the rules—there could be no interference in a one-on-one fair fight. There would have been nothing wrong with challenging Mark after he fought Kenny, but there was nothing Jeff could've done to prevent it, unless the threat of his challenge would've been enough. In many ways, Jeff was a study in contradictions. While he was at least six feet tall, in pretty good shape, and could take care of himself, he was also extremely passive and was the comedian of our group. I remember the day I met him, just after I had moved into the neighborhood. We were playing stickball in the street and there was

Jeff, even then taller than everyone else, and he wouldn't stop spitting. I thought he was some kind of tough guy, and I admit that I was a little afraid of him, until I got to know him better. Now he was probably my best friend and it was not uncommon for him to get a little drunk and lick people's foreheads or arms, whatever flesh was available, simply because he knew it would make everyone else laugh. Even now, as he was going on about what he would've done for Kenny had Myra not made him clean out the garage that day, he still had the scarf tied around his neck and was wearing a black shag wig he had found in my mother's box. Then he added these yellow, oversized women's sunglasses.

"You know what," Kenny said, leaning forward. "I'm sick of how the Jews have been taken advantage of. I think we should all be like the JDL. Had they been around, they would've killed Hitler."

"Yeah," Mike said, sitting up and flipping his hair. "They've always been so damned passive, like they just sit back and let the fuckin' world kill them."

"Maybe it's time we did something about it." Though he looked completely ridiculous, there was a seriousness in Jeff's voice that told us he wasn't kidding. More than an idea, it was a commandment—the voice of God on Mount Sinai, coming through Jeff on Staten Island. The silence that followed showed we all heard it the same way.

I was going to start talking about the Maccabees and the story of Chanukah, when the lights kept burning and they wouldn't give up. Or the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, how Jews with rocks and sticks fought German soldiers with machine guns. But even I knew that, in both cases, resistance had been futile. The Maccabees had won the battle but lost the war. The Jews of Warsaw were gassed at Treblinka, a fact that had been repeated to

me by my grandmother, who grew up in Poland and lost her family in the camps. There was no appropriate historical precedent I could think of, not that it would've mattered. Mike's lips were pursed, like he was blowing into a trumpet. He nodded his head, letting the hair on his shoulders bob up and down. With one eyebrow raised, Kenny wore an "Aha!" smile. He looked like he'd just discovered electricity. Jeff stared out over the yellow frames of the glasses, watching our reactions.

Soon, we were all reaching into my mother's box of old clothes and assorted other items that had been in storage for God knows how long. Mike found an old Russian style fur hat, with pull down earflaps that must've been my grandfather's from long before my time. He put his hair up under the hat, pulled the flaps down, put on a pair of dark sunglasses. Kenny put on a dark blue ski mask with red stitching around the holes for his eyes, nose, and mouth. I tied a black and white checkerboard scarf with white fringe around my face, just under my eyes, and a red bandanna over my head in the style of a Gypsy fortuneteller, covering that with a pair of furry black ear muffs. Then it was into the winter coats, some of which were once mine, like the beaten up gray suede jacket with beer stains from a party a year before. I'd give it one last hurrah. Kenny chose a poofy looking black thing that my mother had bought but I never wore because it looked like those inflatable muscles kids wore on Halloween. Mike picked my father's ratty old trench coat with the ripped lining. To complete his outfit, Jeff found my mother's purple, fake fur coat. With the wig and the glasses, he looked like a psychedelic pimp. We piled into the bathroom to check ourselves in the mirror. Our reflection stands out in my memory like an old photograph—this motley group of laughing Jewish terrorists, striking poses: Jeff's arms crossed high on his chest; Mike's left arm out to his side, his right hand

down around his crotch as if he had just struck a power chord on his electric guitar; Kenny's fist raised in a black power salute; and me, leaning back against my parents' washing machine, hands on my hips—before venturing out to perform what we called *The Revenge of Santastein*, our own historical revision of the Nazi's infamous *Kristallnacht*.

Jeff's plan was that, disguised, we would go to the houses with Christmas lights and do a little mischief, like break car windows and pull the lights down. We could let air out of tires, rip up gardens. We talked about setting garbage cans on fire, turning on outside faucets so driveways would be covered in ice by morning. But that would be going too far. Despite his own brand of militant Judaism, Kenny said because we were Jews and smarter than everybody else, we had to be safe—we didn't want anybody to get killed over this so that we'd get sued or have to run away to Israel. Our first stop would be Mark Brackner's house, down the block from my house. Fortunately, his house bordered the park entrance, so we'd have an easy escape.

It was freezing and eerily quiet. The only sound was the strangely magnified electric hum coming off one of the streetlights. Kenny mumbled that this was wrong, that he had changed his mind. We shushed him quiet. Standing in a circle, our breath steaming white puffs that mingled together and floated away like smoke from the power plant towers, the tops of which could still be seen over the houses in the bright moonlight, we held rocks that we picked up along the way, chosen specifically for our purpose, round and smooth for maximum control. Almost simultaneously, we removed the gloves from our right hands, placed them in our left hands or under our left arms. At Jeff's signal—three pumps of his fist—we leaned back and assumed our throwing positions,

Kenny included. Then we let the rocks fly over the trees that lined the park entrance, in the direction of Mark Brackner's bedroom window. Immediately after releasing the first volley, we flipped second rocks from our left hands into our right ones. We threw again just as the first rocks struck aluminum siding with loud metallic pops. Sprinting down the path into the darkness of the park, we heard the sound of glass breaking. One of us had hit our mark.

For years, this would be the source of debate, each trying to prove that it was his rock that broke the window, calculating the time of the crash against the moment we remembered letting go. Jeff always maintained he saw his rock strike the window just as he started running, though the rest of us agreed this was impossible. Based on where he claimed to be standing and the relative height of the trees, we determined there was no way he could be sure, though as late as last year, when I ran into him during a quick visit to the old neighborhood—where he now owns an Italian restaurant—he steadfastly claimed that he knows what he saw. Two years ago, when I met up with Kenny, now a police officer, after not seeing him in nearly four years, he whispered so his wife and kids couldn't hear, "It was *my* wock." Nobody's seen or heard from Mike since just after college. He suffered some kind of breakdown. We attributed it to his parents forcing him to major in business when he wanted to keep playing music, but his family would only say he was "getting better." But I have no doubt, if he could remember what we did, he'd claim that it was his rock. And it would be incredibly funny if it were mine. Though I never told the others, I wasn't trying to hit anything. Secretly, though, probably because I didn't care if it was or wasn't, I still suspect that it was my rock.

We hung out in the park, smoking a joint, laughing about what we had done. As usual, Kenny refused to smoke. He stood there, shivering, constantly checking the shadows. Soon we were a little paranoid, sure that all the people in the houses that bordered the park were looking out their windows, wondering what a bunch of kids were doing out on Christmas Eve, dressed like post apocalyptic homeless marauders. We wandered to the farthest end of the park, behind the tennis courts that bordered the main road. Though the streetlights were on, the road was empty. In the silence, we could hear a buzz coming from the green metal power box aside the darkened tennis courts. Through the trees and across the street, we could make out the top of a Christmas tree in a house, the angel Gabriel perched on top, blowing his horn.

We removed our disguises—the jackets, scarves, ear muffs, everything—and ditched them in a garbage can. We had to walk home freezing, but didn't dare chance being caught carrying anything that could implicate us. As I looked at the top of the power plant towers, rising over Kenny's right shoulder, the stars seemed to burn a little brighter than before, even through the tiny trails of white smoke. They were really twinkling, each one winking in some mysterious sequence, one after another, like millions of little sparks. I knew it had to be some kind of message. I didn't say anything, but I wondered if it was God's way of saying he was cool with what we did, or that, disguises or not, he knew everything. He would make the appropriate notations in his Book of Life.

However, on the walk home, I wondered if there was going to be some divine punishment for breaking Brackner's window. If the Jews were God's chosen people—chosen for what, I didn't know, but it was an expression I heard constantly—what would God think? From my early years in Hebrew school, I knew that, for Jews, everything

depends on our actions, more so than our faith. Faith was one thing for many Christians. Though it had been a long time since Hebrew school, I couldn't recall any specific prohibitions against rock throwing. But that didn't mean they didn't exist. I had always been taught that Jews are more concerned with the idea of a good life being its own reward, but if there was a higher judgment, wasn't God going to be a little pissed off?

I like to think I got my answer the next day, when we ran into our friend Darren. He wanted to know how come we didn't go to the Jewish Singles' Night, where he was with all the rest of our friends, all of whom hooked up with different girls from all over the Island and some from Brooklyn, even as far away as New Jersey. It was a bigger deal than any of us had imagined. He told me that Audrey Jacobs—"who looked fuckin' hot, man, you should've seen her"—was looking for me and seemed disappointed that he didn't know where I was. He said that Ira Levine would eventually take her home, but she wanted me—stupid, stupid me! Now, all these years later, I have no pleasant memories of being with Audrey Jacobs any night. All I have is the memory of what we looked like, in my bathroom mirror, and a few notations in God's Book of Life, either positive or negative or maybe a little of both. There's no way to know. My only regret is that the box I did put out before bed that night was a lot lighter than it should've been. That's why, every year, I'm sure to leave something for the nuns on Christmas Day. Assimilated or not, it's the right thing to do.

I didn't know any of this on the walk home that night, past all the houses with blinking Christmas lights. Hunched against the cold, my arms were crossed, hands tucked into my armpits, trying to keep warm. Kenny held his hands to his face, blowing on them. Mike pushed him a few times, asking if it felt good to get his revenge, to stand

up for ourselves, do something. Jeff held Kenny in a mock headlock, told him it would all be all right—nobody would know it was us, though maybe Mark Brackner would think twice the next time he called someone a kike.

“Isn’t that right, Spick?” he called to me, a few paces behind, staring up at the stars over the power plant towers.

BEHIND THE MUSIC

In the spring of 1985, when I was a junior in high school, I sat in the back of my Humanities classroom with hair well past my shoulders, wearing Wayfarer sunglasses, a blue feather dangling from my left ear. The sleeves of my Levi's denim jacket were rolled tight, the collar up. The jacket was covered with the names of my favorite bands—KISS, Rush, Van Halen, the Ramones, the Clash, the Sex Pistols—painted on, in White Out, drips under some letters. I liked the effect, but it couldn't be duplicated. Like the holes in my jeans, it had to occur naturally.

Every day, dressed in his short sleeve white dress shirts and cheap polyester ties, Mr. Reuben Rivlin would waste the first ten minutes of class, checking homework. He would occasionally pause to read a few lines of the short essays, smiling when he liked something. Holding his green grading book folded over in his hand, he'd rhythmically tap his pen before checking the boxes next to our names, written in his perfect, crisp script. We had been reading Irving Stone's mammoth novel *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. As a Jew, I wanted to give Stone the benefit of the doubt—especially considering the big news story of the day, how Ronald Reagan's planned trip to Bitburg Cemetery was still on even after it was reported that *Luftwaffe* SS troops were buried there—but I just couldn't. Almost a thousand pages, nothing but agony

Humanities was for the elite honors students. They read the best literature and went on the best trips. I had no business being there. My mother petitioned for me to take the

class. A few years earlier, my sister had been a Humanities favorite. Mom hoped it would spark an interest in school, unleash the hidden intelligence she always claimed I kept buried inside, but I didn't fit. The kids wore Members Only jackets and new Adidas Stan Smith sneakers. Some ironed their jeans. The guys wore Champs de Baron button down shirts, with thin collars, in every color of the rainbow, even pink, bloused into their pants. They liked belts.

They all had their homework before them. Some, the real overachievers, would even take the pages out of their loose-leaf binders, so Rivlin could hold them up as examples. These kids actually got off on it, like it was the crowning achievement of their day.

"Atta girl, Jen," Rivlin would say, waving his hand until the page stood straight up. Holding it at eye level, he looked up from under furrowed eyebrows.

"In *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, Irving Stone seeks to recreate, in painstaking detail that mimics the work it describes, both the agony and the ecstasy Michelangelo experienced in his lifetime, while he worked under the patronage of the Medici family, one of Italy's richest and most powerful families. It is a great book."

From my desk at the back of the room—where I had written the name *Julie* over so many times it was carved through the protective shellac, directly into the wood underneath—I choked back my laughter.

"In this class, Tonto, we raise our hands when we wish to speak. Do you have something you'd like to contribute?"

Rivlin called me Tonto from the first day. He was kind of hung up on the feather and would use any excuse to say something about it, always with this mocking smile. He liked the way the other students laughed when he said it, reminding me that I didn't fit in.

“Painstaking is very *apropos*,” I said, in an accent more Brooklyn than French. *Apropos* was a Julie word. She had a great vocabulary.

“I see you don’t have your homework again,” he said, smiling, as if not having homework negated any point I may have made.

Shaking my head, I retraced Julie’s name in the desk.

One day, before I even knew her (though I had admired her for about a year), Julie walked over to me on the city bus we took to high school. Her hair was spiked straight up; the sides swept back. It was four different colors: black, brown, red, and blue. She wore clunky black high top Doc Martens, the Anarchy symbol painted on the toes in White Out. Her jeans had holes in the knees. They were rolled halfway up her calf, showing off argyle socks. A black leather motorcycle jacket—at least four sizes too big—hung low on her shoulders, the sleeves a good three inches past her hands. As she walked down the aisle, staring out over her Wayfarer sunglasses, she was the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen.

Standing before me, she pushed the sleeves to her elbows, revealing slightly hairy arms, knelt down, grabbed one of my shoelaces and pulled. I counted six hoop earrings in one ear, three in the other. From over her glasses, I could see that she went heavy on the eyeliner, which made her eyes seem slightly stretched, giving her something of an Asian appearance.

She fumbled with the cross pattern of my laces, pulling them, tugging at the sides of my high tops, lifting the tongue until the laces hung about an inch and a half from the top loop, then did the same to the other sneaker. I tried to look cool, like it was no big

deal—beautiful punk rock girls always undid my shoelaces. Standing and stepping back, admiring her handiwork, she pronounced them “Better,” then returned to her seat in an exaggerated tough girl bop, grabbing each pole along the way. Black and white boxer shorts peeked through the three or four frayed holes under the pockets of her snug Levis. She didn’t look at me again the whole ride.

Later that month, my group from below the hill started meeting hers from above, in the park our neighborhoods shared. One cool late September night, she came over and stuck a joint in my mouth. Three X’s were shaved into the sides of her hair. The top, now all blue, was spiked. We stood there, passing the joint between us, staring into each other’s eyes, oblivious to the others. Neither of us spoke. I faced down the hill, toward my neighborhood—row houses with identical white aluminum siding and black roofs. The stadium lights of the Fresh Kills Landfill, the largest in the world, said to be visible from space, were bright in the background.

Julie removed a safety pin from the lapel of her jacket, held her lighter to the tip until it glowed. She grabbed my left ear, pulled me toward her. I thought she was going to kiss me. Instead, she placed the pin against my ear lobe. After working it back and forth until it was halfway through, she thrust it the rest of the way. She didn’t say a word. It hurt like hell but I didn’t let on, didn’t even flinch when I heard an intense cracking sound, the pin penetrating cartilage. She took one of the hoops from her ear, attached a blue feather from the roach clip we used, put that in my ear, and ignored me the rest of the night.

I was a unique combination of musical styles back then. Everything about my appearance had been calculated to mock my suburban upbringing and conservative, bourgeois parents, including my long hair and perpetually unshaven face. My father used to ask, “What are you—a *Sandinista*?” He had taken to calling me *Señor* Ortega. Since, as a Jew, I already felt ostracized from mainstream America, I figured I’d go all out with the look. After all, anarchy’s easy when you live at home.

My mother was clueless about coolness. Though she once had Ronnie Spector hair and makeup—and was even grounded for sneaking out to an Alan Freed emceed sock hop at the Brooklyn Paramount when she was my age—she had apparently forgotten all about it. Now she would yell at me to dry my hair.

“You can’t go out with a wet head—you want to catch pneumonia?”

I told her that there was this new thing called *science*, which explained that colds and other illnesses were caused by *germs*, and not wet hair, but old superstitions die hard.

Once, she happened past the TV and saw David Lee Roth in Van Halen’s “Panama” video on MTV. “That hair,” she said. “He looks like a girl.”

“He’s Jewish, ma.”

“His poor mother.”

My mother felt a kinship with all Jewish mothers, felt their misfortune if their kids turned out bad. It was okay for the *goyum* to screw up, but there was some greater failure in the fall of a Jew. “Why do you want to look like a bum?” she said. “Nice Jewish boys don’t wear ripped pants.”

“I’m not a nice Jewish boy. Thank God Joey Ramone doesn’t listen to his mother,” I said. “Imagine what the world would be like.”

“I don’t know who this Joey is, but I’m sure his mother loves him. When are you going to find some Jewish friends?”

“He’s not a friend, ma—he’s Joey Ramone, of the Ramones. And he *is* Jewish. His real name’s Jeffrey Hyman, from Forrest Hills, Queens.”

“So why does he call himself *Ramon*? He wants to be Spanish?”

Jewish rock stars were my role models. I saw them as akin to the Old Testament heroes I had learned about in Hebrew School, who questioned God.

When I was ten years old, the only other Jewish kid on my block was hit by a car and died. His name was Aaron, and he lived across the street. He had something wrong with him (in those days, it was just said that he was “retarded,” so I never knew what exactly). I once joked that, after Aaron, it was no wonder everyone in our suburban Long Island neighborhood hated the Jews—it was why some kids I thought were my friends would periodically spray paint swastikas or bagels on our fence. My mother slapped me, said that I should never, ever, make fun of anyone for anything, especially things they couldn’t control. I remember thinking that Aaron’s problem was linked with Judaism—just as there was something wrong with him, there was something wrong with me. I used to see him afternoons, on my walk home from the bus stop, riding his bike in circles.

“Hello,” he’d say in a tone louder than necessary, but always friendly, though we didn’t really know each other. “Look, no hands!”

Aaron would stop his bike, smile, wave in these exaggerated movements—until the day I came home, as they were loading his body into the ambulance. His mangled

bicycle was still in the street. Every housewife in the neighborhood stood outside, hugging and crying.

Aaron was a favorite at the temple where I was supposed to learn Hebrew. The next week, a special assembly was called, so that the rabbi could talk to us about death.

“It’s okay to feel badly for Aaron and his family,” the rabbi said, tugging his wooly brown beard. “It’s okay for us to cry and get angry with God, to ask him why he did this, why he took Aaron, such a sweet and wonderful boy.” He paused to look around the room, finally fixing his eyes on mine, though I hardly knew the guy. “As Jews,” he continued, staring straight into my eyes, “each of us has the right to question God. It’s in the Torah.”

“Remember,” the rabbi said, “that Abraham, the first Jew, challenged God’s decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, saying, ‘Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?’ He then asks, ‘Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?’ Later, when God wants to destroy the Israelites, after their sin with the golden calf, Moses argues strenuously on behalf of his people. And, of course, we cannot forget Job.”

That year, KISS released *Alive II* (I got it for Chanukah). I couldn’t help but see Gene Simmons and Paul Stanley (real names Gene Klein and Stanley Harvey Eisen) as specifically Jewish heroes, in that same Old Testament kind of way. I’d wonder about the kids who sprayed our fence—would they have done it to Gene and Paul, if they lived in the neighborhood? I’d go to sleep at night imagining Gene Simmons, in full demon makeup, with the platform gargoyles and six-inch heels of teeth, from their 1976 *Destroyer* album, coming out from my house. He’d stand there in the moonlight, about

seven feet tall, frizzy hair pulled into a mini bun up top. “God of Thunder” playing from a mystical stereo:

You’ve got something about you. You’ve got something I need.

Daughter of Aphrodite, hear my words and take heed.

I was born on Olympus, to my father a son.

I was raised by the demons, trained to reign as the one.

God of thunder, and rock and roll.

The spell you’re under will slowly rob you of your virgin soul.

Then he’d breathe fire at my friends, just like he did in concert. Incinerate them all.

One day, Rivlin stopped me on my way out, to ask why I refused to do homework.

“Well,” I said, sunglasses on, collar of my jacket up, “Let me ask you something.” I resisted the urge to punch his arm, call him Rube. “Why do you make us do it?”

“To reinforce the lessons we learn in class,” he said.

“To what end do you reinforce these lessons? I mean, what’s the point? So we do well on the tests, right?”

“Yes, to some extent,” he said, curious. He put a pinky finger in his left ear, wiggled it, like he was trying to dislodge a wad of wax.

“Well, since I already get 90s on your tests, I don’t need the reinforcement, *ergo*, no homework.”

It was a perfect argument. Straight out of Geometry—*if P, then Q*. How could anybody argue against that? And wasn’t part of the point of school to teach us to think critically and argue logically, present our points of view and defend them? At the time,

however, I was just trying to be a pain in the ass, doing it more for the social protest. I didn't like his system, so I was dismantling it, showing its cracks and weaknesses, delighting in proving to Mr. Rivlin that, despite my clothes and my hair and my music, I wasn't a moron. Though I didn't know it at the time, I was Derrida, deconstructing homework. If Rivlin's way was *A*, then my equally valid reading was *non A*. The *ergo* was strictly for him, the pretentious prick.

"Well," Rivlin said, smiling. "You are entitled to your opinion, however, as I specifically told the class on the first day, homework counts toward your final grade. *Ergo*," he added after a pause, "if you don't do it, you fail."

I went home and did all the homework assignments—including a lengthy critique of Michelangelo as a sell out, bastardizing his artistic vision to please the whim of his "corporate sponsors"—primarily because Rivlin thought I wouldn't do it, probably didn't want me to. I knew he hated my guts. It was in the way he looked at me, like I was a threat. He didn't like kids with ripped jeans, didn't like how I sat there with sunglasses, even after he warned me not to. Yeah, I was pushing his buttons. I didn't like him and his elitist students, with their elitist attitudes. To me they were all sheep, playing the game, blindly obedient to the system, though I wasn't exactly sure what the system was. In some ways, who could blame them? Get all A's, join the Key Club, whatever that was, go to college and come out doctors, lawyers, whatever paid the most money. At the time, I hadn't thought about college. I just wanted to go on tour with my band. Wouldn't these suckers be jealous when they saw the video?

The next time Rivlin checked the homework, I was ready. Every assignment was on my desk, fanned out on top of my notebook. He walked right past, didn't say a word.

“Excuse me,” I said. “I have the homework.”

“As I told the class on the first day, Tonto,” he said in his best snob voice, like he was an Oxford don in a robe and I was some savage, “I do not take late assignments.”

I wanted to let loose with a barrage of expletives, call him every word for sexual anatomy, both male and female, prefacing each one with *fuckin’*, in my fullest Brooklyn accent. Maybe one good Johnny Rottenesque *fuckin’ cunt*, in mock English accent, just for kicks, though I knew nobody would get it. It was at that moment that I decided to get back at Rivlin. I didn’t yet know how, only that it would have to be done on the class trip we were taking to the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine. We were to hear a lecture, take a tour to see the cathedral’s Gothic architecture and stained glass—including the Great Rose Window, with its five foot seven inch depiction of Jesus, made up of 10,000 pieces of glass—and the mysterious Chapel of the Seven Tongues, which made me think of Gene Simmons of KISS, and his disturbingly long tongue.

On trip day, I wore my tightest jeans, with the frayed holes in the knees, and the beginning of a seam separation in the crotch. I hoped that I’d get lucky—they’d rip right through, in the middle of the cathedral, and I’d sit there with my balls hanging out, smiling.

Although I didn’t have any friends in Humanities, a few kids were intrigued enough to sit near me on the bus. Robert, a heavy metal fan, was next to me in the left back seat. Walkman strapped to his belt, headphones on his ears, he was singing along to Rush.

“In the high school halls, in the shopping malls, conform or be cast out.”

Rob started the semester overweight. By this time, he had lost so much weight that his face was drawn in, making his features pointy. He looked like a skeleton in a stonewashed denim jacket or Eddie from the Iron Maiden album covers. At the end of the semester, I'd learn he suffered from bulimia, almost died. He's the only guy I've ever heard of to have this disorder.

"Do you like Rush?" he asked, pulling the headphones off.

We were all Rush fans. After a concert, you'd see hundreds of kids in identical jerseys—black with three quarter blue sleeves—walking through the halls like brainwashed cultists. The lead singer/bassist, Geddy Lee, real name Gary Lee Weinrib, was my favorite. His parents were Holocaust survivors.

"That's so cool," Rob said, tracing an imaginary line down from his ear. "The feather. Do you get pissed when Rivlin calls you Tonto? I mean, you're not really Indian, are you?"

"Fuck him," I said, looking out the window. We were on the West Shore Expressway, passing the Fresh Kills landfill, where thousands of seagulls converged. In the distance, the twin towers of the World Trade Center, rising above the garbage strewn hills of the landfill, appeared to jut straight out of the fluffy white clouds.

"By the way," Rob said, as we turned onto the Staten Island Expressway. "It was so cool how you never did the homework. What happened that day, after you did them all?"

Pressing *play* on my boom box, the Ramones' "Howling at the Moon" came on.

"Nothing," I said, reaching into my pocket for a cigarette. I sat up, trying to see Rivlin. He was reading the newspaper, oblivious. "He won't take them." Crouching back in the seat, I lit up. The bus had slide down windows that clicked into place at

different heights, and all of them were open. Plus, we were too far away from Rivlin for it to matter. We were moving toward the bridge. Rob stared at the cigarette and smiled. I raised the volume.

“There’s no law, no law anymore, I’m gonna steal from the rich and give to the poor.”

About the time we hit the Goethels Bridge, I sunk down in the seat, removed one of the joints from the cigarette pack in my pocket. Holding it, I’d run it through my fingers, under my nose, giving an occasional half twist. I wanted the honors students to notice.

I liked taking buses over the bridges that led off Staten Island. Seated above the rails and cement wall, I could see the graffiti in the strangest, hard to reach places, sometimes by people whose tags I knew. Julie was friends with all the graffiti writers. I respected them. The music was different, but they were fighting the system, just as I was. Plus, the really cool ones risked their lives climbing bridges and overpasses and the ship loading cranes in Elizabeth, New Jersey, under cover of darkness, just to write their names. There was one guy, named TAP, whose tag still stands atop this giant metal barge loader, in huge silver bubble letters, with red trim. I don’t know how he did it, but it was almost 3D, like it was popping out of the metal. They arrested him, but couldn’t figure out a way to get up there to clean it. He never revealed his secret. As anti-establishment as I was, I didn’t have the guts to do that. I could see myself getting arrested for tagging, my mother flipping out. She would’ve sent me to live on a kibbutz with relatives in Israel, where I’d pick dates off trees, listening to *Hava Negila* until suicidal.

Stephanie and Jennifer, two girls from class, sat in the opposite back seat, watching me light the joint. They looked back and forth from me to Rivlin, their eyes wide with

wonder and fear. I didn't have any fear. I didn't want to get caught, but if I did, well, I *was* an anarchist.

I watched Rob's internal debate from the corner of my eye.

"Hey," he finally said. "Can I try some?"

"You ever do it before?" I took a toke and held it in.

"Yeah, sure, all the time," he said, scrunching his face up like it was a stupid question. He could tell I wasn't buying it. "All right, no. But I always wanted to."

"Here," I said, placing the joint in his fingers. "Get down."

He held the smoke longer than I thought he would, expelling it in a coughing fit.

After I provided an example, with exaggerated movements of breathing in and expanding my chest, we passed it to Stephanie and Jennifer. It was obvious they had never tried it.

Stephanie was a tall skinny blond I used to catch staring at me during Rivlin's lectures. I couldn't tell if she liked or feared me. Later that year, she would get her first period, during the second night performance of Junior Sing, while she was seated on the shoulders of Mark Argenteneu. Everyone on stage was singing "Everything's coming up Roses!" She rushed off, in mid-performance, right past me, clutching her legs together, repeating, "Oh my God, Oh my God, Oh my God." I would be backstage director then and had to explain to our faculty advisor that, "Our little Stephanie is a woman now."

She held the joint aloft, afraid to be too close, didn't want it stinking up her fancy pink Benneton sweatshirt, with green sleeves and stripped cuffs. Bringing it to her lips, she'd take two small, quick tokes before passing it to Jennifer.

Jennifer had big ears and curly hair. She also had this pronounced twitch above her left eye that would sometimes spasm into a violent head jerk. You'd talk to her and—all of sudden, whiplash fast—her head would veer left, like something grabbed her attention. Rumors spread that she'd also curse under her breath, words like *cock* and *cunt*, but I never heard it. Her straight A average was never good enough for her mother, who always preferred Jen's older brother. Years later, I'd hear that Jen was A.B.D. in Psych but gave it all up to be a housewife, buying the house next door to her mother, happily tending garden in a Prozac induced serenity.

Jen glanced at Rivlin. She took three quick tokes in a row, not even fully exhaling, then a half hearted last one, before passing it across the aisle to the kids in front of Rob. Once I saw that it wasn't coming back, I lit another.

As we entered the tunnel, I put *Never Mind the Bullocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* into the tape player, rewound to "Anarchy in the UK." Like the Ramones' tape, it was Julie's.

The bus was moving at a quick clip—diesel engine humming, air conditioning whirring despite the open windows. The fluorescent lights of the tunnel, flashing by like electric spears, had a cathartic effect on some of the kids, until I pressed play.

"Right. . . noooooooooow."

Heads turned as Johnny Rotten let loose with that wicked laugh. Then, with the opening chords, I was nodding my head, mouthing the words.

"I am an antichrist, I am an anarchist. Don't know what I want but I know how to get it, I wanna destroy passerby 'cause IIIIIIIII wanna beeeeeeee, Anarchy."

I'd lost track of both the first and second joints, so I lit a third. Several heads were bopping up over the tall seats, in tune to the music. Rob was playing air guitar, still

strumming as I passed him the joint. By the time the next chorus came around, we were all singing.

“IIIIII wanna beeeeeee, Anarchy!”

Soon, it was our own little mosh pit, in the back seats of that bus, in the darkness of the Lincoln Tunnel. We were banging into each other, into the walls, into the seats, laughing. A few kids paused to pay attention when Rotten goes off on initials:

“Is this the MPLA? Or is this the UDA? Is this the IRA? I thought it was the UK—or juuuuust anotheeeeer country.”

This was my favorite part. I even looked up the references. I felt like it recalled my own earliest influence, the soundtrack to *Hair*, especially the initial song—where LBJ took the IRT and saw the youth of America on LSD. Sometimes I’d remember being a year or two old, dancing around my hippie uncle’s apartment, listening to *Hair* and Bob Dylan, though I didn’t know what it all meant. On that bus, though the sheer tone alone showed the change in the generations, from peaceful mockery of the system to violent threats of overthrow, I felt I was following that same path—from the heroes of the Old Testament, questioning God, to the don’t-trust-anyone-over-thirty mentality of the ‘60s, to the punks a few years before my time, introduced to me by Julie. Exiting into the light and traffic of the city, a group of black squeegee guys cheered us on. We growled at staring drivers, flashed them the devil horns, kept on moshing.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Rivlin,” I said, standing outside the cathedral, sunglasses on, a line of kids from several other honors classes behind me. Rivlin didn’t have much patience. He

hadn't been happy about the mini mosh, but since we all stayed seated, he couldn't say anything. He was clueless about the pot.

"What is it? What's wrong? Why are you holding us up?"

"I can't go in there. I'm sorry, but I just can't do it."

"Why not? Are you sick?"

"No, but I play for the other team," I leaned forward, whispered, "I'm *Jewish*."

"Well, Tonto," he said, a slight smile on his lips, pinky finger wiggling in his left ear.

"You and I are on the same team. Now get the hell inside and shut up." He would eventually give me a 65 for the class—passing, but just barely. He'd tell me that I was too Romantic, that I'd grow up to be disappointed. I wouldn't have a clue what he meant, until about a year later, just before graduation. In a history course that focused on the 1960s, my teacher would bring in a picture of himself and his old college friend, Rueben Rivlin—with long, braided hair—standing half naked in a giant mud puddle at Woodstock.

The Chapel of the Seven Tongues, with its coves named for saints and dedicated to different European people—Scandinavian, German, British, Eastern Christians, French, Italian, and Spanish—was like stepping into the middle ages. A long aisle, under vaulted ceilings, with arches, one after another, led toward the altar.

"It's like something out of a Dio video," Rob whispered, flashing the devil horns.

We filed into the pews on the extreme left side of the altar. After making sure that all his students were accounted for, Rivlin sat across the aisle from us, at the opposite end, intently concentrating on the lecture. I had hoped to sneak the boom box in and very casually, almost accidentally, hit play at some perfect moment, when one of Rob's tapes

just happened to be rewound to play Motley Crue's "Shout at the Devil," or something harder, like Merciful Fate's "Nuns Have No Fun," but Rivlin made me leave the box on the bus.

I had a few other schemes for causing disruption, such as shaking up Rob's soda can while he wasn't looking, fake a coughing fit so he'd open it, and I toyed with various other ideas (a stink bomb came to mind), but decided against it. I had to face up to the fact that, despite my clothes, my hair, and general attitude, I didn't have it in me to do anything really violent. But something happened as I sat in the pew, looking at my now paranoid Humanities class, their eyes darting from Rivlin to me and back again. Some were concentrating on the reverend, with thinning gun metal hair, parted on the side and swept over to the left. He reminded me of a caricature of Ronald Reagan, with blue hair. The dim light shining from behind made him look like an apparition, a ghostly messenger from God.

All houses of worship scared me. I felt as if God was lurking around, hiding under a pew. He could hear my thoughts in ways that He couldn't elsewhere. One Yom Kippur, in temple, I sat next to this girl, Alicia Fox, who had a terrible nose but an incredible body. Her legs were crossed. The slit in her skirt revealed a nice, somewhat oval kneecap and newly shaven legs, leading to sexy black pumps. Though I kept the prayer book in my lap, it didn't matter. I knew that God knew what was happening inside my pants, entirely against my will, and he must've told Alicia, because she smiled. So much for atonement.

I couldn't keep my eyes off the second cove down, directly in front of us—St. Boniface, dedicated to the German people. I was reminded of Ronald Reagan's planned

trip to Bitburg. How angry I was! Kids at school were Reagan fans, saying, “What’s the big deal? It’s going to be five minutes. A stupid wreath. The war was forty years ago. Can’t these people get over it?” This was often followed by a general tirade on how the Jews owned all the media outlets and were sending out secret signals to control our minds.

I didn’t think Reagan should go. Outwardly, I probably said otherwise, so as not to reveal my affiliation with an organization that plotted world domination, but it troubled me in a way that I couldn’t at the time articulate. About a year later, in one of their most political and greatest songs, the Ramones would release “Bonzo Goes to Bitburg,” originally titled “My Brain is Hanging Upside Down,” because Johnny Ramone, the guitarist, was a Reaganite.

You’ve got to pick up the pieces, come on, sort your trash.

Better pull yourself back together, maybe you got too much cash.

Better call, call the law, when you gonna turn yourself in, yeah.

You’re a politician, don’t become one of Hitler’s children.

Bonzo goes to Bitburg and goes out for a cup of tea.

As I watched it on TV somehow it really bothered me.

Drank in all the bars in town for an extended foreign policy.

Pick up the pieces.

Now I know I felt betrayed. Why was there no cove for my people? I mean, I knew it was a cathedral, but just to be nice—the honorary Saint Shlomo, for the Jews of Europe? I felt marginalized, left out. I had spent the better part of my life trying to hide what I was, now Reagan said it was time to heal old wounds. Fuck that. I wanted to do

something, make a statement, shout out to everyone, “*Here I am, motherfuckers—the kid who killed Christ!*”—with my long hair and feather, looking like the freak I always felt I was. I imagined the reverend pulling out a flying V guitar, striking some chords to whip everyone into a frenzy. Musicians of all the represented people would step—no, *float*—out from each cove, dressed in leather jackets, ripped jeans, even Gene Simmons, on bass, who’d flick his tongue around, chicken blood dripping from his lips, before spitting a ball of fire at the ceiling. I’d stand on top of the pew, spread my arms like Christ—another Jewish freak—fall into the waiting arms of my stoned classmates, who would pass my body along, high over the moshing crowd, on a sea of hands. I thought of Aaron, being hoisted into the ambulance, how I joked about everyone hating the Jews because of him. I searched around for a fire alarm I could pull, an extinguisher I could shoot off—something to cause a disruption, strike out against Rueben Rivlin and maybe even God. Let them both know that I’d had enough.

Just then, the reverend pointed at a cross carved out of the plaster on the ceiling. I watched the blank faces of my classmates, with red eyes, turn up, simultaneously—some leaning all the way back, like it was Laser Floyd at the Hayden Planetarium. I couldn’t help but laugh, trying to stifle it in a cough. Stephanie and Jennifer turned to me with their eyebrows raised, big toothy smiles. Jen’s twitching left eye was still, drooping in fact. I couldn’t help it, I laughed out loud, which made Rob laugh, and Jen and Stephanie and all the others laughed. Soon, in one of those spontaneous, contagious laughing fits, every kid from our bus, even those who didn’t actually smoke but must have achieved a contact high, was in hysterics, giggling, snickering, chortling. The reverend looked at Rivlin, wondering what was so funny. Everyone in the cathedral turned to look

at our pew, which only made us laugh all the more. Rivlin tried to smile politely, but he looked like a man who suddenly realized his pants were too tight in the crotch and were squeezing his balls. I could tell he was humiliated. I didn't know what God was thinking, though I suspect he might've thought it was pretty funny, too. Maybe this was better than any scene I could cause. So what if it wasn't anarchy—I still got some of Rivlin's elite students stoned out of their minds, in a cathedral. Score a point for the Jew with the feather. I thought of Julie, who would've been in that class, had she not moved away. She would've laughed louder than anyone. I remembered our last conversation, in the park, when we discussed what she called my "individual aesthetic," different from the traditional punk, but punk nonetheless. "Truer in spirit," she said.

We were sitting on a concrete bench. Julie's hair was short, spiked, platinum blond. Her eyebrows were orange. She had meant to dye them blond, but it didn't take, swore she'd kill me if I told anybody. Clad in her oversize leather jacket, over a black Anarchy t-shirt, her legs straddled the sides of the bench. She was wearing skin tight black stretch pants, with matching holes in the thighs, including one with gossamer thread stretched across, like a spider web. The stirrups were cut so that they hung beside her unlaced pink Converse—*Love*, written in black marker in the white rubber half moon that covered the toes of her left sneaker, *Hate* written on the right. I faced out, down the hill, with a view of the white sanitation trucks at the landfill, in their moonlit radioactive glow.

"I'm moving," she said, in the middle of a conversation about an incident at school, where some black and Hispanic gang, Zulu Nation, had driven by, threatening some guidos.

“Where you going—you’re not comfortable?”

“No, I mean moving, as in *away*. I didn’t know how to tell you. I figured I’d just say it.”

“What? When?” I was shocked, also hurt. I wondered what “didn’t know how to tell” me meant—that she knew how I felt and didn’t want to hurt me, or she felt the same way and didn’t want to say it? It’s funny how many thoughts can rush through a person’s head at the same time.

“A few weeks. My parents bought a house in Great Neck. I’m going to finish the term here and start school there next semester.”

“Are you excited?” It was a stupid question. I was stalling, trying to think what to say.

“No, I think it sucks, but I don’t have a choice. Better commute for my dad. I guess I’ll be closer to the city, though, too.”

I knew her dad was a partner in a law firm. I also knew that punk Kevin, with the red mohawk, lived in the city. She brought him around once. He didn’t say much, though he asked me, “What’s with the feather?” His pierced nose had a chain that connected to his ear. I was a little afraid. He struck me as the kind of guy who didn’t have any regard for the universal laws of fighting—if it ever came to that, which it didn’t. He’d just as soon slice somebody open as throw a punch, then he’d eat their heart. I let the feather comment pass. He did, however, admire my father’s army boots, called them “authentic.” They were a size too big.

“Are you pissed at me?” she asked after I didn’t respond. She lit a cigarette, playfully blowing mentholated smoke in my face. I watched it drift out over the stars above the landfill.

“No, I’m just. . .” I took a Marlboro from my jacket pocket, lit it with my Zippo. “I’m a lot of things right now, Julie.”

“It’s only Great Neck,” she said, after taking a drag. “Long Island.”

“I used to live in Stony Brook.” Images of swastikas flooded my mind along with Aaron’s mangled bicycle.

“You’re afraid I’ll turn into a JAP, right?”

“I hear there are a lot of them,” I said, taking a drag. I suspected she was Jewish but wasn’t sure. We never spoke about it. “At least it’ll be better than my experience in Long Island.”

“What happened?”

“Some kids used to paint swastikas on my fence.”

“You went through shit like that? Don’t you want to go back and stomp them—you’re a punk now.” She pounded her feet against the side of the bench.

“Not according to your friend Kevin,” I said, laughing.

“What does he know? He thinks that nose thing makes him a tough guy. Meanwhile, you’d just have to pull it, rip his fuckin’ face off. In a way, you’re more punk than he is.” She reached over, pulled the hair out from my jacket. “Yours is a more individual aesthetic, truer in spirit.” She ran a finger along my ear, down the feather, continuing down my neck.

I told her about my fascination with Jewish rock stars—Gene and Paul from KISS, Joey Ramone, Lou Reed, Marc Bolan from T-Rex, even Donald Fagan from Steely Dan (Bob Dylan was too inconsistent, Jewish one day, born again Christian the next)—how, to me, they were just like the heroes of the Old Testament. She told me about Chris Stein, the guitarist and chief songwriter of Blondie, and Mick Jones, guitarist of the Clash. Both, she had heard, were Jewish. Plus her favorite artist, the East Berlin born Nina Hagen, the mother of punk, whose Jewish grandparents were killed at Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

“I guess the freaks that don’t fit have to fight back,” she said.

In the distance, I could hear the rumble of the trucks at the landfill, their incessant beep indicating that they were in crunch mode, their metal walls collapsing, lights flashing.

Julie put her hand on the inside of my thigh, pulled my leg over the bench, so that I faced her. Grabbing my shoulders, she thrust herself against me, wrapping her legs around my waist.

“Isn’t it time you kissed me—before I turn into a pumpkin?” She chewed her gum with her front teeth, raised her orange eyebrows a few times, in quick succession.

“You have another piece?” I asked, my hands on her hips. “I’ve been waiting for this a long time. Figures it’s after I smoked half a pack and don’t have mints.”

She took the gum from her mouth and placed it into mine. It was sticky, didn’t have any flavor left. I chewed a few seconds, staring into her brown eyes. We both smiled. In that moment, before first our lips and then our tongues met—that split second as we tilted our heads in opposite directions and moved them slowly toward each other—I thought of

KISS' cover of the Crystal's 1962 hit, "Then He Kissed Me," written by Jewish weirdo, wonder producer Phil Spector, which KISS changed to "Then She Kissed Me," off their 1977 release *Love Gun*, one of the first albums I ever bought.

She walked up to me and she asked me if I wanted to dance.

She looked kinda nice and so I said I might take a chance.

When we danced she held me tight, and when I walked her home that night,

All the stars were shining bright and then she kissed me.

BROTHERS IN ARMS

In the fall of 1988, when I was twenty years old and president of my college fraternity, I deliberately dated an Indian girl from our sister sorority, primarily because I thought it would freak out my Jewish mother. True, a black girl would've been better, but since one wasn't available, I'd take what I could get.

Her hair was the first thing I noticed. Long, jet-black circular ringlets cascading past her thin shoulders, hanging halfway down her back. It was so dark it seemed to emit an otherworldly glow, as if she was enveloped in a hazy blue light. Plus, she couldn't have weighed more than ninety pounds, which I confess is part of what made her so attractive, at least at first. All my life I listened to my mother telling me to eat all the food on my plate because people were starving in India—always India, never Somalia or the Sudan. Now I wanted to bring her home to represent the millions of emaciated Indians my mother worried so much about. I wanted to get back at my mother for not allowing me to go away to school. My parents had promised that if I got good grades, they'd pay for me to join my friends in Albany. Although I had a 4.0 and was well on my way to becoming a productive member of society, they feared messing up a good thing. A skinny little Indian was just what I needed.

I was captivated from the moment she walked in the classroom with the twelve other girls of the sorority we were sponsoring. Nervously taking seats at their first meeting, they folded their hands on the desks like good students wanting to make a favorable

impression on their teachers—the twelve of us guys in tight jeans and brand new black football jerseys with white, nearly glow-in-the-dark Greek letters—KIA for Kappa Iota Lambda, nicknamed KIL for what we wanted to do to the concept of fraternities.

Dane, our Treasurer, conducted the meeting. A preppy mulatto with greased curly hair and rimless glasses, he was passionate about the fraternity, probably because he didn't have any other family. While everyone else, including Joe and me, the original founders, saw the fraternity as a way to get girls, Dane talked about our mission and vision, as if these things had any place in our anti-fraternity fraternity. Drawing a diagram of our hierarchy on the blackboard—all our names connected by lines like a patriarchal family tree—he introduced the fraternity, betraying an embarrassed smile when he got to Joe, our vice president.

“And this is Joe Broussou,” Dane said tilting his head, careful to give Joe's last name the correct French accent even though Joe himself preferred a harsher, more Italian pronunciation—*Brusso*. “Joe is pledge master for all our regular pledge classes, though I'll be handling that for your class.” Leaning against the desk, he smiled at Joe, thankfully resisting a fluttering fingertip wave.

Nervously running a hand over the short spikes of his crew cut, Joe had that struck dumb expression he got when he was confused, as if he was frozen in place. Blankly staring with his mouth hanging open, he looked like he couldn't decide if he should rush to front of the room and rain blows on Dane's head or pretend not to notice. With Dane leading the meeting, I knew Joe worried that the girls would think we were a gay organization, that Dane cast doubt on us all.

There had been considerable debate about Dane. At our first meeting in Joe's parents' living room, decorated in the Neoclassical Brooklyn Italian so fashionable on Staten Island in those days—gold accented furniture with gilded curved legs and gaudy red velvet designed to look antique, like it came from a Medici family castle—Joe tried to ask Dane without being too direct, but no matter the question, Dane's answers were deliberately vague, as if he prepared in advance. When asked if he had a girlfriend, Dane had many *girl friends*, along with many guy friends. Asked if he was seeing anybody, Dane said he was seeing *someone*, but wouldn't hint if it were male or female. Finally, after everyone left and it was just me, Joe and Joe's cop father sitting on the couch, drinking beer, we had our first real decision—whether such an ambiguously gay guy in our fraternity would contaminate the entire project.

“Whatt'dya want for letters —Phi Alpha Gamma? You wanna be the FAGS?” Joe's father said, raising his eyebrows. Short, with wide shoulders, a powerful chest, and white hair combed to the side, he seemed like an old school New York City cop out of a movie—the kind who carried a snub nosed 38 in an ankle holster as a throwaway, to make sure all the alleged bad buys were sufficiently bad enough to justify shooting. Like the furniture in the house, everything about him screamed Italian gangster, right down to the pronunciation of their French Canadian last name, though his wife, Joe's mother, the real Italian in the family, said it with a French accent. He'd once been wounded in a shootout with a black robbery suspect and walked with limp, putting him on desk duty as he waited for retirement. In addition to the bullet fragment lodged in his leg, he harbored a deep-seated suspicion of anyone with dark skin, though I suspected its origins ran a lot deeper.

“I don’t know what youse want with a gay tribesman,” he said, waving his beer as if he were already tipsy. “You know him how long and he already has two strikes? I’m not prejudiced or nothing, but makes you wonder what you don’t know.”

After I commented on Dane’s organizational skills and how excited he was about the fraternity, he continued.

“Of course he’s excited” Joe’s father said, sitting up in his seat. “It’s just a question of what he’s excited about—if you catch my drift. You guys see this a way to have parties and score chicks. With this guy in a fraternity, it’s like the fox guarding the chicken coop. And you two,” he added, wagging a thick finger between me and Joe, “are the unsuspecting chickadees.” Slowly limping his way up stairs, he called out a final “Cluck, cluck!”

“And finally, our president, Jonathan Bauch,” Dane said, holding his hand out, using the full first name that nobody other than my mother ever used, and even that was only when she was mad at me. For years I’d gotten by on just Jon, happy to let people mistakenly assume John because, to me, Jonathan was a little too Old Testament—a little too Jewish—a fact I was happy to let people overlook. Dane had no way to know this. He just liked the name, said it sounded *presidential*, though I had a hard time imagining an American president named Jonathan. I never expected he would use it at the introductory meeting of our sister sorority, accidentally outing me before the audience I least wanted to know I was Jewish. Smiling at the girls, I did not look at Maria, afraid I might notice a questioning look—the skinny little Indian wondering if the exceedingly handsome and sophisticated fraternity president was or was not related to a certain Eastern European tribe of *shtetl* dwellers.

“O-kay,” Dane said clapping his hands like a kindergarten teacher, his already high voice raising a few octaves as it did whenever he got excited. “Why don’t you go around the room and introduce yourselves? Tell us who you are and anything else you want us to know.”

Cup size, favorite sexual positions—do you swallow? I thought, no doubt at the same time as the rest of my brothers. The sexual jokes started as soon as the girls asked us to pledge them. First we toyed with the idea of naming them Lambda Iota Kappa, the opposite of KIL, or LIK for short. Then we had a field day imagining all the things we could make our very own sorority do—like daily Brotherhood Unity Gang Bangs, to foster a spirit of teamwork. Eventually we decided there could be nothing overtly sexual, to preserve the appearance of legitimacy. Of course, that didn’t mean we couldn’t *think* these things.

Though the jury was still out on Dane, I thought this was one instance when his sexual ambiguity could work to our advantage, make the girls feel safe. At least it was better than letting Joe lead the meeting, as he originally wanted. With his militant drill sergeant demeanor, he was liable to pull out a whistle and have the entire group break into calisthenics, scream in their faces that they were a bunch of *pussies* who’d never made good *soldiers*—as he did during the regular pledge classes. One time, at the beach behind his house, he had our first pledges doing jumping jacks in below freezing temperatures until well after midnight, all of them chanting our motto, “*Non est mensa Gloria.*” I had no idea why—it wasn’t like physical fitness was a fraternal requirement—but since he was pledge master, I figured what the hell.

As the girls introduced themselves, I watched my brothers, in our matching uniforms, strike poses like a fraternal order of militant thugs ala the notorious black shirts. I was proud how far we'd come from our first meetings, when it seemed we were a self-help group for fraternity victims—countless guys who lost girlfriends to the allure of Greek letters. Every guy had the same sad story—a girlfriend away at school, a few parties.

“We can help you,” our group said, welcoming them all like brothers in arms, offering friendship, understanding, and beer, promising Knowledge, Integrity, and Loyalty—the three qualities our letters allegedly stood for, even though we came up with it well after we settled on the name. Now, those same beaten down men stood proud in their own jerseys, in their own letters. Guys like little Joey Pagliotta—Joey Pags for short. He had been our first pledge and even cried during the final night of hell week, under intense questioning from Joe, screaming in the poor kid's face, asking what KIL meant to him. With tears streaming down his cheeks, Pags told everyone how his girlfriend became the official fraternity slut for some group called Sigma Nu. I don't think he ever did answer what KIL *meant*. Now, standing at the front of the room with his chest thrust out and both hands on his hips like Superman, he was the picture of confidence, making google eyes at Tricia, the mousy freshman nursing student, coyly twirling a goopy wad of heavily sprayed hair.

“My name is Maria,” my little Indian girl said shyly, slowly, as if she needed to enunciate each syllable to be clearly understood, though I couldn't detect an accent.

Immediately, I thought of *West Side Story*.

Ma-ri-aaaaaa! I just met a girl named Maria. And suddenly I see my parents disown me (or whatever the words were).

Joe and I started the fraternity the previous fall. Sitting outside between classes on a cold day with a steel gray sky, we were sipping hot coffee and chain smoking cigarettes when a group of Alpha Phi Deltas walked by in their shiny purple jackets.

“I fuckin’ hate those guys,” Joe said between drags. Dressed in black, from his jeans to his jacket, his spiked crew cut made him look like he belonged on a compound in Idaho, spouting racist and anti-Semitic propaganda. Running a hand over the short, gelled spikes of hair, as if he couldn’t believe it was so short, he squinted at the Phi Deltas, deliberately trying to provoke them. From mutual friends in high school, I knew Joe could be a little volatile, though not in an overtly violent way. It didn’t matter. They didn’t notice.

He told me how he almost got arrested in a New Jersey frat house, when he visited his girlfriend, tagging along with her friends to a party. The details were vague but it had something to do with fraternity guys checking her out, “Like I wasn’t even there,” he said more than once. Words turned to blows. In his drunken state, he wasn’t even sure who he was swinging at. “I just kept telling myself to hit anyone in gold and green,” he said. Eventually, campus police brought Joe to the station. He spent the night in an unlocked cell with an icepack on his black eye, waiting for his father to pick him up. The girlfriend broke up with him.

I told him about my own girlfriend Stephanie, upstate at SUNY Binghamton. How I stayed with her even after she went off to school, driving the three hours each week to see her after she’d call, crying how much she missed me. It didn’t take long until the calls grew less frequent. Then she didn’t have time when I called her, running off to fraternity

sponsored co-ed softball games. The times we did talk became fights about how distant she was, which she defended as busyness or stress, while her stupid JAP roommates laughed in the background. She accused me of being jealous that she got to go away to school while I had to stay home—which was probably true, though I didn't need it thrown in my face. Finally, during my last visit, we had a big blow out because I refused to participate in some toga Frisbee football game between two chapters of national fraternities who were, Stephanie said, nice enough to let me play.

"You're so childish," she said, sadly shaking her head. Adjusting the toga, she rushed onto the field.

"Toga Frisbee football, and I was wrong," I said, taking a last drag of my cigarette, flicking it into a puddle left over from that morning's rain. "Go figure."

"There's gotta be some way we could stop them," Joe said, leering at the Alpha Phi Deltas, circling like satiny purple sharks around two freshman girls in the center of the quad.

"You know what they say—if you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

"There's no fuckin' way I'm pledging a frat. You know what these guys have to do? I'm not eating a goldfish or marching through the snow calling some jock prick '*Sir*,'" he said, sneering the word.

"No, no," I said. "That's not what I mean. What if we started our own, precisely for all those guys who hate fraternities? What if we started our very own anti-fraternity fraternity?"

From a library book on the Greek alphabet, we selected our name, Kappa Iota Lambda, because the first letters of each spelled KIL, keeping it even after we realized

that the Greek letter for Lambda is an upside down V. Next we went to On The Avenue, a bar near school, to find Dr. Paul S. Burdett Jr., Joe's English teacher, who I had the previous semester.

Burdett sat at the bar before three empty shot glasses and a mug of beer, next to a dog eared paperback of James Clavell's novel *King Rat*, required reading in all his classes, regardless of subject. Nicknamed Sergeant Slaughter, Burdett could be a disciplinarian in class. Once, he stopped dead in the middle of a lecture to stare down a student whispering to the girl next to him.

"I could put a bullet in your mouth from five hundred yards and make it come out your ass," Burdett said, pausing just long to strike fear into everyone before breaking into a wicked smile and returning to the lecture. He was a renegade teacher, aloof from the rest of the faculty, who viewed him with him a mixture of disgust and fear, probably why he never received tenure, though he was one of the best teachers I ever had.

With long brown hair and silver flecked goatee, he wore a beaten up Army jacket with the Ranger insignia, frayed jeans and the coolest black and white Cobra skin cowboy boots—his "Shitkickers" as he called them—a carry over from his youth in a dusty West Texas hick town. A high school football star, he joined the Army to escape a girl's enraged redneck father with a shotgun, who intended to hunt Burdett down "like vermin."

When we told him our plan for a fraternity, he took a long drag of his cigarette. He seemed to get excited when he heard the name and immediately agreed to be our faculty advisor. Though we thought of ourselves as outside the official fraternity system at school, we still needed to list a faculty advisor to receive the stipend allowed for such

organizations. If the school was willing to finance our drinking, it would've been foolish to refuse. When we told Burdett we had a motto, "I ain't no glammer boy," lifted from a popular song, but wanted it translated into Latin, he took a sip of his beer before leaning back on his stool. Stroking his goatee, he starred at us squinting for a moment while he tried to recall something long forgotten.

"Non est mensa Gloria," he said, smiling. "We are not the glorious men."

Joe and I nodded our approval and graciously accepted the two beers that suddenly appeared on the counter before us, lifting them to Burdett in thanks. Somehow knowing that, in addition to once having killed people in a jungle, he was also some kind of Latin-quoting philosophical doctor of death and destruction, he seemed even cooler.

I selected Maria to act as my secretary, not that I needed one, but it looked impressive to the other fraternities, who had at first mocked us but soon had to accept us because of our numbers. Wandering around campus, nearly deserted in the late afternoon, we'd watch the last rays of a sunset highlight the blue girders of the Verrazano Bridge in the distance, or seek shelter from the rain in damp, dark basement hallways, occasionally ducking into empty classrooms. As she'd lean against the concrete wall, I'd press against her, burying my nose in her prickly, slightly kinky hair, intoxicated by the scent of coconut shampoo.

"Is this any way to treat your little sister?" she asked. "Funny how we don't look related," she added, holding her dark hand to my cheek."

"Well, if Joe and Dane can be brothers—we're just one big, happy, metaphysical family."

“Something feels more than merely metaphysical,” she said smiling.

Finally, it was time to bring Maria home to my mother. Though living at home had certain perks, such as a mom to do my laundry, it was still a pain in the ass every time I had to bring a girl home. While my friends and even my own ex-girlfriend fucked with impunity in dorm rooms, I had to wait until Mom was out or else get the volume on the TV to the perfect mid point—loud enough to muffle heavy breathing, low enough to hear a creaking step. Now I wanted to march Maria into the kitchen, stand there with my arm around her waist—so thin she was into negative sizes, as if she didn’t really exist, was nothing more than a belted pair of baggy jeans floating on air—and hope Mom didn’t have a heart attack. Maybe she’d just pass out.

Maria paused before the giant picture of me, from my bar mitzvah. Dressed in a suit and tie, with a yarmulke perched precariously on my head and talus draped around my shoulders, smiling over an opened prayer book in my hands. I always hated that picture. Aside from what it depicted—which was bad enough, believe me—it wasn’t so much framed as it was mounted on a giant piece of wood like tree bark that I always thought was tacky, but was a staple of Jewish homes with bar mitzvahed sons. I once asked my mother if she had to hang it—couldn’t we lock it in a closet? Or at least put it in a less conspicuous spot, not as soon as one walked into the living room, where it screamed, “Look! I’m a Jew!”

Maria didn’t say anything, other than get all excited over how cute and young I looked—*adorable* was the word she used—though I couldn’t help wondering if *I* was adorable or *it* was adorable and had to stop myself from saying, “You should talk, my little Ghandi girl.” I ushered her past it as quickly as I could.

Seated at the kitchen table, in her bathrobe and bright yellow curlers, my mother dunked chocolate chip cookies into a tall glass of milk.

“Mom,” I said, trying not to smile too much, anticipating the impending heart attack. “This is Maria.” I could picture the shattered glass, the plate of cookies flying over my mother’s near lifeless body lying in a heap on the linoleum floor.

Taken by surprise, embarrassed by the robe and curlers, my mother didn’t know what to do. She stood there, seemingly contemplating a run to the bedroom. I imagined her blood pressure soaring to stratospheric heights—veins, arteries, and capillaries blowing apart. This was every Jewish mother’s worst nightmare—a dark skinned *shiksa* girlfriend, a mere shade lighter than a *shvartzer*. Not only was I not sticking to my own kind, I deliberately went out of the ballpark, a personal affront to years of speeches about the horrors inflicted on the Jews, how century after century people tried to wipe us out but we always bounced back, albeit in ever dwindling numbers. Now, her own son, her own flesh, would mix his blood with another race, aiding the final solution.

Collecting herself, she handed Maria the cookies, then poured a second glass of milk, shooting me the threatening look that was her trademark. “Why didn’t you tell me you were having company? Look what I look like.” Turning to Maria, she did a double take, which I imagined was her first realization that Maria was Indian. Here it comes, I thought.

“Look at that,” she said, reaching across the table to grab a chunk of Maria’s hair, as if to make sure it was real. “Your hair is so beautiful—you are so beautiful.”

What the hell was this? Did the commandment about sticking to my own kind only apply to ugly girls? I searched my mother’s eyes for a fear of dark-skinned

grandchildren—a staple of Jewish mothers everywhere—but instead of an awareness of genetic difference, there was nothing except genuine aesthetic appreciation. It was one thing to be captivated by the beautiful Indian in the Miss Universe pageant, but this was different. I felt betrayed by my own mother.

Soon they were chatting about hair care products and specifically ethnic hair, how they'd both grown up dreaming what it would be like to have honest to goodness “straight people hair” in the most literal sense of the word, leaving me to thumb through my notes for the next fraternity meeting. Worst of all, they had such a good time talking I never got to do anything with Maria. Not only did my mother not freak out, but I didn't even get laid, making the night a total failure.

Later, when I asked my mother how come she didn't care that Maria was Indian, she said, “What do such things matter when the girl is so fine, so beautiful, a nice, nice girl, from such a good home? After all,” she added, “this is America. It's not like your grandparents' time, in Europe, when matches were arranged on the *shtetl*.”

There was something very theatrical about this, like it was *West Side Story* again, and I half expected her to break into her best Rita Moreno and dance around the house, extolling the virtues of *Amer-ee-ca*.

“I want to live in Amer-ee-ca. Okay by me in Amer-ee-ca. Everything free in Amer-ee-ca...”

Meanwhile, I threw myself into building up the fraternity, which had grown to over 25 guys in less than a year. There was a lot to do, such as creating new laws to replace the older laws that wouldn't hold up if we wanted to be taken seriously by the nationals—

two of whom had visited our school at Dane's invitation and were interested in taking us on as a chapter.

There was some dissention about this, which necessitated a lot of long and loud meetings, with guys screaming at each other about losing our vision and mission, and others countering with the benefits of a national affiliation.

"This is our chance at the big time," Dane said, his voice in the high register. "We have a chance at being a *na-tion-al* fraternity," he added, enunciating each syllable to stress the achievement, as if even he, our biggest cheerleader, couldn't believe that we had come so far.

"But that's not what we're about!" Joe stopped pacing long enough to run his hand over his hair. He had a tendency to pace whenever Dane was speaking, as if he needed to channel his rage into movement or risk exploding in a violent confrontation. "We're a goddamned anti-fraternity fraternity, in case you've forgotten. It says it right there in the constitution, page one of the mission statement," he added, as if knowing the specific reference made it that much truer.

"Actually," Dane said, an ironic smile forming on his lips. "It's paragraph one, subsection two, located on page three of the constitution." He delighted in showing off his vast knowledge of fraternity history, probably his way of shoring up support for an eventual run at the presidency, once I retired or graduated, whichever came first. Glancing at me, he leaned against the wall, waiting for confirmation. In truth, I had no idea where it was located. Though I'd helped write the constitution, over time—with the addition of so many rules and regulations—it was altered beyond recognition. It was

impossible to say where something was without reading the entire text, which nobody other than Dane ever had the patience to do.

“Who the fuck cares where it is,” Joe said, hands forming into fists as his face flashed red. “It’s what we were, what we are, and what we should remain!” He slammed a fist on the desk. Behind him, several brothers nodded in agreement. I half expected them to step to attention, snap their arms out in salute.

“We have to change with the times,” Dane said, raising his eyebrows in mock surprise at Joe. After so many arguments, he knew Joe could overreact, though I suspected that’s exactly why Dane pushed so hard. “Any organization has to grow into itself. Look at the United States Constitution. It’s called a living document because it too needs to adapt to the modern day.”

Only Dane would say “living document.” A political science major, he hoped to attend law school and figured that membership in a national fraternity would come in handy.

I was caught on the fence. On the one hand, we did start off as an anti-fraternity fraternity, a haven for guys who hated traditional fraternities. On the other hand, what once worked for a few drinking buddies no longer worked when you had as many as we did. For a second I felt like Tevya in *Fiddler on the Roof*, weighing so many options I was running out of hands. As this fight proved, an organization cannot survive without order. There needed to be established guidelines, preserved traditions that people could take seriously. I had to admit that the thought of this thing continuing after we all left school was comforting. At the same time, I couldn’t believe that we had ever gotten to a

point where one could say “mission” and “vision” in the same breath as the anti-fraternity fraternity.

“Look,” I said, standing up and crossing my arms. “You both make good points but so long as I’m president, we’re not pledging allegiance to anything other than ourselves.” I looked around at my brothers, split into separate camps. I knew that, if I stepped down, the fraternity would splinter into two factions, one loyal to Joe, one loyal to Dane, but that separate, the two groups wouldn’t be strong enough to last very long.

“That doesn’t mean that, in the future, whenever Joe or Dane takes over, that it can’t happen,” I said, looking at Dane’s camp, shaking their heads in disappointment, then Joe’s camp, hands on their hips, looking like they were waiting for a signal to start their beer hall putsch. “But right now we’re faced with a choice—whether to become that which we once despised, or to remain true to what we were, which may be a little outdated for what we’ve become.”

I didn’t know where these words were coming from, or if they even made sense. It was like I was channeling some ancient rabbi at the foot of the mountain, watching my poor people dance naked before a golden calf, waiting for Moses to return with the Ten Commandments. Maybe I should’ve pulled a King Solomon, threaten to carve the damn thing into two to see who loved it more. I switched my focus to Joey Pags, standing in his usual place at Joe Brousseau’s right shoulder. Membership in the fraternity was the only thing that gave him legitimacy in college. Without it, there was no reason for him to remain in school at all. For better or worse, he’d probably just drop out and join the plumber’s union, like his stepfather, something he dreaded but that, with his academic performance, was his only real chance. In the fraternity, he could be the hero he always

wanted to be. It was amazing how a black jersey and a couple of Greek letters made us all, at least temporarily, the supermen of our own dreams.

I talked this over with Maria one day, when she found me outside, watching our respective groups play “Strip Basketball” on the courts near the parking lot, hoping they kept it decent so that the school wouldn’t revoke our charter. I told her I didn’t know what to do.

“It’s kind of ironic,” I said. “After all my years rebelling against all forms of authority, I suddenly find myself the authority. How’s that for justice?”

It was weird, opening up to her. She was younger and did start off looking up to me, as president of the fraternity, her “big brother.” Plus, she was part of the group that was dependent on the strength and integrity of our organization. It was certainly against the rules to discuss fraternity business with outsiders. Still, it was tremendous comfort when she took my hand. It was as if she knew everything I felt, and understood even better than I did.

“What you started took on a life of its own,” she said, staring off into the trees that surrounded our school. “More than anything, that’s a tribute to you and the others. And though it may sound stupid, it’s something that means—.” She stopped abruptly, playing with a button on her pink cardigan sweater. Looking at me, she continued. “People like me, I guess. You know, I joined because I didn’t have many friends, and I was somewhat intimidated by the *real* sororities and fraternities. I guess I saw it as a way to meet people.” She squeezed my hand. “And make friends, which I know is the old joke, but it worked. Now that it’s becoming something that could last and be taken seriously—I mean, I still have a few years of school left and, who knows, but maybe it could be

something that looks good on a resume.” She raised her eyebrows and shrugged her shoulders, no doubt wondering if she was making a fool out of herself, talking so seriously about a concept that started as the antithesis of serious.

“No, no,” I said. “Go ahead. You’re making sense.” I held her small hand in mine, suddenly realizing there was more to our relationship than I had originally thought, that I was a long way from simply wanting to freak out my mother. Also, now it seemed there were at least two people in the world to whom my little fraternity (and its related sorority) was a steppingstone to something bigger and better. A line on a resume? How did *that* happen?

“Maybe I’m the biggest nerd in the world, but I think there’s something comfortable about tradition, being a part of history, you know? Every organization has to change and develop, though people may not like it.” She smiled and looked into my eyes. I noticed that she was stroking a blade of grass.

She had no way of knowing, because I never said anything about it, but she could’ve been talking about my own feelings of Judaism, which I knew that despite my insecurities, was always going to be a part of me, whether I liked it or not. In any event, that one conversation changed everything for Maria and me, and I knew that, like the fraternity, our relationship was already something more than the joke it had started out as, and it would continue that way, especially after the party.

Billed as a benefit for the Sickle Cell Anemia Foundation, an organization we didn’t know anything about but whose name we liked, our first big party in a club attracted hundreds of people. In many ways, it was a defining moment, for the fraternity, but even

more so for me personally, especially when this guy started bothering Maria. He kept asking to buy her a drink and wanted her phone number, the usual, annoying guy in the club thing, and he kept going with it, even after she asked him to stop. Finally, I went over.

“Look,” I said. “She’s with me, okay?”

“And who the fuck are you?” he said, getting in my face. From the corners of my eyes I could see my brothers, standing around, some dancing, some talking to girls, all laughing and having a good time. A few left their conversations hanging to stare at the developing scene. Some moved toward us. There was a lot riding on my response.

No one ever wants to back away from a fight, especially when some guy’s been bothering your girl, but there were a lot of people there, and this could be the fraternity’s first real test. Were we tough guys? It’s one thing to act tough at school, but quite another when you’re on a dance floor, standing face to face with some guy who, apparently, really thought he was tough or he wouldn’t have started. Maria stood to my left, looking at me like I was knight in shining armor. Images of *West Side Story* flooded my mind again. I pictured the dance floor clearing. My brothers, in their brand new jackets, walking toward us, whistling and snapping their fingers as Maria, suddenly with a Spanish accent, chimed in,

“A boy like dat, he kill your brother.”

“Come on,” he said, inching closer, so that I could smell the beer and stale cigarette smoke on his breath. “Jew think you’re a tough guy?”

I didn’t know if he really said it, but I wanted to say, “Yeah, the toughest Jew you ever met,” let the blows rain over his face, throw him down and bash his skull against the

shellacked floor until the blood poured out in pools, watching the life slowly drain from his eyes. I'd lean over him, light a cigarette, blow the smoke in his face and say something profound, something biblical, something Old Testament, like "And the earth shall know that there is a God in Israel," in that dramatic narrator's voice from the *Ten Commandments*, or maybe say it in Hebrew, a language I didn't and don't know, but what the hell, it was my fantasy. Though something inside screamed about thousands of years of oppression and some internal voice said something about "Never again," an even stronger voice whispered,

Keep cool, boy. Real cool.

I was in a quandary. I didn't want to fight this guy, not over something like this, but I couldn't back down, either. Besides, Maria had been right. Maybe this thing did mean something. She said it did for her, and if that was true, then I had an obligation to set an example, to be the living embodiment of all that our letters stood for—Knowledge, Integrity, and Loyalty—and that these weren't mere words, recent additions to the newly revised constitution, which they were, but I was thinking of future generations, and they didn't have to know that. If I hit him, a brawl would break out, innocent people could get hurt, and we'd have one hell of a story to talk about, but then we'd have a reputation as thugs, and the only people who'd want to join us would be other thugs. I also knew that some of my guys would've liked that, as it would've fit with their vision of an anti-fraternity fraternity, but that wasn't how I saw myself.

Keep coolie cool, boy!

"I'll tell you what," I said, deliberately scanning the room to make sure he noticed. A crowd gathered. People jockeyed for position. "We could fight it out if you want to, but

I promise you that, at end of the night, I'll be the one taking Maria home. Or we could both get back to the party and have a good time, and you can ask some of your friends who I am, and whose party this is, and then, if you still want to talk about it, I'll be happy to continue this conversation. Trust me, though." I paused for effect. "You don't want to start anything. Not here. Not tonight." I thought the last part might be a little melodramatic, but I said it with conviction, even allowed a smile. I figured being a leader was mostly about confidence. It didn't matter whether or not I actually had any. All that mattered is that he thought I did, and that carried over to the others, especially Maria.

"Ask around," I said, taking an angled half step back, tilting my head in the manner of a waiter, about to escort diners to their table.

Though he looked at me as if I were some kind of lunatic, thankfully he walked off and we all went back to the party. Maria seemed impressed because she stayed by my side the whole night. She was especially expressive, holding my hand, rubbing my back, vainly trying to lead me onto the dance floor. I wanted to tell her that Jews should never dance, except maybe in the company of other Jews, at weddings and bar mitzvahs. Whatever it was we were chosen for, it certainly wasn't rhythm. A drunken Joey Pags danced his way over, Tricia hanging on his shoulder. He called me "*El Presidente*," whispering that he had my back all along.

From across the room, where he leaned against the bar with his arm around one of his students, Burdett shot me a wink followed by a military salute with his right hand, holding it steady until I realized I was expected to return it, which I did. It felt good to know I'd impressed him enough to warrant a salute, especially since I figured him for

more of a shoot 'em up ask questions later kind of guy. Over the speakers I could make out the mournful keyboard and guitar riff of Dire Straits' "Brothers in Arms." Standing by the DJ, Joe and Dane raised their bottles in my direction. It certainly killed the mood for the dancers, most of whom used the break to refresh their drinks, but the lyrics seemed so poignant to me in a way they never had before and I couldn't be sure whether it even occurred to my brothers.

"These mist covered mountains are home now for me.

But my home is the lowlands and always will be.

Someday you'll return to your valleys and your farms.

And you'll no longer burn to be brothers in arms."

I avoided that guy's stares the rest of the night. I didn't want to antagonize him, and I hoped that, if he did ask around, some of my guys would pick up from my lead and play their parts. It worked perfectly. By the end of the night, he gave me a nod on his way out. Later, I found out that he had a long conversation with Joe about the fraternity. Joe played us up as some kind of junior Mafia, with me as some maniacal boss of bosses, and said that the guy seemed interested in pledging, which he did, the following semester.

True to my promise, I did drive Maria home that night and we did make finally make love. While my friends who went away to school had dorm rooms with beds and I had the front seat of Chevy station wagon, parked on a deserted side street, I'd say they don't know what they missed. Maria and I would continue for a while, until her mother found out she was dating a white guy and shipped her off to relatives in India to finish school. How's that for irony? All my life I hesitated before those boxes on official forms that ask for race, unsure what to pick, sometimes settling on "other" until Maria's mother

confirmed it for me. I received a few letters postmarked Kerala, wherever that is, which I always imagined as mystical land, where a beautiful, dark skinned skinny girl sits in a vast green field, silently stroking a single blade of grass. But eventually the letters stopped coming and, eventually, I stopped waiting.

The fraternity would continue for a couple of semesters, with Joe and Dane presiding over a tenuous coalition government. It would finally be taken over by a national group that made it a chapter, dissolving all that we had worked so hard on—the constitution, the rules and regulations, procedures, everything. All that's left are the jackets, jerseys, and wooden paddles from the first few pledge classes, rotting away in closets.

But I'll always remember a moment on that dance floor, with my arm around Maria's waist, the overhead, multi-colored halogen lights illuminating the soft halo around her hair. Joe and Dane came over with their arms around each other's shoulders. Soon the entire group had our arms around each other, singing along to the last strains of Dire Straits—

“But it's written in the stars, in every line of your palm.

We are fools to make war on our brothers in arms.”

THE MYSTERIOUS LATE-NIGHT FIRE
AT THE YE OLDE POETRY INN

On a smoke break from our graduate seminar, English 705, the Reading and Writing of Traditional Poetry, Eric and I discussed that night's student reading. Stephanie Seitman's "Ode on My Vibrator," in imitation of Keats' "Grecian Urn," wasn't so much read as performed, with Stephanie's customary dramatic flourish—fists crossed over her heart, a handful of head rolls, and a few well timed shudders—culminating in accusatory stares at the guys in class. Lighting our cigarettes, I scanned the street for any sign of Christine, the girl who sat behind me.

"If we're going to listen to bad poetry," I said, taking a long, slow drag, "why can't it be from a good looking girl writing about her vibrator?"

"Good looking girls don't write poetry," Eric said. "They're the subjects of poems instead—at least in this class." He raised his eyebrows, no doubt in reference to Christine, the inspiration for my projected sonnet sequence.

"I guess the others are so pissed off they're not someone's subject, they either write angry poems about empty wombs or violent poems about electric appliances."

"Maybe you need to ponder the experience, carry the poem home with you," he said, imitating the ethereal breathlessness of our teacher, Dr. Nancy Bogan, at her most Romantic. Self-consciously exhaling—he smoked only on school nights, either on break

or at the bar—he added, “You gotta admit there’s something funny about ‘More happy hum! more happy, happy hum!’”

The street abuzz with activity—the loitering smokers, the long line at the pizza place, students with knapsacks navigating through the throngs of commuters rushing from the ferry terminal to their buses. Across from our Staten Island campus, in the last rays of the setting sun, the downtown Manhattan skyline cast elongated black shadows on the glistening harbor.

“Stephanie’s got the form,” I said, flicking ash from my cigarette, “but her poems lack spirit. Keats’ ‘Urn’—like all great poetry—is about longing, desires unfulfilled, those bold, never kissing, ever-panting lovers.”

“That’s your complaint—that she gets off?” he said, shrugging. “I guess it’s a good thing your muse is engaged then? I’d hate to see you ruin it by actually pursuing her.”

With a high forehead and mullet hair, short on top and long in back, Eric looked like the high school teacher he was, trying to hang onto a modicum of coolness despite the restrictions of his career. He thought an MA in literature was a waste of time, but since it meant a significant raise, he was willing to write a few poems, drink a few beers, and make us all laugh with his impersonations. Once, in the men’s room during a break from our course on Saul Bellow, Eric went into a prolonged impression of our professor, Daniel Fuchs, complete with the hunched posture and compulsion with his eyeglasses, putting them on and taking them off. Imitating Fuchs’s guttural growl, Eric said, “Here we see another example of the proto-typical Bellovian woman—these complex, often contradictory creatures who, in the words of Moses Herzog, ‘Eat green salad and drink human blood.’” Suddenly, the toilet flushed, the door opened and Fuchs himself stood in

the stall, adjusting his slacks, smiling like even he had to admit the impression was dead on, though there was no way we would pass his class.

“These things take time,” I said. “Besides, they’re pre-engaged. It’s not official.”

Like all the lovely ladies of sonnet sequences, Christine could be coy. She was either engaged to Steve, the big, bald, cop, or else she was “pre-engaged.” Together since high school, they’d broken up when Christine got impatient, demanding a ring. The blue sapphire on her left hand was a compromise promise to one-day promise marriage—at least that’s what she told me. In the dark corners of the Roadhouse bar, where a group of us met after each class, losing ourselves in whispered conversation, she’d call Steve a Philistine for not appreciating poetry, while complementing me, telling me how much more she’d learn if I taught the course. As Sir Philip Sidney’s *Astrophel* endured Cupid’s arrows in pursuit of his love, Stella, I’d suffer a thousand small touches—Christine’s long, multi-colored fingernails lingering on my hand when I lit her cigarettes, the light forearm pats when she’d share a confidence, the gentle taps of my thigh under the table when she’d take her leave—while thinking of Shakespeare, “When my love swears that she is made of truth, / I do believe her though I know she lies.”

“I’m sure he’ll take that into consideration before he shoots you in an alley.”

In truth, I didn’t think I was in much danger from Steve. To him, a guy studying poetry might as well dress in red tights and wear twirled shoes—that’s how threatened he was. As much as I wanted to, I was having a hard time hating Steve. The few times I met him, when he suffered nights out with Christine’s “school friends,” as he called us, he turned out to be a decent guy, so long as poetry didn’t dominate the conversation. In

fact, after a few beers, he seemed to have a good time, telling how he and cop friends “tooled up” bad guys.

“A little dramatic, don’t you think? Besides, I haven’t done anything. So what if I’m *inspired* by Christine. What’s the harm in that?”

“No harm,” Eric said, taking quick drags, like he feared someone might report him to the Board of Ed. “He’s much too practical for subtle distinctions. You go too far and he’s liable to kill you—and I mean that quite literally, and not some grand metaphor, Astrophel falling off his horse or some shit like that.”

Eric was still smarting from the beating he took in our Renaissance class, when our teacher laughed at his interpretation of horsemanship in Sidney’s sonnet 49, “I on my horse, and Love on me, doth try,” from the *Astrophel and Stella* sonnet sequence. Eric saw it as a metaphor for sex—the reins, bridle, and saddle accessories for a particularly kinky encounter. “She rides him, he rides her. It’s like some twisted Kentucky Derby,” he said in his deadpan way we all assumed was meant to be funny, but he meant literally. To be honest, I considered the sexual read myself, until I realized that Sidney was more interested in Astrophel’s physical suffering and public humiliation, a Petrarchan conceit that runs throughout the sequence, rendering the sexual read a little sophomoric.

Walking up from the pizzeria, the poetess herself, Stephanie Seitman, nibbled a piece of crust. In a matching light blue sweat suit, long, greasy dark hair tied in a sloppy ponytail, she looked more dressed for a work out than the serious study of poetry—her “single solitary passion” she said. To me, her poems seemed excuses to write about “cocks and cunts”—always said together as if they were the proverbial “cups and cakes” of an English breakfast. Each time she’d read, we’d wait for the harsh, consonant Anglo

Saxon and Middle English cocks and cunts to rear their angry heads, usually by the second stanza, followed by the obligatory images of things ripping, shredding, bleeding, Stephanie sweating, so breathless we'd wonder if she was having a heart attack or, worse, an orgasm in class.

"If it isn't the laureate and the jester," she said, tucking an errant clump of hair behind her ear, leaving us to decide which was which. "What are you half-wits talking about?"

"Sonnets," I said before Eric could mention Christine. Years before, as undergrads, Stephanie was my archenemy. If I had been the faculty favorite of one side of the English Department, she was the darling of the other. In class, our prolonged debates took up entire periods, each refusing to yield the final word. Like in American Lit, when she called Melville's *Moby Dick* "a giant phallus," reducing Howell's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* to "a metaphor for a throbbing erection." When I said her puerile reads ignored entire forests to focus on single sexual trees, she sneered, "Oh, for Christ's sake, the man has a rising *ham* in his *lap*." I guess it was no surprise she wrote poems about vibrators, emphasizing cocks and cunts with a disturbing delight. It was bad enough that I was stuck in class with her again. I didn't need her knowing about Christine.

"So, let me ask you something, professor," Eric said, changing the subject. He'd taken to calling me the professor because, contrary to the all the secondary school teachers in class, getting MAs for the pay raise, I actually intended to go on for the Ph.D. and a career teaching college, if not writing sonnets. "My students wonder if Shakespeare was gay—all those poems to a young man? Or with those Dark Lady poems, he swung both ways on the fruitsy vine."

“Irrelevant,” I said. “It makes no difference because his intent isn’t to get anyone in bed. He himself cannot give the young man a child, and I doubt he expected to get laid writing that the Dark Lady treads on the ground. Instead, he’s after something much bigger— immortality, for the others, and, more importantly, for himself.”

“Should I be taking notes?” Eric asked, patting his chest as if searching for a pen in a pocket he didn’t have. “Is this going to be on the final?”

“Please,” Stephanie said, dismissing me with a wave of her hand. “Immortality my ass. He wants them—the young poet, the rival poet, and the Dark Lady—to think he’s making them immortal so that they’ll all think he’s so fucking great and want to fuck him all the more for it. Immortality? I got your immortality right here,” she said, grabbing her crotch before entering the building, leaving Eric and me speechless.

The first time I saw Christine was something of a religious experience. Standing in the doorway to class—with her silky, shoulder length dark hair, mischievous brown eyes, prominent cheeks and glistening red lips—she seemed angelic, as if backlit by beams of heavenly light, the rising, high-pitched hum of a Gregorian chant ringing in my ears. Tall and thin, her long legs taking short steps in small heels, she didn’t merely walk so much as drip into class, slowly sliding down the aisle, taking the seat behind me.

At first, I looked around the room to see if anyone else had noticed her or if she was a figment of my imagination. Aside from a few curious glances to see who had the nerve to walk into a graduate course so late, with the professor already well into the description, my classmates had that look of serious students, concentrating on the teacher’s every

word. Nodding in agreement, laughing in all the right places, some even mimicked Bogan's annoyed glance, turning up their noses at Christine and sighing in disgust.

As Bogan explained, our grades would be based on a portfolio of poems imitating traditional forms—ballads, odes, sonnets, etc.. As a future literary scholar, I felt the class beneath me. Serious students of literature wrote papers constructing readings; they did not write poems imitating forms. With Stephanie Seitman sitting across the room, leering at me, I had collected my books and was about to leave, hoping the registrar's office stayed open late, when Christine walked in, complete with her beams of heavenly light and the chanting Gregorian choir. I stayed.

Now, more than five hours into my sonnet, I didn't have anything but disjointed images, a few words describing Christine as some glorious, sparkling *thing*, and the nagging beat of iambic pentameter—*da dat, da dat, da dat, da dat, da dat*—throbbing in my head. Apparently, it was infinitely easier to study poetry than actually create it.

Just before sunrise, my father stuck his head in my room.

"What are you doing up?" he asked, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, a little concern in his voice. To my father, a man who spent his entire adult life commuting from one borough or another into Manhattan, there clearly was something scary about a son sitting alone in the green glow of a word processor at five-thirty in the morning.

"*I am / work-ing / on a / son-net / for class*," I said, slipping into exaggerated iambic pentameter while counting syllables on my fingers. If there was something scary about my being up at that hour, I could only imagine what he thought about my writing poetry—not to mention speaking like a robot, tapping my fingertips as if doing a drunken

impression of the itchy-bitsy spider—especially when he was about to start another of his fourteen hour days. I didn't tell him I hadn't been to sleep yet.

"A sonnet?" he asked. "Isn't that a short poem, just a few lines? How long can it take?"

"It's not the length so much as the meter—the beat of the syllables," I added, in case he didn't understand. "With the standard rhyme scheme of the English sonnet—three quatrains followed by a couplet—it's not as easy as it sounds." Turning to the screen, I realized how pretentious I sounded.

"Get some sleep," he said, closing the door. "The sun's coming up."

With only an associate's degree himself, my father believed there was something noble about a son in graduate school, all his hard work in service to giving me a better chance, even if it was getting an MA in literature and not something practical, like an MBA. Sometimes I felt guilty, watching him work so hard as a production manager in the garment industry, a job he hated, while I spent the bulk of my day dreaming of Christine. All my life, he told me he did it for me, though I suspect he hoped for something more promising than poetry.

My room was covered in wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling recessed bookshelves my father had made himself on weekends. Looking up at the worn spines lining the poetry shelf, the names, titles, and size of the volumes seemed to mock my own poetic impotence: *The Complete Works*, *The Selected Works*, *The Poetry and Prose* of everyone from the sonneteers—Petrarch, Sidney, Shakespeare—to the Metaphysicals—Donne, Herbert, Marvell—to the Romantics—Keats, Shelley, Byron. Since meeting Christine,

I'd vowed to join their ranks, starting with a sonnet sequence of my own, and assume a prominent position on someone's shelf, if I could just write this first sonnet for class.

After countless false starts—"Look-ing / like an / an-gel / in the / door-way," "I saw / you in / the door / way of / our class"—that either weren't iambic enough or were entirely too literal to be taken seriously, I smoked a cigarette, listening to the hum of the word processor, watching the sunlight streak into my room.

I watch the sun awaken in the east

To light the day, which waited through the night

For its starving flowers to start their feast,

As weary eyes open and focus sight.

Three pathetic fallacies—the awakening sun, the waiting day, those starving flowers—and one desperate concession to the rhyme—*focus sight*. I figured I'd fix it later. No matter that I hadn't been asleep yet. The sentiment was real. Recalling the big bright sapphire from her big bald cop, I continued:

In you I see the shine of a sapphire

That glistens like an early morning dew,

Brightened by a billion suns afire,

Blinding my eyes though still I stare at you.

My critical faculties bristling at the idea of *glistening early morning dew*, especially with that incorrect *an* needed for the meter, but I couldn't stop myself, the words pouring out of my head with an exaggerated, oversexed truth that, I hoped, justified the hyperbolic clichés, not to mention unnecessary articles. Sunlight dimming the phosphorescent glow of my screen, I moved into my third quatrain.

*In you I see the dawn of a new day
Sparkle in such beauty like a vision,
As the first of the great sun's piercing rays
Cuts my sleep with silent soft precision.*

Though Steve might own Christine's heart and even her body, I was stealing a piece of her essence, realizing how addictive this feeling could be, especially in the absence of sex—how this very absence was exactly what compelled Petrarch to write 366 sonnets, Sidney 108, Shakespeare 154 (even if his are more about time than any beloved friend, male or female, and he had actually laid with the Dark Lady once or twice)—the release of the words in such a structured form a way of metaphorically rendering the beloved's physical presence in an overwhelmingly empty room.

*Now, like the sun that makes the grass grow green,
Illuminate me in your crystal sheen.*

The image of the couplet, and my eventual title, came from a note scribbled on a napkin at the Roadhouse bar—*Crystal Sheen!* My friends staring over their beers with a mixture of fear and envy, Stephanie rolling her eyes when Eric said, "The professor is inspired." Christine smiled, her mischievous eyes shining, the music of her name humming in my ears like a mantra—*Chris-tine, Chris-tine Chris-tine*—calling out to be immortalized beside those literary lovelies, Laura, Stella, the Dark Lady.

Both mentally and physically exhausted, as if I'd just engaged in some frenzied masturbatory calisthenics, I slumped in my chair, sighing, wondering if this was how the masters worked—overnight, from the burning image of a lady (or a young man) and a few hastily scribbled notes on cocktail napkins at the Ye Olde Poetry Inn?

I was reviewing the rhythms of my sonnet in the still empty classroom, feeling a little proud, when Stephanie walked in. Taking the seat next to me, she tried to snatch the paper off my desk.

“A sonnet?” she asked. “Come on, let me see.”

“No way,” I said, stuffing it between the thin pages of our text, the big black paperback edition of the *Norton Anthology of Poetry*. “It’s not ready for history.”

“Oh, give me a break,” she said, rolling her eyes. “What are you, Lord fucking Byron? Like I don’t know what it’s about,” she added, tilting her head toward Christine’s desk. “Your love affair with the mall crawler from hell.” Though Stephanie outwardly admired Christine’s elaborate fingernails—with bright orange and yellow diagonal stripes, little holes and gold rings—privately, she thought they were tacky, wholly inappropriate for graduate students, let alone junior high school teachers.

“It’s not that,” I said, ignoring the insult to Christine, though I had to admit it was funny. “It’s still rough around the edges. Besides, it’s hardly an affair. It’s more an intense friendship.”

“Please,” she said, waving a dismissive hand in that way she had, as if trying to wipe my presence from her sight. “I see how she looks at you, with those puppy dog eyes, every time you say some pseudo intelligent thing in class. ‘Oh yes, professor,’” she added in a high-pitched voice, hands clasped under her chin. “You’re so brilliant, even if that is just a puerile little stump between your legs.”

I knew she was recalling our American Lit class as undergrads, when I criticized her sexual reads of Melville and Howells. Though over the years, I’d already explained what

I meant—how it wasn't that I dismissed her interpretations, just that I felt they were artistically limiting, ignoring more than they illuminated—she still insisted on her cocks and cunts as the impetus for everything, a position that, frankly, was getting a little old.

“This from a girl who writes about vibrators, so desperate for something between her own legs she goes mechanical,” I said, smiling, knowing I hit her where it hurt. “There's something really Freudian there if you think about it.”

Shaking her head, pretending she wasn't at least stung, she said, “You're just pissed that your mall crawler has the special edition cop vibrator, complete with the kinky handcuffs. How's the little poet going to compete with that? Can't you just see her, spread eagle, cuffed to the bedpost, screaming, ‘Stick me with your metaphor’? You want to get Freudian? Maybe your insistence on the nobility of art masks some deep-seated fear of sexual failure—that you're not man enough to please her. It's so much safer to write about it instead, isn't it?” She narrowed her eyes to slits. “Don't forget, all your sonnet heroes were miserable failures in love—none of them got the girl.”

It was my turn to pretend to be unstung. I wanted to lash out, call her a cunt, but she might like that. “Spenser,” I said as calmly as I could. “You know, Edmund Spenser. Wrote the *Amoretti* for Elizabeth Boyle and *Epithalamion* when they got married.”

“Author of the *Faerie Queen*,” she said, untying her ponytail, running her hands through her greasy hair. “Now that's funny. Do yourself a favor,” she added, retying the ponytail as sloppy as it had been, two long chunks of hair falling down either side of her face. “Remember Lord Byron—‘Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch's wife, / He would have written sonnets all his life?’”

Though her own poetry often imitated Keats, Stephanie's real specialty was Byron. No wonder she wrote the poems she did. It would have been pointless trying to explain that I wasn't interested in marrying Christine so much as immortalizing her, forever linking our names together. There's no way Stephanie could've understood that. Instead, I just left, heading for a smoke break. Halfway down the hall, I heard her scream:

"*Chris-tine!*" she said in a singsong voice that echoed in the empty halls. "*My wet dream!*" I was sure that outside, countless commuters looked up at the window, wondering what the hell went on in that classroom. "*From your love, don't let me wean!*"

The subject of a sonnet—the beloved lady—often has no independence. Whether she's smiling coyly or shooting beams of light from her eyes, her entire existence is bound up in the poet's perception, no matter how much indifference he claims she exhibits. In fact, her very indifference itself is often aimed directly at the poet, yet another example of what she does to make him suffer.

These lines, from a paper I wrote on the lady loves of sonnet sequences, were in my head as I turned onto the Staten Island Expressway, Christine sitting next to me, quietly looking out the window. Though I'd driven her before, while her car was in the shop or she caught a ride with Steve, whose precinct was down the block, this was the first time she asked to go straight home instead of to the bar.

"You okay? You seem—" I almost said *indifferent* but settled on "preoccupied."

"Can I ask you something?" she asked. I slowed for traffic at the steep curve under an unfinished overpass for an abandoned stretch of highway. "You're really good at this

poetry thing—you know, reading between the lines, getting at the meaning under the surface.”

“You make it sound so mystical,” I said, removing a cigarette from inside my jacket. “There’s not much to it—just let the text speak. Poetry’s a more highly self-conscious language. Instead of being deliberately vague, it’s actually trying for a greater sense of clarity, reveal a very specific image.” I lit the cigarette, knowing I went too far. “Okay, I’ll stop now.”

“Well, I’ve been a having a really hard time with this poem I’m reading. Maybe you can help me achieve some of that clarity.”

“Who is it?” I asked, hoping it was Petrarch, Sidney, Shakespeare, someone I knew well enough to really show off.

Pulling the textbook from her bag, she opened it to a sheet of paper tucked inside. “I’ll read it to you,” she said, gracefully crossing her long legs until she was seated like a Buddha in the bucket seat, taking a deep breath before reading.

“I watch the sun awaken in the east, to light the day...”

I felt like I had been stripped naked by an invisible force—all my insecurities lay bare before the world and Christine in a public humiliation designed by the cruelest literary gods, or by Stephanie Seitman. For a second, I contemplated spinning the wheel into oncoming traffic, the last of the late night commuters returning from the city, just a few short hours until they turned around to go right back. One flick of my wrist, and it would all be over. I could picture the headlines, *“Graduate students crushed in crunch of metal, vaporized in a fiery blaze—‘A desperate act of poetry,’ cops say.”*

Though I would later learn the details—how Stephanie snatched it from my book, making a copy in the student lounge, presenting it to Christine as soon as she walked into class—at the time, I didn’t know anything other than the fact that Christine herself was reading my sonnet, pretending she didn’t know I wrote it, didn’t know it was about her, all of its flaws infinitely magnified in the sweet melodious harmony of her voice.

Unwavering in her desire to torture me, she read the whole poem, all fourteen lines, enunciating each of the 140 syllables, even slowing down for the couplet, making me acutely aware of the alliteration:

“Now, like the sun that makes the grass grow green, / Illuminate me in your crystal sheen.” Still holding the paper before her, she turned to me, tilting her head. “What do you think it means?” she asked in mock innocence.

If hearing her read it wasn’t bad enough, this was a deliberate, malicious cruelty beyond anything in the sequences. Prior to this moment, even the most sadistic sonnet ladies merely ignored the poet; they did not ask him to explain his work. Somehow, between the school and her house, my angelic Renaissance sonnet lady transformed into a monstrous Romantic lamia—an evil demon snake woman—waylaying a young poet in his own car, instead of the more traditional side of the road. At the traffic light between the two gas stations, I dropped my cigarette out the window and immediately lit another.

For a second, I thought I’d play dumb. Pretend I didn’t know anything about it. Maybe even critique its faults—the hyperbolic clichés, the pathetic fallacies, that desperate concession to the rhyme. But considering the title, “Crystal Sheen,” an obvious play on her name, and the fact that my own name was printed in the heading, there wasn’t much choice. Imagining Shakespeare disavowing his sonnets—“No, no, dear Dark Lady!

It wasn't me at all, but a unskilled rival poet, a rascal and a rogue!"—I started talking, unsure what I was saying.

"It's all about the class, you know? How it made me realize the beauty of poetry." The great thing about the rising sun image, I thought, was that it could be just about anything—rebirth, reawakening, reassessment. "Before this, it was like an intellectual exercise, this clinical game, where you take something apart and put it back together, congratulating yourself for being so smart, but now it's different. Through imitating the form, I know what those guys *felt*, how they tortured themselves, staying up all night, searching for the words, the sounds..."

"So does that mean you don't want to make love to me when the sun comes up?" she asked as if shocked her reading could be so wrong.

This was a flagrant violation of the convention. Sonnet ladies can smile, blush, act indifferent—they can even shoot beams of light from their eyes to knock the poet off his horse—but they cannot offer themselves like ripe fruit ready for plucking. Byron, and therefore Stephanie, was right. There's no way Petrarch would have written 366 sonnets if halfway through the first one Laura said, "Just do me already, you handsome Latin humanist." Even Spenser, the only known sonneteer to successfully win the beloved, wrote 88 sonnets before she acquiesced. Here I was, after my first attempt, and Christine brings up lovemaking, just like that? I pictured Laura, Stella, and the Dark Lady sipping coffee in some celestial paradise, shooting disapproving stares, my career as a neo-sonneteer flushed down the toilet, along with any hope of immortality.

"You can definitely see it that way," I said, staring into her mischievous eyes, with her brilliant heavenly light, the chanting Gregorian choir sustained in the higher register,

like eunuchs falling from a cliff. Putting her hand on my thigh, Christine slowly leaned toward me, the literary lovelies dabbing moist brows and unfurling their fans.

Although this represented the culmination of everything I eventually wanted, I wondered if it wasn't too easy. How many other poets did she appear to, sneaking into their rooms on the first rays of sunlight, sprinkling laurel leaves, sparking creativity, only to snatch it away like some beautifully hideous poetic succubus, draining the very wellspring she inspired? How many great works of literature would be lost to history, how many unwritten *Hamlets*, *Macbeths*, *Othellos* dumped into the metaphysical dustbin because the Dark Lady rejected her conventional role and threw herself at the poet? Who knows but she might've sent the young Shakespeare home to his wife in Stratford to be a glove maker like his father, before he even wrote the plays. I imagined all the books on my poetry shelf disappearing, exploding one after another, leaving nothing but empty space.

Pulling into the spot in front of her house, Christine's face mere inches from mine, I could smell the sugary sweetness of her pink bubble gum as she tucked it into her cheek. It suddenly dawned on me that if all these works didn't exist, I would have wound up working alongside my father in the garment industry, getting ready for bed and another of my own fourteen hour days at a job I despised, instead of sitting in my car, with Christine, eyes and lips half closed in preparation for the moment I wanted and wanted all the more for wanting. So this was the reason my father did what he did, this was the chance he hoped to give me?

As our lips met and I felt Christine's tongue rhythmically sliding circles around my own, I saw my entire poetic legacy—a single solitary sonnet—tucked into a book like a

crushed carnation. In a dark corner of The Ye Olde Poetry Inn, I pictured Petrarch, Sidney and Shakespeare toasting this wayward young poet. Though I'd never write a sequence, never join their exclusive club, I knew that, despite their immortality, I'd always have this moment, and wondered which of my heroes would trade a little renown for one such sugared kiss.

"Would you like to come inside?" Christine asked, breaking away. I think I heard the faint rattle of her tail as her brown eyes flashed demonic red.

I should have seen it coming—the merciless beauty inviting me to her elfin grot. I knew before the night was over that I'd find myself on a cold hill side, alone and palely loitering, but couldn't care less. Leaning back in the seat, I took a drag of my cigarette and asked about Steve—some sense of chivalry carried over from Medieval Lit.

"What about him?" she asked, annoyed. "He never wrote a sonnet for me, never said I was his sun, brightening the world. What are those poems about seizing the moment, doing something because we're all going to die some day?"

"*Carpe diem*," I said, knowing she was thinking of Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," where the poet implores the lady to have sex, race against a running sun, before worms try her long preserved virginity. Recalling one critic who said that, despite the speaker's desperate pleas, the argument doesn't achieve his goal, I pictured Marvell himself taking a seat at the inn, lifting his mug, winking at me.

Christine and Steve would break up and get back together three more times. They would finally marry a year later, during the worst Nor'easter in recent New York memory, four feet of frozen snow and near hurricane force winds, as if the literary gods themselves sought to stop the wedding. When the priest asked if anyone objected,

Stephanie and Eric, holding hands, turned to me so quickly the squeak of our pew echoed through the silent church. As the entire congregation strained their necks, staring, I sank low in the seat. Steve himself turned to see the commotion, no doubt wondering what these poets were doing at his wedding, hoping we didn't do anything too embarrassing, lest his cop friends have to "tool us up." Later, sharing a drink with me—still bathed in that heavenly light, the long train of her fairytale white wedding dress concealing her slithering tail—Christine would sneak drags from my cigarette, lightly touching my wrist, tell me she half hoped I would've stood up and carried her away.

Shutting the engine, my flicked cigarette shattering sparks on the pavement like the hundreds of unwritten sonnets, I recalled Stephanie's poems, all the cocks and cunts we had mocked for an entire semester. So much for convention, I thought, getting out of the car, following Christine up the path, wondering if the literary gods were blessing or cursing me—giving me Christine at the same time they took her away. At her front door, under a crescent moon, the outside light shining off Christine's silky hair, Lord Byron himself set fire to the Ye Olde Poetry Inn and I was consumed with a desire that trumps all poetry, all art, all my petty intellectual arguments about longing and immortality falling well beside the burgeoning point in my pants.

EPILOGUE:

TOMORROW

“I’ve been over it a million times,” Sam said, after the waiter had taken their orders and the busboy brought their ice water. “It has to have been Anton.” She unfolded the cloth napkin on her lap. “There was one night when we were both pretty drunk and he didn’t have a condom. I kept telling him, ‘No, don’t,’ but he kept saying, ‘Wait, wait. Just a little more. You’re so beautiful.’ Before I knew it, well.” Taking a sip of water, she eyed Jon over the glass.

She had finally stopped crying in the car. Jon had rubbed her knee and held her hand and wouldn’t let go, even as he continuously downshifted for better traction on the wet roads that were starting to ice up. “It’ll be okay,” he reassured her. “We’ll get through this.”

“What should I do, Jon?” She glanced at his cigarettes on the table.

“I can’t make that decision,” he said. “That’s something you have to do on your own, with Anton.” *Anton the town stud*, he wanted to add, the guy who could’ve and practically did have almost every girl on Staten Island. He felt like he was reading the script of a made-for-TV movie.

“Anton’s nothing to me. You know that. Promise me he won’t find out.”

Now it was full-blown melodrama. Jon wondered if Sam was always this dramatic or if it was a recently acquired trait. Maybe she’d been watching soap operas?

“All right.” Jon shrugged. “He won’t hear it from it me, but it’s not like we hang out together, you know. He doesn’t even like me.” Actually, he thought, he didn’t like Anton.

“He hates your guts. I’m not allowed to mention your name, and he made me remove all the pictures from my wall. Remember the pictures, from Wildwood—the first time we went? When you won me that huge stuffed bear?”

He remembered the contrast of Sam, in her yellow bikini top, cut off denim shorts and, at the time, recently lightened, oversprayed blond hair, standing on the boardwalk against a background of rolling surf and gray clouds. Eternally optimistic, she was waiting for the sun.

The object of the game was to completely shoot out the red star on a slip of paper. Everyone said it was fixed, but Jon had a system. Using a few bbs to take the points out first—his aim was that good—he used the remainder to blast through the center, teeth clenched in some ecstatic fury that was half anger, half arousal at the prospect of the sexual positions that bear would win for him. One had to control the natural impulse to let loose with the bbs, an all or nothing philosophy that left the girlfriends empty handed and the guys frustrated. Sam clutched the bear, literally half her size, against her chest. Arm around her waist, he guided her back to their room.

They did it all on that first trip, covered every square inch of that hotel room—then on the deck overlooking the ocean, in the pool at midnight, in the lifeguard chair under the stars, and on a good portion of the beach as well. He had her upside down, right side up, and every which way in between. Had he been a few inches taller, he would’ve hung

from the ceiling fan, with Sam wrapped around him, watching themselves spin in the mirror.

“He’s just jealous,” Sam said, rearranging her silverware. “He knows I’ve never gotten over you and would dump him in a second.” She moved for the cigarettes, but pulled away.

He couldn’t tell if she was playing up her love or playing him up. It didn’t matter. Years earlier, before Sam, before rent, he would’ve given anything to walk in Anton’s he-could-only-imagine-size-fourteen shoes. Now it was nice to hear that Anton Updale would’ve traded for Jon’s nine and a half triple Es.

“So, what’s the plan?” he asked, just after the food arrived. “What do you want to do?”

“I don’t have any money. I wanted to go on for my masters, and I don’t want to throw my life away over some stupid mistake with fuckin’ Anton.”

Fucking Anton was the stupid mistake, he wanted to say. He wondered if a master’s in Psychology would help or hurt this poor screwed up girl. Laughing to himself, he thought about “screwed up” as a play-on-words, wondering if he wasn’t at least partially responsible for that. After all, her first mistake was how she wanted to marry Jon.

“Don’t worry about the money,” he said, spearing his fork through a pink piece of medium rare prime beef. He hadn’t yet converted his cash into traveler’s checks for his trip to California. The money was in his wallet. Plus, he was counting on getting something off the rent for the flood at his apartment.

“Look at you, Mr. Moneybags all of a sudden.” She tossed and retossed her tossed salad. “What happened to ‘I can’t get married until I’m more settled?’”

Though he had used that excuse in the early stages of their marriage debate, he never imagined she took it seriously enough to bring it up now, not since her ultimatum and his response.

“Don’t start, Sam. Not now.”

“Seriously, you’re doing that well?”

“I do okay. There’s a lot of stuff to write and edit. Plus, the manual’s a pretty big deal, a lot of complicated shit, and I work a little overtime.”

A technical writer for a new electronic mail program, Jon thought the program complicated and the manual boring, nothing but *point, click, open*, in bullet points, under headings like *To Check Your Mailbox*. A highlight for him was the in-depth description of how to file a message: *Click and hold the left button on the mouse, slide mouse to drag selected message into a folder*—or the trash can icon, which were the same instructions, different heading. He tried to jazz it up, by beginning each section with a scene of office workers using the program, give it a real life, user friendly feel. First, he’d denigrate the old way of doing things—finding time to make a call, getting stuck on hold, interruptions, leaving messages, etc.—leading to a demonstration with a personal hook, such as, “Joe wants to ask Janet out, but never has time to call.” At first, his bosses loved the idea—“Just change Joe and Janet to something more ethnic, to show us bringing people together.” Jon went over the top, “Hey, Maria, your flamenco skirt drives me crazy.” “Thanks, Ahmed, your turban turns me on.” In the end, he had to cut it. They suggested he attend the convention, see how other companies were doing it. A lifetime studying literature, dreaming of his great American novel, only to wind up tech writing for the new fangled computer mail, he thought.

“A big shot, with a lot of responsibility. Moving up? Going places?”

“Jesus Christ, Sam. I said I’ll give you the money and I won’t tell Anton. What more you want from me?”

“Sorry. I didn’t know it was such a touchy subject.”

“It’s not, but I think you have more to worry about than how much money I make. I fuckin’ told you to slow it down, take it easy with the drinking and going out.”

“So that’s what this is about? I didn’t listen to you? You’re the one who didn’t want me, remember? What was I supposed to do, sit on the couch all day and suck your dick whenever you wanted? Would that have made me more or less desirable as a wife?”

A few neighboring diners turned their heads. Jon rubbed a hand against his forehead.

“No, but you weren’t supposed to go and get knocked up by Anton now, either. Did you think that would make you more desirable?” *Wanted*, he thought, playing his semantic game, defining words as they came up in conversation that made his manual writing bearable. *With an intensity of feeling; able to inspire such. A longing for someone or something.*

“This was a mistake,” Sam said, standing up and tossing her napkin on the table. He moved to go after her, but sat back down when he realized she was heading to the restroom, not the exit. Smiling at the onlookers, he shrugged, lit a cigarette.

Ten after eight. He contemplated dropping her off and hightailing it into the city for the Janet Jackson concert at the Garden with his coworkers from the computer company, but with the snow, he’d never make it. His friends in Albany were probably finishing Adam’s specialty dinner, something called “garbage bread”—everything he had in the refrigerator rolled into a dough and baked like a calzone. The redhead Adam had

promised would be there, his wife's nursing colleague, would be getting restless. Jon pictured Anton, in a silk pirate's shirt, with the crisscross laces, sliding up next to her on the couch.

Maybe I could pay for her abortion, too. Send me the bill, motherfucker.

Sam returned, eyes red and almost devoid of the thick ring of her trademark eyeliner. His mother had likened it to bull's-eyes. Jon loved it. Without it, he thought, she was a little boring.

"I'm sorry, Jon. It's just. . . I don't know." She paused and stared into his eyes. "If it was yours, I'd keep it. You do know that, right?"

"It doesn't matter, Sam. Go ahead, eat something."

Only a few hours earlier, at five o'clock on New Year's Eve, he had been full of possibilities. Sitting on his futon, in his two room basement apartment, he tried to see past the static snow on the old black and white TV. The news was about a homeless man found frozen to death in Central Park. Outside, snowflakes drifted past the rectangular slit of his pull down living room/dining room/kitchen combo window that let in a wicked draft and emphasized the stench from the previous week's flood. Too much snow had built up on the grass. The sudden forty-degree temps that followed melted it through the foundation, down the walls, into his apartment. He had come home to a saturated carpet and this noxious mildew smell. He ripped out the carpet.

It had been one bad storm, keeping him out of the apartment for two days without heat. He stayed at his parents' rather than risk freezing to death himself. The landlord was in a fight with his soon-to-be-ex-wife—it wasn't his fault that she did or did not do

this with her life, and not her fault that he did or did not do that with his. For a month they had awakened him every morning at 6:00, screaming. Jon went back and the heat was on. He was glad that he didn't see the landlord. He wasn't going to pay a penny more than half the past due rent anyway, and that was before he saw the flood.

The snow was picking up. The weather guy was talking about a low pressure system of arctic Canadian air slamming into a cold front full of moisture, causing the second big storm of the week, but Jon couldn't make out the forecast. He hoped it wouldn't get too bad. He was supposed to leave for San Francisco in a few days. There wouldn't be much for him to do—he was just the tech writer—but his boss wanted him to check out the latest documentation. Jon thought that a gross exaggeration. There was nothing so important about it that it needed to be *documented*, preserved for history. Walking through the cubicles, he would imagine himself a filmmaker, with a French accent, in a black turtleneck and a red beret. With his hands before him, thumbs touching, squaring the perfect shot, he'd say, "I seek to capture the—*comment dit on?*—*essence* of the program. It is not just mail. It is life!"

He had already arranged to meet his first girlfriend from the fourth grade, who was now a law student at Berkley. She had promised to show him the Bay Area. It had been ten years since he had seen Michelle—after her family had visited his when they were back in town for a wedding. Michelle turned out okay, he thought, glancing at the wallet size photo her mother had sent his. More than okay. Tall and thin, with short dark hair tied neatly in a bun and legs that, it seemed to him, threatened to break through the concrete she was standing on and pop up somewhere in China. Still smiling her embarrassed smile—she never did like taking pictures. For him, the convention was an

excuse to see her. Staying in a fancy suite at the Hyatt Regency, on company money, with a rental car—it was going to be great.

He had called a few nights earlier, after getting her number from his mother, who got it from Michelle's mother, who swore she wouldn't ruin the surprise. She said Michelle would be delighted to hear from him. *Delighted. As in derive pleasure*, he thought. He once dreamed of being Hemingway, but that was before he had to pay rent. Michelle answered in the same high-pitched voice he remembered, but no trace of her once thick New York accent.

"Michelle?" he asked. "Now don't hang up. This is a serious test. If you answer my question correctly, the prize is dinner at the best restaurant in San Francisco. Okay?"

"Okay," she said. He could tell she was smiling and had no idea who it was.

"In fourth grade, you got in trouble for whispering to a certain boy in your class how to spell a certain word. Now, Michelle. For the best dinner of your life, what was that word?"

"Tomorrow," she said, laughing. "T-O-M-O-R-R-O-W, and you *still* got it wrong! Oh my God! Jon! How are you?"

They spent an hour on the phone, talking about everyone from the fourth grade and what they could imagine them doing now, then their first date, playing miniature golf, when his mother had dropped them off and picked them up.

"When I acted so stupid, pretending I was a hockey player on the Rangers, trying to impress you with my athleticism and vast knowledge of hockey," he said. *Stupid* or *Stupidly*? he wondered.

“How about when you scared the hell out of me, kissing me behind the giant windmill.”

“I kissed *you*?” Jon said, laughing at the image that had been on his mind since he first heard of the convention “Try you kissed me. I remember because I actually felt my heart beat and I had to take a piss so bad I thought I was gonna lose it!”

“Well, you had been asking for it, wearing those tight jeans, trying to turn me on.”

He said he had a night flight, that he had to attend the convention the next morning, but would be free every day after. They made plans. She would meet him at the hotel.

“I’m so glad you called,” she said, before hanging up. “I can’t wait to see you.”

After, with his feet on the half full wooden wine rack that he used as a coffee table, he sipped tea, scanning his shelves for the perfect book to read on the plane. Maybe one of the literary theorists he had told himself he intended to read—that he hadn’t bought it just to pad his shelves to impress some artist chick he’d met on Bay Street. *The Sun Also Rises*, a perennial favorite, though, at a mere two hundred pages, it might not last past Pennsylvania. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*?

In that brief moment before Sam’s call, his New Year’s Eve, like his shelves, was filled with choices. There had still been time to make the three-hour drive to Albany, where his friends and their wives were congregated, with plenty of time to get good and drunk before the ball fell. Or he could join his co-workers at the concert in Madison Square Garden— third row center. They’d meet at the pizza place at 9:00. On the one hand, in favor of Albany, was the fact that, as the last unmarried hold out, he got to shamelessly flirt with all his friend’s wives, some of whom he suspected would take it further. Plus, they all wanted to set him up. He had been promised a cute little redhead

would be waiting and willing. On the other hand, the computer people were unmarried, could drink all night, and there was the possibility of meeting girls. Also, it was Janet Jackson—the world’s hottest singer of bubble gum pop tunes—who he could imagine in her leather pants and halter top, covered in sweat and shaking her ass. Though he was no fan of the music, she might pull him up on stage and sing of her undying love. Maybe stroke the microphone seductively, her lips inches from his. A guy could dream.

When the phone rang, he hoped it was Michelle, using the New Year as an excuse to hear his voice.

“Hello?” He sat up, placing his mug on the table, reached for his cigarettes.

“Jon?” Sam asked in her semi-whine, kind of a cross between the last of the left over Valley Girls and a Staten Island Jewish American Princess. She seemed unsure if it was him, though she knew he lived alone. “Are you busy?” She sounded funny.

“No. I’m just sitting here.” He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, preparing for what he was sure would at least be a minor annoyance. With Sam, it always was. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I . . .” Full cry mode. Instantly, he knew his festivities were in jeopardy.

Though it had been almost nine months to the day since their break up, they had continued to see each off and on, mostly for the sex, which had always been good, but he felt a certain sense of responsibility for Sam, who had had a rough time after the split. She was constantly trying to get back together, saying she had made a mistake trying to force him to marry her. Her crying brought him right back to the breakup and her ultimatum— “It’s the next logical step. This is what people *do*. Either we get engaged or we should break up!”

The next logical step. What people do. Like they were wind up toy soldiers. He considered pointing it out, launching into a tirade on conformity as a means of distraction, putting off the inevitable, but what would be the point?

They had been in the car, on the way home from a friend's wedding. It was pouring out. He could barely see the road through the semi-clear ark his worn wipers made on the windshield. Despite the rain, the wipers skipped, making this horrible *rat, tat, whoosh* sound, that repeated like clockwork. "Guess I'd better make plans for this weekend," he had said, calling her bluff, "because I won't be seeing you."

Everyone had said he was cold, that he could've handled it better. She loved him and wanted to marry him, but he let her go like last week's leftovers. Their friends didn't understand. They had been fighting about the marriage thing for months, since a couple they had set up got engaged after knowing each other for only two weeks. Jon couldn't take it anymore.

"I'm sorry," Sam said on the phone, composing herself. "You're the only person I could talk to." He pictured tears dripping down her face as Albany flew out the window.

He held the cigarette awkwardly in his left hand and reached for the mug with his right, phone cradled in his left shoulder. The tea was tepid. *Tepid?* What kind of word was *tepid*? But *luke warm* sounded like a character on a soap opera. *Paging Dr. Luke Warm.* After returning the mug, he took another drag and blew smoke rings at the ceiling—three small ones racing through a lingering large one.

"What is it, Sam? You can tell me. It's okay." He was annoyed, but the responsibility thing was kicking in. As much as he didn't want to marry her, he wasn't opposed to staying together for who knew how long, but he was counting on the rest of

his life being a long time. He wasn't ready for that kind of commitment. The four years he had invested were nothing compared to the fifty years of average male life expectancy he figured he had coming, give or take a few for smoking. He switched the cigarette to his right hand.

"Come on, Sam. Tell me." He checked his watch. Albany was sliding past the Roman numeral III. He could still make the concert. If it was just an "I-broke-up-with-Anton-and-need-a-pep-talk" kinda thing, he thought, he could get through it in ten minutes, assure her that she was beautiful, that he'd always have feelings for her, and make plans for a blow job before his flight. Then he'd still have time for a fast shower, could make the 7:00 ferry, catch an uptown number nine, and be outside the Garden with time to spare.

"I'm pregnant," she said between sobs

Holding the phone with his shoulder again and the cigarette between his teeth, he counted back the months on his fingers since they broke up, stopping abruptly at November, figuring that she'd have to have been showing. He tried to remember if they'd had sex in the past few weeks. In truth, they had had sex so often in their four years together and even since the breakup, both pre and post Anton, that it all blurred together. Recently, he recalled, there had been a lot of oral stimulation. In his astonishment, it took a second to remember that one couldn't get pregnant that way. He didn't have to check his watch again. Through the snow on the TV, he could picture the lone empty third row concert seat.

"Jesus Christ, Sam. What the hell—I'm coming over."

"No, don't," she said, her voice suddenly clear. "You have plans. I don't want to. . ."

He got back to his place at 11:00, after dropping Sam off and watching TV, until she fell asleep in his arms. He had refused her offer of what she called “oral compensation” for his “generous monetary support.” It was one thing to recall their pleasant memories and place him above Anton, but quite another to prostitute herself to pay for Anton’s mistake, especially after he made the offer in good faith. Wanting to get back together was both sad and, at the same time, touching, but this was perverse. He left the money on her dresser.

The light wasn’t blinking. He pressed the button on his answering machine anyway.

You have no new voice messages.

There was something sickening about answering machines. Why did it have to mock him, by stating the positive, *You have*, and then turn it around with the negative? It got his hopes up, plus it was grammatically awkward—this electronic voice that may as well have said, “You ain’t got nothing. Nobody called. Kill yourself, loser.”

Despite the snow and cold, the stench was overwhelming. He pulled open the window. He checked the cube of a refrigerator that would’ve fit perfectly in a dorm room but looked out of place in the spot reserved for a full size. Nothing but beer and a few bottles of white wine he kept chilled, for the ladies—plus the hardboiled eggs in a Tupperware container that his mother had made for him when he moved in, six months earlier. He had pushed it to the back of the refrigerator, afraid to take it out, didn’t want to see what was growing in it. Opening a beer, he crossed to the futon and sat. On impulse, he picked up the phone and called the number on a napkin.

“Hi. This is Michelle. I’m probably buried under books at the library, so I can’t come to the phone right now. Leave a message and I’ll call you as soon as I can, or when I graduate.”

He didn’t leave a message. She didn’t need to know he was home alone on New Year’s Eve, though that could be the new scenario for the manual:

Jon wants to talk to Michele but doesn’t want her to know how his plans have gone to hell because of his crazy ex-girlfriend! Just point and click!

Through the snow on the TV, he could see Times Square. He called Albany.

“Hey,” his friend Adam said, in the sing song way he had when he was stoned. Jon could hear music in the background, some friends asking if it was him. “Let me guess, you’re on the Thruway and you stopped to take a leak. You’ll be here in twenty minutes.”

“Sorry.” He put his feet on the wine rack. “Things got fucked up.” Well, Sam got fucked up but Adam didn’t need to know that. “I just wanted to wish everyone a happy, you know.”

“Everyone,” Adam yelled. “Jon says Happy New Year.”

A loud chorus returned the greeting and Jon could hear his friends yell, “Where are you?” “What are you doing?” “We love you, man!” He could imagine them all raising their beers and half empty glasses of God knows what mixed with God knows what else.

“Listen,” Adam said in something of a whisper. The background noise faded. Jon knew Adam was in his office, off the living room. “There are like four nurses in my house, still in uniform. I told you, these girls Joyce works with. She told them all about you.” His voice slid on the “you,” lengthened it to three syllables.

There once was a time when he would've got in the car and made the drive, even though it was late and dangerous. Nurses in uniform? It was like a porno movie. He pictured tall, leggy, bi-sexual Swedes, giggling and rubbing him with Vaporub.

There was little they could do for him now. Little anyone could do. What did he really expect of Michelle, anyway? It was crazy, putting any stock in a girl who had once whispered letters to him under her breath when they were ten years old, but he could see it so clearly.

Hand in front of her mouth, she whispered the letter *M*. He kept his eyes on Miss Pulis, waiting for a mystical second *M* that always tripped him up. At that moment, Miss Pulis said, "Come on, Jon. Give it a try." He was stuck, unsure if Michelle said it. He went with his gut, "T-O-M-M-O-R-O-W," the same as always. "We'll try again tomorrow," Miss Pulis said as if about to break out into the song from *Annie*:

Tomorrow, tomorrow, I love ya, tomorrow, you're always a day away!

"And Michelle," she added, in her serious teacher voice, though she was only in her twenties and wore short skirts and too much makeup. "Unless you plan to sit next to Jon the rest of his life and give him the answers, you'd better stop that now or he'll never learn to do it himself."

After a sip of beer, he lit a cigarette. Elbows on his knees, he let the smoke drift slowly out his mouth, floating toward the open window.

He had it made in fourth grade. Miss Pulis loved him—she even told his parents that, with his smile, he could get away with murder. That gave him the confidence to ask Michelle out, walking over to her during creative writing. She was writing a story about how she was trapped in some metaphysical closet, with all these weird creatures. He

asked what she was doing. She said he was a jerk for taking his sweet time rescuing her and kept writing.

“You want to go out with me sometime?”

“You mean like a date?” she asked, keeping her eyes on the paper.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“I’ll have to ask my mom, but if she says okay, then yeah. Where would we go?”

“I don’t know. Bowling? A movie? My mom can drive us.” He didn’t like the way that sounded. It just wasn’t cool, but there weren’t many options.

“You like mini golf?” she asked, looking excited.

He hated it. He always wanted to let loose on the balls, hit them as hard as he could, send them flying into space. The game required a subtlety that was too much for a ten year old.

“Sure,” he said. “Though I’m not really good—I mean, I’m not bad, but I’m a much better hockey player.” He had tried to see a connection between hockey and mini golf. The clubs were like mini sticks. Good enough.

“Don’t worry. I’ll teach you.” She smiled, revealing pointy teeth.

He wanted to reiterate his point about hockey, let her know what a skilled wingman he was, strengthen the connection, but there was something in her smile. He let it go.

His mother met hers for coffee. They took pictures of Jon and Michelle on the living room couch. Hair neatly combed, he was wearing his lucky Triumph motorcycles t-shirt, a hand me down from his cool cousin. It made him feel older. Insecure about her looks, she smiled her exaggerated smile, like her eyes were about to pop out of her head.

Draining the last of the warm beer, he checked his watch. His friends in Albany were probably standing around a TV, beginning the countdown. His other friends, in Madison Square Garden, must have been screaming out the flashing numbers on a screen behind the stage, waiting for an explosion into the next song. Janet, now in a halter, mini skirt and braided hair, would run back out to wish them Happy New Year. In Times Square, lovers stared into each other's eyes, amid confetti and streamers, while strangers were coming together, throwing their arms around each other, desperate for someone to hold. Jon dropped the cigarette into the plastic cup. The several butts already settled on the bottom had absorbed most of the water. He tilted the cup until he heard it hiss.

Their mini-golf score was even, he remembered. It was embarrassing. She was a girl, for God's sake. He resorted to hockey, explaining the differences between a slap shot and a wrist shot, what a hat trick was. Steering the ball between imaginary defenders, he slid his sneakers down the turf, giving the play-by-play:

Jon splits the defense and crosses center ice. Slap shot from the blue line—he scores!

The ball ricocheted off the wooden perimeter. Retrieving it, they found themselves behind the white windmill that at the time appeared to be towering, but he now realized was only a little taller than they were. She put her lips on his—or he put his on hers.

With one hand behind his head, he stretched back on the futon, wondering if it was predestined that he should fuck up tomorrow and wind up cold and alone on New Year's Eve, in his tiny apartment, with its draft and smell, after paying for his ex-girlfriend's abortion. What would Michelle really think of his pathetic job that, no matter what it paid—which wasn't much, despite Sam's wishful thinking—could never compensate for the boredom of pointing and clicking and opening little windows. The program was

going to be a big thing, they said— “connect people in ways they couldn’t yet imagine”—but that hardly made up for how insignificant it seemed, especially when his life had once been filled with so much promise.

Strapped into his window seat above the wing, he relaxed his arms on the rests. He always hated flying, but this was especially bad. The day’s previous twelve scheduled flights to California had all been scrapped. It was practically a blizzard. Plus, the below zero temperatures had made everything that had already fallen turn to ice. It had taken hours to get to the airport. He thought of turning back more than once, but he recalled Michelle spelling *tomorrow*, and felt compelled to keep going.

The flight attendant helped the passengers with the overhead bins. She tried to be casual, but Jon caught her sneaking looks out the window. Her expression didn’t ease his fears. If the professional flyers thought they were going to die, how the hell was an amateur like him supposed to feel? All to meet some girl he had once kissed behind a windmill when they were both ten years old?

He was struck by a thought. What if, by some weird twist of fate, he had somehow gotten Michelle pregnant that day, either on or off the mini-golf course? Their child would be fifteen years old, older than he had been at the time of their kiss. One minute you’re in the fourth grade, with your only responsibility to spell the word *tomorrow*, and the next you’re watching your New Year’s plans go to hell because your fucked up ex-girlfriend was pregnant by the town stud. He recalled Sam looking at him over her glass of ice water in the restaurant, how she kept going back to how much money he made.

They had once been so good together. There was even a time that he thought he loved her. She hadn't seemed crazy then. They went new places and did exciting things, until the places became old favorites and the things they did all seemed the same. The second and third trips to Wildwood were just like the first, as was every other trip after them, until he realized that it wasn't the where but the who. The sex remained good, but later, when she'd fall asleep in his arms, he'd be restless. She knew he was bored, thought an engagement would liven things up like it had for their friends. He wanted a return to possibilities.

A few stragglers now stood in the aisle, trying to find room in the overhead bins for their heavy winter coats and larger-than-the-limit luggage. Despite the whirl of the engines and the hum of air compressors, there was a strange silence to the passengers, like they didn't want to acknowledge the fear they all felt. Still, the old man next to him had his legs stretched out, hands on his protruding belly. His eyes were closed. He looked, Jon thought, like a man with no regrets, like he couldn't care less if his time was up. What must that be like? If his time were up, Jon thought, there would be nothing to write on his tombstone, except *point, click, open* or maybe something poetic about the unfulfilled promise of tomorrow.

The flight attendant's hand signals illustrated how to inflate the life preservers, then she pointed at the emergency exits before clicking together the halves of a seat belt.

Palms sweating, Jon felt a chill on the back of his neck. He glanced out the window. Runway workers were deicing the wing. What the hell was he doing? Chasing his past or charging the future? *Charging. To propel forward, like a bull.*

What if it had been his? Would he have been so quick to give Sam the money? Was it his destiny to get Sam pregnant? Maybe he was supposed to marry her, but somehow fucked that up as well. Maybe Sam had been right—it was the next logical step. Then he wouldn't be on this plane right now and there would be no more Michelles and no more tomorrows, but he'd be settled. He could learn to like it.

Jesus Christ! What if it *was* his? Mostly, they had used condoms, but not always. He tried to be careful, do the responsible thing. Some guys, like Anton, pushed it to the limit, daring fate to, as Jon thought, fuck them while they fucked their girlfriends. Still, something could have happened. One couldn't prepare for everything. Was this her last ditch effort to get him back or a final test to prove that they were really finished?

Ladies and gentlemen. We have been cleared to proceed to the runway.

There was static over the loudspeaker. Jon thought he heard a hint of irony in the pilot's voice—as if even he couldn't believe they were being waved on. *Cleared to proceed to* was terrible syntax. *We have received clearance and will proceed* was better, though very formal. He would've preferred *okayed to get going*—kind of folksy and comforting, though he'd never get away with that in the manual.

The plane backed out of the gate. The deicing guys waved their metal extenders in long, exaggerated overhead movements, then walked away. Jon thought he saw one shrug. He watched the crystals of sleet and snow reform on the wing and slide toward each other, compelled by some natural, inexplicable desire to combine, into a sheet of ice.

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Thesis Title:

Permanent Record

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