

1-1-2007

What Are Friends For?

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.25669/ahjl-wr44>

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WHAT ARE FRIENDS FOR?

by

David Eric Surratt

Bachelor of Science in Biology
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
1989

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
December 2007

UMI Number: 1452278

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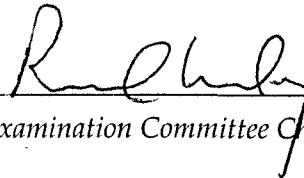
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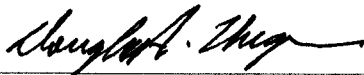
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing



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ABSTRACT

What Are Friends For?

by

David Eric Surratt

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As social beings, nearly all of us find that the development of individual identity requires an acceptance of others' influence, whether good or bad. The specifics of self-concept, as we typically understand the term, can only exist relative to one's perceptions of outside selves, in all their likeness and, more importantly, dissimilarity to our own. To know what we are is to know what we are not.

These eight, highly disparate works of short fiction all seek, in some way, to describe the evolution of individual identity that results when separate paths cross, with a broad emphasis on the by-products of our inevitable, frictional resistance to that evolution: sensations such as fear, love, anger, joy, epiphany and humiliation. It is the author's intent with these stories to provide an imaginary, yet truthful, sampling of such experience with the hope that a reader may empathize.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For their encouragement and support, I would like to thank my thesis committee, especially Richard Wiley and Doug Unger, as well as my parents, Lou and Shirley Surratt, and everyone else who thought this was a good idea.

CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM SOLVED

The line between humility and narcissism is a fine one, sure, but only to those who insist on walking it in the furrow-browed way: willing right foot over left, cursing the wind's dumb caprice, suffering in vain the queasy throb of shifting internal pressures like God's deliriously guilty little soap bubbles. "How do I feel now? How about—now?" I got over it. None of this feverish back-and-forth for me, never again. I've beaten the conundrum, tenderized it and thrown it back into this stewpot balanced on my neck. Now I serve myself bowl after bowl of the same savory ambiguity from which I once so witlessly recoiled. This takes time. For me, the whole process was easy, but only in retrospect. I did get some help from Khuram, whom I met for the first and last time several months ago, one night after cold December had lumbered in.

Early that evening, I'd crossed the burnt-orange murmur of Wilkerson Auditorium lobby and swung out into the night, part of a throng of bundled acquaintances. They were strangers, strictly speaking, but this concert of traditional Indian music had been sublime, and a fast unity was built among us. In the span of an hour, these performers (lousy word—they were shamen, not plate-spinners) had managed to channel something so otherworldly as to shake away all the lies and social apprehensions of their audience. I was close to tears by the end. They coaxed strangers into wordless acquaintanceship, and they must have promoted acquaintances to bona fide pals or higher with their sonic

testimony, that candor of drums and wires we all witnessed together, shoulder-to-shoulder in the auditorium. How many such conversions had this absorbent old cavern seen? Leaving it felt like leaving the Mass of the movie theater thirty summers ago, when I was ten and nearly every film I saw sent me atremble. Back then, an epic heartswell would see me through the parking lot and the ride home, all the way past supper and bed where it could at least flavor my dreams before dying at dawn. But this sensation of "all is forgiven, forever" would live for the whole day. That was then, and even the next thirty years of real-world insults couldn't change the essence of this long, celestial sigh, even if they did decimate its lifespan.

After the show, I'd headed for the car with a shiver in my shoulders and a dizzy lift in my sinuses that seemed to be my body's flattered reply to the Good Thing. An apostolic charge orbited my head. I was shot through with big nostalgia—not the flimsy self-indulgent kind, but a real, muscular longing relevant to the moment. It was December and it was night, but a young sun flared in my chest, casting serene twilight over the graceful herd of notions that loped and grazed there—the nimbused fauna of epiphany, sleeker and more adorable than a gaggle of impassive Madonnas.

The parking lot was cold grease and taillights beckoning through the little wraiths that issued with each breath. I walked on. There was one more breath, a dotted quarter-rest of silence, and then the familiar, muffled impact of iron thoughts from somewhere upstairs—a sickening thing that made me wince very briefly, that I tried to ignore. No no, fifty feet from the car now. Forty feet. My pace quickened and my jaw clenched, rebelling, but against what? Nothing, nothing. Everything had already gone south in a sour flash. That animal glow, that whole electric pastoral had been struck down, leaving

only strewn and smoking carcasses, wide-eyed and agape. I was an instant wretch, dissolute and famished for the car's encapsulation as I kept stride. My ear itched. My pocketed fingers were reduced to fat thugs interrogating each key in the denim dark. Thirty feet. Twenty-nine. And then I fell. Not from a buckling knee or a stubbed toe—nothing like that. In fact, my body never once faltered, but my poor, scarred spirit had smacked solid ice, and for the thousandth time had suffered a jolt worse than what the asphalt could have delivered to heroic palms. It was over.

It happened all the time. Not exactly the discordant rush of panic or the silent push of cancer's doomed colonialism, but something else just as sick and more insidious. It was real infirmity and it was easy for me that night, after all the vulgar repetition, to feel exhausted and wronged. Forsaken. Now I only wanted to rest, to recover from this thing. Nothing special, just a cot on which to flop and a dull ceiling through which to stare while I gathered up again my fragmented self.

Things could have been worse. I hadn't become disaffected or sealed off from the doting, positive energies around me. They're always there, and for all who seek them. I know this for a sort of gnostic fact. There they were, right? Ravishing me just before the zap? Yes. So I hadn't closed my windows to the fresh air. Just the opposite was true. I'd become utterly porous, open-ended, like a fan-blown inflatable man by the roadside: easily full by the grace of an empowering wind from somewhere else, but powerless to retain it. The wind would always stop and I'd always collapse, crestfallen, back to a stasis miserable and mean by comparison. My pleasures were borrowed vapors. Real life's blood flowed only through the closed systems of others around me whose rhythms thrilled me at arm's length, but no nearer. I was outside of life, and yet such a die-hard

fan. The daily parade would stream by while I leapt and whooped behind the cordon, wet-eyed with desire and sympathy for the majorette, praying she'd remain this time and be mine to have and hold and—what can I say? She never did. I couldn't keep her, and instead shackled up with a numbing despair totally wrong for me.

My last, joyless steps to the car were done and I sat alone, waxing gothic, beginning the latest convalescence. The dashboard vinyl in my nostrils was like camphor, the headrest like gauze. Eyes closed, I sighed away the outside chill in a shudder and wheeze duet so loud here, back in the box. I don't know how long I sat, but I remember being flushed out of something tart by the techno *kik-kik* protest of a nearby car alarm standing down; my neighbors to the left had easily managed their own walks through the lot and were jingling nearby. My eyes didn't open. I listened to their glass-filtered voices:

It's a warm coat, but Ron gave it to me and—

Totally. Don't wear it, girl. Burn it and send him the ashes.

We so earned our extra credit. That music was like, what the fuck?

Oh God! Right?

I heard doors open and close again with a reckless double-*shlunk* followed by the ignition. My dry lids rose and, with an affected languor, I rolled my head just in time to catch the eyes of a small-nosed fox grabbing for the seatbelt across her platinum bangs. Her unloved coat was navy. When our eyes met, her lips pulled readily into that sensibly polite smirky thing so second nature to her. Those lips long outlasted her glance, as her head swung briefly down to the belt latch before returning to center as she mouthed mutely ahead, spectral in the dim sodium glow. She glided backward out of view. A chasm was born between my eyes and the uninhabited Pontiac two spots over. Receding

headlights from the girls' car revealed eddies of weightless dust within the new space, and I was reminded of the ghostly planktonic ballrooms in undersea documentaries. The harsh light rotated away, the chasm was empty once more, and I breathed again. I fiercely scratched a deep itch in my palate with my tongue. I stared through the steering wheel. I reached forward and thumbed out a satisfying swath through the grit over the odometer. I sat motionless. I thought about the tabla player's unruly eyebrows and massaged flat my own. I thought about symmetry and the cherrywood grandfather clock in my ex-wife's house six states west—alone in its prismatic dignity, stoic in the hush of carpeted twilight while she guffaws between salacious sips at a smoldering coaster-cluttered slab across town. I wondered whether the pendulum was moving right or moving left...*now*. Maybe dead center at that moment. She probably left it unwound, the pendulum dead-center every moment. I thought about how I was rattling from the cold and needed to get out of this parking lot, so with a twist of the key and a rote choreography of dialturns and switchflips I was vanishing too. The waltzing plankton appeared once again, rushed in to bid me overfriendly farewell as if thrilling privately to see me go.

At eighty-four miles an hour, the interstate is a torpid dream. It oozes by, all striped and snakey—deceptive—because eighty-four is a rate at which our ancient forms were never meant to move and, until very recently did not—unless we were suddenly airborne, hurtling huge-pupiled and croaking into the crevasse or, a little later, flicked casually skyward by one of our own mean-spirited detonations. On the highway, something snorting and primal within us bristles. It knows we can't live for long at that absurd interstate velocity. It remains unduped by the merely stifled death blast of modern transit, despite the assent of something else within us—something sophisticated and gullible that

simply sniffs a moment before climbing idiotically behind the wheel. But the primal part—the ape-man—won't have it. Long, hairy hands wave it all off in a spastic flurry and screech. As a final compromise, we're allowed the luxury of speed but only a limited awareness of it; the sophisticate drives while the sensible savage lies tossing and turning in the back seat.

I remember, from my primal youth, the sprawl of that seat on long trips and the proficiency with which I could mind-surf from its cradle. One moment weaving along a liminal crest, nominally awake, wrists thin as leeks piled atop a downy hairline, mellowed and entranced by miles of dipping phone wires. Then asleep, pitching headlong into black water, tossed by tepid currents just under the surface until I awoke after dark, groggy and shipwrecked somewhere downshore, splayed out under the yellow moon of the dome light while Mom spoke a foreign tongue and rummaged noisily for snacks. I'd pretend to stay asleep. I'd hear the road beneath us and concentrate, trying to subtract the whole car, parents and all, from around me. I'd imagine myself prone, sliding sideways and perfectly unprotected down the totally dark highway at a constant two feet from the screaming pavement. And I'd really grasp it suddenly, nail the incongruity down for a second, just long enough to raise my own hackles in a sensation of dizzying peril. Do not tease the ape man.

The radio was set to a college station that played, so faintly, a low-fi xylophone solo as I drove home. Earlier that day, I'd turned the volume way down after pulling up to a pharmacy pickup window and rolling down my own to engage the assistant in white. She wasn't much to look at, but as the cheery antecedent to my treasured meds, she'd begun to elicit something Pavlovian in me—I twitched and drooled over this girl with the bad

teeth and ferocious, overlined eyes. Now that the car window was down, I noticed with sharp embarrassment that the honky-tonk lament I'd been listening to had, in the college station way, segued into Chinese bells echoing wearily beneath violent, thought-disrupting peals of shattering glass. And so I'd hastened to quiet the radio before it somehow betrayed to her what was going on under my belt buckle.

I don't work. I don't need to work, nor do I need to explain myself to those who do. Those who do are the only ones who ask, and they ask all the time. They're dying to know why I don't need to work, looking for any way to safely denigrate the lifestyle to themselves. They never wonder if their own legitimate careers are what the devil found for idle hands. Mine aren't set to task so easily.

Exit fifty-one rose up and I took it. The car went left at the BP station three lights down and then took an immediate right, setting a course for the house before I regained control. There were still three or four escape routes available before dead-ending at my own cul-de-sac and the unkempt salt-box where, if I wasn't careful, I'd find myself offered another encore of the same three or four claustrophobic, already boiled-down scenes as were played out the night before and the night before that. Home was home, but it had to be put off. I wheeled right and headed down dimly lit Duck Street, lined with the senescent pin oaks and poplars I knew by day. A breeze high in their crowns sent curled, sepia scraps slanting down in loops and lazy corkscrews to the road ahead where I was the first to gently run them over. I slowed for a sexless, hooded figure out walking a bull mastiff, all chest and jowls. The dog turned to watch my approach, flashing twin pools of chartreuse that seemed to project somewhere out in front of its mashed face. Three houses down, a gum-chewing, crewcut teen in a gown of a football jersey sat on an

undersized Day-Glo dirtbike by the curb, steadying himself on a mailbox with one bent arm. When I neared, number twenty-two spat territorially on the ground next to his knobby front tire. He looked up to give a quick “hey now” nod at my windshield which I stupidly reciprocated.

Duck Street led back to the busying highway, where I scanned open houses of distraction: bowling, sushi, cinema, dance club, gourmet grocery, several bars. I’ve never liked bars. That is to say, I’ve always liked the idea of bars and their promise for streamlining our stories but never the reality of their simple amplification, in which alcohol coaxes out the earnest plaintiff but far too often summons also his conjoined idiot brother, self-absorbed and presumptuous to the point of stone deaf non-utility. Still, after a brief weighing, a bar was the place to stop that night so I accelerated, made a U-turn behind a coughing El Camino and parallel parked without ado in the only open spot nearby. My front bumper nosed nonchalantly past a listing blue warning sign and into the sacred space of public buses.

Once out on the sidewalk, I was struck by how easily I’d picked a destination, which was great, because another ugly thing had arisen in recent years. I suffered from a nearly constant, at times crippling, indecision when faced with even the dullest of life’s forks. This had steadily worsened, graduating stepwise from an inordinate trouble with vacation plans, on to twenty minutes in choosing a frozen entree and eventually (though on only one occasion) a harrowing paralysis as I stood with a full bladder before three identical urinals, alone in a horrible public restroom. I still blame the fluorescent lights. The door had opened suddenly and I’d hurried to the one in the middle, furious both with the new arrival for his timeliness and with myself for picking that one, forcing him to cozy up

next to the crazy.

There had been good days and bad days, but tonight's snap decision—"I'm going to a bar"—for all its mundanity, resounded atypically in its failure to resound. I'd picked a place to stop, just like that. No seventh guess. No rueful aftertaste. At all. I even smacked my lips and sought it out with a certain confusion as I started down the sidewalk. I strained to detect a hidden threat somewhere in the same way one might tightly pad across the room, take the closet doorknob in a slow, meticulous vise-grip and fling it open to find nothing, only to turn around with a dry mouth and regard the frozen flowerprint bed with its shrouded underneath. Nothing. And I didn't seem to care. And if that was how it was going to be, so much the better.

The bar. Which bar? One without a band, definitely. I was still plenty full from the concert. Music fills me up and requires a stretch of time to digest, ideally overnight. Otherwise, more piled on top just hurts my head and stomach like a caffeine overdose. And the better the new music is—the more I enjoy it—the sicker I feel, just from the added guilt of wastefulness. A bar without a band, a bar without a band—simple as that! But before I could get into craning at the lettered facades on breezy Parula Street, I woke up lost among the human faces nearby. Suddenly I was there on Earth again, leaning hard on my outstep to avoid collision with lil' leather-and-horn-rims, meeting the beady eyes of big oxford-and-toupé, catching a tangy whiff of nimble sweatpants-and-headphones. Then another wave: mop-top-and-cable-knit, beanie-and-nose-ring, acne-and-flannel. And there was the smell—the weird, hanging melange of cologne, car exhaust, and batter-fried everything that smothered my autumn. Gratuitous and unanswered. Too much. I sniffled, maybe just from the cold air. From the car, immersed in myself, these

Friday-folk had been but distant forms, symbols, as elongate and scenic as they'd been in the auditorium parking lot. Now their numbers and the vividness of their lashes and freckled jawlines gave me vertigo, challenged my walking a straight line. I felt remiss, like I wasn't all there for them. Less than reflexive, as if I'd been roused from a deep sleep by a good friend's phone call but couldn't yet form the sentences that would prove my involvement. I could only relax my brow and smile slightly, vulnerably like a good citizen, and that would have to suffice. A bar without a band, a bar without a band. And there it was across the street: The Crawlspace. I'd been here before. Once with Sally, early on, when she grabbed my arm at jokes and still did shots. Once again in the daytime two summers ago with Andy and swollen, churlish Paul after his late-life wisdom teeth extraction.

We'd had the place to ourselves then. Andy and I had played nine-ball while Paul tossed back Jaegermeister chased with saliva, blood and clove oil from his groaning sockets, all the while whimpering pathetically in a new madras shirt at the winsome brunette behind the bar until she had, out of pity stirred with disgust, microwaved him her own little Tupperware drum of cream of broccoli. Andy had rolled his eyes and racked up the next game. The first taste burned hapless Paul's mouth—*Hot!* he slurred, furiously sucking air and letting his spoon hand flop back down where it caught the edge of his ashtray, capsizing it noisily at the same moment I scratched on the break.

Andy and his wife had moved to Savannah a month later, where they're now crowded by a five-week-old boy. The kid is already somehow contemplative and brooding and, I swear, cynical like his father. Paul was still around, unmarried, renting out abused tillers and jigsaws to a dilettante clientele of bored newmoneys in upscale Carrington. I'd

visited him at work not long ago. The store was hopping and I'd tried to get out of assistant manager Paul's hair, saying I'd be back another day. He'd have none of it and began struggling instead to create an easy back-and-forth with me while ringing up extension cords, blathering about cubic inches and gruffing out orders to a kid behind the counter, a sleepy-eyed still life with blue work shirt and oval "Russ" patch. But Paul was divided and wired-out and, to no one's surprise, couldn't pull it off. I finally followed the flushed back of his neck out the front door as he hefted a banged-up drill press to the bed of a pickup, mouse-brown oil spatters all over the cuff of his depressing khakis. He had shaken my hand ridiculously in the parking lot and we'd agreed to get together "real soon."

From the curb I found a run-sized gap in the traffic and jogged over to The Crawlspace, fists balled in gritty coat pockets, feeling the creak and bother in my dried-out hamstrings. They started to stiffen even before I reached the sidewalk where a set of filthy cement steps slunk down between weathered brick exteriors to the bar's side entrance. By the light of a single bare bulb I heeled carefully down to the door I vaguely remembered: drab, windowless, thickly painted with a layer of dark green that peeled and flaked away near the top to reveal historical flickers of mildewy pale blue running through shallow bays of bare wood. End this, begin that. With a deep breath and a tonal sigh, I pushed the old door open and went in.

Heat. Light. A scatter of strange faces directed my way. Dirt, ductwork, a whimsical string of Christmas lights. Yeast and sweat swirled into a perfumed and thinly-smoked atmosphere still supportive of life. A resplendent library of liquors and liqueurs, and even—but after these few seconds it all fell into impressionism as my glasses were

hopelessly fogged, already forcing me into a painful little divestment. Those of us so awfully dependent on our corrective lenses understand what it means to take them off in public. It's a transient but true blindness. Even though I smilingly hiked my eyebrows at the luminous face-puffs around me while rubbing these two cold disks on my shirt, the ape-man was bewildered, vulnerable, getting riled, and I quickly returned his glasses to settle him.

I strode across the dirt floor and took a stool at the far corner of the bar, behind which a spiky-haired twenty-something in a gray t-shirt and earrings casually rubbed his own glasses with a white rag, placing them one by one in an invisible rack below. He was chatting with an older, sharp-featured patron two seats down from me. This guy was very enunciated, Indian by appearance. Behind me, walnut stained booths lined a dank cinderblock wall. Coletrane played at a permissive volume (still, indigestion) through diagonally mounted speakers that hunched over between slats of the joisted ceiling, trailing black wire tethers like lost balloons. The pool table was gone, but a venerable if illegible dartboard still graced the back wall. It was spent twice over from ten thousand throws and there were almost as many holes in the paneling around it as in the board itself. A fresh one hung in its place would have been the picture of sustained, flawless incompetence. And what's this? Next to the dartboard where a yellowing jukebox or pinball machine should be, stood a narrow confessional. A priest's confessional. I'd have remembered that. It was a hip and surely storied addition.

A discreet look around showed the several booths to be half occupied by slouching pairs and one noisy foursome of stylish students: three girls and one bleary, simpering turtlenecked boy who leaned forward and, with a furtive glance my way, too loudly asked

the table seriously, no disrespect to you guys, but seriously, do you actually, like, enjoy giving blowjobs? I turned back to the bar, ears open for whatever hushed response would follow the tittering flashes of faux outrage, but now here was that bartender kid asking what can I getcha? I ummed for a bit. Then I bought a gin and tonic and dropped the change into an empty mason jar with its magic-marker reminder that students are poor, be a pal, etc. But I had problems of my own. For one thing, I didn't want the gin and tonic. I wanted a Bloody Mary, but it was too late, so I lifted the glass and fumed, resolving to burn through it and get this mistake out of my sight. I gulped. The bartender had gone back to the Indian guy and I watched them sidelong over the tilted rim of my tumbler. The Indian spoke.

"But the players themselves can be *just* as uncertain about what to expect from American audiences." The bartender wiped and nodded while he continued.

"You'll often hear Indian musicians preface their playing to westerners with a brief—though not always so—" he laughed, "ahh, a brief lecture on classical Indian composition and, ahh, *intent* you know? Explaining the historical significance of the raga form, that kind of thing." He stopped and sipped.

The bartender was agreeable. "Well that's a good idea, I guess. Most Americans don't know anything about that stuff, and I guess they'll get into it more if they understand what it is." His dangling earring, the only one I could see, glinted with borrowed neon from a sign behind his head. Glasses clinked. Someone scooted a chair out.

The Indian man frowned at a dark beer between his hands and countered. "But it's unnecessary, the introduction. The audience is not there to understand. They are there to hear Indian music, and they already know what it sounds like, you know? And that's all

that matters, you know? Let them read a book if they're curious about the theory. They are there because of the strangeness of it, not in spite of it. And if it's good music, no matter its, ah, origin, you shouldn't have to explain anything before playing, right?"

"Ohhh, so you think they're not giving us enough credit?" tried the bartender.

The Indian guy brightened. Or was it glowered? I still thought he might be furious.

"Yes, of course of *course*, but it's really only because the musicians are not giving *themselves* enough credit, you know? They may speak as if an introduction is necessary to minimize any, ah, misinterpretation by untrained western ears, but I suspect that they're really more afraid of a correct or at least, ah, justifiable *other* interpretation which they may be able to, you know, beat down with a quick music lesson." He sipped again, raised his bushy brow at the bartender and continued. "Otherwise, maybe American audiences will hear their music for what it is, as much as anyone can, and still not like it. That'd be no good, right? Right?"

At this, he laughed hard and suddenly with a goblin warmth that reassured me immensely. The bartender laughed back and said that no, he guessed not. The gin and tonic was gone. I felt safer and butted in.

"Do you—" I rasped and cleared my throat. "Do you like classical Indian music?"

Both men looked at me, and I saw the Indian full-on for the first time, a mosaic vision in mahogany, severe along a certain axis and yet softened by kindness and the rubbery, superimposed caricature from my own stereotype. He fixed me with wide, watery eyes, his stained ivory teeth still showing from a lingering grin. Some of the vertigo I'd known on the sidewalk returned, but I held fast to eye contact.

"What's that? Yes I do, very much."

“And not just because you’re Indian?” I risked.

He laughed again. “I’m Pakistani. My name is Khuram.” And he twisted to extend his pale-nailed hand for me to shake, which I gladly did, although with too much grip, I think to squeeze back into his palm any hot dust of American arrogance I might have kicked up with my silly presumption.

“And this is Tom,” he gestured toward the bartender. Aproned Tom smiled politely and nodded my way, still wiping down those glasses.

“Good to meet you,” I said.

And none of us spoke for a while. I worried that I’d spoiled something. But even if I had, what could be done at that point? Conceivably, these men were annoyed with me and wanted back their dialogue. But they didn’t know me, so even if they were bothered, would it have been polite for me to give it back so readily? Would it really have pleased them if I’d just clammed up, pinching off my last words into an unreferenced singularity? A clown’s unicycle, insular and pointless? No, of course not. Withdrawal here would be, unquestionably, an insult, even if I were less than welcome. Here I was, fretting again over what I pretended was an issue of respect for privacy when the real monster was my own shyness. As vices and virtues go, shyness defies popular categorization. Once roundly stigmatized as antisocial, its apologists have not only won it clemency, but even managed with ironic audacity to make shyness over, giving it charisma and victim appeal, slapping on it a counterfeit seal of authenticity and pushing it through some loophole in the social contract. What’s lost is the fact that—Khuram excused himself and went to the restroom—what’s lost is the fact that shy simply equals, as it always has, rude. Believe me, it does. Now we indiscriminately coddle the shy. We make special

allowances and even find admirable this egotism. What a mistake! For my part, I'll go forth *responsibly*, case by case, offering dispensation (within reason) to those wounded, those clearly made unnaturally taciturn by real calamity, but no blanket amnesty for the habitually shy—no way. Where I see it teetering, I'll kick it the into the vice heap every time. We're all friends here.

I asked my bartender friend, Tom, for a vodka martini. Grey Goose. Slightly dirty. Two olives please. He brandished bottles, cupped his hands around the shaker like a squeezebox, poured, then murdered the two olives for me with a plastic pick. The drink was scrumptious and seared my esophagus. Again. Again! I was almost done with it when Khuram returned to sit down and look at my glass. He only said "Ha!" and laughed once more, warmly.

"Yeah," I said, feeling suddenly snug. I hunched forward and stretched my aching back, forearms crossed on the bar like a genie. Maybe a mischievous, wish-twisting genie, but maybe an honest and good one who deserves scratches behind the ears. And an expert genie I was, transfiguring without effort: The Christmas lights went quickly from ornament to essence and the girls, the irksome starlings at my back, were turned to nightingales. Even the hunched black speakers became sanguine gargoyles cooing out narrative saxophone streams. They sang of melons and missed buses, porch frost and robbers. Tom had moved down the bar and was greeting someone who had just walked in. He looked like Tom, only he was about ten years older with no earrings. He was pulling up one leg by the ankle and pointing emphatically to a yellow sock. *Check it out Tom! Bring back memories!?* He cackled and let go of the foot while Tom nodded sheepishly. I finished the vodka and went for the olives, slowly pulping them into some

new words.

“So Khuram, were you at the concert tonight? At Wilkerson?”

“Yes. I was sitting behind you, actually.” He didn’t laugh, but only smiled very slightly. “What did you think?”

I squinted. “Of the music?”

“Yes, of the music and of the introduction they gave before it. Everything.” Was he smirking? I wanted the teeth back.

I told him that I loved it, and that the intro didn’t bother me because I didn’t really pay attention to it. I caught Tom’s eye and signaled for a new martini.

“Good, good!” said Khuram, and I got the teeth back. “I enjoyed it too. The tabla player was really expressive, you know? Disarmingly so. He made everyone feel welcome I think, like they were among friends.”

The tabla player? Like they were among friends? Oh man. A fever broke. My pocked and huddled spirit sat up suddenly in bed with matted bangs and an appetite. I opened my mouth and looked at Khuram, who must have seen something rise up into my face, for his brow rose a little and his eyes were big and searching.

“Among friends?” I managed. Tom played his squeezebox and poured.

“Yes, do you know what I mean? Did you get that feeling?” asked Khuram.

I told him that I did, yes I did, and then I deflated. We could talk all night about the pleasures of music and camaraderie spawned, about the holy union of opposites, about childhood and its death, about re-illusionment, but we would not. We would not, because tonight I couldn’t watch it all vaporize again, especially not with a new acquaintance or a phantom friend or whatever this guy was. I liked him. I loved him. Already. And I

couldn't just stretch out here in this accident of a bar with Khuram in besotted rollick and reverie while, upstairs, my poor spirit read magazines in the stale gloom, waiting for headache and relapse. I didn't meet people like Khuram often but I would remain silent, even if Khuram wanted to talk, and I was sorry for both of us. He spoke but I barely heard him, as though he were behind thick glass.

"I saw those same guys in D.C. last spring," he went on. "But they looked tired. It was a bigger crowd, much bigger, and things just didn't really, ah, play out the same way, you know? It happens. Have you seen them before?"

I didn't answer, but instead stared at the new pair of skewered olives, one dead and one wounded. I waited. My lids were heavy and I wanted to fall instantly asleep. Which way the pendulum, right or left? Or centered?

"Hey, ah, are you okay?" Khuram said.

I looked up at him to answer but only stared with my lips parted. He was concerned. How and on what level I didn't know, but there was concern where his eyebrows met and unchallenged compassion in his protruding ears. My upper lip started a chaotic quiver and the shame I felt over it made things worse. My head went hot. I swallowed, hearing windy rumbles and squeaks in my temples. My eyes filled with tears but Khuram did not look away.

"You're not okay."

I got a grip and blinked, sending a drip down my left cheek which I swooped on before it could reach the high beardgrass.

"I'm sorry. I'm okay." My face burned.

"No you're not," he said. I looked straight ahead and nodded either an insistence or

an agreement, I wasn't sure which. What did I just do? I had cried in front of Khuram, a guy I didn't know. Suddenly I recalled the first week of junior high when I was beaten down in the locker room by apish Scott Freeman. I'd sat down on the cement, encircled by gangly, gawking strangers, hands on my tucked head, convulsed by great sobs while another part of me gently rocked north...east...south...west...in order to make a neat square out of one...two...three...four drops of blood from my nose. What did I just do? I had cried in front of a stranger. Cried at a stranger. Khuram knew that I was crying. Me. It was unintentional, and it was mortifying. I think I was hungry. I was starving, and was simply feasting on a real response to the unreal sorrow I'd wordlessly let slip. But of course it was no accident, and the human form that had just moved a seat closer was everything to me. What had I done? I'd just walked into a bar and shown a stranger some inscrutable tears I'd come across. *Hey man, check these out!*

Khuram's hand lightly clasped my shoulder at this last thought and I huffed a mouthy guffaw, pinching the slippery wet bridge of my nose under my glasses.

"Hey," he said, "I think I know what you need. See that over there?"

I squinted up at him. He was pointing to the back wall, to the dark little confessional by the dartboard. I stuttered out another laugh and he grinned.

"Seriously. It might help if you confess!"

"Confess what?"

"I don't know. You'll know once you're in there. You'll be surprised."

"Confess to who? To you?"

"Sure. I'd be happy to receive your confession."

This was touching, although if he was just feeling zany, I was sorry to see him resort

to glib sacrilege. I smiled thinly, looked toward the lacquered booth, then turned back to Khuram who cocked his head as if to say *okay*? He was serious. I protested. Confess here? In a dive? With horns and drunken hoots and smoke? I wasn't raised with religion. It would mean nothing to me. Besides, I already feel much better. Confess what? But in another minute he'd convinced me. We rose together from our stools, attracting the attention of Tom the Bartender who was still at the other end. He stood with hands in pockets and a tinsel glint from his earlobe, rocking on his heels and nodding at Yellowsocks, who couldn't seem to shut up. Tom looked to me and then to Khuram who pointed discreetly toward the back, saying "We'll be over at the box for a bit." Tom narrowed his eyes and kicked his chin up knowingly, approvingly it seemed. How often did this happen? It occurred to me that a self-service unburdening device like a confessional might lighten the load of any bartender.

We left the watery dregs in our glasses and I followed Khuram's eggshell shirt toward the back, seeing now that I was—wait—yes, I was drunk. We passed the student quartet but I registered only one of them, a foreheady young woman in a plum-colored silk blouse who sat with hands hidden under the table in her lap, a cigarette burning in front of her. When our pink eyes met, she drew in her shoulders against a chill and made a goofy face.

"Oooh, a confession! Are you confessing something?" she flirted.

"I don't know. Yeah, I think so."

"What are you confessing?" The other three stared up at me now. Curls and shiny bracelets and cleavage. Blearyboy looked interrupted but curious.

"He doesn't know yet," chimed Khuram behind me. "C'mon," he nagged. He thought

I might opt out, but he needn't have worried. I was turned away from him and yet pulled by gravity at my back, reeled in by reverse baby steps while I regarded this girl in silk.

"Can I listen?" she asked.

"What?" I said, considering her request. She looked edible.

"Can I listen?"

"Uhh," I stalled.

"Can I listen too?—Can I listen?" sugared the other two. I wouldn't have consented, but I saw the scrawny turtleneck kid shoot glum glances around the table, and something overrode my want for privacy. The liquored-up ape-man inside me said to take all three of his females.

"Sure, you can all listen," I said.

They got up, followed by the poor sport who stood slowly, sighing like an old man. I turned back to Khuram. He was sitting crosslegged and beautiful in his linen and loafers on the minimal booth's attached outside bench, fixing me with another impatient look. I approached the flimsy little door, tweaked it open and peered in, my eyes accomodating after a few seconds. Inside there was a simple braced seat and no floor except for the packed dirt on which the confessional stood. The interior smelled of musty earth and woodstain. It was dark inside and became still darker after I sat down and, with involuntary ritual, slowly pulled the door shut. Through the waning crack I could see the girls jockeying for spots close to Khuram while the boy lagged behind, one hand in his pocket and the other swirling a brown bottle.

Once the door had clicked, the outside bar noise was cut more that I'd expected. I sniffed to myself loudly and watched yellow light from under the door creep to my shoes,

to my handcuffs, and throw into relief the lumpy earth around my feet. There was a latticed panel by my head. Light entered through it and fell upon the back of my hand, creased and fragmented in the waffle beam. Knuckles flecked with glossy nicks. Wrist older and hairier than I cared to contemplate. So I looked up and away, through the crossed wooden strips where I could piece together Khuram's now patient profile, regal and resolute amidst a flanking jumble of doe eyes, soft hair and blushed cheeks. No one spoke. I breathed deeply and exhaled.

"Bless me, umm—all of you—for I have sinned."

Only Khuram answered. "What is it, my son?"

I swallowed, still not knowing what to say. I looked back down at my wrist and groped for inspiration while gouging at the wood under the window with a thumbnail. I thought of the locker room and Scott Freeman's pitted face. Of Sally driving off, numb and raccoon-eyed from ruined mascara. Of frantic Yellowsocks, whom I could still hear above all else. Of the bull mastiff's eyes and a new shower curtain I'd bought. Of my protracted loneliness and bitter continuance. Of my problem. But nothing rushed forth with requisite fire. No thirst for absolution and no stomach for fabrication. I cleared my throat.

"I don't know," I said.

The girls hissed. Khuram turned his head to the lattice and raised an eyebrow.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," I said. "I don't know. At least not right now. I thought I had something to confess, but I don't. There! That's my confession. I've committed the sin of ignorance of my sin. I'm sorry." Then I gave a strained chuckle. I really was sorry.

No one was amused. The students moved away, carping tactlessly, bokking like chickens while Khuram stayed fixed on his bench and stared straight ahead.

"This didn't really help," I told him.

He looked over at me with tired eyes, for the first time appearing as drunk as anyone.

"Yes, it often doesn't," he said quietly. "Another time, maybe. Sometimes it takes a long while to know what's beneath it all. To know what's gone wrong. To know thyself."

He kept looking at me through the lattice, and I saw something else in him, something that wasn't there at the bar. He continued.

"And when this self-knowledge offers itself so nakedly, one finds that there can be no, ahh, dressing it up again, no holding back the truth of what it means, you know? Sometime soon, you'll know what to confess and you'll do so with bizarre eloquence, because you will have finally grasped your true identity, ahh, your *place*. You know? Your place. Just give it some time, my friend. It will happen."

Khuram gave a maudlin smile that the rest of his face couldn't support. His lips had become tight, his eyes imploring. He spoke again.

"Want to switch places?"

CHAPTER 2

FLAMES

A cold December sun sent its silent blare low through the oaks, naked and shamed, their hands thrown upward in lament while three separate fires burned below. One was still tiny, only just kindled from a book-sized mat of pine needles that writhed into neon script under a tangle of twigs. After a moment the twigs were ablaze too, beset along their lengths by marching flamelets the color of cantaloupe, neatly spaced like files of nodding ducks or, as this firestarter saw it, little devils on escalators. Ribbons of smoke lifted up and away as he knelt before the snapping mirage, his shoulders slumped in flannel.

The other two fires were a bit older and not the same—they burned invisibly in the stomachs of this kid and the girl who'd rolled with him into an empty campground a couple of hours earlier, when the sun had been the same pearly ball as now, but higher up on the overcast. Before that, the two had been on the road and chattering for the last hour or so of flat Indiana, each propped and propelled in conversation by a secret case of nerves that advanced with the miles, their faces shooting for placid while their unwashed heads turned too often in search of good humor and clues of reassurance in the eyes of the other. His jitters were free-floating, as formless as his days since graduation. He'd never been to Indiana but still knew the turns; since freshman year, he'd roadtripped like this and bedded down in the dark. He'd kept warm and fed and camped backcountry, lonesome solo under the strain of all weather and vermin. He'd even loved and traveled

with another girl not so different from this one, although without this one's grace, because *this one* knew a couple of tricky truths which maddened him for her—riddles over which he himself still labored and choked: *I am always strong and exposed. I will always freeze and melt at the same time.* He didn't fully appreciate it yet, but her mastery here was what had made him hers after only six pulsing weeks. But autumn romance at twenty-two is Bailey's and chimney smoke. They'd never faced together the baptismal fire of travel. And so here he was, the young outdoorsman, steeped in funk and admiration, ready for any contingency, ready for nothing.

Her worry had been focused in contrast but similarly polymorphic: darting over and under as they neared the campground, flitting up out of her churning stomach and into her throat where, like a manic puppeteer, it gave sudden and odd vitality to such topics as irrigation and her hangnail. *He must know what I'm going to tell him,* she'd thought, imagining that it was over, that her secret was already out, betrayed to the finest detail by an unmanageable bleat she heard in her own voice.

But he hadn't known anything. He had only known that they were heading out west. They would sleep at the dunes. Tomorrow they would pack up and divert fifteen miles south to Valparaiso for a shower and quick visit with her estranged (or something) father. He expected them. Tomorrow was her father's birthday. He knew that this man had been trouble for the family, that he had made them unhappy, that he drank. She'd told him as much weeks before, as they were brushing past dark rhododendrons on a day hike back home in the Virginia Appalachians. Her father had first come up late one night in his parents' paneled basement, on the occasion of wine and Stereolab and a merciless tarot spread between them that spoke of secrecy, of a formidable male figure from her past, of

a need for cleansing. He knew that her mother had left her father several years earlier and that the man had since moved here, to Indiana. This was all he had been told. The kid's protective side had been roused without a doubt, although he saw that no real threat existed. The man he was to meet tomorrow sounded like a loser. The man reeked all the way from here, fifteen miles away, but only of some vague selfishness and immaturity, some tragic but generic mark of lousy fatherhood. The man had fucked up, been fired, and was now long gone.

These two had eventually stepped from the car onto this campsite and with deep sighs stretched their compacted spines a moment, heads thrown back to gaze past interlocked fingers at the pale gray above. Then they had set to work in relative silence. The back seat was unloaded and clothes were quickly layered on. Rubberized bags on the roof rack were unbungeed and rifled through for dry noodles and cookware. He'd tramped around in steel-toe boots picking up branches from under oaks and around neighboring sites. She had kicked away the sticks and stones from a flat spot and rolled out a maroon dome tent which, despite a newness to such things, she deftly brought into bloom while he'd gathered wood and watched her. They had then rested, stopping to sit on stumps around a little Coleman stove where they boiled noodles and traded a crinkling bottle of water made tepid by the floor vent.

She had poked at her noodles and started to speak then in a still friendly but, he'd thought, curiously deliberate tone. She was nervous about seeing her father. But *he* needn't be nervous because her father was pretty easy-going and always got along well with people. Really, he shouldn't feel nervous.

He had chewed his spicy chicken-flavored noodles and watched her while she

continued.

She was nervous because her father had been a big disappointment to her and her mother, like she'd already told him. Things had gotten ugly in the past, before the family split up, and she didn't know what to expect from him this visit.

He had listened and nodded while scraping at his empty bowl, but his thoughts had strayed toward the firewood. He'd picked up enough logs and twigs, but was there enough of the medium-sized stuff? She'd raised her hands to brush the hair behind her red ears and looked at the ground, slouching on the stump with the noodle bowl balanced on her knees.

She had gone on to explain that her father had problems and that he had hurt her, but that he had also been very sweet to her. That she always knew he loved her, and that this was more important than anything else, you know? Did he know what she meant? Did he know how important it is to feel loved by your parents even though they're not perfect?

He'd said that he did, absolutely, hoping that she would believe him and maybe change the subject. He'd begun to grind his teeth with an insipid rhythm.

But she had gone further. She and her father had actually been quite close when she was younger. He was a substitute teacher. They'd spent lots of time together, especially during a few long summer stretches when he was out of work. Her father had marveled out loud at her precocity and insight, telling her proudly how much less mature the kids he taught were. He was easily impressed, she'd thought. He had read to her and lectured excitedly, correcting with perfect tact what she'd learned in school. He was such a nerd. They'd thrown softballs and sung together in the garden. They'd bought groceries and steamed shrimp and cuddled together in front of soaps and Braves games while summer

showers played the drainpipes. This is the way things were—even when she was fifteen and should have been out with friends her own age. They'd gotten very close. *Too* close, you know? They'd gotten way too close.

And this gracious young woman had looked up at that moment with a thin smile and for the first time, he'd seen puddles in her eyes. It was disorienting to him, and she'd reflexed forward to lay a firm hand on his knee, as if to keep the boy from flying away. Her face became a sudden composite of something he knew and something else unfamiliar and illegible. She had meant for it to say, *This is part of my life and I'm sorry, but now it's part of yours too*. Somewhere he may have grasped that, but the sentiment was instantly diluted to destruction; the seconds that followed had been an acceleration in his mind, a whoosh up to speed, far faster than words or even thought itself. And then they had dislodged, the only labels he had: Molested. Sexually molested. Sexual abuse. Abused. Incest. They were all bad, very bad. Vulgar. The stuff of sick jokes and suicide notes. What could be worse?

Alarmed thus, he had imagined pure trauma for the girl and chosen to see in her face something only pitiable. A lost lamb, deranged with fear. Abused. He was feverishly sympathetic and had risen to his own challenge, sliding from the stump to his knees at the girl's feet, hugging her around her fleeced middle with his head against her belly, saying he was sorry as she set the clanking noodle bowl aside. She'd squeezed him back and given a tearful little laugh of relief and embarrassment, as much for him as for herself. How persistently maudlin it all was. It had been a while now since she'd told anyone, but he was only the latest to know among a handful of others who had shown similar half-comprehension—always the half of horrific cruelty and misfortune. For her always the

wrong half, and it still rankled, but she'd learned another trick: Don't protest. Let them believe what they want at first, or you'll never escape their condolences.

In group therapy at age sixteen she had seen the wrong half. There were a couple of poor girls who'd been raped by their fathers as routinely as the rain fell, a few more who were threatened or coerced or just hard-sold with lies from the mouths of beasts or step-beasts, and she'd wept for them in the same shade of bewilderment offered her at this campground. They had been as different from her as she was from the little outdoorsman at her feet. More different. She couldn't imagine her father doing the things these girls described, and yet she'd been gravely compelled to sit in a circle with them all and trade sex-with-dad stories. She'd done so but had felt tacky, and soon sensed that something in her tone wasn't welcome. The group leader, more doctrinaire than facilitator, had prodded her amazingly, shaken her down for any nuggets of rage she might have stashed, but had gotten nothing and moved on.

Of course, there had been something. Had the group leader shown some respect, a lump of shame might have revealed itself then; this girl was sorry for what her mother had weathered. The woman's already weakened marriage had been simply plundered—an inside job—and at times like these, wrapped in consoling arms, her daughter was obliged to revisit her own role as happy homewrecker. To be fair, in the days before discovery she'd had a child's concept of her own influence even if it *had* been retained, as she suspected, a little too dearly by her midteens. Wisdom came swift and horrible one sultry late morning in August when her mother jaunted home from work with Thai takeout and heard an awful, protracted moan from down the hall. *Sweetie?* she had called tremulously, making a beeline for her wounded daughter. In another breath, she was in

the open doorway, frozen after a classic double-take on her way to the wrong room and still clutching the bag of lunch. She'd seen her husband's hands retract violently and (though his lover never knew this detail) a collage of legs, wet fur and vanishing white finger marks symmetrical across her daughter's buttocks had been burned into the woman's brain forever. The girl remembered swiveling her head then to see her mom let go of the bag and slouch for a second as if absolutely relaxed. Then she had sunk heavily to her knees, dragged her fingertips hard down her long face, making her own marks, and blasted the room with a throat-searing shriek. *What's going on?*

The girl had always remembered the question as a difficult riddle: what was going on? After that day of vomit and sobs and the numbness that followed, she never stopped wondering what was going on. Her beleaguered father had packed up and driven away, trailing apologies, leaving her alone to wonder what had happened. She would not press charges. Her mother had been ice for a while, eventually melting into a kind of surly roommate and then, finally, a mother once more. A mostly forgiving mother on whom she again dared rely for support (to a point), but from whose unforgetting eyes she still caught an occasional chill—a reminder that *I don't know you*. Her mother's faraway stares had been, and still remained for her, the worst part of it all. And while she sometimes felt flares of hateful anger at her idiot father for his carelessness and absence, she always backed off from the abyss, struggling instead to hold her first love sacred and herself accountable despite the hounding from all sides to recant for her own good. She'd fumed, sulked and begged to be left alone, but she had never recanted; she'd sensed that somehow, unless she held on, more and greater misery would be hers, and to what end? No, she would push on ahead of schedule and let the past color the future as it may. This

girl was a special case and a risky resolve was in her nature, as it had been when she'd taught herself to catch copperheads by the neck at age nine.

Now the outdoorsman had much to think about and unoccupied hours in which to make a good start. He let his fire spread throughout the pile of blue-brown twigs before adding anything else. When the time came, on went a layer of thicker branches he'd broken in hand. They hissed and sweated in the flames, reminding him of a steakhouse commercial he'd seen too much, with its close on shot of sizzling shish kebabs. *Good food and good times for the whole family.* Family. Keep things within the family. The family that plays together stays together. Father and daughter together. Drunk, halitotic father all over his daughter. Tada! And here's that daughter now! *My girlfriend was sexually abused by her dad.* He believed it, but it was a big and bullish thing and the visions trod upon him painfully when he tried corralling them; somewhere within the stampede flashed a withering image of sex with his own mother. He'd had many embarrassing questions and carefully voiced a few while the two had washed forks and bowls under a cold water spigot:

How long did it go on? Why didn't you tell your mom? What happened when she found out? Did you see a psychiatrist? *Are you okay?*

He'd felt stupid asking this last question but didn't know what else to say, torn as he was between killing curiosity and fear at the scalding details to a story that already rattled him with its generalities. She'd been patient and honest with her answers:

About two years. I was afraid to tell her. She freaked badly. Yeah, but I hated therapy. *I'm okay.*

Beyond that, there seemed to be surprisingly little to discuss. He'd hugged her once

or twice more and then they had both gone as quiet as before the revelation. He built his fire. She sat in the zippered archway of the tent and scanned a pamphlet from the state park service, occasionally reading parts out loud while he barely pretended to listen. He had one more question, the stupidest one of all and he knew it. Yet it spilled forth at a moment of irritation as she cheerfully read to him about vascular plant diversity.

Why are we going to see him?

She drew a breath. *Because he's my dad.*

Her expression turned suddenly sad and her eyes narrowed with some consternation. She told him calmly that he didn't have to come with her if it was too upsetting. She could go alone and be back to the campground that evening. The outdoorsman considered this briefly before telling her no, that he would come with her. He said that he was sorry, that he of course knew what she meant but that he didn't understand it all. *No shit*, she thought. But her anger abated and she counted her blessings. The thought of this outdoorsman standing pungently at her shoulder while she shook and rapped on a door fifteen miles away was comforting, and she found herself watching him adoringly as he lowered his eyes and played with the fire. Presently she stood up and crept behind him, sinking to her haunches behind his back and wrapping her arms around his warm torso. She kissed him five times on the cheek and they both fell over on their sides, giggling serenely. This is how they lay until the sun set, lazily recounting the trip thusfar and exciting at the promise of points west.

By dusk the fire was full on. A rapacious bed of coals pulled air over itself and devoured what oxygen it could, updrafting the remnants in a column of sidewinder sparks. The two campers lay in each other's arms, face to face. She bit his ear and

whispered her gratitude at him taking her across the country. He squeezed her and kissed her neck, her jaw and then her chapped lips many times, his fingers luxuriating in her oily hair until the kisses were deep and he felt her melt against him. She pried herself away to fetch from the tent a sleeping roll and blankets and smoothed them out by the fire. It was warm enough that they forewent covers and soon their naked, flushed forms were splayed and humping in the open. No ceiling but the starless dome at infinity, no walls but the black oaks and pines, no souls around but these two, primal in the firelight.

The rare splendor of the experience blessed them with simultaneous orgasms. At the noisy zenith, the outdoorsman was awash in lust for the girl's freckled nose and eyelids and for the tips of her teeth, just parted beneath her lips. Here was his love. What's more, there was a sudden, strange pride in his pounding heart. His fingers in her hair smelled of victory, of a claim safely staked and on record, filed here by the ceremonial fire he'd built himself. He'd wanted her and had made her his. She had let him. She squirmed and panted and bit her lip underneath the boy, curling her toes and lifting a leg to bring her bare heel down hard on the blankets. When she felt him release she was loudly approving and scored his back with the nails she'd chewed jagged in the car. The fire was fanned to its highest by a cold breeze. She felt fifteen again. Here was his love, a thing this strong woman procured like food and water. She was taken care of, safe and snug. She was okay.

The next morning it was sunny when they awoke. They rolled up bedding, broke down the tent and ate chocolate doughnuts. While his girlfriend packed up the car, the outdoorsman poured several bottles of spigot water into the fire circle, where it thumped and hissed and billowed opaque white puffs high against the blue. After a smooch and a

final glance around, they got in the car and were gone.

CHAPTER 3

WHAT IT WAS

Andrew was going camping and Jim followed him all over the house asking him about it, squeezing his big brother for conversation before he left. When Andrew rose up the stepladder, Jim was there below him, sadly holding the base. When his brother popped through the attic panel and said “damn,” Jim was outraged along with him without knowing what was so damnable.

“Check it out, Jim!”

He scrambled up to stand by Andrew’s hanging legs, his head now in the hot space. At the far end of the attic, next to the outside vent was a cauliflower-sized wasp nest, alive with the animals and looking extremely dangerous.

“Damn!” said Jim

They were still a moment, then his brother moved.

“Lemme down!”

And Jim was left alone to watch the teeming gray lump send off and welcome back family, several at a time, through a sunny little triangle where wasps vanished and reemerged in the late-day glare. In no time, Andrew was back at the ladder.

“Lemme up!”

He wore a one-piece white worksuit from the garage, a ski mask and ski goggles, his exposed mouth laughing while Jim took him in -- “ha ha HAH!” He clattered a purple

can of D-Con in one gloved hand.

“Lemme up!” he repeated and bulled past Jim up the ladder.

“Are you crazy?” Jim thrilled. He dropped down a step, holding the plywood panel open with only the crown of his head as Andrew fired. A poison streamer pattered the vent slats under the nest. He corrected his aim instantly, but the wasps were hyper in the attic heat; in one second, the entire nest blossomed as they hummed off, forming a violent black blizzard. Andrew soaked the bare nest, and when the wasps clouded across the attic space he mock-screamed and swung the stream wildly at the closest, laughing at them.

Jim took it all in and felt vertigo. He wrapped his fingers around something near the entrance (wooden thing?) and peeked at the scene from under his attic-panel hat, waiting for the last safe second to fully exit. His disguised brother ducked and dodged wildly. Jim paled, tightened his grip on something (weird wooden sculpture?) and kept watching. The killing stream went strong, but then began sputtering foamy blobs, so that the lost room’s smell went metallic and a toxic mist hung in the sunrays. Now the wasps were everywhere. Jim stepped down, pulled whatever it was he held along with him, and the panel fell closed. He stood safely, one rung lower, with the ceiling still touching his hair as he heard Andrew calmly mutter “that’s probably a good idea.” Now Jim had this thing in his hand. He felt its weight and studied it more closely as he stepped to the hall carpet with spots in his vision and Andrew’s muffled voice above him gently lecturing the wasps on the cycle of life and death, survival of the fittest, etc.

What was it he held? A crude carving of a man, and a tragic one. Hunched, tapered at the waist. Skinny legs with huge, unfinished block feet. A small head. He didn’t know whether to be impressed or put off by it. Whether to see what had made it into his hands

or what had been left undone. Abandoned by an artist or finished by a fool. It was what it was, sculpted in coarse scoops as if from a buck knife, giving the slouchy figure a hammered look. Ancient yet fresh to his eyes, stoic yet vulnerable. Flawed to perfection. Jim was suddenly enamored. He went to the kitchen table and sat with his elbows on it, rotating the figure to look at the base: J.G. 1939. His own initials.

His brother called him from upstairs but Jim didn't answer, and now Andrew was thundering down the steps, bursting into the kitchen in his ghastly white with ski-mask and goggles, a scatter of dark bits across his jumpsuit.

"Where'd you go? Help me kill these."

Then he yanked the door open and leapt athletically into the garage. Jim followed, put on his winter gloves and orbited his brother, beating away the hapless wasps, many of which were already gone, only clinging in death-grips.

"That was damn fun, dude."

Several sick ones crawled the floor slab in little circles and died under Andrew's boots, which Jim now saw were wrapped at their tops with duct tape over his pantcuffs.

"You got em' all?" Jim asked.

"Hell no, but there's so much spray in the air——there's no way."

"You didn't get stung?"

"Hell no."

A missed survivor crawled down Andrew's covered forehead and almost made it to his eyelid before Jim saw it. He rushed to crunch it and did so, hard, with the heel of his glove. It meant knocking his big brother in the head, and Jim drew back, expecting to get punched. But Andrew understood. He picked blindly over his eyehole for the wasp that

still hung from the navy fabric, its broken body in a slow and elegant recoil. Jim watched silently as he unmasked, unzipped, untaped, ungloved. They went back into the kitchen. He could see Andrew again, who gave a brief shiver and scratched his head with both hands.

“What’s that?” he asked, grabbing up the wooden figure on the table. Jim wanted to snatch it back but didn’t try.

“Some dumb sculpture that was in the attic.”

“No way!”

Andrew was excited again.

“This guy’s crazy-looking! I’m gonna put him in my car.”

“I found him Andrew!” and he made the grab for it.

“Dude, chill out! Jesus! Take it.”

He handed it over and smacked the back of Jim’s head.

“It’s yours. The chimpy chump is yours.”

Jim looked down at the thing in his hands.

“The Chimpy Chump?”

“Yeah. That’s what he looks like to me. I gotta pack.”

And he left Jim alone with The Chimpy Chump.

It was summer and Jim had been aimless all day, all week since his banjo class ended. Today he’d eaten four bowls of cereal, watched TV for three hours and dug a fairly deep hole in the yard where he buried his coin collection. After packing down the dirt and covering it with pine needles, he’d sat on his calves in the shade and wiped his palms

across his thighs. He'd gazed back at the house with its red shutters that couldn't shut, listened to a cicada's whee-a-whee-a-wheeeeeee and wondered if he could hide in Andrew's trunk before he drove off to go camping. Then there was the attic and the wasps. Now the Chimp Chump. It was what it was. What was it?

When his dad got home, he asked him about it before the man could take his tie off.

"What were you doing in the attic? Your grandpa made that. What do you think?"

"What do I think?"

"Yeah, what do you think of that guy there. Your grandpa carved a lot of stuff."

"I like it I guess. What is this supposed to be exactly?" Jim asked.

"God only knows," his father said, sitting back.

Jim waited.

"I forget what it's supposed to be. Looks like a caveman. It's something he carved later on. Looks like maybe he didn't finish it."

"But he put his initials and the date," Jim complained.

"Well maybe he did finish it. Where's your Mom?"

Jim walked down the hall carrying the sculpture by the base, looking down at it and frowning self-consciously, saying "hmmm" out loud. He stopped at his brother's door and watched him sitting on the floor with his back to him, tying cord around a sleeping bag and singing a dirty song to himself.

"So. The Chimp Chump..." Jim said, and waited for Andrew to turn around, which he did.

"Yeah!"

He went back to tying. Jim went to his own room, sat on the bed and looked at it

some more. Then he stood, walked back up the hall and shouted from the bottom of the stairs.

“I’m going to Toby’s!”

He paused there, pulling on the banister and leaning like a marionette with the Chimp Chump down by his hip as he listened to the faint voices upstairs.

At the top of the driveway he held it over his head and their combined shadow darted almost to the mailboxes across the street. He squatted and stood it on the gravel. Outside the man looked that much rawer, more desperate, and so much smaller that Jim fretted. The figure had a grimey appearance, vulgar really. The little hunched head seemed less pitiable, and Jim’s sympathy waned, but the low sun made a honeycomb of heavy shadow across its craters that brought him back into awe. This was the Chimp Chump.

Jim stood and moved away to regard it, even smaller now, intimacy changing to nostalgia with each foot back. Detail becoming memory, though his eyes never left the figure. Twenty feet away it was an ancient sundial. When a cloud puff blocked the sun and a breeze lifted, he returned quickly, scooped it up and spoke to it.

“Someone remembered you.”

He held it high in front of the returned sun so that it was a thin, edgeless silhouette.

“I got you out of there.”

At Toby’s house the garage door was open and Toby’s dad moved around a table saw, clamping something down. His workshirt sleeves flopped unbuttoned at the wrists and safety goggles were hanging loose around his neck. Jim paused at the door and braced himself. Toby’s dad turned, saw him there and flinched dramatically.

“Whoa, oh no! Don’t kill me Gangsta J!” the man said. He grinned and snickered

with delight. "Whatever those muthas toldja ain't true, dawg!"

He giggled again and cowered back against the table saw with his hands up close to his face. Jim smirked and looked at the ground, swinging his statue with both hands like an elephant's trunk.

"What's up J?" the man asked. "Whatcha got?"

Jim held it out by its skinny waist and rotated it back and forth as if taunting the man. He told about the wasps and the attic.

"Then Andrew and me killed em' all, and I got this guy out of there. My grandpa made it. In 1939."

"Yo, hold it still Gangsta J, what is it you got?"

He stepped forward and handed it to Toby's dad. The carving looked small again in his heavy hands.

"Well alright!" he said. "This is a funny sculpture." He smirked. "The feet are huge. How's this guy walk, Gangsta J?"

He doesn't, Jim thought.

"His name is The Chimpy Chump."

"The Chimpy Chump?"

"Yep."

"Okay, well, that's awesome."

Toby's dad exhaled past tufted nosehairs and handed it back to Jim, looking suddenly agitated.

"Sorry I touched it Gangsta J! Here ya go, don't cap me man! Please gimme a break!

Yo don't cap me!"

The man leaned back on the table with his hands on his face, pretending to cry. Jim was embarrassed.

“Is Toby home?”

“Yo he’s inside. Be easy on him yo, for the luvva God! He ain’t done nuthin!” He tittered.

Jim walked to the back of the garage and up the four wooden steps to the kitchen as Toby’s dad went back to clamping. When Jim glanced back at him he covered his face, giggling again.

The kitchen smelled like peanut butter and the dining room like dogs. Toby sat on a cluttered couch in the den, his fat white legs dangling. His heels knocked together girlishly as he ate an ice cream sandwich and breathed through his mouth. The drapes were closed and *Cops* was on TV. He looked up.

“Hey! What’s up? What’s that?”

“I found him in the attic. My grandpa—”

“Let me see it.”

Jim lifted it up.

“I can’t see it, give it here.”

Jim obliged, thinking it would be okay. Things moved so fast with Toby.

“What is this?”

Toby’s eyes were hungry and impatient. The corners of his mouth were chocolatey.

“This is a gorilla,” he continued, without waiting for an answer. “What’s wrong with his feet? This is so gay. Where’d you get it?”

“From my attic,” Jim said. “My grandpa carved it. It’s the Chimpy Chump.”

Toby looked at Jim, then at the figure in his hands, then at the TV. Jim felt his words being wasted, bouncing all over Toby's head.

"Your grandpa sucks at art," he said, still fixed on the TV. "This is really gay, dude."

"You suck Toby, give it back."

Toby glanced down at the carving now wedged between his thighs, then quickly back to the screen where a black man mumbled from the back of a police car.

"This guy's such a dumbass. The cops were chasing him and he jumped into a pool. They just pulled him out and put handcuffs on him. What a dumbass."

Jim stood there with his head turned to look at the TV, at the black man's soaked shirt and sad expression. This was too much. He wished he hadn't come to Toby's. Then he relaxed his shoulders.

"C'mon man. Gimme that back, okay? I wanna see something on it."

"See what?"

Toby finally pulled himself away from the TV and back to the object in his lap.

"This guy needs a face." He plunged his hand behind a couch cushion, produced a magic marker and uncapped it.

"C'mon man quit it!" Jim squealed and made a move for the figure, but Toby pounded his shoulder with a fist.

"Calm down you fag, I'm not gonna hurt it."

Jim stood there holding his shoulder, furious, wanting to cry. He thought about throwing himself on Toby and going for his eyes.

"Give it back!"

"I will! Stop screaming!"

“Give it back.”

Toby jumped up from the couch, decided.

“No. Get off my property!” And he ran from the room, holding up the sculpture and knocking it clumsily against the jamb.

“Whah-ha-hah!” he rasped, and was out the door.

Jim stomped after him, livid. The table saw fired up in the garage. Toby was at the top of the stairs next to a filthy terrier, waving the Chimp Chump.

“Wha-ha-HAH!”

“Give it back!” Jim screamed.

“Get off my property,” Toby answered, then disappeared into his room and slammed the door behind him. Jim ran up to the door, beat it and kicked it, yelled until his voice broke. Inside, Toby turned up another TV as loud as it would go. Dealer incentives. Zero down, zero per month. Jim stared at the carpet and then ran back down the stairs, through the peanut butter smell and into the garage. He was going to tell Toby’s dad and solve this problem.

When Toby’s dad saw Jim return, he said “Oh no!” and squatted down low, grimacing and duck-walking with his hands on his head.

“He’s back! The killa’s back!”

The man sat down on the cement floor with his head between his knees as if dejected, moaning to himself. He pleaded for his life as Jim walked past and out of the garage.

“Later on, Gangsta J!” he called after him, and Jim broke into a run, clenching his teeth so hard his temples hurt.

When he got home, Andrew had already left. He felt hopeless. His father made him a

plate of scrambled eggs for dinner and they ate together in the kitchen. Out the window it was almost dark. Jim thought silently to himself that he didn't care about the Chimp Chump, that he'd already gotten bored with it, that it didn't matter if Toby kept it or what he did with it. He didn't care. But when he dared imagine a little of what Toby could and certainly would do with it, he found that he did care and was miserable. Still, he didn't dare say anything to his dad, who sat there across from him eating eggs and talking about his boss. He didn't say anything, fearing not so much that his dad would be angry with him for losing the Chimp Chump, but that he'd be hurt because it was made by Grandpa.

When Jim went to his room that night he tried thinking of ways to get back what was his. He could tell Toby's dad and hope that he would stop talking about the killing and capping just long enough to punish his fat son. Toby hated the Chimp Chump, but Toby's dad knew how awesome it was. Toby's dad could hit Toby in the stomach and Jim could catch the Chimp Chump as it fell from his hands. If he could just get it back, he would never have to go there again, never have to see either of them again if he didn't want to. Ever. Why had he taken it outside? Why had he gone there? Jim eventually fell asleep, not knowing the answer to these questions.

The next morning, Jim awoke and his arm stayed asleep for a while. As it returned and prickled, he imagined that this was a new arm—a cyber-synthetic—and that the pain was just a matter of getting used to it. *Still a few technical problems*, said the hovering doctors. *You'll get used to it. It will be worth it Jim*, they said as he cursed them and weathered the agony like a man. *This arm is what we're counting on...just use it wisely, please Jim. It's a weapon. Report back when you have the Chump.*

He made a fist and relaxed it, thinking of how his statue had looked standing on the gravel outside, twenty feet away. He'd still possessed it then. What could he do to get it back? He could tell Toby that he'd trade it for a map which would show where he'd buried his coin collection. Then the map would have Toby digging far away from where the jar actually was, and he'd look like a fool until Andrew came out and told him to get the hell off their property.

His parents weren't up, and he wandered to the garage to look at the dead wasps that had ridden downstairs on Andrew's suit. The car was over top of them now and he could only see a couple by the front tire, which had pinned one of his discarded winter gloves to the floor. Only the fingers stuck out. Jim scanned the workshelves for something he could trade to Toby. Among the putties and varnishes were loose bolts and cans of shoe polish. In a cardboard box were the old walkie-talkies he hadn't used in months. Jim grabbed two nine-volts from the battery drawer and tested one radio up to his ear and one to his mouth, saying "testing testing, testing things out. Just testing things out sir, no need for alarm."

He might want to keep these after all, but no, he would take them to Toby's. The back of his mother's housecoat was just gliding out of the kitchen when he stepped back in.

"Hi Mom!" he called after her.

"Good morning Jimmy," she called back, her voice high and sweet with a morning quaver. "Your breakfast is on the table."

He heard her houseshoes hurrying back up the stairs.

The prize in the cereal box was a hologram sticker of a box of cereal. Jim had taken it out of the box the morning before, but failed to claim it. He wasn't interested then, but

when Andrew scooped it up and stuck it to the back of his new driver's license, then he was interested. "Lemme see it," he'd said, and Andrew had waggled it inches from Jim's face, saying "See it? License to crunch, baby!" and bit his lower lip before sliding the plastic card back into his wallet. Then he'd sat back and chewed with his mouth open, drumming his big hands on the table while Jim sat silent, regarding his brother's blackheads. Now he was alone. No Andrew, no hologram, only the cereal. He ate three bowls.

Jim sprawled on the living room carpet with his walkie-talkies, sliding one antenna over the other as if sparking a fire. They were fun. They were better than a wooden statue guy. He couldn't even remember what that thing looked like. He lay there on his stomach, kicked his toes against the carpet, and convinced himself that by keeping these radios he would be coming out ahead on a trade that had, of course, never actually happened. This idea lasted until he rolled over and spotted Grandpa's picture over the mantel. Jim had gone months without noticing it, but now he felt his face flush as Grandpa looked sadly down at the walkie-talkies and him.

Go get the Chimp Chump, Jimmy. I made it for the family and now I'm dead. Get him back Jimmy.

The eyes in the portrait looked moist, and now Jim remembered it. Its hunch and its blocky feet. The sunlight across its lovable little head. It was all he wanted, and his eyes moistened with Grandpa's. He stood up.

"Don't worry Grandpa, I won't let the family down," he said aloud. Then he shouted upstairs.

"I'm going to Toby's!"

Jim let himself in the front door, glad Toby's dad was at work. He could hear the TV and could feel Toby watching it, but didn't go right in. Toby didn't hear him come in. Jim let out the breath he'd taken before entering and stood in the fetid living room in a sort of mellow daze, his eyes accommodating to the dim. There was time for something. How much time? Toby didn't know he was there. Maybe the Chimp Chump was right here somewhere and he wouldn't have to see Toby at all. He scanned around, but didn't see it. Outside the picture window, bumblebees worked at the azaleas he'd just passed. In here was dirty beige carpet, the dog smell, and the almost ultrasonic TV tone he could hear anywhere in the house. He walked to the entertainment center and drew a pale little finger through the dust on the turntable lid. It occurred to him that if Toby had a mom, the living room might not look or smell like this.

The window sill was populated with action figures, most of them corrupted in some way. Gandalf smoldered at him, shirtless, his gray hair trimmed to a neat bob as he sat astride a huge rubber iguana, surrounded by hobbits in football jerseys. The dingy white walls were interrupted with colored paint here and there. Strange caricatures, comic scenes with speech bubbles and text, complex starbursts and other fluid designs that radiated from their centers outward. Blue footprints over the sofa. Toby had decorated the living room. Not just his own room upstairs, but the living room. Jim had seen these walls many times before. At first he'd been confused, something had felt off, but by now it was just part of Toby's house. He padded softly up the stairs to Toby's room.

The terrier thumped its tail and jutted its head, so he petted it and felt calmer. Toby's door was closed and Jim opened it. No movement inside. It felt like the room itself might scream him away, but there was only a melancholy stillness. Toby's wall-paintings,

Toby's bed, his garbage, his strewn toys and clothes. His swimsuit model posters——Jim didn't understand these. Andrew had some too, so he knew they were a good thing, but these were from Toby's dad. Toby had convinced Jim to wrestle one day, and was letting him pin him to the floor when his dad walked in with the posters and tacked them up himself. He thought about it now and envied Toby's situation, amazed that his dad would do something that cool.

The Chimp Chump was nowhere to be found, not even in the flat box underneath a heap of stuffed animals in the closet. He thought of wreaking some vengeance here, alone in Toby's room, but found himself blocked in his daze, creatively bankrupt. He picked up a small robot at random and pocketed it. Jim suddenly hated the house, but didn't want to give up the intrigue just yet. He clicked on the red walkie-talkie, carefully set it at the base of the stairs and turned it all the way up. He kept the blue one. Back upstairs, he shut the door quietly and found the middle of the room before turning it on. The TV in the den was loud enough that he could hear the commercial. Zero down, zero per month. He waited for the end, for the second of silence, and even before that he started to moan.

“Uhhhhhhhoowwwaaaahahahaeeeeewahhawawawawawa!”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeyoop! HA! WHOOOOO...Hahh!”

Then he cracked the door and was quiet until he heard heavy footsteps below. Jim threw open the door, jumped out sideways into the hall with both feet and sank to his knees, pointing downstairs with both fingers, terrifying the dog next to him.

“HAHhhh!”

Toby stood over the red walkie-talkie, wearing the same clothes as yesterday. His mouth hung open a little as he looked up at Jim.

“Fag! Get the hell out of my room!”

“I’m not in your room.”

“What are you doing?”

God only knew.

“Hey, come down here,” Toby brightened. “I wanna show you something!”

Stung with impatience, Jim skipped down, gathered the hissing radio and followed Toby toward the TV noise. In the den the air was chemical, more like a garage. The coffee table was hidden under sheets of newspaper, smeared and misted with metallic gold. A stoneware bowl with spoon and sugared milk remnants, all heavily flecked with the same gold. Assorted paints and tiny brushes. A little felt bag from Carlsbad Caverns. An uncapped aerosol can. Hammer. Tiny tube of glue. Toby stood cheerfully on the murky carpet, his hands behind his back.

“Are you ready?” He was excited, rocking back on his heels.

“What?” Jim said.

Toby stretched his arms out toward him. He held a carving by the base. A primitive human form, hunched, impressionistic, with huge blocky feet. It had been sprayed a uniform gold and then filigreed, meticulously hand-painted all over with fine feathery lines of black and maroon, giving the effect of swirling musculature. It had purple eyes: two tiny amethyst chips glued to just the right spots on the red and gold head. The image was jarring and Jim was amazed.

“Look!” said Toby. His face was open and carried no obvious malice. The TV reassured: Bad credit? No credit? No problem. Jim swallowed once and lashed out for Toby’s hands, but Toby jerked them back, his expression pained. Jim was rigid all over.

"Let me have him!" he blurted, so forcefully that Toby stepped back and bumped the TV, staring at Jim with the same troubled look.

"Okay, I will. But look, he's...I made him look like——" Toby started.

"You ruined it! Give it back!"

Jim's voice rattled and his chest heaved. Toby stared, still holding the thing to him. Jim remembered the walkie-talkies.

"Here," he said with a creepy calm, holding them out. "I'll trade ya!"

Toby looked down, still troubled, and took the blue one.

"You can have both of them," said Jim. "Give me the Chimpy Chump and you can have both of them."

Toby eyed the TV screen.

"No," he said softly, still focused on the TV. "No!"

And he ran out of the den again. In the hallway Jim saw the front door standing open, a washed-out rectangle of sun and green. He ran out. No Toby. He ran to side of the house and looked to the backyard. Toby: bounding heavily away in his shorts, his hands hidden in front of him, into the pine trees and gone. Jim took a second to collect himself but it didn't work. He sprinted toward the pines and stopped midway. A pretty neighbor, sunhat and trowel, hips and tanned knees stood up to his right.

"Hi!" she said.

"Hi!" said Jim, and forced a smile.

He felt foolish. He paced back to Toby's patio and sat on a bench. No Chimpy Chump and one walkie-talkie. He clicked it on and there were words.

Code four, copy? Toby's voice was officious, void of the real-life timbre it had in the

den, but still Toby's voice.

Code four, need some help here, copy?

Jim squeezed the talk button and spoke through his teeth. "Give it back Toby."

He glanced at the gardening neighbor who grinned back at him, approving and oblivious. A hummingbird jetted between them, tittering. Then the radio-crackle again:

Suspect is in custody. Request backup, copy?

Jim stood up and looked out into the pines, then walked off the patio and toward them, his hands pushing hard into his pockets. The red walkie-talkie was now clipped to his waist and he focused into the branch and needle mess straight before him. He thought suddenly of Andrew and imagined his brother's oiled face here instead of his own. Andrew going camping. Walking straight into the woods to camp. To go and get camping from the woods. And he was always successful, bringing back pungent proof every time. Jim lost himself in this for a second and his t-shirted shoulders squared. His slow gait quickened a little, yet relaxed at the same time.

The sun warmed one arm, and when he reached the shade of the pines he felt it cool again to the stopping of a distant lawnmower. He walked a little more and then stood still, a mat of yellow needles under his sneakers. No Toby. And no Chimp Chump, which was now red and gold with violet eyes. The dazzling image Jim had seen in the den sat somewhere beyond anger for him. It was just there in his head, painfully unlabeled. The radio on his hip popped again.

Hey Jim, why are you so mad? He looks way cooler now. Now he can see with hypervision, and we could make some more and——

"You stole it Toby," Jim interrupted. "You stole it and you ruined it."

He gripped the radio with all his strength.

“You suck you suck you suck!” he barked into it, hunching and pounding the dry needles with one foot on each “suck,” and then stood a long moment looking at the impossibly complex ground, his arms out at his sides. He was suddenly tired. The radio was quiet, then popped again:

I can see you.

He bucked his head up and scanned wildly left, right, then up. Toby. Halfway up two trees grown together, the blue walkie-talkie in front of his face and gold in his hand, tiny but visible through the green darkness. Jim picked up a pinecone and slung it up, way short.

“You suck!” he spat.

“Fag,” said Toby.

Jim turned and left, walked out of the pines the way he came, back across the yard with his head down, never looking up at the neighbor until he reached the patio where he sat back down on the same bench. He only stayed for a few seconds, then bolted up and walked back around to the front of the house with its azaleas and happy bees. The Chimp Chump was gone. It had been what it had been, but was no more. Out of his hands forever. He set the red walkie-talkie on the porch and paced, looked straight up into the noon sky, sat down on the cement walk and immediately killed an ant under his thumb. Then another. The radio: You’re such a bitch Jim! Then another. You scared little baby. Then three more. His thumb was wet and indented from the ants and grit.

Don’t you want your Chimp Chump?

Jim watched the radio on the porch, then rose and clicked it off, took out the battery

and threw it in the grass. He sat back down, watching the ants he hadn't killed knock their antennae around on the ones he had until he heard the back door slam around the other side. He stood again and went back through the open front door.

In the den, Toby was lodged in his spot, knocking his heels together. The painted man lay in his lap. When he saw Jim in the doorway, he said nothing, but just looked up at him, his eyes tired and sweat on his cheeks from the tree-climbing. Zero down, zero per month. Behind Jim there were heavy steps in the living room and then Toby's dad's voice. He was back for lunch.

"Toby! Dude! I got Chinese, my man! I got the moo goo gai pan, my man! I got the faw-choon cookie for you, my man! Toby?"

Jim turned around.

"Gangsta J!" The man was incredibly tickled in his mechanic's clothes. Toby was at Jim's side, holding the sculpture. His dad's eyes went wide at Jim.

"Oh now hold on now J-Dawg, iss not like I knew you was inna house, knowhumsayin? Sorry ta bust in all loud an shit!"

He set a bag on the table and faced his palms out, backing away and tittering through his teeth, grinning, his big eyes crinkling warmly. Now the room smelled like dogs and chicken.

"And you, stud." He pointed at Toby. "I gotcha this too...snagged it from the shop."

He held up a wall calendar from an auto parts company. It was open to August and featured two nearly-nude women with explosive blonde manes, baring their teeth and playing tug-o-war with a timing belt.

"Toby stole the Chimp Chump!" Jim blurted. "It's mine and he just took it! And he

ruined it! He totally messed it up!”

Toby’s dad lost his smile. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Look!” Jim said. “He ruined it.”

Toby was sweaty and impassive, fixed on his father’s confused face. The man looked at whatever was in Toby’s hand.

“Toby, you have to give that back if it’s Jim’s.”

Toby inhaled.

“But he doesn’t care about it, Dad!” He inhaled again.

“He doesn’t care about it! I made it dad, look!”

He held up the figure with gemstone eyes and his dad regarded it with interest, tossing the calendar on the table next to the Chinese food.

“It’s mine!” shouted Jim, “My grandpa made it and now he’s dead, Toby you liar!”

Toby’s dad winced, still staring at what his son held out.

“Let me see it.”

Toby stepped to him quickly and offered it.

“This is the same guy you had yesterday?” he said to Jim.

“Yes!”

Toby’s dad turned it over in his hands. “And you did this to it Toby? You painted it?”

“Yeah! I made it look like that!”

“And the eyes? You put these on?”

“Yeah dad, I did it!”

Toby’s dad looked happy again.

“This is really cool, Toby. Yeah. You did it.”

Toby glowed. His sweaty face brightened and he bounced once on his heels. Jim was speechless, watching the two together.

“But it’s mine! It was in my attic! For the family! My grandpa——”

“Jim!” Toby’s dad cut him off and for the first time ever, Jim was scared of his face, of his naked irritation, and fell silent.

The man’s attention went back to what he held. After some hesitation, he spoke.

“Toby, you have to give this back.” He appeared worn and miserable.

“But Dad! I made it and——”

“It doesn’t matter Toby.” He hunched and softened. “It doesn’t matter. You did a great job on this, my man.” He frowned at the beauty in his hand. “A really great job. But you can’t take it from Jim. It belongs to him.”

He looked back at Toby and smirked with difficulty.

“You have to give it back.”

He set it in his son’s hands and straightened up, looking less like Toby’s dad than Jim could believe. Toby lurched back across the room and handed it to Jim, then ran as fast as he could upstairs where a door slammed horribly and a sad moan filled the silence—a moan that interrupted itself with staccatoed *ah-ah-ah*’s while Jim squeezed his ruined Chimp Chump and envisioned a boy upstairs among toys and food wrappers, shaking with grief. Toby’s dad stared at him with the same sad look, then frowned slightly.

“Okay Jim, you should go home now.”

Jim pulled the stolen robot from his pocket and set it on the table. He stood another moment and then was almost out the door when something made him turn back to the dim living room. Toby’s dad still stood where he’d been, looking back at Jim with the

same face.

“Jim,” said Toby’s dad.

He stayed, not answering. He didn’t want to leave.

“Jim, you have to go home.”

He stayed. The crying upstairs continued and the man drew a deep breath, now openly angry.

“What’s the problem Jim? What do you want?”

“I’m never coming back here again!” he said, and broke into a sob.

“Go home Jim,” the man said, and Jim did.

When he reached the house, he saw Andrew’s car and ran inside wiping his eyes.

Andrew was in his room, untying a sleeping bag and singing to himself.

“Andrew!”

His brother turned his head serenely.

“Hey dude.” He went back to untying.

The room smelled like pines. Jim held out the sculpture and started to speak, but stopped himself. He backed out of Andrew’s room, walked down the hall and through the kitchen, never once glancing at the thing in his hand. The garage was empty now, swept of all wasps and clothing. There was plenty of space to sit and work and, on top of that, he found the sandpaper in the very first place he looked.

CHAPTER 4

BED AND BREAKFAST

As individuals, we're microcosms of nations. Each of us is not just one person, but an entire citizenry. Our egos are dictators that rule over our mouths, limbs and marginalized desires with an iron fist, and we don't do a lot of things we'd like to do. But when we do, we're only human, because what we call our "humanity" arises from this conflict, from this revolution, from this straining of our mouths and limbs against our own beliefs. To really embrace oneself is to know that vows are made to be broken.

What does all this mean? Two things:

- 1) I'm a highly educated political theorist, unhappy and prone to insomnia.
- 2) Just try and remain faithful to your wife. Just try and rid yourself of desire for other women. Just try and commit to only one of them, knowing as you do that sure, there are plenty of other fish in the sea, but that this one was made for you and you for her. Your soulmate. That's something I got from my wife, before she was my wife. I knew the term, of course, but she's the one who blushed at me four years ago across an empty Merlot bottle and confessed her belief in fate and destiny and soulmates. And the truth is, I stiffened right then. Something inside me said no, no way, no such thing. That was my shadow self. It leapt out and was beaten back. I didn't even try to repress it, it just happened. Our engagement, to me, had just seemed like the thing to do. I never proposed to her with any particular spiritual directive in mind. But then she said "soulmate" and I

thought “soulmate, ok, yeah, maybe that’s it.” I was a vegan then. She was sitting back on the couch, naked except for an engagement ring and a glaze of drying semen on her belly (the pill makes her crazier) and I chose to believe her. My semen plus her belly plus ring equals soulmates.

Four years later, here we are at a North Carolina bed and breakfast. It’s our anniversary. It’s three a.m. She sleeps next to me, snoring. I say she snores worse than I do, and we argue playfully over this from time to time. Neither of us knows how we snore, but we compare notes while awake, trying to convince each other that you snore worse. There’s no way to settle this argument objectively, unless we were to bring a third person in to sleep with us. That might really help. She sleeps next to me in a bed neither of us has ever lain in before. But I feel like I have. The bed and breakfast is run by a woman five years older than me. She’s thirty-four. her name is Karen, and she’s the sole proprietor of this place. I think she’s up. I think I heard her walk softly down the hall—softly, so as not to wake the guests. Very considerate. Very professional. I love that. We’re in a 1920s-era mountain cottage, nestled here in the Asheville foothills. God its beautiful up here. It’s mid-October (a fall wedding is the only way to go), and the oak leaves we can see by day range from chartreuse to deep red, even a little redder than Karen’s scarf. What if she were trying to outdo those leaves with her scarf? I could see her doing that, even if unconsciously. Maybe the “humility before nature” she described today is only her ego at work. Maybe her shadow self is trying to outcolor nature with the scarf. And maybe she’s even a little aware of this arrogance—maybe she’s laughing to herself right now, forgiving herself, downstairs in the kitchen with leftover peach cobbler, because I think I just heard her walk down the hall. In her nightgown. She can’t

sleep. She's thinking about her own desires, taking a break from her work. In her nightgown, with her black pillow-tangled hair spilling like rapids over a flannel collar. In the kitchen, with a stoneware plate and fork and glistening peach cobbler in her lap. What does her cunt look like? I have to know. She's shy, but so confident. She could easily be thinking about me, because I'm think-aboutable. Two other couples are here with my wife and me and yes, we all talked over dinner, but I'm the one who talked in a language she understood. Karen could be my soulmate as truly as anyone. When she mentioned humility before nature, I'm the one who knew exactly what she was talking about. The other two couples nodded and murmured about how nice it was to get out of the "big city," how it was a "real pretty" place she had here. But I was the one who caught her eye with my own, I was the one who smiled disarmingly, saying nothing, but never averting my gaze, not for a second, letting her wonder if I really understood. Because only a fool says he understands. A real player fosters uncertainty, grows mystery—and not out of arrogance, but out of truth. All is uncertain, all is mysterious, and this is precisely why one would feel humbled before nature in the first place. What the hell am I talking about? A real player? Truth? Who do I think I am? Fuck. I'm twenty-nine. I'm too old for this. I'm married, and that means something bigger than having the hots for a bed and breakfast hostess. We have a certificate at home that says so.

My wife lies next to me. She just inhaled suddenly, then let it out and swallowed wetly in her sleep. I can see the walls and furniture. In low sunlight, the branch-wrought wreath is an elaborate micro-world you could get lost in. Now it's just a dark ring. My wife lies next to me and her head is turned away. It was turned toward me before, and when I wondered what Karen's cunt looked like, she turned it away. Older couples joke

about finishing each others' sentences, being clairvoyant. I hope this isn't true. What's that? Plumbing? I just heard a toilet flush. Karen was in the bathroom all this time. I wish she'd been in the kitchen. She's incredible in the kitchen, doing ten things at once and still conversing like she's on a veranda with a gin and tonic. I watched her cut onions underwater in the sink. "Why are you cutting those underwater?" I asked. She told me without turning around, "So they won't make me cry." I said, "Oh that's a good idea." Then she looked over her shoulder at me for a second, her hands still cutting the onions, and said if she was going to cry she wanted it to be for a good reason, not because of a vegetable, and then she laughed hard just for a second. That was at five-thirty this evening. I remember because I looked at my watch, wondering how long it would take my wife to get two simple items from the store: Midol and a map of western North Carolina. We needed a map because her almost infallible sense of direction (and it is amazing) failed us once we got off I-40 in Asheville. We took every conceivable wrong turn. It was like she didn't want to get here at all.

My wife lies next to me now, her brown hair playing strangely across the pillow and her lips full and red in the moonlight, her cheek pale. She looks like a sleeping vampire, which reminds me, I saw a muddy wooden stake by the broken section of the garden fence this evening, but that's a really fucked-up thought. Her moonlit cheek could just as easily be a thing of romance. I saw that cheek, the right one, lift up at the end of dinner when Karen took her plate. Karen was already carrying too much. My wife looked up and asked if she needed help, scooted her chair out a little and was about to rise. Karen said "That's okay," and I swear there was an edge to her voice, like she was insulted. My wife was being considerate. Karen was trying to be the perfect host. My wife was only trying

to help. Karen was trying to prove something—that she could run circles around the bed and breakfast competition, that she could handle it all, clear a table for six in one swoop. But she was too anxious. She wasn't clearing the table, she was bussing it. Lowering herself needlessly. It's a bed and breakfast, not a goddamn Denny's. My wife was only trying to help. She'd bought her Midol and the map, then returned and given me a backrub while she bubbled excitedly about horseback riding tomorrow and I melted under her fingers. Now she was being nice at dinner, sensing Karen's anxiety and trying to alleviate it, even if she doesn't understand that when a host has something to prove, for God's sake, just let them do it. But she was only trying to be helpful, like I'd tried to be (much more tactfully, to be fair) in the kitchen. There was something cold in Karen's response to my wife, and I didn't like it. She didn't even thank her for offering. She just said, "That's okay." My wife smiled weakly and blushed, and I was miserable. Karen either didn't understand, or wouldn't. She was so wrapped up in her host thing that she ignored the simple decency of my wife's offer to help. Karen is five years older than me but maybe she doesn't understand how important little things like that are. My wife is five years younger than me, but she understands. Or if she doesn't really understand, it's okay, because she does it anyway. It's not necessary that she understand the subtleties beneath courtesy. One doesn't have to understand why it's important to be decent in order to be an exemplar of humanity, one only needs to be decent. What the hell am I talking about? An exemplar of humanity? I have to pee, but not yet.

My wife lies next to me, and now I want to fuck her. I could wake her up. It's our anniversary, and anniversaries are supposed to be romantic. Supremely romantic. We already had sex tonight, but I could wake her up and we could do it again. My dick is

hard, and I could just push against the small of her back and kiss her neck until she wakes up. Or I could whisper something in her ear and then, while she's somewhere between asleep and awake, I could roll her onto her back, get on top and slowly push into her while she smiles sweetly and grunts in her sleep. I know what her cunt looks like. It's her cunt. Excuse the term, but what else do you say? I'm not talking about her vagina, and I'm not talking about just her vulva. What stupid words. I'm talking about the whole thing. The whole beautiful thing. You should see it when it's big and wet. You know what I mean. Or do you? Do you know what it's like to come home from work, take your goddamn tie off, try your absolute damndest to forget about Bill Kroenig's astoundingly stupid face which has stuck with you the entire drive home, wolf down dinner, smoke a bowl, and then bury your seven o'clock shadow in your wife's amazingly fragrant cunt—your cunt—before fucking it? It's like going from Hell to Hawaii in twenty minutes. But that's only my side of it, right? Because my wife and I once went to a movie in which the super-sexy female protagonist lies naked beneath an over-anxious boyfriend. It's an overhead shot, and he's groaning ridiculously, almost whimpering, his head mashed next to her in the pillow while she stares at the ceiling, eyes wide open and excruciatingly bored, smirking secretly while he bounces up and down. My wife and I sat there, watching this scene in silence. It was a really good film, but I remember almost nothing about it except for that scene. I remember it because I was horrified at the distance between this beautiful, terrifyingly collected woman and her pathetic lover while he brought himself to orgasm, in love maybe, and she just smirked at the ceiling. I squirmed and snuck a glance at my wife, and she was smiling too. She was smiling at something she recognized, just as I'd smiled earlier at the same woman when she slapped way too

much ketchup on her hamburger. Not the same, goddammit. Not the same at all. Every woman in that theater who didn't laugh out loud was probably laughing surreptitiously, just like my wife. And all the men at their sides were either sinking like I was or else laughed along, delusional—it's all in good fun!—clueless of the fact that they *are* the onscreen chump gyrating atop this everywoman. Men are as stupid as women are cold.

Is Karen that cold? She's a successful business-woman. She runs a bed and breakfast, and it's very expensive. There's a bottom line she'll never lose sight of. But she wants to sell this place. She told me this in the kitchen. She told me how running an establishment like this takes so much work, and how she was losing steam. She wiped her wet hands across her apron, streaked it with dark earth from freshly-pulled beets and said she couldn't bear the thought of slacking off, trading her high standards for higher profit. Then she squatted down to dig for something under the sink while describing her ideal buyer: "They'll have to love this house and love what I do here. I have to get that vibe before I'll sell it."

Karen's voice: rich and a little scratchy, yet all woman. Her cadence is quick, yet never hurried. She understands that there's all day to finish a sentence if she needs it. And her accent: unapologetically southern, with a lazy precision that inflamed me even over the phone when I made reservations. There were at least four other bed-and-breakfasts in Asheville that made much more economic sense, but none of them had a voice like this one. In the kitchen she kept squatting, rooting around through cookware while she talked, shifting the weight on her haunches to the right, then left, in low-rider jeans and a white t-shirt, her country hair ponytailed with a red scrunchy. For a solid thirty seconds, my mind was out of commission while I stood there glued to the just-visible top of her crack,

trying to extrapolate it all the way down, trying to vanish the pants and imagine her weight shifting to and fro instead of right and left. I never saw any panties but they may have been there, ridden down with the jeans and adorable while she talked business and interrupted herself at one point to growl in frustration at not seeing whatever she was looking for. She finally stood up, and I barely had time to unslouch and close my mouth as she turned to face me with a steel colander. “Found it!” she said, then held it up, laughing with all her teeth, and her pale face was as close to mine as it had ever been. A single foot closer can make such a difference when you’re facing someone. Karen’s face: oval, pretty, a little bit horsey, mildly freckled. I could see that one front tooth was chipped slightly and my attraction tripled. I offered to help with the cooking, she declined, and I shut up about it. Don’t insist. Let the host run the show. Sure, I’m paying for the stay, but getting behind the scenes isn’t part of the package. When you order a cocktail at a busy lounge, you don’t vault behind the bar to cut limes. And yet it’s so homey at a bed and breakfast. It just seems right to offer help, the same way you would at your aunt’s. But Karen isn’t my aunt. Not at all. She’s beautiful, graceful and totally unrelated to me. Still, it seems almost incestuous. It’s a maternal role she’s in, it’s part of her style—maternal. But she’s hot. And her voice. God almighty. She declined my kitchen help with that voice. “But I love the company,” she said, “and the conversation.” Then she paused at the sink with her half-cut onions and dirty apron, and said she was glad to talk to someone who shared her understanding of humility before nature. She pushed back her black hair with a wet hand and said that she was always up for more talking and “hanging out” while I was staying here, no matter what time it was, because she usually keeps “pretty crazy hours.” I told her that I keep crazy hours too, and that

we're here for the next four days.

My wife lies next to me, breathing more evenly now. I'm thinking about the trip to Vancouver. We fought so hard on that trip that we almost separated. Every fight is a separation but this time was serious, whatever that means. We biked all day among the black squirrels in Stanley Park, happier than either of us had been in months, and then we fought like rabid skunks in the motel room. Really. Screaming, frothing at the mouth, breaking shit and slurring our words while sober—that kind of fighting. Why? I don't know, because of the low water pressure. Who cares? The important thing is that we fought hard and valiantly. We actually talked specifics in that poor rented room just to scare the living hell out of each other, but mostly ourselves. Who gets the boat? Who gets the dogs? I want Boiler because she's so sassy. I want Jiggy because he curls up next to me by the fireplace. Okay, who gets the fireplace? Then we started laughing. Since then, I've given up trying to figure out exactly what we were each laughing about. The important thing is that we were laughing.

Now she lies next to me. I want to get on top of her right now and fuck her. When I say fuck, do you know what I mean? I mean claim. A man has to claim his woman, this I know. Hell, every man knows this except for the ones who still believe that we, as men—men!—can just pull up stakes and move over here to this flatter, less dangerous area where everyone can have a good time, where men and women are not just equals, but fucking identicals, reciprocal, transitive across some cosmic equals sign, and just what does this pig mean by “claim her”? If you're one of these men, I have two things to say to you. First, you're delusional, pathetically delusional. You were probably laughing along with your wife in that theater, asking for whom the bell tolls, embarrassing yourself by

pretending to get an inside joke that you were the butt of. Second, I refuse to apologize for my shadow self, my honest un-monogamous desires, and third, fuck you.

I don't really mean that. I'm obviously upset about something here, and I need for you to understand what I'm talking about. The truth is, I used to believe the man-woman equivalence thing myself. It's not your fault, and I shouldn't direct my rage at you. So, I'm sorry. Let's laugh again. Want to hear something funny? I've been dying to urinate now for over an hour. I'm in real pain, and for no good reason. But it's taken me this long to swing my legs over the edge of the bed and get up. Now I'm squinting in the bathroom light, trying to keep the toilet rim dry. Now I feel better. My wife lies sleeping next to the vacant half of the bed. Nothing wakes her up between three and five. In the hallway, I suddenly feel like I'm trespassing, like I've climbed over a velvet rope. This bed and breakfast is a museum bigger than I am, but as the seconds tick by, I feel myself growing to fill it. We're here for four days, there's a light under Karen's door, and I feel like talking.

CHAPTER 5

LAST WRITES

Dear Sam,

First thing's first: I'm so sorry, Donkey. I know it's a selfish thing I've done, but you know I'm crazy-impulsive. I'm also a fraud, a suicide-fraud, as I've never truly wanted to kill myself until today. I've been happy. The last couple of months with you have been better than any other time in my life—pure joy—so much more than I ever thought possible, and not just because of Thailand or my new dresses or the horses or anything else tangible, but also because of how proud I've been of you. Traveling and realizing a few of my long-abandoned desires alongside you in a terminal world has brought me such clarity, such forgiveness for all the stupid little things. When we deboarded in Bangkok, I looked at your serious face and your long hands, and since then I've felt more devoted to you in every way: romantically, sexually, altruistically. I've been more proud of your strength than ever before, and it's exactly because of this that I'm sitting here now with pen and paper and half a glass of lethal orange juice.

I know you're upset but don't you dare be surprised, Sam. You're as crazy as I am, and you know as well as I do how it feels to flip-flop endlessly about this thing. Remember, you're the one who gave me *The Bell Jar* in college, with its do-I-or-don't-I vacillations. We haven't discussed Plath for years—"sophomoric" you've said—but we've still talked about suicide in terms philosophical and visceral ever since, and all the time we've been

together we've see-sawed, taking turns in each other's life-affirming arms when one of us wanted it to all be over. You can't be surprised. You and me, ya know, we're soulmates 4-ever and all that, and anything I've decided to do, you can relate to whether you like or not, buddy. So there's no surprise, nothing more to say. But I have more paper, so why don't I get really hokey here for a bit and take us down memory lane? I know you know this shit and that you hate to talk about even the pleasant past, but the past is all that's left now and besides, I just want to record it, so...

Remember when we first met? At Todd's little dorm room "cocktail hour"? You'd pledged Greek like a ninny and were standing there with a Bloody Mary, whining about the scratchy tag on your new Phi Sig sweatshirt. I think you had a few chin whiskers then. You were adorable. I accidentally brushed you a couple of times with no reaction, and so the next time you complained about the tag, I ripped it off with all my might and tore a hole in the back. You looked like you wanted to sock me. Good thing you didn't, or I never would have showed you how to get the tomato juice puke out of your bonehead sweatshirt.

Remember our first kiss? It was the day of the Tim Leary and G. Gordon Liddy debate. We were walking to the auditorium and you asked if I was planning to take Statistics and I said it was probable. You asked if I was always this clever, and I said it was variable and you stopped me by the arm just as we hit the shady spot underneath that giant sycamore—the one Todd later tied himself to get over his fear of thunderstorms like Liddy said he'd done. You stopped me there by the arm and you looked confused, then reached out and scratched my hair like I was a terrier, then leaned in and mashed your lips against the corner of my mouth. I must have looked happy, because you got all

serious and sexy-eyed and took my face in your long, gentle hands and kissed me on the lips for ten seconds or so. That one was for real, but I've always kind of liked that first thing better, whatever it was.

So remember when Todd tied himself to that tree? Or rather had us tie him to it? We heard thunder outside and Todd said, "Come on!" He grabbed a mess of nylon rope and we followed him out where the western sky was like slate and the wind was picking up. You said "You're sure?" and Todd said "Of course," so you pulled the last knot tight and we went in to watch him from my window fifty yards away. Half an hour later we could see him squirming against the sycamore in the lightning strobes and hear him screaming between thunderclaps. When we ran out to rescue him, he was drenched and livid. "I'm fine! Go away!" he screamed, "I'm fine!" Remember how he kept screaming "I'm fine!" long after we were back in my room watching him through the window again?

Remember the first time we had sex? We made out for like six hours before I gave you the green light, at which point you put on a condom, said "Wait," jumped up to put in Depeche Mode, then got inside me and came before the lyrics started. You were mortified at bobbling and dropping your machismo like that, but you gained it all back with interest right there by calming down and finishing me off like the hero you were.

Remember when I sliced my wrists? I did it ten minutes before you got home. Cross-wise, not lengthwise—safer that way. I sat hunched forward on the couch watching Beavis and Butthead with my elbows on my knees and my hands hanging down, making beautiful twin crimson blazes on the beige carpet. Remember that nasty carpet? It never looked better than that day. You came in the door and said "Hey baby. Oh shit." You didn't say anything else, you just picked me up and carried me to the bathroom, washed

and bandaged me. Later you said "Why?" and I said "I don't know." You said "That book I gave you," and I said "No." Then you said "What should we do?" and I said "Nothing I guess." It wasn't serious, and we both knew it.

But it was the beginning of something, wasn't it? I'm thinking about how you never wanted to discuss what happened (neither did I), but you quickly got into psychology and theology, accounts of near-death experiences, that kind of thing. You read about death cults and ordered an old Newsweek with a cover story of the Jonestown mass-suicide in Guyana. I never thought I'd see that cover again, with the shot of all those villagers who'd lain down to die together. My parents had that issue on the coffee table when I was a kid. It was winter. Snow was falling outside the living room window, but the dead folks in the Newsweek photo lay among jungle foliage. My parents just left this horrific magazine out in the open, and I was the only one with sense enough to turn it upside down, which meant I had to lift the corner up very slowly until I could just make out the first body in the foreground—a bell-bottomed woman with black hair and a bloated face. Her mouth is open slightly, like yours when you sleep.

Now I'm thinking about our honeymoon in Vegas. Whose idea was it to honeymoon in Vegas in June? It was a hundred degrees in the shade and we spent the whole time on the Sahara's seventeenth floor sleeping, screwing and riding down the elevator to lose more money. The last day we were there, we looked out the window and saw ambulances out front. The room service waiter told us that a guy in line for the rollercoaster had dropped and died of heatstroke. Why would anyone want to get on a rollercoaster in that kind of weather I wondered, and the waiter read my mind, saying "People come to Vegas and think they're invincible, like it's only a dream."

We went back to bed with our drinks and stared at the ham-fisted still life on the wall and talked about how easy it would be to drop dead without even trying. You reached over and grabbed your medical index off the floor to read aloud about heatstroke. Then you flipped to brain aneurysms and read that aloud until I asked you to stop. You rolled your eyes and told me to chill out. You said that no one gets out of here alive and that worrying about it is the surest way to waste what life we have, if not bring the end around sooner. I said "It's our honeymoon, jackass," so you slammed the book shut and threw it to the floor. Then you put your arms around me and said you were sorry. I said "You really don't care if you die?" and you said you couldn't afford to care. I told you that I cared if you died, and you squeezed me. "What if I died right now," I asked, and you didn't say anything so I asked you again. "What if I died right now, Donkey? Would that just roll off your back?" You rolled onto your stomach and faced the wall and neither of us spoke for a long while. "We could die at the same time," you finally muttered. "We could," I said. "Let's do that then," you said "Deal," I said, and I laughed, but you didn't. You started trembling and said "I don't ever want to see you die." I held you until you fell asleep on your back with your mouth open.

And now I'm breaking the deal, Donkey. You can't be surprised because, like I said, you know how impulsive I am. How many times did we switch hotel bookings in Vegas before settling on the Sahara? How many times have I changed careers since we were married? I'm back and forth with everything. I'm not to be trusted, not even with orange juice.

So time marched on and we sank slowly. When we were still in college, legions of sad sacks ten years older were full of glib advice about living it up during our college

days because it was different in the "real" world—your responsibilities mount exponentially, they explained, and things get far more complicated after college. I never paid attention to such crap, and the people who said such inane things knew it was wasted on me but never grasped the real reason why. They satisfied themselves with "Ah, well, you can't tell young people anything—the kid will find out for herself." What I suspected then, and what I know now, is that they had it backwards. Life doesn't get more complicated after college, it gets excruciatingly simple. Boring. It was pure existential crisis that had these people so rattled—the realization that there was no schedule anymore, nothing in place but their own free agency to plow the next row.

For the last ten years, Sam, you and I both have seen that nothing happens after college. We kept our chins up as best we could, waiting for those complexities to jump out and scare us, but they never have. What monsters were those folks raving about? Bills? Bad jobs? Family, maybe. Kids. But it was easy enough for us to avoid kids, so what's left? Money. People are terrified of not having enough money. But how much money does it take not to die of starvation or exposure? Not a big salary, although yours has certainly been nice, Dr. Donkey. You're a genius, a healer of sick souls, even if you've never wanted to be careful with yourself.

Remember when you threw your back out fucking me on the veranda swing? That was funny.

So we got bored and depressed, even though we knew better, or maybe because we knew better. How did we let it happen though? I've never understood. A couple of months ago, before we went abroad, we walked in the park and talked about hopelessness. A Springer Spaniel ran up to us and you were totally unreactive. You said

"I used to love dogs so much it made me cry, but now I don't know what a dog means. I don't know what morning frost means, and I don't know what it means that none of my patients get better. What does schizophrenia mean?" I told you that none of it means anything, and that looking for meaning was a mistake. "I know," you said.

I knew you knew, but that was the best I could do. My own words had no more meaning to me than anything else, because I was probably even worse off than you at that point. You couldn't have known that, because I didn't want to complain too much or do anything to upstage the suicidal depression you had going on. You were in the zone, and I was proud of you. We watched the spaniel sprint away in a flurry of black and white, and I told you I understood exactly how you felt. That I felt exactly the same way. That nothing about my life appealed to me anymore. I stopped talking when we reached the fountain with the cycling water-arcs and iridescent pigeon entourage I cared nothing about. If I'd kept talking, I could have told you that I felt like a body born without a soul. I could have said that I felt like an incorrigible liar when I told my students that Pluto, at minus three-hundred and seventy degrees, would be a bad place to live (it's as good a place as any). I could have told you that being a liar to children felt the same as being sleepy, and I could have said that these children appeared to me as animated carcasses. I could have let you in on the fact that I'd considered killing myself on a hundred occasions, including our honeymoon, and in no less than twenty ways, including slow decapitation.

I know you would have listened and done your best, but I didn't want you to worry for me. And yet I wanted to worry for you because worrying for you was the only thing that could, for moments at least, push away the drive for self-annihilation. Not fair of me,

I know—it makes me a cheat on top of being a liar and a fraud.

By the way, here's why else I'm a cheat: I slept with Todd after we were married. You may already know that too, somehow. It was when I was going out of town on job interviews and I stayed with him in D.C. We had sex in that rowhouse he owned, the one where he was killed. I cheated and I never told you, and not because I was scared to, but because I didn't want you to hate Todd. He loved you, Sam, and for most of the time that we were naked he seemed genuinely distraught.

But back to our day in the park—you said "Remember on our honeymoon how we agreed to die together?" I said I did, and you said, "Well, do you still want to?" and I said "No doubt. A deal's a deal. You mean now?" and you said "I don't know, maybe." You looked scared, and so I was too, and I said "We don't have to immediately. Shouldn't we blow all our cash first?" You laughed and said that we probably should.

Thank you for taking me to Thailand, Donkey! And for the super-chic clothes and for the horses, of course of course. These things helped me get somewhere else entirely, somewhere crazy-beautiful, and this is where I still am. I'm inspired again by my surroundings like I was when we were in college. It stuck with me all through the last two months, it's still there, and it doesn't seem to want to go away. By our second day abroad, I knew I was going to back out of our deal. I thought hard about telling you, Sam, but why? Travel didn't seem to change anything in you. You were still the dedicated zombie I love. You had your amazing thing and I had mine—intoxicatingly nostalgic delivery from evil—and I saw no reason to blab about it, so I kept quiet and looked as numb as possible even though I was far, far from it.

I'm a manipulator on top of being a fraud and a liar and a cheat. I remembered the

fear you expressed in Vegas, of seeing me die, and so when we sat down today to do this, I said "We're going to share this juice, but I weigh a lot less, so I guess I'll probably go out before you." You looked panicked and it broke my heart, but it's what I was hoping for. "We can't do this," you said. "We should explode ourselves instead." I told you that was silly, and that simultaneity was practically impossible—someone's always first and someone's always last. I said that you could drink first and I'd drink as soon as you felt something. You touched my face with your hands and apologized for being so weak. Then you drank. I said "You're not weak, man, you just drank cyanide. That's pretty hardcore." You smiled and said "Okay, widows are sexier than widowers anyway, and you should die as sexily as you've lived." That was sweet, Sam—beautiful last words. After a few minutes, you said "I'm starting to feel something." Your eyes were closed. "Are you sure?" I said. You didn't answer, and that was that.

I'm more proud of you than ever—way more than when you finished med school. That was someone else's plan. This is all you. Sorry for the deception and all, but it's worth it, right? I didn't want to risk you backing out because of my own rediscovered illusions that have nothing to do with you. I'm a little jealous, I have to admit, but better one of us than neither of us. You'll always be first, I'll always be last, and I have no problem with that.

You're sleeping with your mouth open again. It's different this time because your chest isn't moving, and I need to get out of here because I know myself, and I know I'm impulsive enough to come with you if I stay in this room. It's your hands—if I look at your long hands I'll think about never seeing or feeling them again, and I'll drink the rest of this juice. It's funny, Sam, I really do want to die now, and I'm so sure of it that I feel

like I can wait even longer before it happens. It's utterly thrilling, actually, but I'm sure that doesn't surprise you. I really am jealous though. You look like you're having fun, and I want to be there with you. Okay, I'll stop sneaking peeks at your hands. I'll be there Donkey, just not today. That's a promise I can keep.

If Todd asks about me, scream "She's fine!"

CHAPTER 6

OH MARY!

Magenta film overlays the miles-away clouds after sunset, as always, but neighbors on rooftops this evening are spared the quiet component by a low jetliner's exit thunder. It tacks something showier onto the red backdrop: a daring avian thing, a migrant impulse whose smart silhouette drifts left, lapping out behind it an unearthly bass—rich, bodyfelt, a patient decay reminiscent of Sergeant Pepper's last chord. By the time it's over—really over—the magenta has gone too and leaves the flat horizon a gray and lilac parfait. This is the view from the tops of rowhouses—flat sheets runed with cooling silver and pitch where a disconnected scatter of residents in chairs nestle in their alcohols, alone and in pairs, loving the breeze on their bare arms again.

Almost every evening it comes like this, for free. And they're all happy about it, even if they don't know it. Not completely happy, not happy about the wearying, hung-juries of their lives, but at least about the breeze off the Pacific—all of them are happy about the breeze, even the one who sits crying alone up there. Maybe he's more appreciative than anyone, forcing his eyes open, glad to let the wind bum-rush some tears from their corners, hang them out to dry in thin crystalline strokes on his cheeks. The cruising air is everywhere, like the fluttering, poly-eyed God that church kids are eased into. Everywhere, everywhere and right here if anywhere, kissing his wet eyeballs and empathizing more firmly with a layered sorrow than any mortal could—even if one were

staring him full on, tender inches from his face with a silk heart and noble focus.

In a moment, the tears stop. What liquid cushion remains is soon gone and the wind goes arid on his eyes, making them squinch shut, hard but with humor at the change. Humor because the pain isn't unexpected and, despite the salt sting, an honesty in the breeze soothes him, charms him further, pushes out a bit of what was most wrenching, perhaps? Can that be said? He would think so, sure, but he also knows better than to look a gift instant in the mouth lest it convulse shut on his gawking head.

He stands, retreats, and ponders:

As if he were a player. As if chucking a wayward Nerf ball, off-balance in jeans and a knapsack, back across the parking lot to a swaggery covey of teens makes him a player. And isn't this what he'd done? Just thrown back a friendly pass to she who owned the game? *She sure acted like it was all hers, the fucking psycho.* And it wasn't a ball, it was her cat—up here on the roof last March, chirping and ramming his shins while he paced gingerly on the phone with a friend. Who knows where it thought it was, and why the ridiculous trust? Shouldn't an animal so savvy be more careful? A misstep might have been the yowling, bloody finale. But he'd been careful. The phone friend had to go—*alright, later on man*—and so he'd finally stooped down to scratch the swirling furry cover on its skull, a flattish dome with hidden contour. He'd scritchd at the inverted hammock under its chin and his knuckles felt its speedy throat-pulses, inaudible over the evening breeze and traffic forty feet down. As if that weren't enough, there had been eyes at his feet last March, down there past the crosswind: two tiny paperweights entombing reptilian pupils, little football slits that aimed around, picky and pointless, then lingered on his own, then looked through him. *Dumb little guy.* And he'd seen it even before then,

in February, on Valentine's Day actually; he'd watched her capture it in the stairwell, all pink-nailed and freaked out like the cat would explode outside the high pressure of her apartment. By March, he knew where to go with it. He'd scooped it up under the arms and kissed its dusty head—taken the bait, overlooked the hook.

Now as he sinks back down the building, musing miserably in shadow, he contrives a clue invisible to him that day: a filament descending along with him, starting from his wounded bottom lip and running down his bruising chest, between his clench-and-release fists and down the ladder through the skeletal moving tunnel his body makes. It shimmers with slow confidence, like a Photoshop selection marquee anchored at one end to his face and running down past him to the gray metal mesh his dirty feet now meet. He imagines the filament lazily coiling there a few times, then creeping up through the open window and spilling into the gloomy third floor landing where it beckons more brightly and flirts past his apartment, loops over the banister to the dark second floor parquet, snakes away glimmering through dust bunnies and finally bisects the baton of light under her door.

He stands and squints down over the rail at the bottom of that door. Calves quake and a syrupy dejection fouls his throat. Fingers curl, dragging at the concave ladderpaint flakes stuck to his palms. She's in there now, right now, where he was with her only ten minutes ago, and oh how his temples throb mutinously while he tries to stare down the light under her door, fails to outstubborn it. His testicles ache. *Jesus Christ, what just happened?* He closes his eyes and inhales, tilts back on his bare heels and sways again to center. *Breathe, man.* He looks back. Through the window, another jet slants up and away in winks of red and white as two tired pigeons invade the foreground, dropping in puffs to roost at the ladder bottom. The image helps a little. He stands another minute

facing the yawning hall interior, then slouches rigidly into his apartment.

Now he paces in the humming kitchen, trying to nurse back the filament theory that's just gone so lame. Must resuscitate! He quickly pictures her downstairs, wild-eyed at this moment, planted next to the coffee table in thick rubber waders, legs apart, knees bent, clutching a rod and reeling frantically, *zizza zizza zizza zizza zizza!* The desolate hallway would see the shiny line jump alive, robbed of its easy slack until taut against all jambs and railings at once, and upstairs a ripping pain would hit his lower lip and *why why why?* And he dares not laugh. Instead, he scratches savagely at his scalp with all ten nails and melts to the linoleum with a whimper, pinching and pulling at his lip.

If he insists (and he does) on devising such sinister influences for himself, such deviously laid snares, then how would he feel to know that his thread simply vanishes where it hits that hateful threshold?

Downstairs she lies, still barely dressed on the couch. If she were thinking about magic string (which she isn't), there would never be cruel boots or tackle on her end. Any hooks would be cast from the merciless Above and run through her own lip—she actually does have a hole there where a small platinum stud ornaments her chin. She pierced it herself but even so, this would be just the thing to tarnish his precious analogy were he to remember it.

On her sternum a tense cat idles, a life-raft, slick driftwood bobbing up and down as she breaths more calmly now, sending her hands down its spine in long, possessive strokes, all the way up to the tapered conclusion of the tail snapping to and fro in her fingers. Languid trip-hop unwinds from knick-knacked speakers twenty feet apart. She

has just now put them to work, hoping the strains will cleanse her apartment, repaint it with crucial optimism. The room is still full of his shouts—*how odd!*—and she can see them now, his vandal strokes. Scorn hangs in the air. Vile invective arcs over walls, across cupboards and windows. There's a *WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU FUCKING INSANE?* slashing over the bookcase behind her. Spatters of *BRAT* and *BITCH* blot her maps and friends' photos, desecrate poor Mary on the mantel. Over her puffy eyes, his longest, most venomous construct loops obscenely around the ceiling like a terrifying cord of monster spaghetti: *I CAN'T TAKE THIS SHIT GET SOME FUCKING SELF CONTROL YOU THINK ANYONE WOULD TAKE THIS FROM YOU YOU'RE INSANE I'M FUCKING GLAD I KNOW NOW!*

And she panics that instant, grunts and hurries off the couch with her baby before the words can unstick and drop on them.

She trots sway-hipped to the bedroom, breathing hard again, leaving the stereo like a flea fogger to make what repairs it might. Her bedroom helps once she's safely past a patient floor-length mirror from which her eyes avert, and she sets down the cat in a long-limbed motion before falling into bed, her black hair fanning out in lush chaos over the edge of the mattress. Sub-bass and gossamer major-sevenths peek at her around the doorway. She lies perfectly still.

Two rasping breaths, a sniff, and then up again standing at the mirror. And there she is, in dim light, just right of the equals sign at the end of a shaky twenty-two year equation—smeared, illegible in most places, lost forever she fears. It hurts to look, and look she does. Those eyes, those lips. That steely stud. The fun mint baby-tee with cartoon kitten and *spoiled* text, backward across her reflection. She does what she can—tears it off like lightning and sidearms it viciously away where it should find the pile in

the hall but instead catches doorknob, bungees back to hang in unfortunate folds: soiled. Her hand aches. She stands still before herself. Pale and naked except for her rings and the spongy triangle of her nicest white underwear, even paler, posting itself protectively over hips she's been adoring lately—and he encouraged that, as recently as today, drizzling sugars like *sexy*, *luscious* and even *incredible* while her eyes flashed and her red ears luxuriated under him.

You'll never, ever...EVER see this again you pathetic...warped....

But she gags on it, beginning to tremble. Evil is on her mind. Uncaring evil. Evil in the world, especially upstairs. Evil peeling and dangling in the living room so strewn with easy lies of such sickly persuasion. Worst of all, evil here in her chest, right between the beady brown eyes of her small breasts. Evil puckering the scandalized mouth of her navel, making it say *oo—!* But not in her eyes—she sees nothing important in her own eyes. She bullies herself for it, glares, burns at the hollow specter until time stops and her whole round face goes invisible. The stereo chokes on a scratched disc, goes quiet. The cat is motoring around her ankles. *Oh Mary, what just happened?* And the grimacing two of her wither shamefully to the carpet, four palms in docked pairs, *EEK-EEK-EEK*ing down the cold glass between. No response from Mary of the Mantel.

Mary? Mary...

(She stirs.)

Oh Mary! A girl lies collapsed beside herself in the next room. A boy lies fetal across a sauce-spotted kitchen floor above, tugging at his lip, gripping his crotch. So much pain between the two! What happened, Mary? What did You see?

(She sighs with one eye open, the other shut against a black corner of his earlier profanity, diagonal across Her high little forehead.)

What do you mean what happened? The usual happened.

(She sighs in ancient exasperation, then looks up with Her one good eye.)

Not for them, of course—not for these two. These two aren't used to it yet, so it's not usual for them, right? Very new. How will they deal with it? Futures are forged this very hour, and that's as dramatic as I'll get. I can't believe I'm talking about this. What do you want? You were here, right? How complicated can it be?

I'm sorry. I hoped that—

Well there's nothing new to say! Yes, once I had an idea that the possibilities among all of them—even just one of them—would never be exhausted. Ever. Something seemed so clearly infinite. Something delicious in the way they lived together, reacted to each other, would stay fresh like the waves crashing outside somehow still do. I believed this, and yes it was true for, let's see...about a hundred years? Not the same as never is it? Yes, I'm bitter. I am. After nineteen-hundred years of crushing boredom I'm bitter. Yes—I've seen this mess unfold billions of times. Billions. And no—usually I don't get this way, but look at my face! I can barely see. Once in a while this will happen; I get dragged into the frays where I hate to even spectate. And it's not his fault, it's hers. He spewed all this silliness, but she keeps it on the walls and across my face. I know, I'm Mary and she's just a girl. But I'm hers, and apparently this is the way she wants it for now. I won't try to explain. But you're asking me what happened. Weren't you here?

I was. Well, I was very nearby but I can't—some of us can't really—

Oh please stop, it's painful. I'm teasing you. I don't think we've met. You new guys

have that weird thing where—

Yes.

Right. Anyway, you've been watching these two for a while and you know how they've been. They met. They talked endlessly. Suns rose and set, leaving them shivering in secret with terrible excitement, neither really seeing what the other would instantly become once the secret was no more. And then it was no more. But not by accident, and not by any slip or fumbled guard even though it might have looked that way (remember their flushed incoherence at the wino's "ah young love" assessment?)—no, they destroyed the secret with precision and tongue-kissed over its vanquished carcass, silly notions of co-conspiracy hot in their flared nostrils.

That was in May. It was pure transport for these two, as it was for three-thousand other couples that same day, just on this continent. Blah blah blah, nothing interesting here, except to say it's funny how the further an empire like this one slides into "Romance: anything can happen!", the more fiercely its couples cling in a specific, shared distrust of the idea. As if this new love sprang from the dust and into one's arms, somehow having escaped the insult woven through the other three-hundred million at birth. As if this one is exempt from "original sin" maybe, although I still don't get what that's supposed to be about—and you can tell Him I said that. I don't care!

(Her closed eye flickers open a little and flashes wildly with the other. A pregnant pause, and She speaks again.)

So then there was sex. Lots of sex. And it changed things between them. Big surprise. They all do this at first. They think about sex. Then they have sex. They infuse each other, the buildings, the rain, their politics, their pets, the scrubbers on their kitchen sinks with

the sex humming in their groins, every hour of every day, and then they sit in diners and drone on about how willing and able they are to separate it all out again, how sex is beautiful but not the most important part, how it doesn't have to change things—as if they're rinsing paintbrushes under a faucet, satisfied, watching rich and expendable streams of color pour forth and swirl diluted down the drain, safely unbound from the tools they've renewed for another day. It doesn't have to change things.

Easy to say. Not so easy to forget the rutting animal they squeezed at orgasm, the animal they themselves were. That's the thing they can't conquer; despite feverish attempts to own it, tame it, muzzle the memory, nothing works. They resort to violence—kill the sex-beast! Suffocate it with kindness! And they're good with kind words, so they heap them on: lovemaking, trust, faith, union, soulmate and rapture; sharing, knowing, special, sacred and beautiful. But these labels cover nothing! They only slide sweatlogged from arching rumps! Then another round, this time a harder tack: bang, nail, hit, lay, do it, the nasty, ball, fuck. And these might stick a little longer but still don't work, because they're only jokey sidesteps or angry jabs at their own embarrassing first volley—not really aimed at the target at all. Every spell they know fails to contain what's stalking them. You know, actually, I really like “the beast with two backs”, which is older than I am. But it doesn't work either. Every time one of them thinks to say it, those listening just stare for a moment, simply imagining a beast with two backs, and what can you do with that? Am I making you uncomfortable?

What? No. You're not. I just—

Because your wings are twitching. I thought maybe you—

No, no. This is good, very helpful, but I was—

But you were asking me what happened during the worst of it, while you were hiding in the hallway with your fingers in your ears.

Well, see, it's not exactly hiding, it's more like—

What IS the deal with that anyway? You can handle everything until what, until trouble starts? Until things get too intense and they're upset?

Well, when they—

You know, a lot of them will swear that you're right there beside them all the time, no matter what.

I know!

(She smirks and lifts her tiny eyebrow. The mantel clock ticks twice.)

I know. It's only when they're together. If they're alone, no problem. I can handle anything. I'm there. But when they're together it's...extremely difficult. It's so much. I'm not sure I'm needed. I'm trying to fix it.

Mmm. And He knows about all this?

He knows. He's not happy about it, but He—

Oh I'm sure He's not. I'm sure He's made His own frustration very clear—He's an Expert at that. Very practiced.

(She smiles, tight-lipped, both eyes open now. The black across Her forehead has faded noticeably, as have the words on the walls. The clock ticks four times. Rustlings come from the bedroom, and She glances toward them.)

Okay. So you want to know what happened while you were out?

That would be great.

They came in laughing. Laughing because they were excited, and excited because

why? Because they were going to make the beast with two backs. Again. Once today wasn't enough, so they came in the door laughing on each other, hands all over, tired bodies harnessed cruelly to their whipping groins—his more than hers of course. He sat bulging on the couch and winced as she picked up the cat, her furry little delay. And she didn't see the wince, but she could feel it. It irritated her, but also pleased her sadomodesty as she cradled the lonely thing and did little knee-bends. And he couldn't—

Sadomodesty?

My word, not theirs. You know what I'm saying. All of them indulge on occasion, relish it privately, and are themselves jilted for seconds at a time when it titillates the other, right? Sadomodesty. It's like...it's like...oh it's like how it sounds! Just listen! Stop interrupting!

(She cocks her head with a wary glower, then continues)

She was pleased that he was annoyed. He couldn't see her pleasure. But he could feel it and it bothered him. So what if he'd done the same to her at lunch? Taking a frivolous call as she excited to him about flying out to see her sister tonight, beloved and radiant, fun again since her divorce. He grabbed at his phone and paused her mid-sentence with one insipid finger and enjoyed her impatience at his life. But here on the couch it was no fun for him, because it was her life, and he who had to wait. And it bothered him. So pouty. Maybe it was all over right there.

(She blinks tiredly and swallows, then speaks quietly.)

After a moment she put the cat down, and both of them were on the couch undressing each other in a shaft of sunlight whorled with dust and fur from the cushions. He'd lost a shirt and she her jeans. And they caught each others' eyes as they groped, and there was

lust, but something else there too for a second, something mixed with lust. You saw it. You were still here. A happy thing, right? A happy last look, like coupled skydivers before stepping out, or surrounded bank thieves before the last stand. Like these two themselves last week—how they looked at each other and locked hands before sprinting into the parking lot downpour, eyes fixed on a distant sedan and laughing out of control, suffocating together under the overkill blankets of tepid wet from Above as they ran, veering clumsily apart and pulling each other back again by slick, wrenched fingers until they collided, almost tumbling, gripping each other hard, and their laughter shot up like small artillery through the furious sky. Remember? Well that was the look they gave each other on the couch.

(She gazes, so beautiful, Her face clear and Her lips parted slightly.)

But the cat came back. It was lonely and anxious after torturing itself all day with pigeons out the window. It leapt up and kneaded her neck, mewing. 'Not now,' she said, and lifted it down to the carpet. They writhed and nibbled and the cat came back, was put off again. He grew more irritated and she more darkly amused, and his fluidity, his moves, gave way to something mechanized as he kept at her, struggling to keep the mood, stay in form, stay in love. That's when you went and hid, right? Yes, I think it was. The cat jumped up once more, this time stinging his bare shoulder with accidental claws, and he lost it. He let out a jarring curse, cupped the animal under its belly and tossed it roughly off the couch where its poor head caught the corner of the coffee table in a sad little 'thunk'. And he was sorry at this but as he turned back to her, her fist was already in the air, and it met his chest with all the fury she hadn't known was there.

It shocked him; he just hovered over her, gaping another second until she powered a

leg into his babbling groin and screamed 'Get off!' And he did then, backing away in unholy pain, not taking his eyes off hers, wondering where the other look had gone. She trembled now, up on her elbows. The cat was under the couch. Nausea took hold of him, and he stood in a hunch, silent, going pale. Then he inhaled suddenly and vomited what you see fading from the walls. She stared at him, clenching her teeth, mesmerized, almost sleepy, letting his words rain over her, feeling them needle blindly into her, corroding her inside. She even wished for an instant that he had just punched her back, blackened her eyes instead of her ears. But he didn't touch her! He didn't touch her. He just grabbed his shirt and plodded out. She lay here and sobbed. After a few minutes, the cat came out, flickered its head and hopped up to her. She wept and held it, apologized to it over and over until it purred.

(Her almond eyes are big and moist. Her long neck works tremulously.)

And that's what happened. They try.

(She is weeping freely, Her chin up in defiance. The clock ticks. Agonized grunge guitar suddenly comes muffled through the ceiling and She glances up, knitting Her brow.)

They try?

They try! At least they try! They might never know what they're doing, but they're doing something! What is it? What are they doing? I can almost remember. What was it I used to do? They wake up each morning and they're lost even before they open their eyes. It's over! A fresh new day, and hope is already gone! But they get up anyway, and they give each other those looks! What are they thinking?

I know! They have faith that—

Shut up!! Do you ever shut up!? I know what they're thinking. They're thinking what I was thinking until the day one of you fools swooped in, scared the Hell out of the animals and my husband and muttered that I'd soon push out a Superbaby because He wanted one. And that's what happened! Because He could! And without the sex, because He was too clean for it. Too clean for me, and then too clean for our Son who cried out for Him, bled and died like a hoisted hog while I groveled, and still, the Loser couldn't find the balls to comfort either of us! And now He sends guys like you? It's incredible! It's just incredible! Go away! Leave us alone, coward! It's true! They don't need you! Get out! NOW!! And tell Him to GO TO HELL!!

There is sudden movement here and in the bedroom doorway. She's in the living room with a hair-toss, refreshed, dressed in new clothes and carrying a green overnight bag.

Upstairs he sits against the bedroom wall, his sore lap full of disused guitar, trying anything to get away. He droops his head to watch the old oxidized strings, dull and greasy under the pick. They defocus with each strum while nearby, a haggard amplifier explodes into gossip, aloof to his hands and their chops, disgorging the news it can't hold down. He is unrelenting; the little crate howls boorishly, loud out of all proportion to its size as he keeps swiping away, weathering the blast like one 30,000 feet above the ground weathers a screaming pink babe across the aisle. It's worth it, he thinks. *She hears this, she knows.*

And he keeps going, hacking with his right hand, fretting with his left, sticking to root

chords. Back and forth between E and easy D, then a daring move to the B-minor he's never handled and still can't despite the gravity here—it takes humiliating effort to nail it down while the amp hiccups and squeaks in horror. When he finds the chord, he's livid, and tears into the old strings, slashes at them with the tortoise-shell pick. The amplifier screams. He screams. They scream together. The pick escapes, flies away and cartwheels across the carpet, hides behind a bedpost. A silent second and his rage triples—he now attacks with a bare hand, slammed by the noise he can feel in his teeth, the skin flayed from his knuckles *for her* he thinks, until the weak B string breaks with a violent *choink!* and whips across his cheek, startling him to stillness. He stares at the humming amp, at the little red light by the power button. *She still needs a ride to the airport. I'll still do that. She'll apologize then. She'll have to.* He sets the guitar on the carpet, mutes it, sees his blood-flecked fingers leave its neck as he gets to his feet and looks at his watch. *We have to leave now!* He strides to the living room, grabs his phone, wallet, keys, then exits the apartment. Inside, the knob jiggles and the deadbolt slides home.

The room is quiet.

He steps easily down the stairs, composing himself further, barely thinking. At the second floor he stops, ten feet from her door, sees the light underneath, hears nothing within. He swallows. *Is she packed? Is she still going? She has to go, it's her sister. I won't let her cancel because of this. She can't cancel her trip because of me. I won't let her.* He starts forward, the door opens, he jumps. Light pushing from inside pours out and she backs into the hallway with the green bag and a purse over her shoulder, not seeing him. She's talking sweetly, telling the cat who'll come by to feed it. The cat tenses in the doorway, eyes fixed on the one in the hall. She pulls the door closed and digs in her

purse, still not seeing him, so he jingles his own keys and she jumps, shoots a look behind her, sees him several feet away.

There is great difficulty here.

She locks her door, turns and glances at him, sees that his posture is practical, his eyes querulous, saying *okay, whatever—shall we?* She looks forward and strides past to the stairs, almost brushing him. He follows her down, first with eyes now softening at the sight of her, then with his mobilized legs, descending behind her to the first floor, watching her hips sway fifteen feet ahead, strong and sexy beyond measure, so obviously independent of his praise. *What have I done?* And his pride dissolves—his plan inverts itself—he knows that *he* 'll use the ride to apologize now, without question. She'll hear how sorry he is, how wrong he knows he was. A lightness buoys him suddenly, and he sees the front door to the building swing open before she reaches it, held for her politely by a returning neighbor, whom she thanks with a gracious smile so wise and so good that he now begins to trot after her, his mouth open to speak. But before he can catch up, she steps out into the night and onto the sidewalk where a dirty yellow cab waits. He stops at the threshold and watches as the nearest street lamp rays down at the perfect angle, silently dashing the darkness from her, streaking it larger-than-life across the cement at her feet.

CHAPTER 7

WHAT ARE FRIENDS FOR?

(A STUDENT READING)

Albert and I were having gin in his little kitchen when he told me that, as a kid, he'd been diagnosed with a kind of borderline autism because he rocked all the time.

"Now I keep it in my jaw," he said, "but I used to let it go all through me. It was better that way. But once, at the kitchen table—this table right here—my dad bear-hugged me 'til I couldn't breathe and said 'Just stop it. Just stop rocking, goddammit. Keep it to yourself, Albert.'"

I reminded him that his dad was dead, and that he should rock again if it feels better. He started up immediately, back and forth on the creaky chair, his huge forearms on the table and his head cocked like he was listening for something far away.

"This is much better!"

He grinned savagely and rocked harder and the whole table swayed.

"This doesn't bother you?" he asked.

"Not really."

"Ha-HA!" he yelled. "I feel like a boy again!" Albert stepped up the violence and continued. "You just gave me some great advice," he shouted. "Now I'll give back. Here's what you should do."

He rocked even harder and stared happily, straight through me.

"I'm listening," I said. The table groaned and crackled like it would collapse on our legs and cold gin leapt over the rims of both glasses.

"What?" he said.

"I said I'm listening."

"For my advice?"

"Yes! Stop it!" I blurted, and scooted my chair back from the dying table. The rocking stopped and I instantly felt bad. The kitchen was quiet. Albert gulped once from his wet glass, set it back down gingerly and rubbed alcohol between his giant palms.

"You should cut your hair," he said.

"Why?"

"Because you want to cut it. You wish that long hair suited you, but it definitely doesn't. You're just forcing it on yourself. Some of these guys you hang out with, it works for them because they're longhairs anyway. But you're anal and intense about everything by nature. It's the first thing anyone can tell about you. That hair is supposed to convince people that you're some kind of easy-going free spirit, and it's failing. The way you toss it and fuck with it all the time, it's just one more thing for you to be all uptight about. You've settled on long hair as a safe way to be a little bit different, but it's backfiring. You look like a twit. You even look like you suspect you look like a twit, but you're not sure, so you're trying not to think about it. That's gotta be exhausting. Cut your hair. If you really want to impress yourself, get your whole face tattooed. Then you'll know you're serious. At least stop trimming the split ends. You don't know how you look."

"Thanks," I said.

"You're welcome," said Albert, daubing spilled gin over his eyebrows with both

pinkies.

[three-second "NPR guitar" flourish—a cheesy little chromatic chord descent typical of the way they punctuate the ends of whimsical essays read on National Public Radio.]

When I was a kid, I worked a puzzle of the United States—one state per piece—and it was important for me to believe that there were no discrepancies of money or influence or vision or even population between, say, Florida and Wyoming. They were different sizes, of course, but they were all waxy, partical board slices of the same thickness and color—something between raw umber and burnt sienna. Fifty equal parts. Now I see that there's barely a United States at all.

I was furious as a teenager and fought the world with teeth and nails. When I started college, my guarded, adolescent mind began to open; I thought a lot about feminism, invertebrate zoology and how the Tao that you can Tao is not the real Tao. I hugged people harder and more often. This felt great, so I really let my mind bloom for a few years. I watched it go from open to wide-open to grotesquely inside-out.

The night before graduation, I stayed up drinking bad beer with my roommate while he pitched a dome tent in the living room. Empties covered the coffee table and I railed to him about how the world is illusion and that judgement is arbitrary—that conclusions and decisiveness are harrowing addictions we're saddled with at infancy as we writhe and struggle from day one to corral the unmanageable chaos here outside the womb.

He orbited the tent, waterproofing the seams with some kind of gluestick and not

looking up.

I kept going. I told him that this very effort, this push for control, becomes our fatal flaw—an endless game of categories that imprisons us, isolates us from real truth and happiness. I went on, saying that no one is immune, but that we must try valiantly to give up the ego game and open ourselves again to some earlier, divinely primal impulse. I explained that almost no one is willing to see this problem for what it is, hence the pain and solitude we slog through until death. I was a fun drunk.

Dan was an ex-Campus Crusader, and here he pointed out that I was talking about original sin—the one we commit just by being born.

"I used to believe in that too," he said, still not looking at me, "and it just made me really guilty and pissed all the time. You gotta let it go, dude. You gotta lighten up, give the world a break. I mean, no offense, but relax. Try to open your mind. Get outdoors once in a while."

He stepped back to look at the finished tent, a horrible nylon gumdrop that crowded my thoughts. So I turned on him, laughing down his advice as absurd coming from someone who came to college chasing everyone around with a bible like a lunatic—except I said 'asshole'.

He looked at me and said more patiently than I could bear, "I'm sorry about all that, but I was pretty confused. You know that. And you were very cool when you confronted me about it back then. What happened?"

Then he belched and went to bed. I was up at least another hour, sitting in the tent.

[more NPR guitar]

Nature *is* beautiful, but not always in the way I would like. Effective camping means surrender. The further I go into the wilderness, away from town and even away from crowded campgrounds with blue-graveled pull-in spots of exactly 3.5 residents each, the more crucial it becomes for me to just break down at some point and wave the white flag. This could be a fresh paper towel (a paper towel in the wilderness is like a cumberbund on a cactus) or it could be an athletic sock swung around over my head, losing stagnant creek water in long spirals. I have to surrender, better sooner than later.

But here's the rub. I'm not surrendering to anything that isn't me. I'm the victor just as surely as I am the vanquished. If I forget, even for a moment, that *I am* the wilderness, I'll risk panic, and the unhinging thought of "what the hell am I doing in the middle of nowhere with this cold flashlight and this giant gray I-don't-know-what-it-is—I think it went in my backpack—when I could be home in bed, squeezed among six flat surfaces, suffering only the tickle of a pillow-embedded hair against my cheek?" The answer? I like it out here. I love it. Victor and vanquished, man, victor and vanquished. But even that will turn on me sometimes. I'll scrape imagined spiders from my scalp and fall down kicking and squealing under the awful realization that not only do I have to be a good loser, but a graceful winner. As I plead into Nature's abyss for clemency, so it pleads back at me, and I see that I'm in a hall of mirrors, playing all rolls at once: the creek, the gray thing in the bag, the bag, the mountains focused at infinity, and even the camper himself. At that point, the roll of the camper seems like the one I'm most comfortable with, so I give it everything I have. I sleep well that night, and the next morning I look out at Nature and say "Nature baby, you are so beautiful. Hey. Aren't you the pretty little

thing who's been known to level entire civilizations in a—*wink*? Oh I think ya are."

It's always the quiet ones.

[one last NPR guitar moment]

I went to a rock and roll show last year in my hometown. It was at The Crawlspace, downtown on the corner of Ninth and Grumble. It's not a bad place to see a band, but you might have to stoop—the ceiling is only five-and-a-half-feet high and layered with fiberglass insulation. The Crawlspace started out as a "little people" only venue, owned and operated by a local guy, a tiny general contractor who loved music and drinking and designed the place for other little people to kick back—mostly house construction folks whom he tended to hire preferentially. This is how the place ran—quietly—for a couple of months until the papers picked up the story. Then the whole town knew about it and they really went for the idea. They wouldn't be kept away, and the Crawlspace became instantly friendly to taller people as well. Soon it was chic. The place was packed every Friday and Saturday night with a mix of big and little, and not much in between. It was the place to see and be seen. They sold wings and fries, and a six-liquors-at-once drink called "The Diminuator."

Musicians were dying to get booked. Bands waited for months to get on the list, and gladly signed a release saying that the Crawlspace wasn't responsible for head injuries sustained on the ceiling joist. But little musicians still played there almost as often. The night I went was life-changing. Lil' Baby Belladonna was playing. She was three-foot-three with chestnut hair and green eyes, cuter and luckier than rabbit's feet. The most

beautiful creature I'd ever seen. I tried talking to her at the bar, not realizing she was going onstage. She was a quiet one. I asked her how that "Diminuator" was working out for her, and she just said "Great." I think I said something really stupid then, like, "Should you be drinking that?" I meant it well, but she got up and moved.

A few minutes later, she took the stage and I decided to show as much enthusiasm as I could muster, just to make up for the gaffe. As it turned out, by God, I didn't need to muster anything but self-control. Lil' Baby Belladonna was strictly a solo act—she played a full-size Gibson hollow-body acoustic. She was all over the place. To this day I'm still trying to remember what she did, and it won't be the same, but...

[bizarre and eclectic noodling and thrashing around with the guitar]

Halfway through, she put down the guitar and recited some piece of short fiction she'd written, and it was okay, but I was thinking, "Oh Jesus, is this a rock and roll show or a reading?" After a couple of minutes she went back to work...

[more of the same guitar, ending with a maudlin expression and over-the-top, progressive rock drama]

When it was all over, I ran up to Lil' Baby Belladonna with tears in my eyes.

"Lil' Baby Belladonna! That was the—single—most—"

But she was all like, "Ahhh!?" *[freeze, scowling with mouth open, giving extended-arm, sassy "talk to the hand" gesture]*

Thank you.

CHAPTER 8

THE DARK

I can't see them anymore, but the birds still conference in my backyard twice a day. Once at dawn, when I'm horizontal upstairs and the blue-jays' raucous *jeers* complement the taste of my tongue, and again at dusk, as I'm upright on the patio and flute-bursts from thrushes seem to drizzle and quench the sun I can't see anymore either, not even when I aim my dead eyes directly at it by perfectly balancing its heat among my cheeks, chin and forehead.

It's been a laborious adjustment full of big and little losses, but the birds are an exception. When I could see, I never found them in the trees. Most of them aren't much to look at anyway. Now I enjoy them with a precision that was impossible a few months ago when the chaos of crabgrass and ice-damaged birches was such a distraction. At this moment, I have the positions of several fixed: a cardinal *whoips* from halfway up the sugar-maple; a parula calls from the closest pine to my left—just over the shed—like the accelerating zip of a parka, slow at the waist then quick near the collar; two robins *tut-tut* under the sweetgum and three, maybe four crows continue to worry the poor vireo couple near their nest at the sycamore's breezy top. A hummingbird is here and gone, leaves a shimmering green streak in the air behind my neck. All of this overlays a redolent, golden platform of honeysuckle and wisteria. The two nectars merge in my nose, where I could probably separate them if I didn't smoke.

It's funny—now that I can't see, there is no such thing as noise. I'm convinced that any irritation I ever suffered at sounds was really a displaced aggression toward the excess of their sights. Now I see how oppressive it was to link lips with voices and pretend that lungs and wires are responsible for the sonic tapestries that blanket concert halls—there's no real connection. Now I see.

No one knows I'm like this. I live alone in the featureless (hence unmissed) suburbs where I'll stroll eighteen confident paces to the mailbox, smile and nod in the direction of any neighbor sounds, and return to the kitchen with a stack of envelopes. Then I'll sit on a computer chair where I open each one, lay the first page on a scanner and command the speech-recognition software to read it aloud. After a long pause, a clumsy little techno-voice tells me about zero percent balance transfers, or how long the Green Party candidate has been fighting for my right to clean water. Landscape Photography wants to know why I haven't submitted anything lately. It's because I'm no longer fretting over light meters and f-stops, or frustrating myself with composition and cropping. I was pretty good at one time though, and extremely industrious. My bank account still bears the fruit of that labor. I'm not sure what to do when the money runs out. I may write articles about landscape photography. But I can't think about money these days, so I avoid their letters and calls.

I've always been private; I know almost no one in this town. Family and old friends are entities of the telephone, where all things are equal. Email is a godsend, although everyone speaks in that same naive little techno-voice. I've been encouraging people to send sound files instead of text, but no one will. "C'mon, it's so much warmer," I say.

It was only this past winter that I noticed any trouble with my eyesight. Dimness. I

remembered that my grandfather discovered the same thing when he was my age and that it led to the man I know now, who clenches armrests as if watching a horror flick and lets his jaw hang, who won't budge without a nurse's light touch between his tensed shoulder blades.

For me, a steady darkening followed, a three month fade-to-black which at least gave me some time to prepare. I notched the tags of pants and shirts to allow coordination. Bought a deep-freezer and crammed it full, everything coded with tiny puncture-patterns I read with my thumb. Counted steps like an obsessive-compulsive, so that now my head is teeming with secret digits. Closed my eyes and re-learned a hundred other mundane tasks we take for granted.

By late March, there was very little left to see. One night before bed, I excavated a crushed shoebox of photos from the hall closet and sat naked on the rug with a 300-watt floodlight, studying the dearest faces I'll ever know. Then I brushed my teeth and stood a while with my nose almost touching the mirror. I blinked out a couple of tears and practiced the "normal face" one last time while a cricket consoled from under the hamper. When I awoke the next morning, my birthday, there were only the birds. Numerous and social and unafraid. More immediate than ever before—something between free-jazz and a cocktail party. I found the open window, pushed the screen out and heard it tumble down into the spicebushes, which made me laugh. Then I thrust my head into the dewy air and said to the birds, "That's good! Don't ever stop doing that!" In some way, I was happier than I'd been in forty years.

Things have been going so well, but today I've made two mistakes. I carried several bags to the curb for trash pickup, including one with ten cartons of cigarettes that I'd

lazily left on the kitchen floor instead of returning to the cabinet. That's three hundred dollars out the window. I have to get to the Jet-Mart for more, and I've already called for a cab twice with no luck. They say tonight is prom night and a massive responsible driver campaign has tied up all their vehicles—it could be several hours. I'd walk the half-mile to the store, but my ankle is throbbing from when I twisted it on the curb last night. That was the other mistake. I was spacing out, whistling cheerfully to myself after throwing away two-thousand cigarettes. Stupid.

Now I have to do something I hate.

There are four steps down to the garage floor. The keys are on a hook to my right—a little higher—there. After feeling my way around the hood to the driver-side door, I get in. I put on sunglasses. My hands cruise over everything—dash knobs, the steering wheel, the seat next to me, the roof upholstery—until I feel grounded. There's a hawk feather hanging from the rearview mirror that I like to touch for luck, and I sit for a minute doing this, gingerly tracing its spongy edges with my thumb and forefinger, touching the downy part near the quill. Total quiet. I start the car.

This engine always fires up louder than I expect, and I get a chill. The garage door clatters open behind me. I ensure that all the windows are fully powered down and try to muster all the sensory focus I can. The car eases slowly back and out of the wild echo chamber, where it's much quieter and the honeysuckle and wisteria rush in. When the back tires meet the lip of the driveway, I stop and stick my head out the window, listening for any other traffic. Nothing there, so I give a timid honk and keep going, very slowly, hoping desperately not to crush a deaf kid on a tricycle. There are no deaf children on this street as far as I know, but it kills me that I leave this up to mere hope.

After the front tires have cleared, I turn semi-hard to the left, straighten out, then stop and shift into first.

My heart is pounding. It's impossible to know exactly where I'm aiming the car until I start moving. Fortunately, it's a straight shot to the intersection. You'd think that parked vehicles on the side of the street would be a real problem here, but I actually rely on them. With the windows open, I can hear the echo of my own engine bounce off their sides as I creep by. I'll lean sideways in the seat like a punk, trying to center my head while I compare the volumes of these echoes from the left and from the right. As long as they stay slightly louder on the passenger side, I know I'm on the right side of the road. Easy.

Still, as I start forward I feel I'm in a tank instead of a Camry, and I get the shudders again. I can't do this anymore. It's insane. Literally insane. I'll return to the garage, go back inside and wait for the cab. There's a woman who lives four houses down whom I saw smoking last summer. I can bum a few off her. But it won't make sense. She's probably seen me driving before. If anyone finds out now, I'll be arrested. Even if she doesn't suspect my eyes, she'll think I'm unstable. For all I know she's watching me right now. Oh, this is crap. I can do this. Concentrate!

There are kids playing in yards on both sides of me. Not only does this make me feel generally vile, but their laughs and shrieks are extremely unnerving. I can't tell if a scream is from fun or from something grisly about to happen. Plus, it's so much harder to hear the echoes. I should have waited an hour for nightfall, but it's too late now. I roll past them at a crawl, white-knuckled.

At the end of the street, the echoes are gone. I slow down even further, and when my

left front tire hits the manhole cover, I stop. This is a four-lane highway. I practiced this part constantly last winter. I turn off the engine, cut on the hazards and get out to listen. Traffic is fairly heavy, and I have to make a left. This could take a while. If anyone pulls up behind me, they can go around. I'm just having car trouble. I listen. And listen. A few promising gaps emerge, but always with the faint swell of more tires on the way. Finally, it's quiet. I jump back in, start the engine, throw it in gear, honk and hit the gas, holding my breath as I execute a wide sweep to the left, shift up, count three seconds and straighten out. I know I'm in the far right lane, but I don't exhale until I feel the pothole next to Floral Designs. Halfway there.

I'm going about twenty-five miles an hour, which I can usually tell from the engine's pitch. But just in case, I've removed the plastic cover over the gauges. The speedometer increments are marked with bits of scotch tape that I can feel along with the needle itself—same with the fuel gauge. Potholes are everywhere on this stretch, so I use these instead of echoes to keep myself straight. Eventually the town will fill them and I'll be screwed. No, I'll figure something out. There's a distinct rhythm they create; if I speed up to thirty, right—here—it sounds just like the beginning of "Honky Tonk Woman" and I relax a bit.

Now I slow down, way down. I'm practically at the store, but there's a stoplight ahead, so I shift to neutral, cut the engine and coast quietly with my head out the window once more, listening for vehicles idling in front of me. There are none. The light is probably green, but I stop anyway, about fifteen feet after the dip in the road. With the engine still off, I listen through both windows for anything crossing, turning or stopping. But I lose the image of what's in front of me. The sounds don't seem to fit, and I'm

paralyzed until the car behind me honks. Thank you.

Just past the intersection is a final pothole which marks the spot where I turn right into the Jet-Mart. I can sense a crowd here this evening as I pull in and make another very gradual, heavily-practiced veer toward an unmarked parking spot off to the side of the real ones, out of the way of foot-traffic. Before pulling in, I stop and get out. Highschool kids are laughing to my left. At me? No. At the price of corsages. I walk to the front of the car and face the hood, where I then back slowly away, my face pointed down at it while I stoop and frown slightly, like I'm checking the front end for some problem. Someone is slapping a fresh pack of cigarettes on their palm. After a few steps back, I know that there's nothing in my spot, so I return to the car, pull in, and sigh loudly.

Seven steps to the door and I'm there. Once inside, I'm a hip-hop star. I start humming and laying down beats with my lips and throat. It's for the echoes again. They're subtle, but I can at least tell if someone is standing right in front of me and avoid collision. It's a huge help, even though I'm sure the endless funk assault makes me look like, well, like one of those people. I guess I am one of those people now.

I find the back of the line and wait. The Jet-Mart is in high-spirits and it's infectious. The air conditioning blows around a mix of hotdog, cologne and floor cleaner. All three customers in front of me get ID'd, and the last one gets turned away. He grouses mildly, and I imagine a young, tuxedoed Kevin Bacon (same voice) slouching back to the cooler with a twelve of Heineken.

"Next."

I bounce forward in my shades, still beatboxing.

"Carton o' reds, please," I say, flipping through my wallet.

"Have you tried these?" the cashier asks. "They're discounted this week."

Great. I point my head at the counter, imagining his hand there holding some generic pack.

"No, never have."

"Umm, these up here?" he says with some flippancy, and I can tell he's at the back wall, pointing to the cartons.

"No, that's alright. Just the reds."

"Twenty-nine sixteen."

I hold out two twenties with their bottom left corners snipped off and he takes them. The register opens and the till squeaks annoyingly as I gently take the carton.

"Change is ten eighty-four," he says.

"Just the ten, I don't need the rest."

The last time I was here, I dropped coins all over the counter, apologized, said I was in a big hurry and hustled off without them, ramming an old woman in my rush to the door.

"Al-right," he says with the same flip tone, and lays a bill in my palm.

"Thanks," I say, and carefully leave.

I'm suddenly exhausted. When I get in the car, I'm going to open this box and smoke the hell out of one right now, before I start home. A walkie-talkie crackles very nearby. My legs weaken and I pause. Cop. Two o'clock. I resume walking.

"Sir, is this your vehicle?"

I freeze. It's over. Just like that. The blood drains from my face and I point it at him.

"Yes it is."

The entire unfeasibility of my existence lurches into focus, and it's an abominable sensation. I'm sick. There's something very wrong with me—worse than any problem with my eyes.

“Are you aware that you're parked in a handicapped space?”

What? It's not a handicapped space. What is he saying?

“What?” I croak.

“This is a handicapped space, sir. Unless you're handicapped, I'm gonna have to cite you.”

“Is it new?” I ask.

“It's been recently added, yes, but it's clearly marked.” He's flipping through papers.

Some of my composure returns and I relax my face.

“I apologize, officer. I was just in there for a couple seconds. I'll definitely not park—”

“I understand sir,” he interrupts in a bored and delightfully unthreatening tone, “but the space is reserved for handicapped motorists. I'm afraid I have to issue a citation. Could I please see your driver's license?”

“Okay,” I say, and fish it out of my wallet. It disappears from my hand and he thanks me, says he'll be back in a moment, and I hear him head for his cruiser. I wait, braced on a newspaper box, trying to look appropriate. He's back after longer than a moment.

“Okay Mr. Snow,” he says, flipping through papers. He describes the summons as I nod with my brow knitted, but not too much.

“Let me give you this back,” he says after he's done.

My license. I offer my hand at mid-length and let him insert the card between my

thumb and fingers.

“And I’ll need you to sign here.”

This rattles me afresh. I pause for a long second to visualize the most likely gesture and raise both hands, the left one palm-up, banking on a clipboard, the right on a pen. I get both without dropping. The carton of cigarettes is clamped under my arm. Sign where?

“Sign where?” I ask.

“Here, at the ‘X’,” he answers, and I’m forced to quickly touch his extended finger with my knuckles so I’ll know where he’s pointing. Too hard—I think I just marked him with the pen.

“Sorry,” I say. He doesn’t answer. I scratch off the hastiest signature I can in that region of the clipboard and hand the items back. He takes them and tears off a sheet.

“And here’s your copy, sir.”

I bring my arm up under the sheet to take it.

“Thanks,” I murmur.

“Thank you, sir. And be careful on the road this evening. It is prom night, and there’s gonna be folks on the road with no business being behind a wheel.”

“I know. Thanks.”

“You have a good day now,” he says.

“You too, thanks.”

It’s almost over, but I’m beginning to tremble as I shuffle toward the car, my scrutinizing face aimed down at the ticket in my hand while my hip follows the quarter-panel. Go away, go away, please go away. When I’m in the driver’s seat, I just sit there

for a minute, still pretending to read the summons. Is he there? Is he watching me? I don't know. I get the idea to create a diversion, and it's slimy—kids inside are showing each other their fake ID's.

"Oh, officer?"

No answer. I start the car and back out, wheel around, trying to focus, finding that I can't. I feel eyes all over me, and I can't stop shaking. My right tires thump-thump over the curb on my way out.

All the way home, my confidence is shot. I'm driving more conservatively than ever, yet still manage to attract three horn blasts before I get to my street. I'm basted in a clammy, nauseating film, risen from within, and sweat dampens my eyebrows. Once I'm off the highway, I stop. A cool balm of honeysuckle and wisteria moves over me, and I catch my breath before continuing on. There are no children near the road now. Halfway to the house, I lose the guiding echoes and have to stop again, get out and find the curb, where I kick my toe around in the brush with my head down as if looking for something. I pause, then turn back to the car.

"Did you lose something?"

I jump. It's a young girl, and I turn back around.

"Did you lose something?" she asks again, identically. Yes. My mind.

"Yeah, my watch," I say. "When I was walking by here the other day."

"I'll help you find it," she sings. Her voice is wrapped in the nectar breeze.

"No, that's okay. It could be anywhere. Thank you though." I smile a little, charmed.

"Why is your house dark all the time?" she asks.

"Dark?"

“Yup, your house is always dark. My dad says it’s weird. Why is your house dark all the time?”

I keep two lights on, upstairs and downstairs, but now it hits me that I haven’t felt for the hot bulbs in several weeks. I often forget to turn them off, so they could both be out. Jesus. So Dad thinks I’m weird. And now I’m stopped next to his house, talking to his little girl. I start to respond, but she speaks again.

“I’m afraid of the dark. You’re not afraid of the dark?”

“I try really hard not to be,” I say.

She doesn’t answer. Her eyes are holding me.

“Well, bye,” I say.

“Bye,” she says, and I can go.

I sit in a cold patio chair, swallowing whiskey and water, dragging hard on a cigarette. I think about the highway, with its infusion of burning teens, immortal, living outside of time for now. The birds are all quiet except for one, a whip-poor-will, deep in the pines. I know how it gets its name, but tonight it sounds like, “Yeah, for real! Yeah, for real!”

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Thesis Title: What Are Friends For?

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