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Dylan M. Walsh

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LOVE WEEK AND OTHER STORIES

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department
of English

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

By

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ABSTRACT

This is a collection of four stories, two of which are short and two of which (so far) fall into the nebulous category of the long short story. All are works in progress. The stories focus much on moments of small, fraught drama between characters who have strong, if ill-defined, feelings about each other. The protagonists are confused, obsessive types who attempt, with very limited success, to understand their own feelings and motivations—to distinguish between delusion and truthful perception. Prominent themes include romantic longing, jealousy, loneliness, self-awareness, egotism, and responsibility for others. On the sociopolitical level, the stories are concerned with issues of economics, social class, gender identity, and racism, as filtered through the perceptions, feelings, and thoughts of white, primarily heterosexual, working-class Americans. Finally, as explorations of intersections between ideology and psychology, the stories explore ways political discourses and institutionalized modes of perception inform and shape the imaginations of individuals as citizens, workers, lovers, and family members.

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Issa

She's the kind of thin that can make you lonely to look at or turned on. But the closest we'd got to doing anything we were out in the woods with half a bottle from my dad's cabinet, and I told her she had the flattest belly I'd ever seen and she let me put my hand on it. But then she got up to go piss somewhere and when she came back all she could talk about was how good Frank is at two things: baseball and electrical work. Now, across the street from the commuter rail station, she's on Frank again, tapping her cigarette to make a line of ash in the crease between bench boards.

“So the other day he comes over and my dad's in the kitchen like 'How you doing, Frank?' Which is weird for my dad, right? Because usually he doesn't say shit. But all the sudden today for no apparent reason he's all Mr. Friendly. But what's Frank do? Just stares at him and finally he's like 'Hey.' But, you know, it's 'Hey' in this I-give-a-fuck voice instead of ‘Yo, Mr. Caprielli, how you doing? Nice of you to be nice to me today.’ Which, you know, I understand because my dad's always a big fat asshole to Frank, talks to him like he's some hood who wants to jump his precious daughter who he never talks to anyway—but Frank could set an example, right? He could take the opportunity, just be nice and polite just this once and that'd be it—Dad would have to be nice back. But does Frank do this? No, because Frank has to be bad boy vo-tech Frank. Has to have people not like him instead of like him. I say ‘Frank, how do you think you're going to run for president if you can't be nice to people?’ And you know what he says? He says, ‘I'm going to be the first president who isn't like a bullshitter. If I don't like someone, I'm

going to tell him to his face—I'm not going to be nice to him just to get a stupid vote.'

And you know what I say? I say 'Right on, Frank, you fucking loser.'"

"I'm sure Frank and your dad will get along eventually," I offer.

Issa sucks on the cigarette, maybe aware of me studying her out of the corner of my eye, though I pretend to be monitoring the pretzel guy in front of the train station as he bounces up and down on his toes while bopping his head back and forth to music on the giant headphones sticking out from under his pom-pommed Patriots cap. Every time a potential customer gets spooked by the pretzel guy's enthusiasm for life and retreats without buying a pretzel, I win a drag of Issa's cigarette—which I take even though it makes me sick. It's one of our games. But so far today, everyone's steering totally clear of the pretzel cart, leaving before it a wide human-less swath of sidewalk.

"Here I am going on about myself again," says Issa. "Me, me, me. So how's your mom?"

"Lonely."

I can't think of what else to say about Mom. Issa loves to hear me talk shit about her ever since Mom made Issa wait on the front steps while I ran in to grab cigarette-and-Slurpee money from the jar.

"She's just in love with you, your mom. Probably wants you to bend her over the toilet...Oh, sorry, am I being offensive? Am I offending Mr. Delicate Artistic Sensibilities? Mr. Don't Talk Bad About My Precious Lonely Old Mom Who Gets An Excuse For Everything Because Her Lard-Ass Husband Farted Out On Her?"

I think about it. "Maybe. I don't know."

Issa mashes the cigarette out and aims the filter-and-nub at a pigeon, nailing it on

the leg. The pigeon fluffs itself and limps toward some frozen brown bushes.

“Fat little fucker!” she calls after it, socking me on the shoulder. It’s pigeon hit—and shoulder punch—number three for the afternoon. The shoulder hurts, but so far I’ve managed to keep from rubbing it.

“What do I have to like bad boys for?” she says. “I should like you. You’re smart, sensitive, a good listener—a little fat maybe, but so what? Someday you’ll have a nice house and a slick car and a non-crazy wife with a nice ass and you’ll invite me over just to make me jealous. Meanwhile, my crazy-ass boyfriend’s going to be a guest of the frigging government like my dad says, going to be writing me letters about how he wants to do me so bad every time he looks at a certain hole in his wall and I’m going to write back like ‘Don’t drop the soap, honey-buns.’ Ha ha. So original.”

We smoke, she taps her sneaker toes together and pulls some folded notebook pages out of her jeans pocket. Unfolding the pages, she stares down at the one on top.

“What’s that?”

“Fuck off. Girl poems.”

“I’d like to see—if you want to show me.”

“*If you want to show me,*” she mimics. “No thanks, Grandma. They’re all about how awesome and manly Frank is and you wouldn’t be able to fake liking them.”

Still, she goes on looking at the page. I notice it’s covered edge to edge in messy blue words made of fat blocky letters, like some kid’s writing. It doesn’t look like a poem to me. And I see “Frank” nowhere on it. But then Issa refolds the pages and shoves them back into her pocket.

Another pigeon, this one with a pale crust on its beak, comes within range. With

a casual spit glob she just misses it. We watch as the pigeon sidesteps cluelessly toward the glob but randomly stops just in time, its cold pink claw just beyond the edge of the slightly yellowish pool. It dawdles for a second, contemplating its next move. Then, of course, it steps right in.

Issa does a victorious pigeon-head bop with her head and drills her solid-for-a-girl fist into me harder than any of the first three times so that I almost fall sideways off the bench.

“You and Frank will be all right,” I say, giving in and massaging the shoulder, deciding not to mention that the rules of our game say nothing about her getting to punch me if a pigeon steps into an already landed spit glob. “I can tell.”

“Oh, really?” she says, “What makes you Mr. Relationship Expert? My brain gets worn out trying to find new ways to stroke his fucking ego. Not that he notices unless I stop stroking it. I got to say to him, ‘Ooh, Frank, you’re so good at this or that.’ I got to go to his stupid boring vo-tech baseball games and watch him pitch. I mean, I guess he’s really a good pitcher and all, but baseball is for people with time on their hands—of which I’m not one: I got to do something, get a job. You know I’m going to college? Filled out applications all week—BU, BC. Mr. P. says I’ll get in one of them if I keep up my grades, blah, blah, fucking blah. He’s super into my essay on pursuing my dreams despite the challenges in my life.”

“Your dreams?”

“I made some dumb-ass shit up, obviously. I guess it sounded real enough to Mr. P. Or he thinks it’ll sound real to someone at a college. It probably doesn’t matter. Of course, what does Frank have to say about all this? Nothing—because I haven’t told him

and I'm not going to until I have to. What would he be like? He'd be like 'Issa, what the fuck you need to do that shit for? I'll take care of you.' But you know what? The other day he says to me Puju died, his frigging goldfish, Puju. I say, 'No shit, you know, I'm sorry, how old was he?' 'Oh, he was only a baby, I just forgot to feed him for a week.' You know? His perfectly healthy baby goldfish dies of starvation and he's all proud of it too. Why? Because this is how he is: One day he's into something, just that thing—for that one day it's Puju this and Puju that and fuck all Puju ain't. And then next day, wham! could look Puju right in the eye and not even see him, look right through him at the wall—or at the back of the fish tank, I guess. And that's how Frank is. And he's going to take care of me? Oh well for me.”

* * *

Issa gives me a few cigarettes for letting her punch me harder than usual. I go home with these in my pocket and there I find not only Mom at the kitchen table with her plate of dinner ham but also the plumber. The plumber has got some ham rectangles of his own and is about to fork a soggy piece of broccoli into his mouth. When he sees me, he dumps the broccoli onto his plate as if I've caught him sneaking it.

“Aren't you the plumber?” I say.

“Of course he's the plumber, Danny,” Mom says. “Why don't you sit down and eat?”

I get a plate out of the cabinet, one of the plain white plates without any flowers or faded fruit-in-basket pictures, and put some ham and vegetables on it. But when I go

to pull out my chair, the leg is caught on the plumber's boot.

“Oops,” says the plumber, grinning. And then he purses his lips at one of his ham squares and slices into it. I finish pulling the chair out. I sit. I use the fork to separate ham from peas.

“You want honey for your ham?” Mom says. “Or for your peas?”

“Mom,” I say, “Who puts honey on their ham?”

Mom has no answer. I stare deeply into the stems of dried flowers in the vase Mom insists on keeping in the middle of the table even though the flowers smell like air freshener and make us both sneeze. The plumber's jittery leg is shaking the table, causing specks of brown perfumey plant matter to rain off the flowers and cloud the air.

“Is the toilet fixed?” I ask.

“Danny,” Mom says, “this is Leo.”

“Hi, Danny,” Leo says, nodding to show his approval of my presence in my kitchen.

Chewing ham, I reach into my pocket, extract one of Issa's cigarettes, and position it between my lips.

Mom straightens up and gives me a frown, brandishing her fork pissily.

“Where did you get that?” she says. For a moment, her eyes tell me she knows exactly where I got it. Then they go back to their usual shiny blankness.

“It was okay for Dad,” I say. In fact, Dad always smoked all through dinner, lighting one cigarette off another, sitting in the chair now occupied by Leo.

I wonder what Leo makes of this typical mom-and-son-and-ghost-dad moment. Hard to say. But then I hear a familiar click and a big, pale, hairy and ham-smelling hand

appears in front of my face, offering me fire from a fancy metal lighter decorated with lightning bolts and skulls. I push my face forward, cocking my head to the side just a little, the way Issa does. As I inhale, I stare into Mom's eyes. The flame divides her face. I shut my right eye, and Mom's face jumps to the left. I've saved her from burning, but just barely.

"So, Danny," Leo says, lighting his own cigarette. "I hear you're in high school."

He leans way back in the chair to shove the lighter into a pocket of his gray plumbing pants.

"Yup," I say.

But Leo finds encouragement. Or maybe doesn't need it. He leans over confidentially. His elbow moves out and nudges my elbow.

"You know what I think?" he says. "Come on—you know what I think?"

I look up at him, expecting I don't know what.

"I think it's all bullshit," he says, giving me a wink. "Bullshit is all it is."

I glance at Mom. If I said this, she'd yell at me to stop whining and Focus! Focus! But now she's gazing blank-eyed at Leo, ignoring me.

"High school," Leo opines, "like most of society, is just a bunch of people trying to mess with your head."

He taps his forehead, producing an irritated pink spot. Then he tilts his face up, makes an O out of his lips, and exhales three wobbly balls of smoke. He smiles at them with vague sappiness, as if they are happy tots he's letting outside to play. The smoke balls drift toward the ceiling and disappear. Leo gives me a wink and a grin: *Well, how about it, old fellow?*

I stare at him through my shapeless hood of smoke. His hair clings on in the form of isolated stringy tufts, a weird mix of gray and orangey-red, like doll hair half eaten by some bug-eyed kid. A pinkish line extends across his forehead. Leo the sweatband-wearer. I picture him working at his pipes, pausing to lift the band off his head, letting it snap back in place, adjusting it with finger and thumb. Lift. Snap. Adjust. Back to work.

“I’ll tell you,” Leo says, “what you got to figure out, what you got to eventually realize: It’s your head, it’s no one else’s head—you got to learn to use it for yourself. They tell you all kinds of things about how you’re supposed to think about everybody in the goddamn world. But you don’t have to think about everybody in the world. All you got to think about is only one guy—and that guy is you.”

He stabs three pieces of ham onto his fork, grins, nods, and folds them into his wide-open mouth.

“Think about it,” he says. Air hisses in and out of his nose.

“Danny doesn’t like high school,” Mom says, as if to assure Leo that his views are welcome here. “Danny doesn’t like much of anything,” she goes on in her sort-of-making-a-joke voice.

Leo raises his eyebrows and grinds his cigarette against his plate. Mom glances at the half-squashed cigarette filter sticking out of the smear of ash right next to the fruit basket picture—but opts for shiny blankness again.

“Oh, is that right?” Leo inquires. “Well, I think most kids go through that. I can’t say I didn’t go through it. It wasn’t until somebody said to me ‘Look, kid, food isn’t going to just cancan right onto your plate, you better find something to do with yourself—you

know, learn a trade or something, something people need, make yourself a wanted man' that I really started getting all my ducks in a row as far as what to give a shit about. You look at the TV, you listen to the news, you listen to what they tell you in high school, you start to think the world is full of all kinds of nice, funny people.”

Pursing his lips, he moves his tongue thoughtfully along his teeth. Then he leans across the table and taps his fork against the edge of my plate.

“Listen to me, Dan, listen to me,” he says, pausing for effect, “Don't think they won't let you starve.”

Wink, smile, nod.

Mom sighs, pushing her glasses, which have gone kind of crooked, onto her nose. She rests a pink cheek in her hand and then sneezes all over the flowers and everyone's ham.

“Yup,” she says, using a napkin on her nose and mouth.

* * *

I fit the plunger over the hole and start working, careful not to slosh my knees.

“It worked earlier,” Mom says. “I'll never understand it.”

She sucks anxiously at one of her fingers.

“We'll have to call the plumber,” she says.

I do my best, but Mom watching me from the doorway cramps my style. The bathroom is narrow. The ceiling slopes down on the toilet end so that I have to keep my head down even though I'm already bent over to plunge. And I can't help but remember

Dad on the pot, filling up the tiny room with his gas and his smoke and his churning, clogged-up thoughts. Sometimes Mom would go in with him and close the door and they would talk—mostly Mom would talk: she'd try to lure him off the toilet. In her whispery-coaxy voice she'd say, "You've been in here an hour, Charles, you're going to get a clot in your leg. At least flush it," she'd say. "It's shameful to sit in such a stink." And Dad would say, "Can't a guy relax, chew things over a bit, do a little reading?"

It was weird. But also normal.

"You want a sandwich?" Mom says after I've been going at it for a while, plunging, flushing, waiting, plunging again.

She goes away and comes back in her purple apron with shamrocks and hearts, holding out a cold swiss chunk on pumpernickel with a slice of leftover ham.

I give the toilet a few more stiff efforts, flush once more, and soap my hands and forearms under the faucet. I take the sandwich and sit on the lid while Mom leans on the door, blowing her nose into a tissue. As if stowing a love note, she deposits the tissue into the apron's big front pocket.

We listen to the ceiling fan, we listen to the pipe hiss as the tank refills.

"When was the last time you did a urine sample?" Mom says, and I feel a grin creeping onto my face. I chew loudly with an open mouth, showing her the black bread, the pale ham with all the pink chewed out.

Mom refuses to react.

"Don't start that," she says calmly.

"There's nothing wrong with my pee."

"You're getting fat," she says, "and you put all that sugar in your tea."

“I’m not getting fat. I weigh the same as I did three months ago.”

“You’re putting it on in the face,” she says. “That’s where it starts—for men. That’s where it started with your father. But he always was handsome, even when he was heavy. He had a fine bone structure.”

She pushes up the skin on her cheekbones.

"I always loved high cheekbones on a man. That he had those bedroom eyes didn't hurt either. You can't get those from genes. Eyes come from the soul, and your father had good light eyes that always smiled even if he wasn't feeling good. I used to call him Old Smoky. Smoky Eyes. ‘Yup, yup, yup,’ he'd say. And then he'd smile after he said it that nice smile. He said it to make me feel good—‘Yup, yup, yup.’ It meant something nice. Who knows?”

She takes off her glasses, puts them up to her mouth and breathes throat air on them to fog them up.

I finish most of the sandwich and toss the crust and bits in the sink. Mom picks them out carefully, folding them into another tissue, which also disappears into the pocket of the apron.

“Well, she says, “How are we going to pee? How are we going to poop?”

I crack my knuckles, first one set, then the other, and take up the plunger again.

“You’ll have to go faster,” she says.

“Why do you have to stand there the whole the time?”

“Everything’s a conspiracy against you,” she says.

* * *

The phone wakes me out of a dream in which I am trying to feed a chunk of soft drippy food to a big sad person with a tiny mouth.

“Can you meet me?” Issa says over the phone.

I sit up. There’s a click.

“Leo?” Mom says in a wide-awake voice.

“I got it, Mom.”

We wait for the click of Mom hanging up. After a pause, we hear it, but we wait more. Then we hear the sneaky soft click of Mom secretly picking up again.

“Mom.”

“You’re giving him cigarettes?” says Mom. “Don’t you know what killed his father?”

“Boredom?” Issa guesses.

Another pause.

“Skinny bitch,” Mom mutters so low I almost can’t make out the words.

Pause again. Then click. Again we wait, but there is not another click. Mom, I sense, is in the next room, sitting on the edge of her bed, hands on her knees, glaring at the phone. Then I hear the bed frame creak. She must have moved a little.

“Weirdo. Fuck her. Can you please come see me? I’m having a problem and I need to talk to you.”

“It’s not like I was sleeping.”

“I wrote something—for you. I mean, if you want to read it. You said you

wanted to see if I wanted to show you, right?"

* * *

We sit up on the hill. I've forgotten my hat and my earlobes are numb from the cold. Issa seems on edge. There is a hole in the fence between the cemetery and the train tracks, and she keeps looking over at it like she expects someone to come through it. Whenever there's a breeze, a metal banging sound comes across the cemetery from the fence hole area. We've heard this plenty of times before—just some loose thing getting blown against the fence. Months ago, when we started meeting here, our game was to hit one gravestone with a rock for every lingering *bong* of the mysterious metal thing, but after a while we just stopped playing it.

There's one cigarette left.

"You have it," Issa says. "It was really nice of you to meet me—no, fuck that, split it with me."

She puts the cigarette between her lips and, after a few tries, I manage to light it from a pack of matches.

"Damn," she says, inhaling. "I need cigarettes. Tonight is cigarette night supreme."

She exhales a stream of thin white smoke and hands me the cigarette.

"He's seeing some bitch, some Spanish bitch from Dorchester. Yeah, get this—he writes her letters, like actual pen-on-paper letters. Spanish or at least part in Spanish. I mean, the guy can barely *habla ingles* if you ask me. But I found them in his electricity

notebook—letters. So he just straight up admitted it, which I guess he deserves some credit for. He's like 'Issa, I can kind of speak Spanish now, and I'm seeing this chick, her name's Rae. It's not serious, but I'm telling you because I want to be honest.' He wants to be frigging honest. 'I wouldn't see her,' he says, 'but I got to,' he says. He's like 'I love you, Issa, I love you a lot—you know I love you, right?' But then—get this—I can't go with white girls,' he says. Can't go with white girls even though he's whiter than that fucking grave.”

She gestures vaguely to all the gravestones.

“Can't go with white girls, can't satisfy himself off white girls. That's what he says—what's that word? The one they use in books that means 'Yeah, that's really what he said, can you believe it?'”

“Sic?”

“And that's exactly what he is: A fucking sick bastard.”

I'm starting to feel sick too—sick from the cigarette. But I suck even harder on it, pulling in as much smoke as I can. All I have to do is get used to it, I tell myself.

“Can't satisfy himself off white girls,” Issa is saying, “Needs chicks of 'other cultures,' he says. Know what I mean?”

She puts two fingers on either side of her head and wiggles them for quotation marks.

I nod.

“‘Other cultures,’ like they'd say in school or something. What the hell does that mean? He wouldn't like it if he found out I was with some black dude. No way he would like that. He'd kill the fucker. You know he would. He'd kill the fucker and then he'd

kill me. So what's this shit? And the worst of it is he's like—oh, get this—he's like 'Yeah, I still wanna be your boyfriend. I still want to, but I gotta see other girls.' And then 'Only sometimes, you know, not serious, just for'—you know. Yeah, he actually said that. 'It won't be so bad, we can have threesomes'—him and me and some other girl. 'It won't be so bad,' he says.

“Then the next thing out of his mouth is 'Are you down with that?' What the fuck is that language?" she says, waving away my offer of the last bit of cigarette. "Who is he now, Dr. Frigging Dre? Is this, like, nineteen-eighty-fucking-sixty-two? So I tell him, I'm like 'Frank, you know something? You are a disgusting retard self-centered illiterate pig pussy is all you are, is all you ever will be. I regret the moment,' I say, 'I ever allowed you to lay a hand on me.' 'I don't even have anything to say to you,' I say. 'I want you out of here, out of my house, back to your Mexican princess or whatever.'”

“Frank's not so bad,” I manage to say. “You two will be—”

“So we're sitting there at the kitchen table, Frank and me, and you know what he does? We're sitting there and he looks at me, doesn't say anything, looks at me for a long time and I'm starting to be like Okay, what's he going to freak now? Is he finally going to spill his nuts? But this is what he does: He stuffs his fucking retard PB&J he wanted me to make him in his mouth and chews on it and keeps chewing on it and keeps staring me down like he's so whatever until the jelly starts to come out the corners of his mouth. I'm not kidding. The jelly comes out and goes down his chin. But does he do anything about it? Does he get up and get a napkin or something? No, he's Mr. Vo-tech Psycho Badass Isn't It Scary That Purple Shit Is Sliding Down My Face? Mr. Aren't You Quaking in Your Fucking Boots To See Shit Sliding Down My Face?

“So he sits back in the chair and holds my dad's beer in his lap like maybe someone just invited him over for poker and he chews extra loud on this sandwich and goes right back to giving me this oh-yeah-you-know-what-I-mean-bitch-stare. But I don't know what he means. Is he going to chew me like a sandwich until I slide out of his mouth and mess up his fucking baseball uniform shirt, with my dad right in the other room in his chair reading his frigging war book or something, I should mention?”

“But then he's like, ‘You know what? Don't you ever call me that. Who do you think I am anyway?’ And I'm like ‘I don't know who the fuck you are, I thought you were my boyfriend, but now I'm like I don't know who you are—what are you going to do, kick my ass?’”

“‘I'm your boyfriend?’” he says. “‘You say I'm your boyfriend? Then what the fuck you doing with that fat little douche, Dan, or whatever his name is—Mr. Let Me Give You Some Deep-Ass Philosophy Books To Read So You'll Think I'm Really Smart And Want To Fuck Me or whatever guy’—I'm sorry, Danny, I don't mean to hurt your feelings. You are not a douchebag, as far as I'm concerned. In my book, you're a really sweet guy. But I'm like ‘Frank, all right, what the fuck are you talking about?’ And he's all ‘You know what I'm talking about.’ And I'm like ‘Hello? No, I do not know or I would not have said I do not know.’ ‘Fine, that's just fine,’ he says. ‘So how'd you like it if I slapped him around a little bit? How'd you like that?’ And I'm like ‘Don't you touch him.’ And he's like ‘Oh really?’ So I say, ‘You're frigging nuts is all you are. You're a paranoid lunatic,’ I say. ‘You better stay away from my friends.’”

“But then I hear my dad coming and Dad's like ‘I don't want to hear you yelling at my daughter.’ And Frank just looks at him, gives him that same bitch stare, and Dad

looks right back at him, says, all Mr. Dad like in a movie, 'I want you out of my house.'

"But Frank, you know, being a psycho, just keeps on looking. So Dad's like 'I'm calling the police.' But he doesn't do it on the phone that so happens to be right next to him on the wall in the kitchen, he goes back in the other room—I guess to get the other phone or something. Anyway, I don't know if he ever called them or not."

"So what happened after that?"

"Nothing," she says. "I don't know. What difference does it make what happened? Goddamn," she says, "did you finish off the whole frigging thing?"

"I think there's a little left," I say, even though it's obvious I've nursed it to the nub.

"Issa?"

No answer.

"Issa?"

"What?" she says. "What do you think of all this, Mr. Superior? Mr.—what's the word? Aloof? Mr. Hide Up In My Room And Jack Off To Books And Never Come Down To Talk To Anybody Or Do Anything Unless Something Bad Happens And Then He's Johnny On The Spot? Mr. Shoulder-To-Lean-On Shit? Nice. That's a nice fucking racket. What, you think I have a fucked up life? You think I make bad decisions? Fuck that. What am I supposed to do, cross my legs and live like a nun? I don't care what you fucking think. Think you're smarter than me and Frank? Lots of people smarter than you. You want to help me? You want to make me into a better person? Teach me to read books? Like I don't know how to read books. I know how to read books, I just don't care about them. Why should anyone care about them? Books don't do anything

anyway. They just talk, talk, talk. And they don't even do that really, they don't even talk. They're just there—books, like blah blah blah, I'm a stupid useless book.”

Issa stares across the cemetery at the fence hole. Then she turns and gives me a face.

“I'm sorry I said that, Danny. I am really sorry. As in sorry-sorry. Can I be sorry?”

I'm not sure what to say, but it doesn't matter: Suddenly I'm flat on my back on the grass and Issa is more or less on top of me. Something shoots up my throat, and I have to grit my teeth to stop it from coming out.

Issa's tongue stabs against my wall of gritted teeth.

“Put your hand on my butt,” she says, lifting her face away from mine. “What the hell?”

“What?”

“You're not doing anything, you're just lying there. Be a little less totally fucking gay.”

I put my hand on Issa's butt. I've dreamed of it, all skinny and slithery and female. I'm sure there's a certain aliveness, a warm, pulsating Issa-ness, I'm supposed to feel coursing from the butt into my hand, infusing into the blood of my veins and so on. But I picture Mom: She's standing over the toilet in one of her nightgowns, watching the faintly yellow water swirl down, switching off the lights, getting fatly back into bed, smelling of sadness and ham.

“I'm sorry,” I tell Issa, though I don't remove my hand because what if it's the last time I get to touch Issa's butt? I have the feeling it will be the last time.

“It’s not like I *want* to be thinking about her,” I say.

“Jesus,” Issa says, rolling off me. “We’re both sorry, then, aren’t we? Fine, we’ll be sorry. Do you have any money? Can we get cigarettes?”

Ostrich

To avoid returning Harry's stare, Marsha shut one eye and squinted into the whiskey-and-soda Harry had poured her, which she was sure she didn't want and of which she'd taken at the most five or six sips. Without meaning to, she sighed. She'd been stuck in Harry's kitchen for almost an hour, watching Harry watch her with what seemed to be desirous longing, and she was getting tired of being stared at and longed for by Harry. Besides, she had algebra homework to do and she wanted to call Ed. Probably Ed wouldn't be home because Ed never was home, but she wanted to call Ed anyway, just in case on this one particular evening Ed wasn't totally impossible to get on the phone. And if Ed was as usual not home, she wanted to sit in her room and write a letter to Ed in her notebook of letters to Ed. She never showed Ed the things she wrote to him because he wouldn't care and probably would laugh at her for writing them, but she liked writing to him anyway, imagining what it would be like if one day he did want to read them.

Ed, Ed, Ed, she thought—but in her mind, Ed seemed to float somewhere above her and to the right. Ed was turned away from her, his blue eyes fixed on some distant object. Steve, on the other hand—Steve's round smiling face appeared on the dark shimmering surface of her drink, as if he had projected himself there so that she would drink him and he would be inside her.

“I could never get enough of you,” Steve had told her. “Never. Even if I were in the cells of your body, I couldn't get enough.”

He'd said this in December, a few weeks before she'd broken up with him, in a

note he'd passed her in biology. "Even if I could swim in the cytoplasm of the cells of your body," the note read, "I still would not be enough *with* you, not far enough *in* you."

"Grossness," she'd written back.

She hadn't meant it though—it wasn't gross, really, it was kind of flattering. And she could tell Steve had been totally sincere. But the thought of how close Steve wanted to get to her made her squirm. He didn't want to be himself, he wanted to be part of her. Being himself wasn't enough for him, and if it wasn't enough for him, it couldn't be enough for her, could it? Besides, who would want to walk around with a whole other person inside? With another person inside you, you couldn't think your own thoughts or have your own feelings or anything. If the person inside you felt sad one day, you'd have to be sad all day too, until the person got better. And if you wanted to break up with the person, you'd have to have some kind of weird operation. It would be too much.

Ed, on the other hand, Ed seemed an eternal factor, a solid block of real individual existence, a thing that could never be dissolved. She would cling to it. Maybe she could dissolve one hard corner of it and that would be enough—one corner of Ed spread throughout her, so that although he would still be himself, Ed, he would be attached to her and he would look at her sometimes, and she would be able to tell by his look that he was at least somewhat happy with the idea of being attached to her.

Marsha gazed into her drink, attempting to see Ed there. Not much, she noted, was left of the drink. Sip it and think, she thought. Don't look like you're rushing: Take your time. Harry's a sad old man—a little sympathy or empathy or whichever it was, and she could get the school candy drive money and go home. If she couldn't get Ed on the phone, she would put the weed Harry had promised to give her to make up for making

her come to his house for the candy bar payment in the random small things box on her dresser and save it for tomorrow, when she would again call Ed. Also, she wanted to go home in case someone else might have called her. Probably Steve would have called to say he missed her, which he did every afternoon except on those days when he decided he was mad at her and she was a deceptive two-faced bitch and he never wanted to talk to her again, or Ed would possibly have called, but most likely only Steve—or Renee, Michelle, or Miranda, all of whom would want the latest updates on the Ed situation. She tried to think of what she would tell them about Ed—something Ed had said or a look he had given her. There wasn't much, however, to tell, and she was afraid if she told some lame story it would be obvious she was stretching. The fact was she hadn't seen Ed in three days.

Marsha put her elbow on the table and her cheek in her hand. Miranda was right: She thought about Ed too much, she thought about Ed an obsessive amount. And that was why Ed felt claustrophobic around her, why he had stopped coming over.

She decided to push the thought of Ed out of her mind. If she could think about Ed less, he might come over more and when he did come over, things would be more relaxed between them because she wouldn't have as many built-up Ed thoughts. But even trying hard to concentrate on Harry's mustache, she couldn't get Ed totally out of her mind, not his eyes or even his pointy blond eyebrows, although he did seem no longer so in focus.

Marsha shut her eyes about halfway, watching as Harry thickened into a blurry outline with some rainbow things hanging around it. Blurry, Harry looked like Steve—his lips were thick and soft and what was left of his hair became fuzzier and stuck out in

strange directions.

"Good stuff?" she heard Harry say. "One thing you can't accuse me of is bad taste in fluids."

She opened her eyes and Harry crystallized before her, his eyeballs if possible one or two levels bulgier than usual. She saw that he was pointing his chin at her drink. She reached out for the cup and took what she hoped would look like a polite, businessy sip. How, she wondered, had she let herself space out in front of Harry? Harry, she figured, wouldn't mind if she got just a little bit out of it—Harry, it was possible, was thinking of doing something to her, maybe he was even considering raping or molesting her. Michelle and Miranda had both been sort-of raped by guys from school, or at least said they had, but to be raped by a faggy old guy like Harry would be off the scale of all possible grossness. Really, though, the idea of Harry with his gold-rimmed glasses and cheeseball mustache crawling on top her while she lay unconscious on the scuzzy tiles of his kitchen floor was funny in a totally nauseating way, or at least she could see how it could be seen as funny by certain people with a certain sense of humor—Ed, anyway, would find it funny. Ed's lips would curl down into his special slightly scary Ed-smirk if he thought about her lying on Harry's floor with Harry just salivating to get on top of her.

"Earth to Ms. Marsha," she heard Harry say—he was waving his hand as if he had just spotted her way down the street and was jogging up to her to say hello—"You want to hear this story or don't you?"

"Of course I want to hear. It's a really fascinating story," she said.

"It is?" Harry said. "You're fascinated?"

"I'm fascinated."

What was Harry talking about? She took a sip of the drink. The bitterness under the sweet made her tongue feel clean but also small. Or was it dirty and big? She considered this question—big or small?—moving her tongue around in her mouth. Then she was pretty sure she was going to sneeze. Not-quite-sneezing had been happening to her quite a bit over the last hour or so. Ed, she thought, would have said just sneeze if you're going to sneeze or if you're not going to sneeze, just don't sneeze. Or, more likely, Ed wouldn't have said anything about it one way or another. It occurred to her that almost sneezing was not something Ed was likely to comment on.

"So where I got that yogurt," Harry said, "was the other night at the 7-11. The reason I was in the 7-11, if you want to know, was to look for my wife, who on a regular basis screws this Arab guy that works there. And if I don't mind revealing to you this tasty tidbit, it's because I don't mind telling anybody—it's the truth and the way I look at it, why should anyone be afraid of a little truth? Truth never hurt anybody is the way I look at it."

That Harry didn't blink, Marsha reflected, was maybe the one thing about Harry that was at all like Ed. Ed hardly ever looked at you when you wanted him to look and never stopped looking, even when you were embarrassed and wanted him to stop. For the most part, however, Harry reminded her of Steve: Both Harry and Steve stared at you hard when they told you things they thought you were going to consider shocking and amazing.

"Anyways," Harry said, "I'm in the 7-11 and I have to make it look normal that I'm in there, so I get a basket. Can you believe that? They have baskets in the 7-11 like in the Stop and Shop? But there they are, baskets, and they happen to serve my purpose

of looking like a normal guy out to buy some stuff on the way home from work or wherever he's coming home from, maybe from screwing some Arab guy's wife. So I take one basket and I go around the back by the refrigerators and take stuff out—I'm not paying attention to what stuff—microwave chicken, ravioli, ice cream, O.J. And of course the yogurt. Gets to the point of the basket getting pretty heavy and me having to switch tactics. So I just stand there reading about how much fat, how many calories in the chicken, the yogurt, all that. Never really read that stuff before. Some of it you wouldn't believe. Or maybe you would—you're nice and thin, in good shape: Maybe you pay attention, but I never did. Anyway, I know I have just a certain amount of time before the Arab guy running the counter takes notice. I'm not just buying yogurts, as they say, I'm buying time. Because once the counter guy notices and two meets two, there's no saying what's going to happen. So I get to calculating, making mental arrangements. Maybe the guy's never seen me. Maybe he has no idea who I am and I could stand there all night with him just thinking I'm being careful about my diet—lots of people are these days. And then how do I know it's that particular Arab that's screwing my wife? There's about 25 of them that work there. How am I going to figure it out?"

Harry tilted his head back far enough that Marsha heard ice cubes smack against his teeth. She watched his throat. It wasn't anything like Ed's throat.

"Well, if you do actually want to know what happened, I found my wife. I thought if I hung around long enough the counter guy would come up and give me trouble and then I'd tell him who I was. My identity, as they say, would be revealed once and for all, and then we would see who was who. But that's not what happens. The counter guy leaves me alone. I mean, I fill the basket till I can't hold it anymore and then

I get another basket and fill that, and then I go over and start reading the newspaper headlines, which brings me closer to the counter. Then finally without even thinking about it I grab a paper and take it up to the counter and heave my crap up there and the guy and I start taking it out of the basket and he starts running the scanner over it and I look at him, but he doesn't look nervous or upset at all. Which gets me thinking maybe I'm going nuts, maybe my wife wanders around in a fog of forlornness regretting that I get my balls broke in every day eight to twelve straight and she doesn't get to see me, the love of her life, except on the rare day, etcetera, etcetera. But then I think, but no, but no, but that doesn't account for why my wife has to go over to the 7-11 thirteen times a day and come back with only one thing each time and then just disappears. Disappears, just like that. Fwwt! Gone! Never to, as they say, return.

"But I tell you, that Arab must have sand in his veins or else really doesn't know me from John Q. Public. Because as I'm getting my wallet, he bends down to get some bags and I have a clean look right into the back room and there she is sitting in some kind of folding chair with her legs crossed reading a magazine. Reading an *Entertainment Weekly* magazine. Just like that. Right in the door where anyone could see her. And then I tell you, I tell you what she did. She must have known I was there the whole time. Because real slow and casual like she looks up from her magazine and sees me and blinks once, blinks twice, blinks a third time, and then smiles this pleasant little smile that makes me want to get her by the neck and pour shampoo down her throat. She gives me this look and then she goes back to her magazine. I mean, she looks back down at her magazine and doesn't look up again. She's saying to me—this is what she's saying and it's important that you pay attention to this part because this is what all ladies say to

guys—she's saying you don't have the balls to do a goddamn thing about it, do you? No, you don't. No, indeed you don't. And I'm too—I'm too what? Shocked and flabbergasted to do anything or say anything about it right then and there, and I know that—I know that about myself, see? And you got to know stuff like that—you got to know when to walk away, I mean. So I just take my bags, six frigging bags, three for each hand, and out I go. So Captain Arab, he makes out with my wife and sixty-five of my bucks.”

Harry picked a crumpled napkin off the table, wiped under one eye and dabbed at his throat.

"My, that's a thoughtful look," he said. "I bet you're the kind of person that thinks a lot. You look like that kind of person."

Marsha moved her shoulders up and down in what she hoped would look like a shrug, though she had the feeling that one shoulder had lifted up way higher than the other.

"I think a pretty normal amount.”

"Well, I'll tell you," Harry said. "You look like you have the kind of mind that would naturally go to profound subjects, you know? Dredge up hard-to-reach truths of the universe, that kind of thing. I bet you're going to be a professor some day or something like that."

"I'm going to be a dental hygienist.”

"A dental hygienist isn't bad either. Takes brainpower. More brainpower than slaying roaches. But let me ask you something. Being so smart and profound, I bet you give pretty good advice. So let me ask you one question: What do you think of the story

I just told you? Is that story nuts or isn't it? I mean, what do you think of an old man like me telling a young girl like you all about his rotten life?"

Marsha tried another shrug.

"Your life really sucks. Your wife sounds like a bitch or maybe crazy."

Harry tilted the rim of his glass at her. "That's a good way to put it," he said.

"Both ways are a good way to put it."

"I have to go outside," Marsha said. Outside was dark and cool and Harry-less. She wished Harry would stop standing there sipping his drink and staring down at her like a big wilted flower sucking up cat piss through its roots. She had problems with people who had a sad, cat-piss-sucking look to them all the time, people who went around thinking about how sad and depressed they were, people who were always just waiting for something bad to happen to them so they could have a reason to complain, so they could say I'm so terrified because I have weird prickling feelings in my chest or I'm upset because my husband ran off with some teenage chick from Montreal, but really whatever reasons they came up with were just excuses. Harry was starting to remind her of her mom, who was the main example of such permanently sad people. Since the divorce Mom sat in front of the TV every night watching home improvement shows and Bruins games, the same things she'd watched with Dad. Mom probably wouldn't care that she, Marsha, had already sold over 57 candy bar boxes and might just have the entire fundraiser contest in the bag. She could use the prize money to buy Ed some new steel-toed boots or a decent amount of marijuana. Miranda would end up in second place, probably, which was the Air Pop—but that was okay because Miranda was always trying to cut calories.

Marsha had once seen a show about a plane that crashed in some mountains. Some people lived and some people died of starvation and cold. If everyone she knew were in such a plane crash, if Ed and Steve and Miranda and Harry and her mom and dad were in a plane crash, along with maybe a few other random people from school, Marsha was pretty sure Harry and her mom would be among those who would give up and croak without even trying to get down the mountain, while people like Ed would survive even if they had to drink other people's blood out of mini shampoo bottles, which was how the people in the show survived.

* * *

"You know what?" Marsha was saying, "Some people only get to live by drinking other people's blood or sometimes their own blood."

She was thinking of Ed stranded on an iceberg, managing to keep himself alive by draining blood out of the pale blue veins of his long arms, collecting the blood in his one remaining steel-toed boot. In order to keep his feet from freezing, he drank the blood from the boot and then quickly put the boot back on, switching it a few times from foot to foot before taking it off again to collect more blood.

Harry smiled. "Listen," he said, "You want some more of that stuff? I got a whole bottle. You and I, we can sit here and drink the whole thing. You're a good talker, you know. And more than that, you're a good listener. Not many people I can talk to. Not many people *can* be talked to. Most people just want to tell you about their own problems or else they could care less. You know? You find that about people?"

Harry was getting up again, sighing and coughing and pushing on his knees. Marsha figured his knees were probably crappy from having to squat and crawl around chasing bugs all day, squirting them with poison from his hose, like he'd been doing in the kitchen at her house when she'd asked him whether he would like to purchase a box of a dozen chocolate bars for the Revere High fundraiser and his eyebrows had gone way up his forehead.

She sat up straight. Her head, she realized, felt something like forward and to the left of where it was supposed to be.

"I told my boyfriend I would be home by six," she said. "I told Ed I would be home."

She took a deep breath. She was used to different kinds of buzzes: The trick, she told herself, was working with the buzz instead of against it. All you had to do was a little extra thinking about things you didn't usually think about, such as putting your hand on the back of a chair if you felt yourself going sideways when you meant to go some other way besides sideways. It wasn't any big deal and anyway the door was right on the other side of the counter, which was right next to the oven. Maybe she was in kind of tight between the stove and the table, but all she would have to do would be push the chair back—all she would have to do would be to make a little space between the chair and the table, a little space to put herself in, and once she got inside that space, she could get her head together and come up with a plan for getting to the door without looking indecisive or unsteady. She was pretty sure she didn't want Harry to see her looking unsteady.

"Boyfriend?" she heard Harry say from somewhere across the room. He was over

near the sink. She squinted so she could see exactly what Harry was doing and then un-squinted in case Harry noticed her squinting. He seemed to be holding a bottle of soda in one hand and a red plastic cup in the other

“Earth to Ms. Marsha, what do you say? Stick around—it won't be so bad. Hey, I know. Why don't you let me show you something? I got to show you this thing.”

And Harry was suddenly doing things, a whole bunch of things. Marsha watched closely. She felt that it was important to separate out each individual action. First, Harry put his drink down next to the sink. Then he turned to the counter and picked up a big round thing obscured in tinfoil. He had to hoist the thing off the counter by bending his crappy knees and getting his forearms under the wooden cutting board the thing sat on. As he lifted, he took a deep breath. When he turned back in Marsha's direction, she saw that a fingertip-shaped blotch of pink had appeared in the center of his forehead. Finally, he let the thing slide out of his arms and onto the table. It banged down and the table shifted in Marsha's direction. Marsha squeezed back against the stove. The stove felt warm against her back, as if Harry had turned it on when she wasn't looking. She was glad Harry didn't seem to notice her squeezing—he seemed completely preoccupied with whatever he was doing. He pulled the table back into position, then wiped his hands on his shirt and began peeling back the foil. Only when he'd got the thing completely uncovered did he look up.

“You know what this is,” Harry said, “this thing?”

Marsha stuck her hands between her knees and her chin out in a way meant to indicate that she was going to humor Harry and his tinfoil surprise for a minute but then she really would definitely have to collect the candy bar money and hit the road.

“Come on, make yourself comfortable,” Harry said. “You’re all slumped over. Don’t you know what this is? You’re going to eat is what you’re going to do.”

Harry got a knife out of a drawer behind him and went to work on the meat. He kept having to pull up the dry pinkish-brown skin and scrape under it. Ed, she thought, would have sliced and diced the sucker. Even Steve would have done a better job than Harry.

“You’ve never had this before,” he said. “I bet you haven’t anyway. No, this is something you could get from me only, if you know what I mean.”

He chuckled at his own craziness.

“Do you know what this is?” he said. “No, you don’t. I can see from the way you’re looking at me that you don’t. I can see you think I’m some kind of crazy one. And I am a crazy son of a bitch—pardon my mustard. And let me tell you, this thing of which we’re about to partake represents the highest degree of craziness you’ll ever see. You know what this thing is? This thing is two hundred bucks. Dollars is what I’m talking about. You know what that is? I don’t even have two hundred bucks barely. For this thing I had to spray on the plastic. But that’s okay. Or it was okay six days ago when I realized once and for all that my wife who once upon a time vowed to be true to me forever was instead getting herself good and screwed by some asshole who wears a fan belt around his head. I mean, do you know what those people do to the female sex in Salty Arabia? They grind you guys up in little pieces. Chop off your titties. Stick knives up your you-know-whats. Jesus Christ. Or the lack thereof. And that’s who my wife wants it from instead of me? I mean, that’s one fucked-in-the-head mate-for-life, right? At least it could have been a fireman or a cop or something. But the towelhead from the

7-11? You know what I mean?"

Harry was really going at it, chopping and stabbing. Mystery bird looked like a meat asteroid that had crashed through a windshield at outer space speed.

"So anyways,' I say to myself, 'So what are you going to do now that you got those horns sprouting out of your head?' You know what that means, about the horns?"

Harry put his fingers to the sides of his head and wiggled them.

"You'll find out. I can tell by looking at you. You'll put a few on some guy's head. Or some guys' heads. I can tell. Or I don't know about you. Maybe you're different. Maybe you're the one exception. But probably you're not. That's how women are. They all do it, all yous, I mean. I mean, look"—he yanked the knife out of where he'd dug it into a pinkish clump and pointed it at her forehead—"Look, if you're going to do it, do it. Fine. But just don't do it with no sleek sheik who runs a 7-11. Is that a lot to ask? You understand? You understand that? Good. Jesus! Look at the mess this bird has become."

Harry sighed, shaking his pointy shoulders up and down like he was getting ready to box a whole pack of sleek sheiks at once. Then he got the knife back in and started working out some slices.

"Ought to have kept this thing in the fridge. Now it's probably bad. Listen, so my wife is fucking some guy and I feel like shit. I feel it right down in the bottom of my shoes. So what do I do? Do I say to myself 'Why don't you go upstairs and run yourself a warm bath and slice the old wrists with her leg razors?' But no, that's not what I say. Do I say 'Why don't you get yourself a bottle and stand in front of the train station with a paper bag at your mouth?' I don't say that either. I say, 'Listen, Harry Marshall,

whoever's fault this is, yours it ain't. I mean, are you cruel and unusual to your wife? Do you beat her? Do you shove knives in her personal area? No, you don't. Do you get her stuff—clothes and shit? Why yes, you do. Do you make sure she gets enough—bed-wise, I mean? Yeah, you do all that. So is it your fault? Nope—but I'll tell you something, Old Bean: you're the one crying in the river. So why don't you do something nice for yourself for once and get something you always wanted?' That's what I said and that's what I did. I ordered myself a thing I always wanted ever since I was a kiddo. And you know what was that thing?"

Harry put his wrists in his armpits and flapped.

"Ostrich. I always wanted just one ostrich. Ever since I was a kid and I saw them on TV or in a book or something, I always wanted one and I never even saw a real one. Thought I could build a pen for it in the backyard—hey, I got that whole backyard: Why not? I was going to build this ostrich a pen and I even went out and got a bunch of fencing to do it. And so here I am waiting for the thing to show up on the back of a truck, a real live ostrich. So what shows up? A freaking FedEx truck shows up and out comes the ostrich. Let me tell you something: Styrofoam crate. I couldn't believe it. But I was so shocked and flabbergasted I signed for it anyway and opened it and there was my frigging used-to-be ostrich. Frigging precooked.

"But you know what? You know what? I had just come home from work and I was hungry anyways and I said to myself 'Look it, you son of a bitch. Look it, this is your life. You either accept it or you don't. You either sit down and eat your dead-ass ostrich or you get a gun and blow your brains out. It doesn't matter to me, I said. It doesn't matter at all. But just pick one and get it over with.'

“So that's what I did. I took a chunk out of that weird old bird, threw it in the nuker, got out the good plates from Mom-in-law along with a can of the finest and settled in for a flip-and-chew to wait for my hornytoad wife to get home with camel cum dripping down her thigh. And you know what came on TV? A whole freaking show about ostriches. Nature channel or something. There it was. Eating habits, humping habits, egg-sitting habits, head-in-the-sand habits. I didn't even know ostriches came out of eggs. I thought they had a pouch. Anyway, there it was—the whole shit. And you know what? I watched the whole thing and when the commercials came on I got up and got myself another chunk.”

Marsha watched the chunks go in circles in the microwave. She sipped the last of her drink and saw herself on a chunk, riding it round and round. She smiled a little at that idea. It was sort of funny. Then she saw herself going home and sitting in her room with her notebook of letters to Ed in her lap. In the notebook she would tell Ed about Harry and how crazy he was.

Although Ed wouldn't care. He would never even read the letter. No one would read the letter. And if anyone did read it, they wouldn't get it. Wouldn't get what it was like to be stuck in Harry's kitchen for pretty much forever, with her back slightly sweaty from the oven behind her and Harry watching and watching her, never taking his eyes off her, not really, even when he turned around.

Suddenly the plate was on the table in front her. The ostrich slice on it looked like a hand with no fingers or skin, just a tiny thumb sticking out toward the window like it wanted to hitch a ride anywhere else.

“Come on,” Harry said. “It's a delicacy. You got to try things.”

But she ignored him.

She stared at the ostrich carcass on the table. At one end was a small cave-like hole, probably where the neck had been. The hole was narrow and squished, and it was dark in there. She felt, somehow, like she'd been staring into that hole forever, and she didn't want to see it any longer or to smell the smell that came out of it. But when she closed her eyes, there in her mind was the hole. It was close up now, warm, familiar—not so bad after all, maybe. She felt herself sliding in.

Truman

For six days Truman had been living with the fact of his mother's death in a pile-up involving a dozen cars caught in a sudden blizzard on a stretch of Route 1 lined by outlet stores and heavily trafficked due to the Christmas shopping season. The car had rolled over several times, Truman's mother, Agnes, had been partially decapitated, and a frontal section of her skull had been, in the words of the medical examiner's report, "slightly caved in." Truman was hard put to reconcile these violent facts with the ordinary things he knew about his mother: her air of slight, potentially penetrable aloofness; her mild bladder control problems; her inability to cook anything other than eggs, mashed carrots, the occasional pie, pot roast for Friday suppers; her fondness for old British sitcoms; her vaguely approving interest in both Truman's unexciting career as a tax preparer and his even more uninteresting love life. She rarely nagged. She never asked too many questions. Never bugged Truman to get married, even after he turned 30. She did not push or prod. Truman sometimes wished he had tried to do something special with his life, something big and difficult, something that would have tested him and revealed his hidden powers and tragic flaws, but this anxiety largely evaporated in his mother's presence. Once a year, during the summer, she would take Truman and Benny for a vacation on Lake Winnepesaukee, and they would eat at the same restaurants they'd been eating at for decades—since Truman and Benny were kids—and they would stay up a little late once or twice, sitting on the screened-in porch, drinking wine and playing Hearts and listening to the water slosh tepidly against the dock whenever the breeze picked up or a motorboat went by.

Now, however, things were suddenly very different for Truman: he would have to break the news of their mother's death to Benny—though, assuming Benny asked, Truman would claim not to know the gory details. But even without these—the head crushing and so on—Truman had little doubt his brother's reaction to the news would mean weeks of toil: Truman would have to comfort Benny, listen to him scream and cry or, worst of all, do the gasping-sobbing thing he did when very upset, looking as if he were drowning in some furious emotional stew, his chin wobbling and becoming moist with tears or drool. Then there would be phone calls and check-ins: Benny would try to kill himself by swallowing a bunch of pills, Truman would have to call an ambulance, wait anxiously through the stomach pumping, etc. The doctors would want to up Benny's dosages or switch his meds—and whenever they messed with his medication, Benny always became a wreck. Most likely he'd lose it altogether, try to kill himself a second time, and end up back in the hospital, which would mean that Truman would have to visit him every couple of days until he got out.

He wasn't looking forward to it.

Truman squeezed onto the cramped elevator among several residents of Benny's rent-subsidized building for people deemed officially disabled by the State of Massachusetts. Truman hated this building; he hated that he had any reason to be near the people who lived in it. Crowded onto the elevator were some typical cases: an old lady in a soft purple jogging suit pushing a metal cart full of brown and white plastic bags and at least two stuffed rabbits—one, its face pressed against the cart's wire grid, missing a black glass eye. The lady—naturally, Truman thought—made hissing, under-the-breath sing-song sounds. Trying not to listen, Truman nevertheless heard the words “fuck” and

“cup” repeated several times in some obscure connection with each other. The murmuring rose and fell—*fuck a cup cup cup*—and Truman felt the cool beginnings of nausea. He pressed his back against the elevator’s narrow rear wall, wanting to put space between himself and the cart woman, as well as the men who stood on either side of her like some surreal bodyguard. One, unusually tall, his head only six inches or so beneath the elevator ceiling, had a soft, downwardly protruding layer of neck fat beneath his chin, although he was otherwise almost painfully skinny. The other, small and jittery, covered in an unhealthy layer of pudgy, soft flesh, and wearing a faded green basketball sweatshirt with a weird orange stain in the middle, had a big almond-shaped splotch of old-looking acne in the center of his forehead.

This one gave Truman a brief insinuating look as he got onto the elevator, then turned his back in a disgusted way and jabbed several times at the button for the fourth floor even though it was already lit up a bright unmissable green.

The elevator jerked and rose. Truman breathed through his mouth, unenthusiastic about inhaling air that had touched the acne guy’s forehead or that was tinged with the reek of ripe fruit and cigarettes that poured off the tall, fat man, as if his pockets were stuffed with masses of citrus pulp and burnt filters. In fact, Truman noticed, the tall guy’s pockets, squeezed tight against his heavy thighs, had swampy, moist bottoms.

Cuppety muck?

Hemmed in between the two men, cart jutting out and banging against the elevator door, the old lady twisted slowly around and gave Truman a pursed-lipped look that hovered between self-abasement and sly hostility.

“Sorry!” she said in an exasperated tone.

“Sure, whatever,” acne guy said. “Don’t mention it.”

The woman stared for a moment longer at Truman, who turned his eyes upward to the elevator ceiling. In it was a small black hole, the darkness of which seemed filled with motion.

The woman returned painfully to her front-facing position and seconds later the murmuring started up again: *Cup cup sucker motherfucker and his fucking cup cup cup*

Truman got off the elevator and traveled through the hall with its blank, tan walls, its faint mold-fighting-with-carpet-cleaner smell, and muffled sounds of solitary household activities taking place behind closed doors. Truman always imagined everyone in the building doing things in their apartments alone and in slow motion—slowly washing dishes, slowly opening envelopes, slowly feeding cats or watering plants or moving objects from room to room. Although, he reminded himself, the people who lived in this building were paragons of health and stability compared to the moaning ghosts at the state hospital where Benny had been sent a year ago after Michelle dumped him and he swallowed all those pills. In his mind Truman saw white-gowned arms, bony and flabby, speckled with moles, reaching out and grasping at him as he walked the green-tiled corridors, trying to find Benny’s room...And seeing Benny there in that white room, his head turned towards the window with its strange light, thick and white, like cotton or fog lit up by...Never mind, he told himself, there was no point in dwelling on it now, no point letting his mind get sucked back into the past, as had been happening over and over for the last week. It only sapped his energy and left him stuck in an exhausting muddle of shapeless, conflicting emotions.

He’d arrived at Benny’s door. Taking a deep breath, he knocked.

“T! *Willkommen! Schneller, schneller!*” Benny called right away. The bright cheeriness of his voice, Truman figured, almost certainly meant Benny had done something that would piss him off.

Hesitantly entering, Truman was enveloped in a sweetly fetid odor. The smell came from everywhere. Vomit. But Truman saw none. As if nothing was amiss, Benny went back to knitting some small piece of bluish yarn, holding it up close to his face—no doubt to hide a smirk, Truman thought. For the past year Benny had been knitting and knitting, borrowing yarn money from Agnes. It was a hobby he’d picked up from Michelle. Truman did not encourage it, but he had at least refrained from giving vent to the sharp annoyance he felt at the sight of Benny bent over his sparkle-covered needles.

In the bathroom he found dried crusts of vomit all over the floor, also clinging to the sink, tub, and toilet seat. A distressed keening sound escaped him. There was so much of it—a week’s worth, it had to be. In frustration, he hammered the side of his fist, once, against the bathroom wall.

“What was that?” Benny called from the other room.

Truman was annoyed at himself. His smacking the wall had no doubt given Benny a little thrill of satisfaction. It was probably exactly what Benny had been going for, it was probably *why* he’d vomited—to achieve just such an outcome. Truman could just see the triumphant little smirk on Benny’s lips now...

“This has to be cleaned,” Truman growled from behind the half-closed bathroom door. He didn’t trust himself to leave the bathroom—didn’t trust himself to be near Benny, to be within striking distance his fat, quivering face with its small, mobile lips and large innocent eyes.

“It has to be cleaned now!” he said, louder, almost yelling.

“I know,” Benny said. “But I go in there and look at it and I start to feel kind of sad about myself. Like who am I that I would do a thing like that—that everything would just fly out of me and all over the place? Who—”

This speech ended, rising in pitch, on a desperate half-sob, as if Benny were about to burst into tears or—just as bad, Truman thought—a flood of slippery self-loathing speech.

“Don’t gush your words out,” Truman snapped. “Talk like a normal person.”

Though still angry, Truman was now also nervous—the last thing he needed was Benny flying off the handle before he’d even gotten into the dead mother stuff.

He could hear Benny sniffing, then breathing deeply to calm himself. These sounds annoyed Truman so much that he hunched over, putting a hand to his chest, as if he were himself having trouble drawing breath.

“I know I ask a lot you, T,” Benny said in a measured voice, “but do you think I could ask yet one more thing of you? Do you think you could maybe—help a little—with the bathroom?”

Truman looked at the wall and saw that his fist had left a small grayish dent in the plaster. He sighed. It’s all falling apart, he thought suddenly—but what did that mean? Something in the words was escaping him—he wasn’t sure what they referred to.

From among the junk at the back of Benny’s bedroom closet—full of the V-neck sweaters Benny had worn to work at MacLawson and Frost during his merely-pudgy days but which he was now too heavy and bloated to even consider wearing, Truman unearthed a bucket and mop. He began to clean the bathroom, gagging, almost in tears.

Several times he leaned over the toilet, on the verge of adding his own vomit to Benny's. Two small cockroaches kept skittering out from behind the toilet, freezing in place, and skittering back again. Truman found he couldn't bring himself to crush them—he was already surrounded by too much dead, rotting matter. Instead, he gave them names—Hans and Franz—characters from early-'90s *Saturday Night Live*. He remembered, when he and Benny were kids, sitting on the living room carpet in front of the TV with Benny, repeating the laugh lines and trying to do the comical Arnold Schwarzenegger accent. Whenever the cockroaches appeared, Truman—under his breath so Benny wouldn't hear from the next room—repeated the lines “‘I am Hans.’ ‘And I am Franz.’ ‘And we are here to pump *you* up!’”

After the sixth or seventh appearance of the cockroaches, he leaned the mop against the wall and clapped the way Hans and Franz clap after “pump” and before “*you* up.” Like Hans and Franz, he aimed his index finger at the studio audience—which in this case was himself in the mirror. He decided he looked not exactly pumped. Pumped people didn't have loose, hanging cheeks and a skin tone that hovered around grayish. But he made himself smile, deciding it was probably a healthy sign that he could cheer himself up by remembering the good times. Though, he could not help but recall, Hans and Franz had led to some not good times as well. As a kid, Benny seemed to find funny things *really* funny, funnier than anyone else found them, and he would go on laughing way too long, high and shrill, almost a scream of laughter. And Benny would repeat the Hans and Franz lines for weeks after the skit had run and everyone else had forgotten about it—after everyone at school, for instance, had long ago stopped talking about the skit or doing impressions. Benny would go on obsessively repeating the lines, sometimes

under his breath, just loud enough for Truman to hear when they were sitting next to each other on the couch watching an entirely different show or a movie Agnes had rented for them when she had to be out for the evening: *I am here to pump* (not quite inaudible clap) *you up!* And Truman would tell him to stop, just stop repeating it, the same fucking thing over and over, Benny was trying on *purpose* to piss him off, he knew, he knew, by repeating, by *repeating*. Trying to drive him nuts! If Benny didn't stop, he would...make him really fucking sorry he hadn't stopped when Truman asked him the first time to stop. And on some such occasions Truman would grab Benny by the arm or shoulder—or by the hair or the neck, he remembered, oh yes the neck, the throat—and he would drag or fling Benny, who was two years younger and much smaller than Truman, against the wall or sometimes he would pin his body against the thick, solid wood doorframe that led from the living room, where they put the Christmas tree, to the front hall, he'd cup his hand around the back of Benny's head and...

The cockroaches skittered out from behind the toilet again, and this time Truman crushed them, grinding them under the rubber heel of his running shoe, then cleaned them up with a square of toilet paper, let this float down into the toilet, and flushed.

...And with the cup of his hand he would push, he would slam over and over, knock the forehead against the hard wood, a sharp line of fury shooting up from his belly into his throat, though his mind was calm and clear: *I am doing this, this is what I am doing, I'm banging Benny's forehead into the doorframe because Benny did not shut up when I asked him politely the first time to shut up, and I will bang Benny's forehead bang bang bang five more times or until he asks me to stop, until he apologizes for fucking repeating repeating...*

The two mangled cockroach bodies were sucked away. Truman picked up the mop and continued cleaning. Mysteriously, the vomit smell lingered even after he'd dumped the foul water down the drain and re-scrubbed everything, cleaning a second time, a third, the toilet, tub, sink, and floor.

Defeated, he emerged into the living room for a breath of non-bathroom air.

Except it wouldn't be just five more times, Truman remembered, he'd bang bang bang bang bang—it would be more than that sometimes, it would be until he'd lost count, until his jaw muscles relaxed slightly and the impulse to hurt, to damage, faded and there was a little moist empty space between his top molars and his bottom molars, a space through which he felt his breath passing...

And then he would feel bad, so bad, as if his soul was marked now to be sucked down into Hell many years in the future after he died...And Benny would be crying—crying and holding his forehead with both hands...

All of Benny's kitchen chairs were piled with random junk—rotting food trash, half-finished afghans, bags—there was nowhere to sit except on the couch next to Benny, and Truman wasn't going to do that. He imagined the couch cushions depressed under the weight of Benny's body, he imagined falling closer to that body, getting sucked in...

...And Truman would by then be crying too, crying but with fear gripping his balls and expanding into his stomach, and he would get down on his knees and ask Benny to please forgive him, what had made him do such an awful thing he didn't know but he would never do it again, and please please don't tell Mom...

Truman saw that Benny was oblivious to the fact that he was standing at the bathroom door looking for a place to sit down. He saw that Benny's attention was

entirely focused on whatever he was knitting. Moving closer, Truman saw that it was a small vest-like thing with openings for four small limbs and in the center of it a bright pink heart bearing the message in ambitious but mangled cursive lettering: “M&B together in a spiritual way.”

Truman held back a nauseated groan. On the little table beside the couch, practically at Benny’s elbow, was a photo of “M”—who, Truman knew, could only be Michelle—in a shiny silver frame that looked recently polished. Why, Truman asked himself, hadn’t Benny got rid of this photo? Only a masochist would keep it around. Benny had first shown it to him on Christmas morning, right after they’d arrived at Agnes’s house bearing bags of presents and, in accordance with tradition, one home-baked item each: Benny with a Tupperware tub of peanut butter cookies (Who wanted peanut butter cookies on Christmas? Truman had wondered) and Truman with a frosted velvet cake in a cake box he’d ordered online. Till after 2 a.m. he’d been up perfecting this cake, having dumped the first three less-than-perfect attempts in the garbage.

The photo had been taken the night before, Christmas Eve, at a mall photo booth and Benny was clearly chomping at the bit to show it off. With his inflexibly cheery naiveté, he obviously expected Truman and Agnes to be deeply impressed by Michelle’s beauty. Of course, Truman had been surprised that any woman—one with a decent job as a paralegal, no less—would have any interest in his chubby, disheveled, V-neck-sweater-obsessed, slightly nuts brother, who was only some low-level IT-room functionary at MacLawson. But seeing the photo, he’d understood: it was a case of mutual desperation. Michelle was, if possible, just as undesirable as Benny, with a thick face, needling, ungenerous eyes, and a nose with an objectionable fleshy thing at the tip

that Truman could think of only as a *twist*. Not only was she distinctly unattractive, but her goofy photo booth faces—her lower-lip-biting, her faux-surprised raised eyebrows—all of this was somehow a smidge too self-conscious to be actually endearing, as it was obviously—and pathetically, in Truman’s view—intended to be.

He’d repressed a smile at the punchline quality of the photo.

Benny said, “Is she not in a category beyond hot?”

Truman paused for a moment. Benny’s energetic silliness, he felt, was a way of emotionally manipulating him into providing the desired response. But no, he would not say that Michelle was hot just to prop up Benny’s mood and he would not say it just because it was Christmas morning (no doubt a cunning selection of occasion on Benny’s part). Benny needed a reality check: Truman would tell him the truth.

“No, Benny,” he said, “I would not say she makes it up to the level of hot.”

Benny looked surprised—Truman thought he saw his nostrils tremble, a tic he’d never before noticed. “Oh, okay,” Benny said. “You wouldn’t say that. Everyone—it’s all—“

“To each his own?” Truman said.

“Yeah,” Benny said, “that. Something like that.”

Truman had been haunted for the rest of Christmas day by a twinge of regret—had he really done the right thing in being honest?—but Benny seemed to recover quickly: his Christmas spirit and general air of new-girlfriend-inspired happiness seemed undampened. He complimented Truman’s velvet cake and danced with Agnes when she put on Phil Spector. During the gift-opening phase of the day, lolling back before the Christmas tree in Agnes’s much-loved leather recliner, he blanketed himself in a

magisterial body-length afghan, which, he informed them proudly, had been knitted by Michelle. The afghan featured a semi-nude man and woman embracing in a grove of trees near a dark pool of water, where they were watched over by a mysterious orange moon. Truman tried to avoid seeing this afghan, which he found both annoying and provocative (the man and the woman were highly detailed, and the woman's palm was placed on the man's buttocks) and absurdly out of place in this room with its lighted Christmas tree, stockings, and colorfully wrapped presents. Moreover, Benny had seemingly arranged the afghan on his body so that the picture—and Michelle's arts-and-crafts talent, Truman supposed—would be on full display. Once in a while, Truman remembered, Benny would tug fussily at a corner of the afghan to remove wrinkles that might obscure the full depth and beauty of the image. Truman made a point of looking everywhere in the room but at the afghan, as if defying Benny's desire to have him be in awe of it.

Now, in Benny's apartment, Truman looked away from the photo. A long day was still to be had, he reminded himself. He had to keep his mind on the present moment.

But something—some hint—caused him to sniff. Another smell, he realized, inhabited this part of the apartment, a second smell hidden within the vomit smell. It came from the area of the couch. A familiar smell, something like the apple pies Agnes would make and serve warm to welcome Truman home from college on winter breaks—her “college boy,” she'd call him, and he'd feel an embarrassing pride, his cheeks flushing slightly and his throat tightening in response to the gently-mocking phrase. He'd have to duck out of the room to calm himself, hoping no one had noticed his reaction.

How stupid and corny, he thought. But he couldn't help it. He was proud of his grades, his awards, the comments professors wrote in the margins of his papers. Calling from his dorm, he told Agnes about...if not every little success, at least many of them. Against his will, the blood would rush into his cheeks. He'd always sensed that Benny, who'd never gone to college, who didn't even move out of Agnes's house until years after Truman had graduated *magna cum laude*, and who was always present for this annual celebration of Truman's winter homecoming, resented those pies.

But the pie smell had a nice wholesome quality, not to mention an element of cinnamon—both absent in this new smell. Then Truman saw: tucked between couch cushions was a plastic soda bottle, its top jaggedly cut off, possibly by a serrated kitchen knife, filled with a yellowish fluid that could be only urine.

Benny looked up, confused at Truman's sudden discomfort, his sparkly green knitting needles paused and attentive. Then he bit his lower lip cutely, not unlike Michelle in the photo, and grinned.

From somewhere behind him on the couch he produced "Mandy," the animatronic dog he'd lately insisted on bringing with him when Truman took him for their weekly trip to the mall and the grocery store. He pointed the dog's smiling, panting, black-eyed face at Truman and pressed a button under a heart-shaped decal on the dog's ear.

"Got a smooch for a pooch?" Mandy said and woofed three times in a muffled, distant-sounding way.

The dog. Truman's mind returned again to last Christmas. The dog had been Benny's gift to their mother—his *last* Christmas gift to their mother, as it turned out—as Benny, Truman thought, would soon learn. Truman did not know how the dog had fallen

into Benny's possession but was unsurprised that it had. Benny and Agnes shared what was, to Truman, an incomprehensible taste for animal dolls, and Truman's dislike of these had long been a running family joke. On one end of Benny's kitchen table, as if Benny conducted meal-time dialogues with them, was a collection of animals that talked and rolled their eyes or moved their limbs in excited or loving motions. A brown bear spread its arms for a hug that (Truman hoped) never came; two cats seated in rocking chairs tilted forward and backward over a miniature tea set; a bespectacled rabbit reclined in some luminescent grass reading a large book to a smaller rabbit, who was in the act of yawning—and who, when the thing was turned on, snored softly beneath the comfortable, fluty, slightly British voice of the big rabbit reading *The Wind in the Willows*. And there were other creatures too, planted around the apartment, eyes gazing darkly at Truman—or at nothing, Truman had to remind himself, in fact they were not even gazing.

But of the many animal grotesqueries in Benny's apartment, Truman hated most this dog. Probably, he thought cynically, Benny had bought it for Agnes with the idea of swiping it from her later—she was always losing things anyway—and transporting it secretly back to his lair—which, last Christmas, had been a dim, clammy studio apartment in Charlestown, a short T trip from MacLawson.

Sitting next to the Christmas tree in a wooden chair borrowed from the kitchen (she'd always insisted, Truman remembered, on sitting in one of these uncomfortable chairs, letting Benny have the recliner and letting Truman have the entire couch to himself, which made him feel both guilty and scorned), Agnes extracted the dog's

plastic-windowed cardboard box from the childish mess of wrapping paper with which Benny had partially obscured it.

“So cute! What fun!” Agnes enthused while Benny grinned with self-satisfaction.

On removing it from its box, Agnes immediately turned the dog to face Truman and pressed the ear button.

“Smile! Life’s an adventure!” the dog advised Truman and then made barking noises that sounded like dry chuckling. Agnes laughed. Benny laughed, and Truman managed to contort his face into an amused, self-deprecating expression that he hoped would save him from the accusation of being a “Christmas grump,” as his mother called him even though he always made an effort to be cheerful on Christmas and to allow others their simple enjoyment of the little rituals of the day, going so far as to have a glass of champagne (he made sure to bring a bottle with him on Christmas, Agnes being a non-drinker) with breakfast so he’d feel relaxed and wouldn’t say critical things about Benny.

But once again his attempt at non-grumpiness had failed, at least in his mother’s eyes.

“Truman doesn’t think it’s so funny,” Agnes said after they’d pumped the dog for a few more dumb jokes and tokens of bumper sticker wisdom, “Let’s leave him alone. Let’s put it on the mantel where it won’t bother him, and he won’t have to think about how silly and shallow we are to like such things. We’ll have to give him a name, of course.”

“Mandy!” Benny said immediately.

“That’s a perfect name,” Agnes said, “almost what I was thinking of myself.”

“How about Randy?” Truman said.

Benny and Agnes turned to give him nearly identical looks of blank incomprehension.

“No, Truman,” Agnes said. “That name doesn’t make sense. It wouldn’t be a good name.”

She rose and positioned the dog on the mantel above the emptied stockings, between the gingerbread house and the *The Night Before Christmas* in its display holder. Agnes read this book to them every Christmas Eve after dinner, sitting between them on the couch, turning the pages so they could see the illustrations, and they all sipped cocoa (Truman’s and Benny’s with dabs of whiskey) and gazed at the multicolored tree lights, and Truman seemed to remember that, when he was a kid, those lights had seemed to glow at such moments with the special dark stillness of late-night Christmas Eve.

Agnes returned to her wooden chair but leaned over and touched Benny’s knee under the afghan—just one quick little tap on the knee, as if she couldn’t repress her affection.

“Thank you, Ben,” she said. “Life *is* an adventure, isn’t it? And what a brilliant afghan. I can’t stop looking at it. Michelle is quite talented.”

Benny nodded, his eyes—to Truman’s surprise—moist with tears, looking too happy to speak intelligibly.

“Oh, Benny,” Agnes said, “where do you find such nice gifts?”

“Brookstone,” Benny managed to say.

“I love that store! I was in there just yesterday—looking for maybe a thing or two.” This she said coyly, apparently referring to gifts yet unopened under the tree.

Agnes and Benny proceeded to affirm their mutual adoration of Brookstone and to discuss a series of electronic gadgets that each, while in Brookstone, had briefly considered purchasing for the other. Truman could have sworn he'd sat through some version of this conversation about Brookstone a dozen times—it happened every Christmas and at both Agnes's and Benny's birthdays. He himself had considered “giving in,” as he thought of it, and buying his mother a Christmas present at Brookstone—something that would get a big predictable reaction, like Benny's dog—but instead he'd marched defiantly into the neighboring Borders, feeling unaccountably drawn to the self-help section.

Truman waited tensely for his mother to draw from the pile of boxes under the tree the book he'd purchased. The book was about “living passionately and intentionally,” as the back cover put it, “especially later in life.” It was the word “intentionally” that had got him. On the one hand, the words made not much sense to him—they were just self-help claptrap; on the other, he felt they were drastically important if not for him, then for his mother to understand. Whatever “intentionally” meant, Agnes wasn't doing it. She was the most *unintentional* person he could think of. She had all the time in the world but just went from day to day stuck in the same pointless, depressing rut. Big excitement for her was having friends, retired elementary school teachers like herself, over for scones and card games once a month; otherwise, she looked forward only to holidays with himself and Benny, which she shopped and planned for months ahead of time. In the self-help section of Borders, he'd forced himself to envision Agnes sitting in the kitchen with her cup of tea, raptly absorbed in this provocative new book with its eye-catching yellow and blue cover. He imagined her

reading it thoughtfully and, as a result, transforming some of her habits and maybe changing her worldview a little. Maybe she would take a trip to Brazil or enroll in an adult ed course on a challenging, unfamiliar subject, grateful to Truman for his insight into the central problems of her life.

But when Agnes finally got around to opening Truman's present, removing the book from the microfiber bag he had purchased—after 30 minutes of consideration—at a gift-bag pop-up stand near the Borders, she was unimpressed.

“Oh,” she said, raising an eyebrow and gazing past Truman as if in conspiracy with an invisible audience somewhere behind him, though behind him was only a windowless wall, papered in a dull yellowish-brown sometime in the '80s, when his father had been around—before he'd left, moving out west, from one big square state to another, never calling but sending the required checks regular as clockwork, or so Agnes had told them.

Agnes held the book out at arm's length as if to see the cover illustration more clearly. Then she turned it over to read the back.

“An improving book from Truman,” she concluded, lips compressed.

Truman ground his teeth in annoyance. Despite his fantasy about Agnes in the kitchen with the book and the tea, he'd known she would react in exactly this way. Why had he bothered putting any thought whatsoever into his gift? Next time, he promised himself, he'd go to Brookstone and grab the first thing he saw off the shelf, no matter how ridiculous and inappropriate it was. If absurdity was what she loved, he'd give her absurdity—he'd give her—he thought carefully—a personal massager! Brookstone had a selection of those somewhere, no doubt, the cheaply fancy kind. With satisfaction, he

imagined Agnes's compressed, disapproving lips parting to form an expression of surprise and horror. Let her try to make a subtle joke at his expense out of that!

Hoping that Benny would sympathize with his irritation—or even express some polite curiosity about the book—he glanced across the room at his brother, but Benny was grinning as if Agnes's quip about the “improving book” had been a real dead-on knee-slapper. Truman watched him cap off his amusement by tilting his head back and inserting into his mouth the brightly frosted leg of a large gingerbread man Agnes had put into his stocking. He munched sloppily; Truman looked away. Agnes had already put the book on the floor, not even bothering to display it by propping it up against the chair legs and was already reaching for another gift.

Gazing glassily down at Truman from the mantel, the black lines of the dog's mouth were curled into a friendly grin, its pink hint of a tongue poking out.

* * *

Benny lowered his large body into the passenger seat of Truman's '93 Sentra, the springs beneath the seat creaking.

““And I am here to pump *you* up!” he said. “Remember that one, T? Hans and Franz? SNL?”

“I was just doing it while I was cleaning the vomit crust off your toilet, Ben. So, yeah, I remember.”

“You were? I thought it just floated into my head from—somewhere.”

They stared through the windshield at another in a long succession of overcast days. It was ten in the morning but, to judge by the thin gray light, could just as well have been six in the evening. For the seventh day in a row the temperature was near zero, and the sidewalks were covered in rock-hard heaps of filthy iced-over snow. On the radio were warnings about inadequate salting and black ice. Everyone's headlights glowed thickly in the medium-level fog, and as Truman took the turn out of the parking lot of Benny's building and onto the street, he felt as if he were taking his place in some vast web-like funeral procession.

His plan was to drive to the North End for pastry. That would be a real treat for Benny, whose excursions into what he called the Blessed Isle of Sugar were confined to candy and soda from the gas station across the street from his building. Ordinarily, Truman strictly denied Benny access to sugar on their weekly outings to the grocery store or the mall, but he figured if he could find a nice quiet shadowy little café somewhere and get Benny sugared up, that would be the best way to break the news of their mother's death. Truman had a particular place in mind he'd discovered a couple of weeks ago on his lunch break. It had decent, though not great, cappuccino, a wide selection of large frosted items in a glass case, and a slightly somber upscale atmosphere that seemed not grossly unfit for the occasion. However, his sense of direction had always been faulty, and he'd taken a wrong turn somewhere. They'd been driving for almost an hour and Truman no longer recognized the neighborhood.

"Kind of hungry," Benny said, cutting into Truman's increasingly irritated thoughts. "Are we going to stop soon?"

"I assume you managed to get yourself breakfast."

“Merely a single piece of toast with margarine and a little NutraSweet. Low on groceries, T.”

“Right. So you’re saying you want me to stop.”

“If the urge strikes you,” Benny said, stroking Mandy, which was perched in his lap.

“You’re not getting any sugar, Benny,” Truman said, imagining the look of cartoonish gratitude that would spread across his brother’s face when Truman unexpectedly handed him a nice thick slab of expensive pastry perched on a napkin or maybe even a heated plate. Truman would let Benny immerse himself fully in the world of the pastry for a moment or two, maybe even a full minute, before telling him that their mother was dead. Despite his fear of Benny’s reaction, he felt a pleasant sense of anticipation: There would be no crawling back into the womb for Benny now. Benny, at long last, would have to deal with the world on its own terms without Agnes interceding for him with stupid jokes or gentle touches on the knee. This idea did not give Truman any hope for Benny—or for himself. He knew that Agnes’s death would not cause Benny to undergo some miraculous transformation. Truman was certain that, after the shock had worn off, Benny would go on being Benny—being just the way he was. Nothing would change.

“Of course not. I only wanted some coffee.”

“No caffeine either,” Truman said, relishing the clear, forceful quality of his denials. “I’m not putting up with that leg shaking business.”

“I just meant decaf and a plain bagel. Just, you know, somewhere. There might be somewhere around here, for instance, maybe.”

Truman suddenly recognized the area—they were in south Charlestown, not far from Benny’s old place and just across the river from MacLawson. How had he got here? he wondered. Piles of brownish-gray snow narrowed the streets, packing the slowly advancing cars too close together for Truman’s comfort. He drove carefully, barely touching the accelerator, afraid that at any moment a patch of ice would send him slipping into the cars beside and in front of him. Despite his caution, he could not help glancing now and then at Benny and Mandy. Benny’s chubby pinkish-white fingers worked themselves around the dog’s ears in a gentle, thoughtful way that made Truman grind his teeth. To Truman, the gentleness of the fingers seemed to imply not only that Benny thought of Mandy as an actual dog but that he thought of Mandy as a particularly sensitive and emotionally fragile dog, a dog that needed gentle, caring, comforting treatment, the kind of treatment Benny had always received from Agnes. Of course Agnes had never treated him, Truman, with anything like a gentle, thoughtful attitude, choosing instead to remain willfully ignorant of the most basic features of his personality, even his likes and dislikes. Of this there could be no better example than the hat—the hat that had turned out to be Agnes’s last gift to him. Unwrapping it, he’d inspected the instructions on the cardboard insert. These consisted of a profile shot of a blandly attractive blond pony-tailed woman wearing a brightly glowing white hat beneath a sun that appeared high in the sky and was colored, for some reason, an ominous dark red. Several curved red arrows shot from the sun down into the hat.

“Hmmm,” Truman said.

“It glows in the dark!” Agnes said, beaming. “It’ll be perfect for those weird jogs you take at night.”

“Hmmm,” Truman said again.

“You’re going to get yourself run over and killed,” Agnes said in a slightly desperate tone.

“Death of a weird jogger,” Truman said.

He removed the hat from the needlessly durable thick plastic pouch with snaps it had been packaged in and put it on his head. In an impulsive attempt at comedy, he stretched it down over his ears and made a face. He’d meant to be funny, but Agnes only looked at him strangely. Truman himself wasn’t sure what the point of the joke was—it was just to highlight the ridiculousness of the hat, he told himself—but he was annoyed that his mother wasn’t laughing. Instead, she removed and replaced her glasses nervously and her mouth seemed on the verge of trembling.

“Very warm already. Thanks, Mom,” Truman said, trying to put an end to the interaction.

“That’s beside the point,” she said.

“I think you pretty much treat it like a regular hat,” Benny put in for no reason that Truman could see, “except that it does that glowing thing.”

Truman said something vague about giving it a shot that evening when he went for a jog, then he stuffed it back into the plastic pouch, snapping the snaps to indicate that he planned to care for it with care and respect while, mentally, he fumed. If Benny had stretched the hat down over his ears as a joke, Agnes would have laughed right away, would have seen the humor, would even have found it adorable—there would have been more affectionate knee-touching, Truman was sure.

But perhaps, Truman considered, nothing showed Agnes's fervent, purblind bias for all things Benny—and casual disregard of all things Truman—more than the episode of the gingerbread house and the DVD remote, which had taken place last Christmas after dinner. There could be no disputing the fact that Agnes was always losing the DVD remote, which was small and black and often difficult to see when placed near other dark-colored objects. But its size and coloring were not an adequate explanation of the problem. They would rent a movie—Truman remembered he'd tried once to get his mother and Benny to watch *Amadeus* and another time *Apocalypse Now*—and the remote would have vanished completely, no one would be able to find it. Once Truman had come across it in the upstairs bathroom magazine basket, crammed in between issues of *Reader's Digest* and *Time*. He'd shaken his head at the thought of his mother ghosting around the house in an absent-minded, schizoid fog, unconsciously depositing the remote in the basket as if it were another magazine. That was why, on Christmas Eve, at Blockbuster to rent *Die Hard*—a movie Agnes had insisted on watching (Truman hated action movies in general and Bruce Willis in particular)—it had occurred to Truman that the DVD remote would probably be missing as usual the next evening when they were ready to watch the movie after dinner. So he went over to Radio Shack and spent 45 minutes examining remote controls. Eventually he chose a long white one that would be difficult to lose behind other objects and that had lots of brightly colored buttons that would make it easy to see across a dimly lit room (Agnes, when alone, tended to leave most of the house lights off). Importantly, the new remote had controls for the DVD as well as the cable, entirely eliminating the need for the DVD remote, which Agnes could

then store in the closet as a back-up. This idea—an extra remote in storage—gave Truman a feeling of satisfaction.

He'd gift-wrapped this new remote and given it to Agnes as a second present. To ensure that his mother would appreciate his forward-thinking about the DVD remote problem, he found the old DVD remote on Christmas morning (grinning sardonically on finding it in a perfectly sensible location—on top of the DVD player) and hid it in the hallway closet in the most random location that presented itself—the pocket of Agnes's rain slicker—imagining Agnes and even Benny smiling with gratitude when Agnes opened the new remote and they realized that Truman had saved *Die Hard* for them. But Agnes hadn't seemed any more impressed with the remote than she had with the self-help book—and when Truman began to explain its virtues and to walk her through the thought process he'd gone through when choosing it, she'd merely smiled vaguely and wandered off to make tea and popcorn to have with the movie.

After dinner, while Truman knelt on the floor in front of the TV trying to find the activation code for the new remote—it was supposed to be on a sticker printed on the package's cardboard backing, but the sticker, incredibly, seemed to be missing—Benny stood at the mantelpiece popping into his mouth pieces of Christmas gingerbread house. Benny slurped and grunted with theatrical satisfaction, while, to Truman's surprise and annoyance, Agnes sat on the couch, sipping her tea, eating Benny's peanut butter cookies (having apparently forgotten about the popcorn), and even smiling at Benny's antics. Truman did his best to ignore Benny, feeling it was best not to reinforce this attention-seeking behavior by reacting to it. To help with the effort of not reacting, he'd gone briefly into the kitchen with the idea of downing the remainder of the breakfast

champagne—for hours he'd been refraining from doing just this—only to find that the bottle was empty, completely dry, not so much as a drop left. There was no other alcohol in the house, and the velvet cake was gone too, along with a chocolate chip banana bread Agnes had made. Filled with resentment, Truman made a grape jelly sandwich, devoured it standing over the breadboard, then trailed back into the living room to resume his work on the remote.

Truman felt he had every reason to expect Agnes to disapprove of Benny's antics: the gingerbread house was perhaps the family's longest-standing Christmas tradition. Agnes bought one every year in mid-December, driving to some obscure shop several towns away that opened only during the holiday season to sell baked goods and tchotchkes. And this year the thing had cost her upwards of 80 bucks, as Truman had learned, having come across the receipt while going through Agnes's purse looking for the keys to her car—a Sentra Truman he had helped her pick out a few years prior—because the brakes felt a bit soft to him and he thought he'd take it to the garage to have them inspected (he hadn't been able to find the keys anywhere in the house, he remembered, and eventually gave up). Probably a hundred times since they were kids, Agnes had instructed Truman and Benny that the gingerbread house was to remain untouched until New Year's. Only then, at the stroke of midnight, would they be allowed to tear it apart together, as Benny was doing now all by himself well ahead of the allotted time. But rather than enforce the long-standing prohibition, Agnes merely chuckled as Benny did some Vaudevillian mugging, dancing around and peeling off chocolate snowflake shingles with showy merriment.

No, Truman wanted to say and perhaps would have said had he not felt ridiculous, *you're not supposed to do that. It's not the right time, dipshit.*

Beyond his usual annoyance at Benny's insatiable craving for their mother's attention, something about his gleeful taboo-breaking gave Truman the creeps. They had, it seemed, few family traditions left, and it pained Truman to see this one go.

—things will change—cut it out—

Truman only looked up when Benny, having stuck his index fingers through the two front windows to represent people who lived in the house, made the finger people talk to each other in despairing yet high-pitched tones about how they couldn't find the remote control to the DVD player.

"Oops, I think I left it in some totally random place again," said one finger person. "Will you forgive me?"

"Ha!" Agnes said and laughed, "good dialogue. Very realistic."

"Yes," said the other, "but first you must become more *intentional*."

"Oh, I will, I will," chirped the first finger.

This time Agnes not only laughed but clapped.

"But wait," Benny said, in a hammy narrator tone.

He removed his fingers from the windows, raising one into the air. Then, ogling Agnes and Truman comically, a brown piece of gingerbread from a section of wall stuck between his front teeth, he made a fist out of the raised hand and brought it down on the roof of the gingerbread house, smashing it to pieces. There was a loud thump, the mantelpiece vibrated, Mandy toppled over to one side.

In mock-triumph, Benny held up a small black object—the DVD remote. It had been inside the gingerbread house.

“Yay, Benny!” Agnes said. “Now we can put in Bruce Willis.”

“Where did you find that?” said Truman, his voice tense, almost a growl.

Benny shrugged and turned his palms out.

“Truman,” Agnes said, “Do you have to pee? You’re sounding like you have to pee. God, Truman, the pee issues.”

Truman stewed on the situation all the way through *Die Hard* (of which he managed to miss 20 minutes, holed up in the bathroom, morosely flipping through a *Time* issue on the hundred most influential people in the world, noting that several of them were years younger than himself and trying to imagine Bill Gates hiding a remote control to impress his mother) and he continued to stew through the collecting of presents and leftovers and through the 10-minute drive across town to his own apartment. When he got home, he made a drink and dialed Agnes, having decided to confess to his pathetic crime. Probably Agnes had heard the truth from Benny, who must somehow have seen him at the closet door with the remote. And if the game was up, it was best to do what he could to save face. In the long run, he told himself, his mother might like him better if he could make a few self-deprecating jokes and prove he didn’t take himself too seriously.

But when he heard his mother’s absurd phone greeting—“Merry Christmas! This is the Beasley residence!”—he changed his mind. Agnes’s cheesy enthusiasm seemed to defy any dipping whatsoever into the realm of psychology in which weird adult emotional insecurities about mothers existed. Even if Benny had told her about the

remote, she would by now have erased the whole episode from her consciousness. It seemed likely, at least.

“I can’t do the ‘ho ho ho’ in the proper spirit at this time of night,” Agnes added, “I’m too pooped.”

Truman decided to go on the offensive.

“Isn’t it weird that a grown man would hide a remote in a gingerbread house?” he asked. He had a sip of his drink and waited for a response. None came.

“Can you really say that you don’t find that a bit disturbing?” he went on, “not to mention we were an hour late starting *Die Hard*. Some of us have to work tomorrow.”

“He likes to make us laugh, Truman. It’s not like you never do anything peculiar,” his mother said. He paused, certain he’d caught a note of insinuation in the word “peculiar.” He gulped the rest of his drink, ready to launch into full-throated denial—What? Was crazy Benny making things up again? He, Truman, was *not* the kind of sad case who would cause a problem just so he could pretend to solve it, at least not in general was he that kind of person. Being a sad case was Benny’s department, the remote control thing being only the most recent example. But Truman could cite other examples. What about the physical deterioration—the recent rapid weight gain, the grease stains on the clothes? What about the late-night phone calls to Truman and Agnes both, in which Benny would talk in a creepy baby voice, scared of something he couldn’t name or adequately describe? These were signs of decline, Truman was sure, and it was important that he convince his mother of that fact before—before—*something* happened.

“What are you talking about, Mom?”

“All that jogging late at night,” she said. “No one does that.”

He let out a breath, his sense of relief solidifying. She didn't know—or she refused to know. It didn't matter which. On the one hand, her militant shallowness annoyed him; on the other, he was happy it was, just this once, working in his favor.

“For Christ's sake,” he said, “Lots of people jog at night!”

“I never see anyone do it.”

“You would have to go outside with your eyes open. And how are those two things alike—jogging and hiding a remote, not to mention making a complete and total mockery of...”

He tried to think how to articulate his feelings about Benny's destruction of the gingerbread house tradition, but he knew he would only sound ridiculous, pretentious. It was not the kind of thing Agnes would believe he cared about—he hardly believed it himself.

“Our gingerbread house?” he finished lamely. He was glad Agnes couldn't see his face flushing.

“*How are those two things alike?*” she mimicked in a high-pitched voice that resembled Benny's finger-person voice. “Who says ‘alike’? Who says ‘complete and total mockery’? The same people who run around in the dark trying to have hard butts and a complete set of abs, I suppose? That's what I mean by *peculiar*,” she said and laughed in a false, strained way. “It just bothers me so much,” she added apologetically. “It puts you in danger. It's narcissism.”

“I wear a reflective vest,” Truman said calmly, “and I've managed to keep myself alive for 35 years.”

“Well, who's my favorite Christmas grump?”

“Good night, Mom. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, Hon,” she said brightly, “love you.”

“Love you too.”

“And I do go outside,” she said, “at night. And I see things. I see them just fine.”

He hung up, pretending he hadn't heard this. He didn't want to know what it meant.

Adrift in these recollections, Truman sensed he was getting even further away from his destination. At this rate it would be dark by the time he got to the café—they'd have the lights on and the evening crowd would be loud and social. Forlornly, he tried a few more streets, managing to convince himself that they looked slightly familiar, then gave up and pulled into a Starbucks drive-thru. In no way did he intend to tell Benny of Agnes's death in a Starbucks, but he was too annoyed to keep driving, and he figured some caffeine might improve his sense of direction and keep his thoughts from getting sucked back to last Christmas. But there was something wrong up ahead: A guy kept sticking his head out of his car and talking to the teenage girl at the window, complaining about something. He had removed the lid from his coffee cup and was tilting it in her direction, apparently wanting her to look closely at the liquid. Truman rolled down his window but couldn't hear their conversation over all the running motors. The teenager looked solemnly into the cup.

Truman pursed his lips cynically. Finally, annoyed at the long delay, he took a hard left, crawling over the slippery, ice-crusting divider between the pick-up lane and the parking lot, vaguely satisfied that the unexpected jolt had disconcerted Benny, who was clutching one of Mandy's ears and looking startled.

Truman trudged across the parking lot alone, not wanting to be seen in this downtown Starbucks with an obviously psychologically troubled slob whom he somewhat resembled. He didn't know anyone around here, but the customers of this Starbucks—which Truman fuzzily calculated was somewhere near the legal district, probably not far from Post Office Square—seemed several degrees more attractive, less bedraggled and morose, than the suburbanites who patronized the Starbucks near the tax prep office where he worked. Slimmer and better dressed, these urban customers seemed to emit, even through their late-morning fatigue, an optimistic glow. This Starbucks, too, he noted, had been done up for the holidays with enthusiasm and creativity. The area near the counter smelled subtly of a seasonal coffee flavor involving nutmeg and cinnamon, silver tinsel had been strung artfully around the menu display above the cash register, and cheerful Christmas-themed reggae burred not too obtrusively from the speaker system. These details added to Truman's irritation by making him feel out of place and not up to the level of his environment; also, the inside line was just as long and slow-moving as the outside line, and soon he had to pee.

Reluctantly he gave up his place in line and followed signs to the bathroom. On the way, he noticed—or thought he noticed—that he'd caught the eye of a young woman sitting at a table. The woman was dressed in a softly glowing white blouse and wearing a tie with bright red diagonal stripes. Her dark smooth hair had been cut into a sporty-yet-elegant bob, on top of which was a colorful little crocheted cap, just plain and minimal enough to add a non-interfering touch of playfulness to her businessy attire, Truman thought. Her lips, brushed lightly with a red accent, matched the stripes of the tie and contrasted alluringly with her pale skin, giving her the look of a beautiful, somewhat

malnourished boy. Truman wanted to embrace her, to feed her, or at least to sit next to her and see what she was typing on her laptop.

Had she glanced at him? The sensation had been strong, but perhaps he'd merely wandered into her field of vision at the moment she happened to look up to ponder something. For the moment, she was focusing all of her attention on her laptop screen as if nothing else existed for her. To Truman, her small hands looked almost too delicate and finely wrought for the act of typing or for doing anything practical at all. How could such hands scrabble the crumbs of peanut butter cookies from a Tupperware container? How carve an ungainly pot-roast? They seemed designed solely to mold invisible shapes in the air. Moreover, the woman's brand-new MacBook, with its dully gleaming white polycarbonate casing, was the kind Truman had been daydreaming for months about purchasing (he fantasized about the arrival in his building's lobby of the special white box he knew those laptops came in, carrying it proudly onto the elevator, opening it carefully, removing the precious Styrofoam-protected contents one by one—power cord, plastic-wrapped instructional manual—much as Charlie Bucket opens the decisive Wonka bar...But this computer would be his golden ticket to—to what? More computing power? Even though he found demoralizing, even depressing, the sight of the solid, dark blue rectangle of his old Dell at work or on the kitchen table, it worked just fine, there was no reason to replace it.

Gazing at this woman, however, with her air of intense engagement and sharply defined cheekbones, he knew now that he would buy himself a MacBook, even if it meant using the Amex card he'd recently qualified for and which he'd planned to use only for travel and gift purchases. He would take the MacBook to some nice café, like

the one he'd been planning to take Benny to. With it, he would do something great, something of national, even global, significance. He would lose weight, his own cheekbones, in recession for decades, would reveal themselves for all to see...

Truman was no longer moving toward the bathroom. He'd stopped and was now staring fixedly at the woman with the MacBook. After a moment, she looked up and met his gaze. He imagined the word "beautiful" emerging in purplish calligraphic script from the woman's just-parted lips...No, that was backwards: the word should be coming from *his* just-parted lips because *she*, of course, not *he*, was the beautiful one. He was confused, short of breath, and his hands and legs felt like strings of cold goo. Seconds later, she returned her gaze to the computer screen—a bit self-consciously, Truman thought. Despite his nervousness, he felt a twinge of tentative pride in his looks: he wasn't, he considered, totally out of place in this upscale Starbucks. He *could* seem to belong here: he'd been working out regularly, doing push-ups and sit-ups, and he'd recently bought a new pair of sneakers with the idea of jogging more efficiently. He was, all told, probably one of the fitter and better-looking men in the tax prep office: his jaw line was in relatively trim condition and his shoulders, he thought, looked somewhat more athletic than they had a few weeks ago (before he'd started the push-up routine), especially with the puffy ski jacket over them. It was possible that his irritated facial expression made him look purposeful and driven, a mysterious, powerful figure descended from one of the towers of steel and glass that surrounded the fast-food strip—a lawyer or broker, someone in a command position who also likely had a sense of humor and a down-to-earth attitude about life. On an impulse, he snapped off his gloves, stuffed

them decisively into the shallow pockets of his ski jacket, and glanced darkly around, as if taking the lay of the land.

A second time the woman looked up at him. She was *definitely* looking at him, he thought—there could be no mistake. After all, he had continued to stand there, continued to stare at her. In fact, she was now squinting at him as if trying to see him more clearly. Was she nearsighted and without glasses or contacts, he wondered? He liked this idea—to think that she had a disability, however slight, made him feel a bit closer to having the upper hand in the situation. No, he told himself firmly: if nearsighted, she would probably have been squinting at her laptop screen, and she hadn't been squinting. This was disappointing; nevertheless, he felt slightly reassured by his ability to calmly analyze the situation, to figure out the probabilities, as the shadowy aristocrat from the skyscraper would have done. If she wasn't nearsighted, then that was that—he'd have to deal with the fact that she could see him clearly.

Tension accumulated. Truman felt compelled to dispel it with speech—anything, he thought, just walk over and say hi. At this point there was no way to casually turn his head and continue on to the bathroom. Moreover, to his surprise, the woman had begun to smile at him in a friendly, conversation-inviting way. Truman forced himself to smile back but quickly became aware of the forced, ambivalent character of his smile and immediately stopped smiling, adopting an expression that he felt probably looked dour and suspicious. But she seemed not to notice.

“Do I know you?” she said. “You look awfully familiar?”

Unintentional, Truman thought, that questioning lilt at the end of the second sentence. She was nervous, he concluded. His goo legs congealed slightly and carried

him to the edge of the woman's table, where he stood vaguely touching his nose with his fingertips, as if to reassure himself that it was still there. His tongue felt heavy—a big dry idiot of a tongue. Lest it betray him, he kept it shackled. He was suddenly worried that she'd take the holes in his ski jacket (it was an old one he'd been meaning to throw out for months) and his worn-out khakis, frayed at the cuffs and possibly vomit-flecked (it occurred to him at this moment that he hadn't checked for vomit before leaving Benny's) as unmistakable signs that, rather than descend to the Starbucks after a long morning of exercising his genius for spotting complex, nearly invisible trends in global markets, he'd wandered here randomly because he couldn't remember the name or location of the place he'd wanted to go instead.

But she smiled warmly, as if truly enthusiastic about meeting him.

“You would be Truman, wouldn't you? Your brother showed me a photo.”

Confused, Truman nodded.

“I have to say, I almost didn't recognize you. You look very—*different*—in the photo,” she said. “I don't mean you look *bad*.”

“Oh,” Truman said, dots connecting. Without a doubt, this was Michelle—Michelle of the afghans and of the silver-framed photo booth photo. How had her face transformed so completely? All the elements he remembered from the photo were present, but somehow the whole they composed was...not the same at all, not in the slightest. The previously cold, ungenerous eyes now appeared dreamily attentive, brimming with confident belief that Truman could turn out to be a wonderfully funny, offbeat, and attractively masculine person. Likewise, the nose, with its disconcerting “twist” now seemed jaunty, exotic—the mark of an intelligent and humorous disposition.

“I feel like I know so much about you,” Michelle said. “Your brother always spoke very highly of you. He thinks you’re incredibly smart.”

Truman felt lightheaded and uncertain. He tried desperately to think of something to say to confirm the idea that he was particularly intelligent but nothing came to him except the word *nonchalant*. Thinking quickly, he decided that the appearance of the word in his mind meant that he should *act* nonchalant, not say it out loud.

Michelle’s smile was disappearing.

“I’m sorry—I probably shouldn’t have said hi,” she said. “I’m putting you in an awkward position. I know, obviously, things between me and Ben ended, you know, on probably the wrong note. Or not wrong, exactly. But at least...Anyway, I can understand that you might not want to talk to me. It’s just that I happen to be—I’ve heard so much—”

Those little hesitations in her speech! he thought. They were truly aristocratic, filled with greater-than-average sensitivity and thought.

Sensing an opportunity to show a capacity for decisiveness—a quality he knew Benny conspicuously lacked—Truman raised his right hand to the level of his head as if to ward off the idea that Michelle had anything to regret or to feel bad about. He sensed that the gesture looked weirdly imperious, as if he were warning a mob to stay back, but he considered that lowering it right away might make him look self-conscious.

“Really,” he said, “water under the bridge.” Good! There, in that expression, was nonchalance! It conveyed an impression of casual magnanimity, as if it was nothing to him to forgive her, or as if he were the kind of big picture guy used to seeing all sides of a conflict and the best in every individual under his command.

Michelle let out a sigh of relief and leaned back in her seat—her breasts, Truman quickly noted, shapely and moderate in size, pressed unobtrusively against her shirt. He looked away, hoping she hadn't noted the direction of his gaze, while at the same time—with a dangerous little thrill—hoping that she had.

“I'm glad you feel that way,” she said. “I thought for a second that maybe you—never mind, it's dumb. The personal injury biz can make you a bit paranoid about people's motivations.”

She smiled.

Vaguely, Truman realized that Michelle had made a casual low-level joke about her profession. He knew he ought to smile: people liked you when you smiled at their jokes and then asked follow-up questions. But he was too lost in thought. It was imperative, he felt, to really bring home the idea that he had a large and forgiving soul—he didn't even mind that she was suspicious of him and was perfectly capable of understanding her paranoia. But how to put that into words? Better to wait for the right opportunity. He gave up and grinned as if considering the whole big crazy problem of Benny from a removed and humorous angle.

“It was good for him, if you ask me,” he said. “I don't mean he's better off without you. Of course that's not what I mean. I mean it was a wake-up call for him, your leaving was. Or it should have been a wake-up call.”

The hand was still in the air, frozen in the warding off gesture. Slowly he lowered it. Michelle was nodding affirmatively but had begun to look troubled.

“Is he—” she paused as if searching for the right word, “still putting on weight? I know he must be. I tried to get him to stop, but he”—another searching pause—“just

doesn't think he deserves anything in life. He—well, never mind. You know him as well as I do, I'm sure.”

Truman was not sure how to respond. He knew it was of great importance to appear knowledgeable about Benny, which, in the moment, seemed to mean appearing to “know” the same things Michelle “knew” about Benny. But the thought that Benny went around feeling worthless had never before occurred to him. Benny feel worthless? Their mother had done nothing but be a prop to his ego. If that hadn't been enough to make Benny feel loved, the problem was certainly his own. He, Truman, was the one who had every reason to feel worthless and would no doubt go around, like Benny, feeling worthless, except that he chose to live in a stable, purposeful way! It all sounded to him like some kooky psychological theory, a lame story Benny had invented to justify his eating and gaining weight and then convinced Michelle of in an attempt to get her to stick around and nurse him. That was how Benny operated. But all of that didn't matter—it wasn't the important thing now. He would take his new white MacBook to all the good cafes in the area, he would get a new job—maybe at a tech start-up out west that needed someone who knew...the whole tax scene...he'd learn French and Japanese...Maybe, he thought, he could give the Sentra to Agnes so she'd have a back-up vehicle, there was something screwy and soft about the brakes as if the master cylinder...and then he remembered that Agnes was dead. At that moment, for the first time and out of nowhere he thought about what *crushed* meant, the roof of the car suddenly coming toward the top of his mother's skull, maybe she *saw*, and maybe, if only for less than a second—but what would a second mean under those circumstances?—maybe she knew, put her head down...

He pushed these thoughts aside. In his mind he saw himself dragging his mother's corpse to the edge of some dark cliff edge. He hurled it into a blackness that could not have been anything but endless. She quickly disappeared.

He realized that his eyes were squeezed shut.

He opened them. Michelle was almost no longer smiling.

"Look," he said. "Stay here a minute. I want to talk to you about Benny. I have—a few things to say on that subject too."

He found himself using his hand to make an abruptly commanding gesture that meant *Sit right there, if you would.*

"Sure," Michelle said, "no problem."

He entered the bathroom thrilled at the idea that he had, however accidentally, come off as commanding and self-possessed. Not only had he—probably—avoided making an ass of himself, but he had told Michelle to do something—to sit in her chair and await his return—and she had readily agreed to do it. Of course, he realized vaguely, she had no doubt intended to continue to sit there anyway—she was obviously doing some work on her computer—yet he couldn't help wondering whether perhaps she had slightly enjoyed his commandingness. He warned himself to not, however, take the commandingness thing too far...If only she'd been smiling in that photo instead of making strained goofy expressions, trying to be cute! She didn't need to be cute, she was beautiful, a true fox! If she'd been smiling in a natural way, Truman told himself, he would have understood a little better the nature of Benny's agony, he would have had a little more sympathy for the poor schlump. How had Benny summoned the courage to

pursue her to begin with? What version of Benny had done that? It seemed impossible to imagine. Bizarrely he felt jealous—jealous of Benny!

Jealous, yes, okay, he would admit it, but of far more significance right now was his elation. Things were going to change for him, were going to turn around, were going to get big, for once, rather than medium or small. He would succeed where his brother had failed. He stood at the toilet but was too excited to pee. A new Truman, one that had always been within him, was about to emerge, to split him apart and reform him. It would take only a slight shift in thought, some indefinable pressure exerted somewhere in the mind's center—a new way of thinking about things. No longer would he let events and people lead him around, from now on he would be intentional.

After another minute or so it became obvious he would not be able to pee. From experience he knew it just wouldn't happen, at least not in the next quarter of an hour, and he didn't have that long—he didn't want Michelle to think he had—bathroom problems or was hiding in the stall, too nervous to reemerge.

He gave up on peeing and went over to the sink to wash his hands. Somewhat reluctantly, he looked into the mirror above the sink and saw that he was wearing Agnes's glow-in-the-dark hat. Could it be real? He reached up and touched it, pressed with the tip of his index finger one of the springy vertical ridges that circled it. Then he remembered. Perchance this morning he'd been unable to find his regular hat—it turned out later he'd left it in the car—and he'd found this one instead, on the shelf in the storage closet. He'd put it on, planning to switch hats later when he found his usual one, but then he'd forgotten.

The hat was soft and comfortable, all told, the material some newly invented stuff both lightweight and good at trapping heat. It kept his head warm, but the tops of his ears were itchy, as was the center of his forehead—there was something abrasive about the fibers or perhaps his skin was mildly allergic to them. The feeling, he realized, had been low-grade bugging him all morning. But the hat, unquestionably, looked ridiculous. Its puffy vertical ridges, which hid wires and lighting elements, made it look like the symbol of some futuristic spiritual sect. What on earth had Michelle thought of it? Speculation on this subject pained him.

Grabbing the hat off his head, he balled it up and shoved it into his ski jacket pocket, along with his gloves. With a little faucet water he smoothed his hair and wished he could somehow erase Benny's existence, start afresh with Michelle as if they were complete strangers. But that was nonsense: Benny was the basis of their interaction, was he not? Michelle had noticed him only because she'd recognized him—hadn't she? And he had to follow up with something important, some information or observation about Benny that would justify the commanding tone of voice with which he'd instructed her to await this future pronouncement—whatever it was. What he needed was a line about Benny, a line to cast across the void separating him from Michelle, a line he could stride across. Wait—he had it! Rather than make an important, fascinating statement about Benny—which might, after all, fall flat or make him sound pompous, he would ask Michelle for *her* thoughts and insights. She would like that because it was the kind of thing people liked—to be asked what *they* thought. If he worked it right, he would seem to be inviting Michelle, as a kind of special privilege, into his confidence, one caretaker of Benny to another, so that she could provide information that would help him solve—in

his decisive, masculine, large-souled way—the difficult set of problems Benny represented.

On striding confidently back to Michelle’s table, he was slightly disappointed to find that she had gone back to whatever she’d been doing on the MacBook. He’d vaguely expected to find her frozen in anticipation of his return, all prior business forgotten. A moment later, however, his courage was renewed: when she saw him, she stopped typing and smiled with polite attentiveness, and in that polite smile Truman thought he detected (could it be?) a dark little twinkle of potential. It had been a long time since, as he thought of it, he had “been with a woman”—years, a fact he avoided thinking about as much as possible. Attractive, well-dressed women filled him with an obscure resentment that emerged in little hostilities he couldn’t explain or justify. The complexities of this dynamic exhausted and depressed him, and so he contented himself as much as possible with pornography and with the occasional tender, platonic flirtation at work, always the very existence of which he could deny if need be.

But not today. Today he would intend, manfully. Taking a breath, he attempted to respond to Michelle’s smile with his own sultry-yet-casual grin. But his face contorted into a weird unwholesome expression and, to escape the awkwardness of the moment, he blurted out, “Look, I was thinking you might want to say hello to him. To Benny. I mean maybe you’d want to just say hi.”

He raised his hand in a “hi” gesture, by which he meant to give the idea of saying hi to Benny a touch of comic appeal. He hoped that this might defuse whatever potential threat the proposition might hold for her.

Michelle frowned and looked anxious. She scrunched up her nose—and there it was, the twist that he remembered from the photograph! It wasn't unattractive, though, just an endearing symptom of nervousness.

“What do you mean? Is he here? Where is he? I don't know that that's a good idea.”

Her eyes drifted back to her computer screen and hovered there, as if she no longer felt comfortable looking at Truman. Truman detected suspicion. Perhaps she was beginning to think she had not run into her ex-boyfriend's brother in this Starbucks, really only a quick subway trip from MacLawson, purely by accident. Their meeting was such an unlikely coincidence that it would be perfectly reasonable, he realized, for her to assume that Truman had been following her—that he'd been stalking her at the behest of Benny. The fact that Benny was outside in the car, he realized, would only confirm—

“Listen,” Truman said, raising his hand in the same authoritative gesture that had worked earlier, “I've no doubt he'd love to see you. I'm pretty sure he's moved on, if that's what you're worried about.”

She looked up at him again, though now with a definite hint of distrust, which seemed to emanate from her stiffly quivering nostrils.

She spoke. “I'm sorry,” she said. “This is just so weird. Does he want to come in and get something to eat? I know he likes those chocolate muffins.”

“The fact is,” Truman said hesitantly, as if concerned about preserving Benny's dignity, “he can't walk very well right now.”

“Can't walk?”

Good, he thought, let it out a clue at a time. This would suggest that the truth was a matter of some delicacy, unseemly to reveal full on. In this way would Michelle be hooked. Besides, it was no lie that Benny had trouble walking. He nipped along bunnyishly, up on his toes, and this made his feet swell.

“It’s nothing,” said Truman. “Temporary condition.”

Michelle raised her eyebrows in surprise. Barely eyebrows! Truman thought. Just curved shadows sharply defying softness and excess! He found this very exciting.

He led Michelle to the door. Passing the cash register area, he felt superior to the people waiting in the ordering and pick-up lines. *He* wasn’t waiting to give or to receive! He was *taking*, creating his destiny, authoritatively leading Michelle into the parking lot, directing her movements. For the moment she would go exactly where—but, God, though, he realized, was she tall. From the photo he’d guessed she was a troll. With some dismay, he noted that she was maybe half an inch taller than himself, even though (he glanced down) she was wearing flat-heeled shoes. His heart sank. What chance had he? She would certainly only date men taller than herself. But no, that couldn’t be true: He was taller than Benny by the same order *at least*—a half inch, maybe three quarters. He must, therefore, be over her threshold, whatever it was. Or perhaps height was not important to her. No, ridiculous: What were the chances that height was unimportant to a tall woman? Maybe she’d dumped Benny because he was, in the final analysis, beneath what she, in the first flushes of romance, had thinly convinced herself she could tolerate? Impossible to say. Benny had always been vague about the details of the dumping.

They advanced across the parking lot, Truman indicating the way with an authoritative finger, although his feeling of command had been tempered by discovery of the height problem. And he was anxious for another reason: the finger was pointing to his shitty, aqua-green Sentra. He'd forgotten all about the car. He'd hated it never more than at this moment. Long had he disdained washing it, taking a perverse pleasure in its outward disintegration, waiting for it to break down expensively enough that he could justify taking out a loan for a new one, but the thing hummed along from day to day without a hitch, oblivious to his loathing. In the mornings, vaguely hoping someone would steal it, he left it in a squalid, trash-strewn municipal lot several blocks from the tax prep office—a place where clients and coworkers were unlikely to see him get into or out of it. Here in the legal district, surrounded by Lexuses and BMWs that gleamed darkly like smooth-skinned sea creatures, the Sentra looked sadder and schlumpier than ever, especially with Benny's body weight slightly depressing the passenger side. Of course, it wouldn't help Truman's case to explain that the car, for all its faults, didn't just *sag* like that under normal circumstances, with no suicidal, morbidly obese siblings in it.

But there was no avoiding the car. Embracing fate, Truman moved toward it with long, authoritative strides. From behind the passenger window, he saw, Benny watched him, expectant but with furrowed brow. Where—Truman could practically see Benny wondering—were the paper cups of coffee in their multicup tray? Where were the crisp white, logo'd bag of bagels, napkins, and perhaps jelly—or, if Truman was in a generous mood, honey spread? And why on earth was Truman pointing at him in that weird, stiff way?

He sped up, hoping to reach the car before Benny spotted Michelle. Ah, to witness up close the moment of recognition—the half second before Benny’s consciousness dove beneath its tepid muck of rationalization, justification, detachment. Benny would offer him little, Truman knew. He would have to content himself with a spasm of cheek muscle, a quick raising of the eyebrows, a slightly deeper furrowing of the forehead. But such would be enough to tell him the poison was in the vein.

Arriving at the car, he gestured excitedly for Benny to roll down the window. He leaned down and spoke through it in a quick, earnest whisper.

“I met someone in the Starbucks,” he said.

“I thought maybe you were in the bathroom.”

“Met someone,” Truman said, “whom you know. I told her how great you’re doing these days. Made you walk on air, as I usually do. Naturally she insisted on saying hi.”

“What? Not following you, T.”

Truman sensed Michelle come up behind him.

“Get ready, big guy,” he whispered, “I’m throwing her right in your lap.”

Truman stepped aside, watching as Benny’s eyes widened and his jaw worked in a fish-like side-to-side motion. Truman was very satisfied. This was more than he’d expected.

Truman continued traveling backwards, moving through a row of cars, onto a snow-covered divider separating the Starbucks parking lot from the parking lot of the neighboring Dunkin Donuts. Michelle was staring through the passenger window, and Truman saw that a brown dribble of coffee had sloshed out of her cup and was now

sliding, unnoticed, over her slender pale knuckles. Longingly, Truman followed the dribble with his gaze as it circled the slim base of her thumb.

Through the windshield Benny stared at him beseechingly. Checking to make sure Michelle wasn't looking, Truman gave him a big grin and two thumbs up. He hoped that, seeing Benny, Michelle would get an inkling of what he, Truman, had been dealing with: he hoped she would get some idea what a good, conscientious protector of a brother he was, diligently caring for Benny, getting him out of the apartment, inducing him to socialize if only in a parking lot, refusing to let him slip fully into this morbid...slump or whatever it was. He hoped it would dawn on her that it took someone with a strong moral compass to—

Michelle seemed to recover from her surprise. Her face composed itself into an expression of fatigued resignation, as if a depressing fact she had long suspected to be true had been finally confirmed. She said something to Benny in a quiet, serious tone. Truman strained to make out the words, took a step forward to hear better, the grass of the divider crunching loudly, offensively, under his sneaker, a fart of ice crystals. Yet there was nothing more to hear—Benny and Michelle, he saw, were engaged in a wordless exchange of pained, somber looks.

As Truman watched this silent interaction, his feeling of glee began to fade, sounds of automotive and pedestrian traffic grated on his nerves, and his earlobes began to sting numbly from the cold. He removed the hat from his ski jacket pocket and put it on, pulling it down to cover his ears.

When he looked over again, he saw that Michelle was now holding—could it be?—yes: Mandy. Not merely was she holding Mandy, she was cradling Mandy in the

crook of her arms as if Mandy were some valuable object, like—he tried to think of valuable objects Mandy was like—a baby! A baby Benny had given her! Michelle was so absorbed in this “baby,” it seemed, that Truman had ceased to exist for her. It was as if he weren’t right there, freezing his ass off in the parking lot not ten feet away, having done all the hard work—risked his dignity—to get her together with Benny for this tender little moment of last goodbyes. Michelle had forgotten all about him even though, not ten minutes before, it was with *him*, not with Benny, she’d been exchanging dark looks of twinkling potential. Where were those dark twinkles now? Replaced by a soft gleam of pity for Benny!

A pained sensation took hold of Truman’s throat. He watched as Michelle, carefully stroking the cradled dog, gazed down sorrowfully at Benny, while Benny, not to be outdone, gazed up at her with a look of even deeper, more tender sorrow.

Truman made a noise of disgust. Michelle had been taken in completely. Benny had found yet another magical bone in his bag of tricks. Truman watched as Michelle leaned into the car window and gave Benny a little kiss—just a smooch—somewhere on his face (Truman couldn’t see where—it *might* have been the lips) and then turned away. Cradling Mandy, she began to drift back to the Starbucks as if wrapped in some daze of maternal affection.

She was almost at the Starbucks entrance when Truman caught up to her. She looked slightly down at him with a vague expression, as if she couldn’t quite place him, then her nose twitched. Suspicion, he thought, even greater now, emanated from it. He instructed himself to seem not upset—or, better yet, to offer his own look of gentle sorrow. After all, as Benny’s large-souled protector, the parting of Michelle and Benny

was somewhat bitter and tragic for him as well. Maybe he could improve on Benny's sorrowful gleam by summoning a few handsome lines of concern at the corners of his eyes, lines of wisdom and kindness.

He formed some facial expression in keeping with these ideas, but Michelle only seemed puzzled. At that moment he glanced again at the cradled dog and realized it was now dressed in the garish little vest of pink and red Benny had made: There, on Mandy's back, was the heart with the message "M&B together in a spiritual way."

A strained sound emerged from Truman's throat.

"I'll take the dog," he barked.

"What?" Michelle said. She appeared, somehow, to have no idea what he meant.

"I'll take the dog," Truman repeated, forcing himself to speak more calmly.

"You'll take the dog?" She looked down at the dog in her arms. Truman noticed with irritation that its face was pointed up at hers, grinning with happy satisfaction.

"You're talking about this dog?"

"Yes, yes," Truman said snappishly, "of course that dog. What other dog could I be talking about?"

He flapped his arms in frustration.

"That one over there, I suppose?" He pointed to a pile of snow at the corner of the parking lot. "Or perhaps that one over there?" He turned halfway around and pointed at random toward the Dunkin Donuts. "Benny takes the thing with him everywhere," he said. "He can't be without it."

“Well,” she said, looking at him warily. “Benny gave it to me as a gift—a sort of going-away present, I guess.” She said this with a faint hint of sadness that ruined Truman’s effort to calm himself down. “I had no idea my taking it would upset you.”

“It’s not that I’m upset,” Truman explained in a patient tone, “it’s just that it’s not Benny’s dog.”

“It’s not—?”

“It’s *my* dog,” he said. “It’s my goddamn dog.”

Michelle’s confusion increased, and he was gratified to see a look of alarm in her eyes. At last he’d gained the upper hand.

“I guess if it’s your dog, you can have it. I had no idea it was yours.”

She held out the dog and he took it from her, telling himself to move his hand slowly and not snatch.

“Well,” he said, “it was nice to meet you.”

“Okay,” she said.

He was about to nod curtly and turn back in the direction of the Sentra, but instead he reached out and put his hand on her shoulder.

“Please,” he said, blinking rapidly. “I don’t know why—I mean I can’t believe I just—”

She jerked her shoulder away from his hand and somehow he found himself on his knees in front of her. He looked up. Her face was far away, framed by the grayish-white sky.

In frustration Truman smacked himself on the forehead with the palm of his hand. “Stupid,” he said, his upper body sinking closer to the ground, tempted by the cold

hardness of it. If he were to bang his forehead against it over and over, would Michelle then have some idea of the confused state he was in? But he did not. “Stupid,” he said again, “dumb shit.”

“Woof you!” said Mandy.

He’d pressed the ear button—he must have but without meaning to. Mandy, on his thighs, was being squashed by his coat as he bent forward. He stared at the knees of Michelle’s jeans. He could see the outline of her small kneecap.

“What did you say?” Michelle said.

For a wild moment, filled with baseless hope, he thought maybe she was about to put a hand on his head, hold it there and comfort him. He waited for this to happen, his eyes fixed on her shoes, which were gray and slightly fuzzy, maybe terrycloth, with ugly squarish toes. They were a mistake, he thought—or, at any rate, they weren’t the shoes he’d have picked out for her. Then the shoes were gone and he saw that Michelle was walking rapidly toward the glass doors of the Starbucks, which were decorated with snowflakes and cookie men. He watched the back of her, dimly uncomprehending, until he heard behind him the sound of a slowing car motor, brakes being gently applied, and he sprang up, making a farcical show of dusting himself off, his face flushed. Then he walked slowly back toward the Sentra, holding Mandy loosely by the neck.

Benny’s window was still open and Benny’s face, he saw, was in it. Moreover, he thought he could see, in the dimming air, a little smirk of triumph on Benny’s lips.

He hurried toward the car, began to run. The smirk, he saw, had vanished, replaced by a look of concern. Five feet off, he came to a stop, drew back his arm, and pitched the dog at Benny’s face. Big, round, and pale, the face was an easy target, a

cream puff. Mandy hit dead center, seeming to hang for a moment, a tan, grinning extension of Benny's face. Then it fell to the ground outside the car, rolling onto its side.

"Hey," said Benny.

Truman glanced furtively over his shoulder to check for possible observers and was surprised to see that Michelle, whom he'd imagined to be in the Starbucks, was dashing toward them across the parking lot, her mouth a frightening little O of surprise and vengeance.

Wanting not to have seen Michelle—wanting, if only for the next few seconds—to be ignorant of the knowledge that she was about to stand before him to issue, from that fearful O of vengeance the absurd accusation that he had hurled a stuffed animal at his brother, he turned back toward Benny. But further trouble awaited him there. He saw that tears had formed beneath his brother's startled eyes and that his hand was moving protectively toward his nose. Then Truman saw that a dark liquid—Blood? It couldn't be blood?—was seeping out of Benny's nose and onto his lips.

Immediately, Truman turned and grinned at Michelle, gesturing over his shoulder with his thumb. Benny the big ham, the drama queen, always with a new way to make Truman look worse than he was! Then he remembered: Mandy's head and legs moved. Mandy must, therefore, have a motor—some hard plastic within it, probably a bit of metal too. It was just possible, he had to admit...But, god, what were the chances that—

He turned once again to Michelle, thumb lowered, jeering expression transformed into a look of serious concern. She was right in front of him now and he flinched, sure she was about to punch him. Instead, she produced a wad of tissue paper from one of her pockets and, kneeling before the passenger door, held it to Benny's nose.

After a moment she looked back at Truman, who stood by uncertainly, hoping she would ask him to help.

“Wow,” she said, “you’re even worse than he said you were. More of—“ she hesitated, nose twitching, steeling herself to use a word she clearly didn’t like, “more of an *asshole* than he made you out to be.”

“It’s really bleeding a lot,” said Benny. “I feel like it won’t ever stop bleeding, though I know it will.”

“Benny,” she said, “you’ll be fine.”

“I have more tissues in my pocket,” Benny said. “We can use those if yours don’t hold it all.”

Truman’s body felt insubstantial. He felt as if he could float. To steady himself, he leaned against the car. Michelle whispered something to Benny, but Truman didn’t try to listen.

You’re even worse than he said you were. What did it mean? What had Benny said about him? Had he told her about the head banging? But he’d been only a kid! He couldn’t be held responsible! It wasn’t fair that Benny had told her about it—he didn’t want her to know. It was enough—more than enough—that he felt privately guilty about it.

Suddenly, he brought his fist down on the roof of the car. There was a loud metallic thunk.

Michelle, startled, turned toward him, still holding the tissue wad to Benny’s nose.

“I could call the police,” she said. “I’m thinking about it. That was assault, what you did with that dog. I know a guy who could get you locked up for that, at least probably.”

By the way she said “a guy” with an admiring little hitch, Truman was sure she had some sort of—relationship—with the “guy.” It was the aristocrat, he knew—the aristocrat from the tower. Truman hated and feared him. He felt as if he were being crushed from all sides.

“You do that,” he said, “You call your friend. I belong in jail. In the meantime, though, like the criminal I am, I’m going to destroy the evidence.”

Mandy was lying on the parking lot near his foot. With the toe of his sneaker, he pressed on Mandy’s side—he pressed hard, pressed viciously. In the end, he had both feet on the dog, all of his weight. From all around him, it seemed, came noises of protest. He ignored them. He was listening very hard for something else. Then he heard it: a small cracking noise from within Mandy, something hard giving way. He kicked the dog, and it bounced off the door of the Jeep Cherokee in the neighboring space.

“Oh, God,” Benny said.

To Truman, Mandy looked more or less the same—just flatter and wider, black parking lot grime from the bottom of his sneakers staining the pink and red vest—but he guessed it wouldn’t talk or move anymore.

“Benny,” Michelle said, “do you want to press charges? I think maybe you should really consider it, but you’ll have to do that on your own, Benny. I can’t be around to help you process your feelings about your family, anymore—or deal with—” she paused—“things like this.”

Benny nodded at her. “No,” he said after a moment. “No charges. But he has to get me a chocolate muffin, and it has to have chocolate frosting on it. You can ask them for frosting. I’ve done it before.”

“Are you serious about calling this guy?” Truman said, peering at Michelle.

Michelle ignored him. “You mean you can ask them for frosting that’s not already on the product?” she said to Benny, shaking her head. “I’m pretty sure you can’t do that.”

“I’ve seen someone do it,” Benny said. “I was in line one time and this lady did it, except it was vanilla frosting, but if they have vanilla, they probably have chocolate.”

Michelle turned to Truman, “Get him a chocolate muffin. It’s the least you can do.”

“And napkins,” Benny said excitedly, brandishing the blood-soaked wad of tissues. “I’ve got more blood on my upper lip here,” he said, pointing to his lip. These tissues can’t absorb it all.”

“Okay, okay,” Truman said, “I’ll get him a muffin.” On the one hand, he didn’t want to leave them alone to talk about him—what if Michelle convinced Benny to call the police? On the other, if he got Benny muffins, maybe that would be enough to convince Michelle that he wasn’t nuts—that he’d just had a fit of sorts, but was now calm again, back to normal.

“I’m probably going to have to tell Mom, though,” Benny said, as Truman began to walk away.

“You do that,” he said without looking back.

* * *

Truman was waiting in line to order when Michelle came in. He raised a hand, somewhat less authoritatively than before, but Michelle either didn't see the hand or was no longer responsive to its magical power. She went past him, back to the table where he'd first sensed her looking at him. She unbuttoned her coat, proceeded to remove the MacBook from her bag, and Truman realized she was going back to whatever she'd been working on. As if nothing had happened. As if he weren't standing in line and still, despite it all, longing for her attention. Somehow, he thought, her compressed lips and glowering expression made her even more desirable. Just one glance, even an unfriendly one, would have given him hope, would have greatly improved his mood.

Benny refused to acknowledge Truman as he got in on the driver's side, clutching a cup of caramel-flavored coffee for himself and a warm paper bag that gave off an odor of baked goods. Benny was kneading Mandy's head, his gaze fixed on the metal lock of the glove compartment.

"Bagels," Truman said, "and honey."

No response.

"They were out of chocolate muffins," he said.

They hadn't been out of chocolate muffins. Available, in fact, had been six varieties of chocolate muffin. On the verge of ordering one—cream-filled, with chips and frosting—he'd changed his mind and ordered the bagels instead. First, however, he'd checked behind him to make sure Michelle wasn't there watching him, waiting to see what he'd do. When he saw that she wasn't, he was disappointed. A tight little lump

of emptiness filled his throat. But he was on his own to choose between muffins and bagels.

“Suit yourself,” Truman said. He pulled the lid off his coffee and sipped the hot fluid. Then he searched the bag for the packet of cream cheese.

“Okay if you don’t want to talk about it,” he said, gnawing at a bagel. “She’s really a fox, though, I’ll give you that.”

Benny looked at him accusingly.

“You thought that was all pretty funny,” he said.

“Keep talking and I might feel bad.”

“At least she gave me her new cell phone number. She wouldn’t give it to me before. So, thanks, T.”

“She—what?”

“In case I change my mind about pressing charges. I’m a disabled person,” Benny went on, “I’m sick. I have a disease. And I am not supposed to eat honey or any other type of sugar,” he said, tearing the honey packet with his teeth and squeezing it around his bagel. “It’s not good. Not good at all.”

“And what disease do you have?” Truman said, “What if you had, say, brain cancer? What would you think then of the life you’re leading now? These would be the good old days, wouldn’t they, the days when you didn’t have brain cancer?”

This debate was an old one. They’d run through it dozens of times. Absorbed in the act of dressing the bagel, Benny didn’t answer. He seemed to have stopped listening. With dainty voluptuousness he smoothed and pressed the honey onto the bagel, using the plastic knife to ensure that not a speck was lost.

“Mmmhmm,” he said, biting in. “Oh, God.”

After a moment, tears began to leak out of his eyes—tears of pleasure, Truman thought. The small car brought him too near to Benny’s sickly bulk, too near Benny’s slovenly, shapeless, needy, greedy inner self. Only the crumb-speckled rectangle of the gearshift platform separated them. Benny’s clothes, warm from the car heat, radiated a sour odor that crept over to Truman’s side, insinuating itself into Truman’s experience of modestly chewing his own bagel. But beneath the sweat and unwashed laundry stink, Benny’s odor was disturbingly familiar: it was a childhood odor, an odor of their mother’s house, of shared baths, of wrestling on the living room floor covered in greenish flickering TV light, of rubbing his six-year-old face into Benny’s firm but ticklish two-year-old belly. It had been so easy back then to make Benny laugh. All he had to do was make a funny noise or pull a face and Benny would crack up—Truman could get Benny to fall over in a giggling fit even if two seconds before he’d been balling his eyes out. No one else could change Benny’s mood so completely and drastically—just Truman. He’d been proud of it, this special power to make his brother suddenly delighted. There was a phrase, Truman remembered, from back in those days—the really good, fun days, as he remembered them—just a silly phrase but it really got Benny in the funny bone. The phrase was—he tried to remember—

You’re even worse than he said you were.

Truman had a need for cold air. He opened the door, stuck his head out, and inhaled deeply, wanting the cold all through him. He thought of running away right then, leaving Benny sitting in the parking lot. Benny would be better off, maybe. But he couldn’t do it, just couldn’t get himself to go.

There was a leak somewhere in the brake lines, a pretty decent one too, he'd seen reddish fluid in the snow when Agnes pulled out of the driveway... Yes, he had seen that.

He pulled himself back in and closed the door.

They sat in the car finishing their bagels and staring at people entering and exiting the Starbucks and, more distantly, the Dunkin Donuts.

Soon it was dark.

“T,” Benny said, “why’s your head all lit up? Is that that dumb hat? I didn’t recognize it. Figured no way you’d ever wear it.”

Truman ignored the questions—which were no doubt intended to annoy him—but he reached up and touched the hat and saw the glow of it on the base of his palm.

Bye, he thought.

In less than an hour the glow had faded, and it was just a normal-looking hat again.

Love Week

1.

Flopping onto the couch, stretching out, Stroud removed his socks. His hope was that Connie would sit on the couch's other end and scratch his feet, always, despite his aerated sneakers, itchy and too warm after the walk home from Mannheim's office in the University of Florida neuroscience building. Stroud wanted especially the spaces between his toes scratched. But he knew Connie wouldn't do it—she did not like to put her fingers between his toes, and he could tell there was little chance of getting even the usual careless half-baked minute-on-each-foot scratch he sometimes got if he prodded and whined. Stroud, as always after a day with Mannheim and Ophelia—who was supervising him as he gradually took over the management of Mannheim's National Science Foundation grants so Ophelia could focus on the newly expanded DARPA program—had a lot to think about, a lot of new information to digest. He thought of Ophelia smiling at him as he explained an idea he'd thought of for streamlining a database related to an upcoming undergraduate poster session...But he saw that he would not be able to reflect or daydream: it was obvious that Connie was not in a good mood. Barefoot, she paced the room in a straight line, back and forth. She was wearing black jeans and a white shirt with frills at the throat. The frills had a heavy, clustered, restrictive look—they clutched greedily at the pale indented throat. Stroud might have been intrigued by this clutching, but stretched across the bare skin between the frills was a necklace decorated with bright-painted seashells—a thing Morris had made in a

Saturday enrichment program to which Connie had lugged him for several weeks some months ago. She'd worn it ever since, in part because, if she removed it, Morris got upset—but, in part, Stroud thought, out of a sense of devotion that he found both admirable and nauseating. The necklace was clownishly constructed. Too slack, it hung far down her chest, framing the single brown mole that interrupted the flat paleness of Connie's skin, a bit off to one side. He remembered now, as he lay on the leather couch, in the early days with Connie, in the tiny, ancient, east Gainesville apartment, with its rent-inflating “charm”—its banister and moldings, its shelves built into the walls of the hallway and bathroom—how endearing, how even enthralling, he'd found this left-of-center mole. Stroud had a very similar one, same size and shape but dead center of the chest, a family inheritance (his mother and her sister had an identical mole) and the lateralness of Connie's had seemed exotic. Now, its brownness set in relief against the bright colors of the necklace, the mole's positioning struck him as mistaken, an imbalance in nature. Tired was he also of the pattern of the shells' shapes and colors: the tiny one with a sharp jutting edge, the trumpet's bell, the crouched animal, the tapering face—a menagerie of meaningless forms. Pink, pink, green, blue, pink again, green, with a final dark red shell, almost perfectly globular but with a tightly wound spiral on one side, placed randomly at one end, dangling just above the mole. Stroud imagined himself hunched over in some dim place, hidden from Connie and Morris, secretly unstringing and rearranging these shells: true, they would be the same shells as always but at least they'd be in a different order. But it didn't matter, he knew: he'd soon tire of the new order and return to the same problem, which wasn't a problem of external patterns, Stroud understood, but a problem of mind, or perhaps of emotion or will—he wasn't sure

which. But certainly it wasn't a problem of colored seashells. Plus, even if Stroud were to do this secret rearranging, Morris would almost certainly notice, and be appalled by, his father's derangement of his creation.

"Do you want to tell me what's wrong?" he asked.

"Nice tone," Connie said. "Transparently annoyed that you have to try to sound patient. Really makes me want to tell you all about my problems."

"You don't have to tell me," Stroud said.

She continued to pace, Morris's necklace clinging as if stuck, unshifting, unbouncing, to her chest, despite the fact that this was no casual pacing but strong and aggressive stuff—more aggressive since he'd mistakenly opened his yawp, he noted—propelled by a precarious anxiety, with quick sharp turns at either end.. Did Ophelia wear necklaces? He tried to remember. Closing his eyes, he saw the base of Ophelia's throat, darker than Connie's, softer, less indented. Should he place a necklace around this throat? Would a necklace suit Ophelia? He saw his hands do it, their backs lightly haired, dry and pinkish, nervous but steady in their offering. Perhaps a thin gold one, its color barely an inflection against Ophelia's tan, pulsing, lightly sweating skin. Traveling up from Ophelia's throat, Stroud's mental gaze encounters Ophelia's mouth. In the corner, between the lips, just peeking out, a little dot of ketchup or hot sauce, something of that nature. As he watches, the tongue shooting out, pointed, sly, snatches away the dot, a movement buglike or reptilian but not less attractive for that reason.

He sat up, suddenly afraid Connie could read his thoughts. He looked over at her, but she seemed absorbed in her pacing. He relaxed and lay down again, again stretching out. Why was he thinking about Ophelia this way? A hundred times he'd seen her eat

lunch at her desk, and he couldn't remember ever seeing her eat anything red, besides maybe a slice of pepper or a cherry tomato, and of course it would be totally inappropriate, not to mention weird, for him to buy her jewelry.

Abruptly, Connie ran out of steam. Veering off toward the couch, she collapsed onto the empty spot by Stroud's feet (ah, he thought, she is at least near the feet) and closed her eyes. What the hell was wrong with her? he wondered. Was it serious? He stretched out his legs, pushing his bare feet inches closer to Connie's thigh on the off chance that she might reflexively, out of habit, begin to scratch one of them.

But she did not scratch. Instead, she made a gagging sound, put one hand over her mouth, and leaned forward, pressing the other to the left side of her chest, slipping her fingers under the seashell necklace and covering the mole.

"I'm going to fail the Shakespeare course," she said, sitting up again and glaring desperately at Stroud. "It's inevitable."

Relieved she'd decided not to pursue the tone issue, Stroud said, "No, you're not. Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm three weeks late with my research paper, and the final is almost due."

"No one cares. Just do it and hand it in."

"That's the thing," she said. "I just can't do it. I should be doing it right now while Morris is distracted, but here I am whining to you. I can't concentrate on it. Just thinking about it makes me shudder"—she paused, as if about to shudder, then went on—"I can't think of anything that's not a total cliché. No matter what I say, I'll just be repeating someone else's ideas."

“You’re being too hard on yourself,” Stroud said. He thought he had it this time—the tone sounded spot on: genuinely sympathetic and encouraging.

She put a hand over her mouth again and again leaned forward.

“Get me some water,” she said, “please.”

Reluctantly, Stroud retracted his feet and rose from the couch.

“God, it’s so humiliating,” she said, as he went away, and pounded her fist on her knee.

In the kitchen, Stroud opened the freezer. There was at least, he thought, the possibility of quid pro quo: he’d fetch the water and listen to her freak out about the paper for a bit and then maybe, when she’d calmed down, she’d be grateful enough to give him a scratch. He could probably convince her to do it: After all, scratching his feet would mean more avoiding the Shakespeare paper.

Stroud wrestled with the plastic ice cube tray—which had only a few cubes left, the ones that he left for Connie, or that Connie left for him, because they were the hardest to get out—and, at the sink, he poured a glass of water. But, turning back to the living room, ice water in hand, he saw that the couch was uninhabited—a slab of leather darkness in a room with pale, empty walls, brightly lit by the evening Florida sun.

Then he heard Connie clearing her throat in the bathroom across the hall. Whenever Connie was upset, she developed indigestion—plumes of choking acidic fluid rose into her throat. The indigestion led to headaches, and these, somehow, to other less definite sicknesses: mysterious aches and longings, fevers, klutziness—Connie would bang into things and bruise herself, yelp with pain, limp ridiculously around. Once caught in some distressful emotion, Stroud knew, Connie was sucked helplessly into a

vortex of self-torture. To avoid this, she moved adroitly through life, craftily avoiding mistakes.

But, Stroud considered, it appeared something had at last caught up with her—Shakespeare criticism. Absurd. He almost laughed. Connie was an inch taller than Stroud and impressive-looking, with long legs, deep orbital bones, and a large authoritative nose. Despite her frequent minor illnesses, she radiated a solid *corpore sano* energy. People liked her. A hint of pent-up neurotic energy only added to her charm. Secretly, Stroud thought, it would be interesting to see her fail—maybe he would even enjoy it a little. True, it would mess up her career prospects, but they would still have his...career prospects. No, he'd never imagined himself as a secretary, which was, unfortunately, his official job title in Mannheim's office. He'd only taken the job because they needed the money, and there weren't many other jobs in Gainesville that his humanities BA qualified him for. But once in Mannheim's office, training with Ophelia, he'd begun to see possibilities. Ultimately, he would oversee—or, at least, would help Mannheim oversee—more than a million dollars in federal funding. Yes, his was an entry-level position, but, Stroud considered, there were financial possibilities in administration that just weren't realistic in teaching—

These were treasonous thoughts and, of course, there was no way he could say any of it to Connie, at least not for the present. He would have to wait, see how things went. Maybe Connie would see for herself.

With two fingers, Stroud plucked up an ice cube floating near the top of the glass and popped it into his mouth. He was annoyed to discover that he felt somehow implicated in Connie's sense of impending failure. What the hell did it have to do with

him? With Morris in daycare, Connie had had the apartment to herself for hours today and had nevertheless failed to sit down and work on the thing. That had been her choice. She was weaving her own fate. He couldn't exactly force her to work...

Fending off the strange guilt, he crunched the ice cube loudly. Could Connie, in the bathroom, hear him chomping? He hoped she'd come out so they could get the rest of this conversation over with. Whether or not she was going to scratch his feet, there was a documentary he wanted to watch this evening so he could mention to Mannheim the next morning that he'd watched it. The documentary was about mirror neurons, and Stroud hoped that Mannheim would be impressed that he was familiarizing himself with Mannheim's research interests outside of work hours.

Stroud settled onto the couch and took a sip of water. It was natural, he thought, that he'd developed a certain intimacy with Ophelia. After all, she'd been training him for months, teaching him everything she knew about the NSF side of the operations. This very afternoon, she had smiled at him so brightly, with a weird simmering excitement, as he explained a thought he'd had about streamlining a database related to an upcoming undergraduate poster session. But that was Ophelia. She was so appreciative whenever he did the slightest helpful thing. "You're my savior," she'd said repeatedly, as he edited quarterly program reports and more precisely line-itemed budgets. "I don't know how I got along without you," she'd said, puffing strands of dark hair off her forehead in a sign of relief. All of Ophelia's gestures, even the most ordinary, seemed theatrical. Paradoxically, this theatrical quality seemed natural to Ophelia, as if she wouldn't really be herself without it. And it imbued the otherwise drab work day with the possibility of a giddy, magical lapse into unreality. That was the kind of thing, he knew, that Connie

would never understand. If he told her about it—which, he reminded himself he ought not to do, especially right now—she would narrow her eyes at him suspiciously, and he would feel as if she'd caught him at something guilty and ridiculous.

At last, Connie came out of the bathroom, blowing her nose into a piece of toilet paper. Her eyes, it seemed to Stroud, had a strange, beadily unfocused glint. She looks really in the throes of something, Stroud thought.

“Look,” she said, standing uncertainly in the middle of the room, “can I bounce some ideas off you for the paper? I think maybe if I talk it out—“

Stroud sighed and shrugged. “Okay, okay,” he said, “but we’ve already done this about a million times.”

She looked at him, confused, and at that moment they heard Morris’s feet scampering along the hallway floor.

“That doesn’t—” she began.

“Daddy’s home!” Morris said in a keening baby voice, sliding into the room across the wooden floorboards on his socked feet, reaching out his arms for Stroud.

Stroud looked at Connie, who was blowing her nose again into perhaps the same piece of toilet paper.

“My god,” he said, “Do you think he does that baby voice to annoy me? Do you think he knows how annoying that is?”

Connie sighed. “You’re attributing ulterior motives again.”

“Please don’t start with the ulterior motives,” he said.

Stroud turned to Morris. They hugged. Stroud patted Morris on the back and on the head. He kissed him on the forehead.

“Yo, bud!” he said, “How ya doin’? Whacha do today?” He turned to Connie.

“That’s my voice that I use with him.”

“Jesus,” Connie said.

“Daddy! Can I show you this video I saw? It’s this guy who pranks this guy but there’s another guy who’s a girl, who’s really pranking them both.”

“That sounds interesting,” Stroud said, “but Daddy’s pretty hungry and tired. And I have to talk to Mommy—about something boring.”

“It’s funny,” Morris said.

“Sure, but it’s not real. Those videos aren’t real,” Stroud said.

“Sorry to bore you,” Connie said.

“I wish they were real,” Morris said.

“You know what’s real?” Stroud said. “My feet. My feet are pretty goddamned real.”

2.

It was more or less impossible, Stroud thought, to have a casual talk with Mannheim. The guy didn’t get normal human interactions. He looked now, as always, like he was struggling to understand why Stroud was speaking to him. It seemed never to occur to Mannheim, Stroud thought, that perhaps he, Mannheim, had failed—almost certainly because he didn’t take Stroud seriously enough to listen to attentively—to comprehend Stroud’s remarks, which, Stroud felt, were always carefully worded and offered in a lighthearted, chatty way, with plenty of pauses for Mannheim to jump in and

make a connection. Instead, Mannheim's puzzled-seeming silences obliged Stroud to assume that he had not expressed himself clearly.

Stroud, leaning casually against the doorway to Mannheim's office, had mentioned casually that he was feeling a bit foggy this morning because he and Connie—his “partner,” he reminded Mannheim—had stayed up late, watching a documentary that Mannheim might be interested in called *Mirror Neurons*. It had been, Stroud went on, no piece of cake to watch the whole thing because Morris—his son—had wandered out of his bedroom to the couch at least six times to interrupt. This was true. Morris had wanted ice water, hugs, Connie's undivided attention, to scream piercingly about nothing in particular, to pee—but, grimly, exhaustedly pausing and unpausing, Stroud had managed to get through the whole thing. Of course, Stroud didn't mention any of those details, but he hoped Mannheim would get the big picture. He hoped that Mannheim would be impressed by Stroud's persistence in overcoming obstacles in order to educate himself.

However, to Stroud's annoyance, Mannheim just sat in his swivel chair blinking distractedly until finally Stroud mumbled, offering a definite conversational goal, “I thought maybe you might have some ideas on the subject, since that's sort of your field, as I understand it.”

Finally, Mannheim snapped to life, said, “Interesting. Who did you say is in that—you called it a documentary?”

Stroud hadn't said. He didn't remember. The names and university affiliations of the researchers featured in the documentary had not seemed important to him, only the research itself. But he realized now what an obvious mistake it had been not to memorize

the names. To Mannheim, that would be the only interesting part. Stroud frowned, struggling to dredge up the information from his sleep-deprived brain.

It didn't matter, he knew. It was clear to Stroud that Mannheim had offered the question only as a barely polite way of getting him out of his office.

"I'll look it up and get back to you," Stroud said, determined never to mention the documentary again. Then they nodded at each other, Mannheim nodding first. To Stroud, Mannheim's nod seemed a patronizing expression of professorial approval—which was what, Stroud realized with a grievous sense of embarrassment, Mannheim thought he wanted. Stroud, however, found himself unable to preserve his dignity by withholding the return nod, although he strove to make it perfunctory, a matter of mere politeness. Even worse, against his will, his mouth shaped itself into a placating simper, the humiliating sense impression of which lingered on his lips and in his cheeks for the next hour.

As Stroud turned to go, Mannheim said, "Would you mind bringing me my coffee?"

Mannheim had never before asked Stroud to fetch coffee. The way he said it, thought Stroud: not even *a cup of* coffee but *my* coffee.

A chilly, dangerous feeling traveled up Stroud's legs and into his groin. For a moment, he wanted badly to spin around, leap at Mannheim, knock him backwards off the stupid, overpriced, ergonomic swivel chair (Stroud himself had picked it out for Mannheim from an office furniture website after Mannheim had mentioned in passing that he had occasional lower back issues), hear the dull thud of the large blond-haired skull against the thin office carpet. Crack nose. Smash lenses into eyes.

“Sure,” Stroud said, not turning around. Unable to stop himself, he added, “It will just be a few minutes.”

“Takes a few minutes for coffee to brew,” Mannheim pointed out.

Hurrying away, Stroud passed through the office and into the file room, where the Bunn sat next to the sink.

Well, he thought, coffee would be good. According to the Bunn’s clock, it was only 8:23 and he was already tired.

As Stroud was sponging the previous day’s coffee out of the carafe, Ophelia came in, bustling confidently though more than 20 minutes late, clutching a big transparent plastic cup of latte, the sugary, creamy smell of which drifted immediately to Stroud. He raised a sudsy, cynical hand in salute and rolled his eyes in the direction of Mannheim’s office. Ophelia smiled brightly at him before passing out of the file room to her desk. He heard her bag, a plain elegant sack of dark green leather, clunk authoritatively down on the desk, the click of her Dell’s power button, the sound of the machine firing up.

The sweet smell of Ophelia’s latte lingering in his nostrils, Stroud’s morning fatigue began to dissipate. A strain of optimism entered his thoughts. In certain ways, he thought, it was useful that Mannheim was so socially oblivious. For instance, as far as Stroud had been able to tell in his three months on the job (and he’d investigated the perception carefully, counseling himself to act on the assumption that it must be mistaken), Mannheim seemed to understand nothing that passed between Stroud and Ophelia that was unrelated to the business of the office. On many occasions this had given Stroud opportunity to grin at Ophelia—in brave moods, even rakishly to wink at her—in Mannheim’s very presence. Mannheim—it had taken Stroud months of fearful

experimentation and, Stroud thought, subtle encouragement from Ophelia to realize— was simply never going to understand that they were making fun of him. Stroud always felt a bit guilty whenever, for instance, he pursed his lips into a grimace of pettish frustration, imitating one of Mannheim’s characteristic facial expressions at the very moment Mannheim stood before them discussing a program budget or planning an undergraduate poster session, but Ophelia obviously got such a kick out of Stroud’s mimicry that for three months he’d kept it up, adding to his stock of Mannheim impressions, polishing his skills, taking pride in his increasing fluency and naturalness. Ophelia would say things like “I literally can’t believe how funny that was. You’re really, really good at being Mannheim.”

Now, standing, arms folded, legs spread, before the steaming, hissing Bunn (a position, Stroud had read, supposed to induce feelings of self-confidence and power), Stroud told himself that his guilt was unnecessary. Mannheim did not deserve it. And Stroud, henceforth, would no longer mind whether Mannheim noticed the mimicry—in fact, the thought that Mannheim might notice gave Stroud a mean thrill of inspiration. After all, what could Mannheim do when he realized that both of his secretaries considered him a laughingstock? He could do nothing, Stroud reasoned, but live with the humiliating knowledge. Mannheim, although a decorated researcher and principal investigator on several high-profile grants, was, on a personal level, Stroud thought, a disorganized wreck—a complete ditz (however intelligent when it came to matters of brain science and artificial intelligence) who couldn’t do without Stroud. Mannheim couldn’t decode his own budget spreadsheets if they were more than a week old, never mind keep up with the numberless threads of correspondence generated by his grant

applications, conference invitations, and research projects. He'd as soon burn down his lab as fire Stroud. Stroud's competence, Stroud told himself, did much for Mannheim: Stroud could handle the university bureaucracy, foreign visitors, stressed-out grad students. If Mannheim wanted suddenly to go to Paris or wherever—fucking Nairobi, didn't matter—Stroud could make the arrangements, set up meetings with the best people, not to mention figure out how to pay for the trip out of grants in a way that would cause not one eyelash to bat. Although he'd been only three months in the office, Stroud had already reorganized Mannheim's decades-old file collection. When he'd finished digitizing the whole shebang, Mannheim would be able to find whatever he needed via keyword. This "my coffee" bit aside, Stroud sensed Mannheim's growing reliance on him and enjoyed the grateful, almost tearful way Mannheim looked at him when he discovered that Stroud had long ago anticipated some problem that had just burst fretfully into the narrow field of his attention...

Stroud carried Mannheim's coffee into his office and placed it on Mannheim's desk near enough for Mannheim to reach but at a safe distance from his keyboard and several piles of stacked paper. If Mannheim were to accidentally knock the coffee over, little of value would be in harm's way. He wondered whether Mannheim would appreciate the thoughtfulness of this positioning.

"Hey, thanks," Mannheim said, glancing up from his monitor.

"No problem," said Stroud. "I hope I made it right."

"I'm sure it's fine."

Mannheim took a sip and went back to the monitor. Stroud hoped for a comment about the quality of the coffee. He thought he'd made it particularly well, balancing the

coffee to water ratio with careful precision. He waited, but he could see that no comment was forthcoming. He left Mannheim's office, returned to the Bunn, poured himself a cup and went to his desk. His fatigue now gone, for almost three hours he worked furiously and with great focus. By 11 o'clock he was prepared for the 11:45 meeting to plan out Mannheim's itinerary for an upcoming neural-control interface conference in Beijing.

Stroud stood up to stretch and glanced at Ophelia, who was entering work hours into the payroll system, the latte on her desk halfway finished.

"Hey," Stroud said, "nice latte." When she looked up at him, he flexed his eyebrows mischievously.

"You want the rest?" she said. "It's too big for me."

No, he told himself, there could be no suggestion in "too big for me." Impossible. He quashed the thought, though it had already given him a queasy feeling.

He saw, however, that she was serious about the offer. This too was weird. Was she really suggesting he should drink from her half-finished latte? That was disgusting—and yet, in a certain way, it was not disgusting. He could see himself doing it, perhaps pouring the remainder of the latte into a coffee mug. Perhaps he and Ophelia would have a conversation about the latte—about its taste and texture, what was good about it, what wasn't, how it could be improved, other types of lattes. But he thought of Connie. Connie would definitely not like the idea of him sharing Ophelia's latte—and if he drank the rest of Ophelia's latte and then didn't tell Connie that he'd done so, he'd feel guilty, as if he were keeping an embarrassing secret from her. Eventually, unable to stand the guilt, he'd tell her, and then she'd be mad at him both for drinking the latte and for not

telling her sooner that he'd drunk the latte. That was not a predicament he wanted to get himself into.

"It still has some cream in it," Ophelia said.

"Thanks—" Stroud began, but he couldn't think of how to go on. He could not accept the latte, but he didn't want to hurt Ophelia's feelings by refusing it. He moved his gaze from Ophelia to the latte, grimacing at it with furrowed brow.

Ophelia laughed suddenly, smacking her desk with the palm of her hand. *Whop!* Stroud jumped.

"Oh my god, I'm just messing with you, Steve. Stop suffering so much."

"Thanks," Stroud, trying to smile, said again.

"You're a weird guy, Strood," she said. She insisted on calling him Strood instead of Stroud, seeming to get a kick out this. He went along with it, assuming it was some sort of friendly teasing.

"It's there if you want it," she said, "or else I'm just going to throw it out. Gets nasty after, like, two o'clock."

Confused, sensing he was not going to be able to puzzle his way through this interaction, Stroud decided on a bathroom break. He left the office and walked slowly down the tiled hall. From behind a closed door, he heard a lecture ongoing—Prof. Snyder discussing the parts of the brain. Stroud heard the words "amygdala," "pit," and "caged," but he could make no sense of what was being said. As he often did at work, he felt he was walking around in a fog, ignorant of the most basic things—things people like Mannheim and Snyder had known all about decades ago, when Stroud was still a kid.

He soon put this thought aside. In the bathroom mirror above the sink, he reviewed his Mannheim facial expressions. Ophelia was right. He *was* good at being Mannheim. His confidence began to return.

At the 11:45 meeting, Stroud—carrying out the advice he'd given himself to be less inhibited—let loose, aggressively aping. He did mouthwork, pensive squints, blank puzzled stares, even Mannheim's schizoid hand slices that seemed symbolically to undercut rather than to emphasize the words they were connected to. Best of all, Stroud found clever ways to seamlessly integrate these parodies into his occasional itinerary-related questions and comments, the better to mask them as his own idiosyncratic expressions and gestures. The idea—and it seemed to Stroud to be working—was that Ophelia would think he was doing a brilliant job of toeing the line, hiding his mockery in plain sight. As the meeting went on, Stroud took more risks, on several occasions imitating a Mannheim gesture in the very moment Mannheim was making it.

Mannheim rattled on, apparently oblivious to Stroud's display, pausing only for travel- or budget-related input from his secretaries.

Finally, Stroud hit pay dirt. Ophelia began to laugh so hard, so uncontrollably, at his impression of Mannheim's apparently unconscious habit of tsking his tongue while thinking over a difficult problem that, girlishly, she covered her mouth with her hand and ran out of the office, bumping her knee on a chair and sending it into a rapid swivel.

The tongue-tsking was Stroud's boldest move to date, and it was gratifying to see it pay off in spades. Stroud felt his heart beat hard and he found himself slightly out of breath.

But the good feeling didn't last long.

“I’m concerned for Ophelia’s health,” Mannheim said gravely, staring at the door Ophelia had run out of. “She’s been acting weird lately, though her work continues to be excellent.”

Stroud covered his mouth to hide a grin, only to realize, with a ping of shame, that his gesture was an echo of Ophelia’s.

“Maybe she’s pregnant,” Mannheim said.

This remark bothered Stroud. For one thing, Mannheim’s tone, he felt, was oddly detached, even for Mannheim. As Stroud walked to Sunflower Earth Queen, the grocery store where he liked to eat lunch, he was trailed by a confused, unsettled feeling. On the store’s patio, shaded by two small palm trees and flanked by large, oscillating air misters, he stretched his legs out under the table and relished a bit of solitude: no Mannheim, no Connie, no Morris. All his life he’d been a fast eater, a gulper, tending to polish off a meal in under a minute, but in the shade of this patio he practiced eating slowly, his awareness trained on the life-giving properties of his food. Gently he reprimanded himself if he happened to neglect to savor a bite of sushi, if he forgot to hold each sip of ginger-flavored kombucha in his mouth for a few seconds, feeling it bathe his gums in raffinose and sizzle purifyingly against the cells of his tongue and cheeks. As he ate and drank, he gazed in admiration at a massive cockroach, sublime in its oblivious rooting intensity, its brown shell glistening with air mist, as it trundled under the low stiff-leaved hedge, brilliant with heavy green life, that separated the patio from the parking lot.

But he could not get Mannheim’s remark out of his head, and he went through most of the kombucha before realizing he had not taken so much as a moment to consciously relish the feeling of being energized and cleansed. It was an odd thing for

Mannheim to say—it crossed a line, Stroud felt: It was the word “pregnant.” One shouldn’t say that a coworker was pregnant—or, at least, one shouldn’t say that Ophelia was pregnant. “Pregnant” was, somehow, an unprofessional thing to say, especially when applied to Ophelia. The word was too physical. It implied that Ophelia had—he tried to hurry past the thought—a partner who might have impregnated her. As far as Stroud knew, Ophelia was not married—she wore no ring, kept no photos whatsoever on her desk. However, Stroud had more than once wondered whether she had some sort of relationship with Ted Taron, the grants specialist from the Sponsored Programs office who reviewed the quarterly reports and applications for new grants that Stroud and Ophelia put together, almost always—to Stroud’s annoyance—sending them back for revision or corrections with jokey little notes that said things like “Pretty close on this one, buddies. But reformat entire document, this time in accordance with institutional guidelines. I know you have the link already. And, for chrissakes, check for grammar.”

Largely because of Ted’s corrections, invariably it seemed that they wouldn’t make deadline, but somehow they always did, and it was always Ted’s intervention that got them over the hump: “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of the rest, fellas,” he’d say, “I know you did your personal bests on this one.” It was Munchausen by grant application, Stroud suspected. And always during these dreary, possibly pointless revision sessions—which required staying in the office until after six o’clock—Ophelia took Ted’s calls. She seemed to enjoy talking to him. Over the phone, Ted would make Ophelia giggle by doing impressions of UF faculty or of the personnel of various grant-making institutions. Stroud would do his best to ignore this giggling, but occasionally, to his vague embarrassment, Ophelia would say things like “Oh, Ted!” and Stroud would be raked

with a strange jealousy. Imagine, Stroud thought, Connie saying “Oh, Steve!” It would never happen. But would he want Connie to be the kind of woman who said things like that? No, he told himself, of course he wouldn’t. Connie didn’t say things like “Oh, Steve!” because she was too intelligent to say them. Connie didn’t laugh at gags and impressions and physical humor. If you wanted to get Connie to laugh, you had to cleverly point out some irony or hypocrisy. That was the kind of thing that got Connie to smile appreciatively.

In the looks department, Ophelia wasn’t much. She was okay, maybe, but she was short, round, and soft. When Stroud went out with Connie, people regarded him with respect and curiosity, he could tell. But if he were to take Ophelia, say, out to dinner (though in what outlandish scenario this would happen he had no idea) no one would look twice at them, no heads would turn. Though, he had to admit, Ophelia did have nice full breasts, significantly bigger than Connie’s. Not only were they big, Ophelia’s breasts seemed somehow generous, open to the possibility of being touched. There was a kind of inviting smile that hovered around them. Not that Stroud wanted to touch them! Or maybe he did, but not in a way, he told himself, that went beyond the usual basic male attraction to the breasts of all young women who were reasonably attractive. It was an easily containable urge and purely meaningless. Hardly ever did it enter his thoughts. And he enjoyed watching Ophelia fork steaming chicken-flavored noodles from a Styrofoam container into her mouth as she gazed at her computer, moving her lipsticked lips unconsciously as she read email or Facebook posts. Connie never wore lipstick or ate noodles or moved her lips unconsciously when she read. She read slim, complex books silently and expressionlessly, her legs crossed or tucked neatly under her, only her

eyes moving to scan lines and her fingers to turn pages. Not that any of this mattered, he reminded himself.

Shaking off these thoughts, Stroud checked his phone and saw that the lunch hour was almost spent. If he wanted to make it on time, he'd have to jog back in his work shoes, but then he'd sweat in the midafternoon sun and get blisters above his heels. He decided to walk. Who cared if he was late? His refusal to hurry would signal to Mannheim that he knew his own value. Besides, there was much he wanted to think about. Mannheim's words, he sensed, hinted at something above and beyond the pregnancy thing. But what was it? Hadn't it seemed, Stroud asked himself, as if Mannheim were straining to project an attitude of neutrality when really he felt... When really he felt what? What could Mannheim possibly feel about Ophelia's pregnancy—if she were pregnant? Even more baffling, Stroud couldn't escape the impression that Mannheim's remark had been accompanied—if only for a split second, almost not enough time for Stroud to notice—by a little smirk, a little smirk that might be described as knowing. Did this smirk suggest that Mannheim thought that Stroud would be bothered by Ophelia's hypothetical pregnancy? Did it suggest that Mannheim would take pleasure in Stroud's discomfort? Or was he imagining everything?

Chewing over these questions, Stroud trailed slowly back to the office, feeling as if he'd been misled in some obvious way that he was too stupid to see. Hours went by before he could bring himself to reenact for Ophelia the scene of Mannheim's odd comment, including the detached and incomprehensible smirk, his unsettling thoughts about which he kept to himself.

Ophelia burst out laughing all over again.

When she calmed down, she said, “Well, yes, I was, actually. Recently. I got it, you know, taken care of.”

She looked him in the eye. “Do you think everyone knows? Sometimes I think everyone knows.”

Stroud felt as if some part of his body had gone numb or transparent. A ghostly, egg-shaped feeling formed in the area of his stomach. He struggled to seem undisturbed.

“How the hell would anyone know a thing like that?”

Ophelia looked alarmed.

“Sorry—probably shouldn’t have just thrown it out there. Like ‘Here, catch: Abortion.’”

She mimed throwing a large ball.

Stroud flinched slightly as though the imaginary ball were about to strike him, though his arms remained stiffly, uselessly by his sides.

“I guess there’s no easy way to say it, if you want to say it,” he said. Then he hid in the back room, among the file cabinets, kicking himself. He hadn’t meant to sound hostile! What had possessed him to imply that she shouldn’t have told him? How could he be such an idiot? Now she’d be withholding details of her personal life left and right. The feeling of comradesly, Mannheim-despising intimacy with Ophelia that he’d carefully, through great effort, cultivated—the intimacy that he’d come to expect and depend on, the intimacy that made the office seem like a second home, in certain ways softer and more inviting than his real home—would be destroyed or at least degraded. He imagined himself drifting into the darkish office at eight in the morning, tearing open

the coffee packet while a feeling of chilly, air-conditioned isolation settled around him. But there seemed no way to recover.

3.

“How long I’ve secretly loved you isn’t important,” TJ, on the phone, was saying, “the overall length of time. That’s not the point at all.”

She was bent over, her head and shoulders in the back seat of the Accord, phone held squeezed between her shoulder and left ear, which was starting to ache from the friction.

“Too tight!” Morris said. He strained his torso upward against the seat belt straps.

Over the phone, she heard TJ flicking a lighter, inhaling, letting smoke drift slowly from his mouth. She knew how he did it.

“Mommy!” Morris said, exasperated. She reached down and loosened the seat belts, but not much: Stroud did not like Morris’s straps to be too loose—it was dangerous, he said.

Morris started to cry.

“I’m trapped,” he said.

Sighing, she loosened the straps again.

“Look, you can pull them up off yourself,” she said. “See?”

She pulled the car seat straps several inches away from Morris’s stomach and shoulders.

“Okay?” she said.

With his thumbs Morris began to push at the straps from underneath. She closed the rear door, watching him through the window. Snot had collected on his upper lip from a cold that was spreading around the daycare.

“You say you love me,” she said, “yet I don’t hear from you for months.”

TJ had called eight times this morning before she’d finally picked up. Which was his M.O. For months, she’d hear nothing from him. He spent this time, she knew, traveling around in an RV, a ’78 Argosy that he was always complaining about, busking in one city or another. He juggled, balanced poles on his palms and head, climbed the walls of buildings or walked on cables strung between them, and occasionally did what he called “white-collar work”: improv, tarot readings, relocation astrology. Somehow he made enough money to keep himself fed and the Argosy on the road. Then, out of nowhere, he’d call her from some totally random location—a trailer park in Arkansas, the Mojave Desert. In a week she’d talk to him six or seven times and then, without warning, the phone calls would stop.

He was silent for a moment, and, on his end, she heard objects being moved around, something scraping, the clicking of a gas stove lighter. She tried to picture the inside of his RV, although, she realized, she couldn’t be sure he was in it. He could be anywhere: a motel, a hostel, someone’s house. But whose house? Who were TJ’s friends these days? She had no idea.

She opened the driver’s door of the Accord and waved to Flo Keeton, who was carrying her twin five-year-old daughters, in her arms, across the parking lot, holding them against her body and moving limpingly toward her car. The little girls clutched at

Flo's brown hair and bare, tanned arms, their equally blond heads resting on her shoulders.

Flo nodded back at her and they exchanged sardonic grins.

"Totally zonked," Flo called across the parking lot to her.

She gave Flo a thumb's up and sat down in the driver's seat.

"That's how my love for you works," TJ said at last. "For a week, or let's call it a period of eight or nine days I love you intensely, I love you more than any man has ever loved woman. I mean, I'm sure old Stroud loves you too, but not as much as I love you, at least not during the love week. He couldn't possibly."

"All right so far," she said. She pulled the door closed.

"Mommy, it's still too tight!"

"It can't be any looser," she called back. "It would be dangerous if we got into an accident. You could go flying—"

"And then it just kind of fades away," TJ said. "I forget. It's like Nietzsche says, you've got to learn to forget. Though I didn't get that directly from the Nietzsche—I got it from Jim Morrison—"

Morris started to cry again.

"who got it from Nietzsche."

"He's sick," she said apologetically, wondering why she felt like she owed him an explanation, "he's out of sorts."

She heard TJ sucking on his cigarette again and then exhaling patiently. There were more clicking sounds—a stove heating up, she guessed.

She reached for the iPad on the passenger seat, put it into her lap and, with the hand that wasn't holding the phone, searched for a popular YouTube kids' show Morris was obsessed with. She'd downloaded a few episodes weeks ago and, while Morris had already seen these episodes eight or nine times, he was usually delighted to watch them all again.

"I bet you're like a beautiful earth mother," TJ said, "a cosmic queen."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I am."

She handed the iPad back to Morris and heard the program started up.

"Hey, kids," said the program's host brightly, "so much to learn about. Today we're visiting an airplane factory. That's a factory where airplanes are made."

"The other thing that helps me forget you," TJ said, "is you wouldn't believe how many pretty women out there will go for a penniless *jongleur* with rooftop AC and a complete vinyl set of The Doors."

"How pretty are we talking? Do they share their social security checks with you?"

"But then I remember again," he said, "or I forget the forgetting. And I love you all over again with a towering hot passion. Or, more accurately, once I remember that I love you, then, in that moment, I've never stopped loving you. You've always been my lady—in that Platonic knight-errant sense. Even though, obviously, you and I have had sex before. Really pretty enjoyable sex, as I remember it. Though not since good old college. And, in regard to you, I feel like a virgin all over again, sort of."

Morris was quiet. She glanced in the rear view mirror and saw that he was absorbed in the video, sticking his face down close to it. Stroud hated that. It was not good for Morris's eyes, he said, but they could not get him to stop.

"I'm going to draw a line there, TJ," she said.

"I understand. You're a Capricorn. You have boundaries. I respect that. Anyway, this time's different."

She started the car.

"But why? Things were going along so smoothly."

"I'm going to say a thing," TJ said, "a thing I would have said long ago if I weren't such an idiotic coward."

She pulled into the street. She hoped Stroud would remember that she'd asked him to leave work a few minutes early. Probably he wouldn't remember. Probably he'd forgotten all about the mall.

TJ cleared his throat. "Ready? This time, during the love week, which just to be clear, is ongoing currently, I'm coming to get you."

"Oh, no," she said, shaking her head slowly, switching the phone to her non-sore ear, and taking a left toward the highway. "That's not a good idea. There'd be a conflict with Steve. And, by the way," she said, "I'm married to Steve. Remember?"

"Common law," he said. "Not even a wedding for my cosmic earth goddess."

"I hate weddings."

"That," he said, "is a statement that proceeds from limited thinking. You've got to flip the switch. With Stroud, you're never going to flip it. You've been with ol' Stroud for—what?—eight years. That's not love, sweetheart, it's endorphins. If that."

“His name is Steve, TJ.”

“You’re right, you’re right. I’m letting my feelings get the better of me.

Anyway, look, I’ll just explain things to him. He’ll get it. He’s emotionally intelligent.”

“That’s very generous of you.”

“Anyway, I can’t just do it, not like that. I need something first.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You have to say yes. You have to invite me in and all that.”

“Like a vampire?”

“Interesting,” TJ said. She could hear him pouring liquid, stirring something with a spoon. “That’s what my therapist calls me. She says ‘vampire’ is my attachment pattern—or something like that.”

“You have a therapist?”

“A mobile one, yeah. Anyway, according to this therapist, I’m a pure egoist, so my motivation with regard to one Connie Duchamp, cosmic earth goddess, is merely to obtain gratification by dragging her away from her man and causing her, if somehow possible, to idolize me. Back in college, you did idolize me, didn’t you, Connie Duchamp? Don’t deny it. It’s an important assumption I’ve made. Of course, I was, back then, a complete asshole. A libertarian, for Christ’s sake. And not the nicest person, as you will no doubt recall. You wouldn’t believe how nice I am now, by comparison. I am kind and gentle as fuck: I go out of my way to help others and to be there for them when they have needs. Just the other day there was this family stranded on I-10, just standing out there sweating their butts off with their thumbs all in the air. I stopped but the old bitch, the old trickster wouldn’t start again—”

“Who?”

“—the damned RV, Con—wouldn’t start. I’d made the mistake of turning it off. You don’t do that to a ’78 Argosy, you just let it run out of gas. But I was so excited about helping—forgot to remember. So we were all stuck there, but at least we were together. And another time I—”

“Idolize is a strong word,” she said. “I did like you a lot.”

There was a banging sound, viciously loud. She imagined him tossing the spoon into a sink.

“And, for me, this idolatry was ‘narcissistic supply,’ if I’m getting the words right. You can see why I’d want you back and would even be willing to have a wrastle with ol’ Stroud over you, if it comes down to it. I’d even wrastle you over it, if such wrastling seems justified by the—by the situation. The kicker, though, is that even if I were to succeed in this *aventure romantique*, pretty soon I’d get tired of you and there would come again the *ennui*, the emptiness of the soul. It’s a terrible, terrible feeling.”

“Is that true?”

“Totally. It happened once already, didn’t it? In college? Sandy is a great therapist. Full of helpful insight.”

“Is she over 66?” she asked, angling the car toward the university exit.

“Sandy is as ageless as the sun and the wind. But it’s also true that I love you with a pure, high, devotional love. Both things—the emptiness, the love—are pretty much equally true. In a fallen world, the earth goddess of virtue must embrace complexity and contradiction.”

She paused, considering.

“And embrace me, Connie Duchamp.”

She heard him very quietly having a sip of his drink, pleased with himself.

“If it’ll make you feel better,” she said, “I’ll admit to some feelings for you—residual ones. Very residual. Like a dash of rainwater on a burning sidewalk. And maybe I did—purely out of naïveté—once, long ago, idolize you a tiny bit. Is that enough supply for you?”

There was another banging sound, as if the cup had been slammed onto something—a table, she imagined.

“Ah, Connie, you had the best naïveté. Delicious, melting. Never since have I encountered a naïveté so succulent, so complete, so poignant. I relished so much taking advantage of it, over and over again.”

“You did seem to enjoy it,” she said. But—shouldn’t have said that, she thought, immediately. She felt a small cold wave of guilt come over her, but beneath it, warmth.

“And, yes, I will lick that slightly moist sidewalk. I am licking it right now. Mmm. The slight moisture will quench me for days.”

She pulled up alongside the neuroscience building and flicked on the emergency lights. Then she twisted around to check on Morris and saw that he had fallen asleep, head hanging over the iPad, a line of snot suspended in the air between his chin and the screen.

“Which is about how much longer you’ll go on loving me,” she said. “Let’s just keep going with this ‘love week’ thing,” she told TJ. “The self-confidence boost is nice, I have to say, and it makes me glad to know you haven’t been stabbed to death in a Walmart parking lot or fallen off a building. I would be sad if you died. But I’ve got a

thing going on here in Florida. A life. A kid. Have you ever considered parenting? You'd love it, obviously.

She was looking around for Stroud. The clock above the radio said 5:03.

"It's impossible to raise kids in America," he went on, "a country full of narcissists bent on subjugating everyone around them and then destroying themselves. Well, and Sandy lives here too. I'm for New Zealand. Children need purity—forests, mountains, lakes. Bring Morris. That's the second part of my proposal."

"But won't you infect the innocent New Zealanders with your American narcissism?"

"I won't be the same person in New Zealand, not once we've been there, say, six months or so. The planetary influences are completely different."

"And we can fly there in your RV?"

"On your altar I'll gladly sacrifice the Argosy—or sell it as parts. That old Chevy engine is gold on EBay."

He paused, and she heard him take a drag of his cigarette. How many had he smoked during this phone call? she wondered. In college he'd gone through two packs a day, but miraculously this seemed to have no effect on his health. He still played squash and tennis—played them, she remembered, beautifully, perfectly, effortlessly. She imagined him sitting with his coffee and his ashtray, in some dim room or maybe the Argosy, thinking of words to say to her.

She looked at the clock: 5:14. Where the hell was Steve? She got out of the car, still holding the phone to her ear, and looked around—although Stroud, when she picked him up, always came down the building's steps, and she could see those perfectly well

from inside the car. There seemed no possibility he'd be coming from some other direction.

"I've designed a tree house," TJ said. "It's my greatest work yet. In fact, I made it extra elaborate in order to impress you with my genius. We'll live in it—you, me, Morris, and our large sandy-haired, cleft-chinned, star-worshipping brood. It will be beautiful. I can only imagine how much you're going to love it. I'll email you the blueprints."

"Don't come here," she said, getting back into the car. "There is no invitation. Where are you anyway?"

Then she thought she heard him whispering to somebody, and she thought she heard somebody whispering back. She felt almost stunned, the warmth she'd felt gone instantaneously. Who could be there in that dim lonely room with him, listening?

"According to Sandy," he said, "this land is called Georgia. The trees here are tall."

"Maybe pretty women are hiding among them," she said lightly. "Go find out and report back. I've got to go. Morris is waking up."

This was not true—Morris was not waking up—but she felt confused: Why had he said such things to her someone else's presence? Some unknown person, a woman?

As she removed the phone from her aching right ear, she heard TJ saying something else, talking fast suddenly—but she didn't care. She pressed the button, disconnected. She imagined him glaring desperately at his phone and took pleasure in the thought.

She half expected him to call back right away, but he didn't.

The muscles of her fingers and left wrist hurt, her palms were sweating. *Damn it.* For a few minutes, she'd felt good, she'd felt a lightness in her chest. Why couldn't she just have it? She'd had it for so short a time and then it had been ripped away from her.

She half-expected TJ to call back right away, but he didn't.

Instead, she called Stroud, but he didn't pick up. She called him again.

She sat for a few minutes, watching the clock above the car radio, then suddenly she pounded the steering wheel with her fist. She sat back, wondering what had made her do that, and at that moment, she saw Mannheim, helmeted, Spandexed, jog down the steps of the neuroscience building, shouldering some kind of expensive, wooden-looking bicycle with futuristic tires. At the bottom of the stairs, Mannheim mounted the bike, pushed off, and then, after going only a few yards along the sidewalk, halted for a squirrel that had emerged from a rectangular bush and was now dithering indecisively before Mannheim's front wheel.

Mannheim planted his feet patiently on the sidewalk, as if to make a point of waiting for the squirrel to sort out its priorities.

Mannheim, she thought suddenly, wasn't bad looking. He had blond hair and very blue deer-in-the-headlights eyes, though his legs, emerging from the tube-like Spandex shorts, were skinny and oddly hairless.

She watched him ride away then called Stroud's phone again. Again, he didn't pick up.

She heard Morris stirring. In the rear view mirror, she saw his head rising from the iPad. She drove across the street to the parking garage and found a spot on the third

level. She'd got out of the car and walked some way toward the exit when she heard a pounding. She turned. Morris was beating the car window with his fist.

She stood watching. She'd forgotten him. How?

She ran back to the car.

He was crying again.

"You forgot me," he said.

"No," she said.

"Yes, you did. I saw you walking away. You were keeping going."

She got him out of the car seat and wiped his face with some tissues, then headed for the exit again, walking slowly, holding Morris's hand.

Yes, she thought, it was true that she had once idolized TJ. She had idolized him, in fact, more than a little. She'd met him at a concert they'd gone to in college—some local band for which TJ professed total contempt but nevertheless sat glaring at, gripping his plastic cup of soda, for the entirety of their minimalist background noise act. Connie wasn't too into the band either. She admitted to TJ that the music struck her as pretentious and that the sudden bursts of pointless arrhythmic drumming were annoying—but she didn't think it was quite as bad as he was making it out. Mostly, she said, she didn't care very much whether the music was good: She just enjoyed having a good time, feeling surrounded by people who were all having a pretty good time, who were turned on and excited. TJ chewed her out at length for her aesthetic neutrality. As their relationship progressed, he made her feel that everything she said was some sort of cliché or an expression of an inner vacuity. Passionately and at great length, he would deride her preferences in music, art, movies, food, people. He would say that she had put

on a bit of weight. He would say that she should probably think about getting her hair dyed blonde or buying looser clothing or that she should try harder to respond intelligently, and perhaps even occasionally with a touch of wit, to the interesting things his friends said about their preferences in art, music, etc., which were also, usually, TJ's preferences. She tended to find his criticisms compelling. She began to see how drab and inauthentic she was—she had been, she saw, not only inauthentic but caught in the pathetic and embarrassing state of being oblivious to her own inauthenticity and drabness. TJ, she felt, had helped to free her from her illusions about herself. Under his critical gaze, she saw that her tastes, her opinions, her ambitions, even her moments of creative epiphany in the studio annex by the river, had been merely products of her desire to be recognized by people she liked and respected—*her* friends, not TJ's—people whose enthusiastic mediocrity she had mistaken for depth and originality. She felt contempt for the optimism and self-confidence of her former friends and began to distrust their praise and encouragement. Eventually, she stopped associating with anyone who wasn't in TJ's small group. She also stopped painting, writing, sculpting, playing the guitar, or doing anything that might be thought of as creative. TJ never did anything creative either, but he seemed always on the verge of launching into some revolutionary project. He managed to keep about him an air of suspense, of great potential held barely in check by sharp critical faculties. She felt there was something tragic about this, as if TJ were condemned to be capable only of great actions that would occur suddenly without build-up or warning. The kinds of small, mediocre accomplishments that passed for examples of talent around campus seemed beneath him.

Being with TJ gave her a precipitous statusy feeling that she mocked herself for relishing. Tall in a rangy, vaguely athletic way; good at tennis; and with a knack for being self-deprecatingly funny and schmoozy while still retaining an air of personal mystery, TJ seemed to be acquainted with deliciously vulnerable, cutely neurotic arts or philosophy women from all over campus, most of whom, it seemed to Connie, were clearly flattered by his attention and possibly jealous of her. But why, she wondered, did TJ prefer her to his many other options? And why did she find such gratification in the jealousy, real or imagined, of other women? Was she insecure? She found herself constantly worrying about such questions and obsessing about her looks. She began to hate her freckles because they detracted from her ability to look menacingly judgmental.

She was obsessed with TJ's looks as well. From the beginning, his mouth had fascinated her; years later, its image still occurred to her with some frequency, strangely disconnected from the rest of his face, though she could sense TJ's presence surrounding the mouth image invisibly, watching her with an attitude of contented scorn. In her memory, the mouth was pert and expressive, as capable of trembling in self-pity as tightening in derision, and TJ seemed always to be gazing at her with lip curled, as if formulating some quiet, penetrating insult about her looks or intelligence or general way of being. TJ's snide look, as she dubbed it, confused her, threw her off balance. She couldn't understand her own reaction to it. Somehow it undermined her carefully built-up self-confidence. Although containing always a vague hint of ironic humor, a cynical acceptance of the inevitability of frailty and fault, the snide look's effectiveness came from the genuine revulsion and contempt it expressed, its disappointment that the object of TJ's gaze fell so far short of some vague and unknowable ideal—an ideal which she

longed to understand completely but which she understood only in fragments, scraps TJ occasionally tossed out about women he found attractive or music he didn't think was awful. Her desire was to merge with the gaze, to identify fully with its perspective, to be no longer its hapless, floundering object. Staring at her face in various mirrors, she tried to imitate the snide look, to reproduce its power, but no matter how she set her lips or glared into the mirror, her face seemed always to revert to a disturbingly empty expression that implied inner peace and contentment, possibly even good will. She could not get her eyes to fill with the intense, knowing hatred that made TJ's gaze so compelling. To compensate, she worked on certain charm techniques: She was inattentive and vague in a way that TJ and his friends seemed to find both frustrating and compelling, but she knew when to cut it out and be unexpectedly direct; she had an instinct for subtle flattery; and she could occasionally startle even herself with a clever remark or instance of self-assertion. But she worried that her attractiveness was, in the end, of a fundamentally bland, healthy type. Inevitably, TJ would grow tired of her non-menacing facial expressions, bored by her somewhat mechanical mystery-laden vaguenesses, and move on to someone who was genuinely fucked up and imbalanced.

In fact, TJ was always on the phone or emailing one or another of his attractive women friends, all of whom seemed perpetually in the middle of her own zany personal crisis. TJ, she couldn't help but notice, treated these attractive friends with far more consideration than he treated her. If Connie had a headache or a cold, he would snap at her, claiming that she was being lazy or self-indulgent, but if one of the friends suffered even some vague emotional wound, TJ immediately demonstrated concern: He was willing to spend long periods of time on the phone, talking almost exclusively about the

attractive friend's life and problems. If Connie drifted into the room during one of these phone calls, she would hear the agonized murmur of the friend's voice over the phone. And when TJ produced one of his psychologically penetrating observations about the root causes of the friend's problem, the friend would go silent for a moment and then resume revealing herself in a slow, thoughtful manner that indicated that she was carefully processing the full extent of the penetrating insight in all its glory.

Connie, however, found comfort in the understanding that TJ felt even more superior to the women friends than he felt to her. He found their entanglements predictable and silly, for the most part self-inflicted, and their desire to talk at length about themselves plainly narcissistic. After a phone call, TJ would invite Connie to join him in continued, off-the-record psychoanalysis of the friend in question. During these sessions, TJ's sense of superiority would become, delightfully, her own: For a while, until the jealousy kicked back in, she would float freely above the gaggle of friends, looking down on them as on small, writhing specimens.

Then there had been Francie. Or maybe there had never been a time when there was *not* Francie. It was impossible to say. Connie would sit in the old Annandale pharmacy, on one of its vintagey, cherry-red lunch counter stools, slowly sipping an iced soda, struggling to focus on the reading for a philosophy seminar—Nietzsche or Foucault—but distracted by intermittent surges of jealousy. TJ would go straight from her dorm to Francie's apartment, disappearing for hours and eventually whole days and nights. Connie would scream at him, throw fits that she recognized as melodramatic, but never, when he came back to her, could she bring herself to turn him away. When he was gone, she would sit on her bed, gazing at dust motes or running her eyes over the room's

pale green cinderblock walls, in her mind replaying the most insidious lines from their most recent argument and sensing the ghostly absence of TJ's mixture of sex, cigarettes, and dust from the library storage room, where he spent time vaguely doing research on astrology or for some vague architectural project—the only two subjects that seemed to interest him consistently.

She was disgusted by her own passivity, even frightened by it. Often she couldn't even bring herself to go for a walk. She would put on her coat and then just sit there, as if waiting for something. She would miss class, huddled in her dorm room all day long, a wounded animal, doing nothing, reading nothing, not lying down because in that position she was easily overpowered by her imagination, which tormented her with scenes of TJ and Francie fucking or hypothetical conversations in which TJ and Francie talked shit about her. In Francie's apartment. On Francie's bed. Connie thought she could write? The tragedy was—and it really *was* a tragedy—Connie was so untalented that she did not, in fact could not (the truly tragic part), understand how thoroughly she lacked talent. It was a problem of self-awareness: Connie simply could not understand how bad she was. And TJ would admit, though a bit reluctantly, somewhat defensive, sucking a bit hard on his cigarette, his melting brown eyes clouded by a faint attractive guilt—yes, it was true, he would say, to be really honest about it, Connie's sense of irony was not what anyone with a highly developed sense of irony would call highly developed, and thus the nauseating poetry, with its pensive insights and profound silences or the boring stories culminating in people feeling supposedly deep things and not a lot else happening. And then TJ and Francie would fuck more, a we-agree-about-Connie's-lack-of-both-talent-and-self-awareness fuck, TJ's lightly tanned, shadowed face expressing a mixture of

physical health and egoistic pleasure...Or maybe she was wrong—maybe TJ and Francie never talked about her at all. Maybe she wasn't important enough to bother feeling superior to. But they no doubt fucked quite a bit, she was sure of that. Francie could not be denied her slutty, *faux*-bohemian attractiveness, nor her lack of freckles, nor her knack for lackadaisical but quite accurate backhands on the tennis court.

4.

That Ophelia would tell him about the abortion, Stroud mused, was evidence of how close they'd grown: an abortion was a very personal thing. Naturally, he considered, their relationship had become infused with a certain intimacy and tenderness. There was nothing unusual or alarming about that—it meant nothing. With Ophelia everything was easy and playful. He didn't have to try to make smart jokes. Ophelia laughed, or at least smiled, at nearly all his jokes, smart or dumb. When she laughed hard, her eyes scrunched up, she had trouble catching her breath, and she made a hoo-hooing sound that he found delightful and puzzling. By contrast, Connie, of late especially, seemed always depressed and irritable, not to mention critical of his parenting. Which was maybe not ideal in certain ways, but still, he *tried*—he didn't *want* to hurt the kid's feelings, but Morris was so oversensitive, so like his mother in that respect, disturbed even by Stroud's mildest reprimands. And Stroud was always so tired out after work. The small fragment of leftover day he had available to spend with Connie and Morris was never when he was at his best. Also, he thought, it wouldn't hurt—it would perhaps make things a bit easier—if Connie had the apartment cleaned up and dinner on

the table once in a while when he got home. Dinner on the table and a clean, organized apartment might make things a bit easier, help everyone get along. But no, claiming fatigue or the need to concentrate on her work, Connie rarely cleaned. After the smooth, continual productivity of the work day, the sense of an enterprise—Mannheim’s various interconnected research and publication ventures—becoming, through Stroud and Ophelia’s teamwork, steadily rationalized and streamlined, life at home seemed dominated by a sense of inertia: it was a swamp of vague hostile emotions, impossible to sort out or trace to their roots.

It was a little after five o’clock when Stroud reemerged from the filing cabinets. Ophelia was at her desk, organizing papers, her tortoise-shells having slipped down her nose in a way that struck him as too cute to be unselfconscious, even though she’d been alone in the room before he’d stepped in.

“Just so you know,” he said, “I don’t object to—that kind of thing.”

This, also, wasn’t what he’d meant to say. He’d meant to say something empathic, embracing, something that suggested a full and sympathetic understanding of Ophelia’s probably somewhat painful and ambivalent feelings about...the thing that she’d chosen to do—feelings that he’d stupidly, if inadvertently, probably intensified. Or if he couldn’t pull off empathy, then a joke, something apologetic and self-deprecating. He certainly hadn’t meant to suggest that he was worried that she might have been concerned about his judgment of her!

Startled, Ophelia turned to look at him, absently pushing the glasses into place with her index finger, a gesture he’d always found endearingly pretentious but which now struck him as disturbingly plain and businesslike, as if Ophelia were purposefully

emptying it of theatrical content in order to signal that she had no further desire to endear herself to him through cuteness. Though had she ever, he wondered, desired to endear herself? Suddenly, he was sure that she had. And he'd failed to recognize it—and now it was too late: it was over because of the stupid thing he'd said. He'd messed it up. But why, after all, should he care? He had Connie! Connie, who was probably already waiting for him in the Accord, parked in the street outside the building with Morris in the back blathering on at an insane level of detail about making crafts at his daycare program or some subject equally mind-numbing and painful to respond to and just generally driving her nuts—the kid was on the spectrum, Stroud could swear, or had Asperger's or some such thing, but Connie refused to get him tested. According to Connie, the “label” would insidiously creep into their relationship with Morris, causing them to view him in an oversimplified and inaccurate way.

It was something they both had strong feelings about—Stroud was for doing the tests—but now was not the time to get annoyed about it all over again. A dark doomful feeling rose from Stroud's stomach into his throat. He tensed, expecting to see some new coldness in Ophelia's face, evidence of emotional inaccessibility. That's what, he knew, he would have seen in Connie's face after a similar slip-up. With Connie, it was either coldness or outright fury. The way Connie's eyes stared at him in that hostile, knowing way when he said something stupid! As if all her illusions about him had been suddenly and violently raked away. *Oh, so you want a nice neat little category to put him in? Is that it?* As if, just in the moment of his saying the stupid thing, whatever it happened to be, she were seeing him for the lumbering, pawing animal he was—her nose, nostrils in-drawn, looking somehow both betrayed and menacing.

But Ophelia laughed in her usual friendly, disarming way, and Stroud felt a sense of relaxation creep provisionally into his shoulders.

“Um, right? I assumed not.”

“Thanks,” Stroud said, grinning and wiping his hand across his forehead in what he meant to be a comical gesture of relief.

Ophelia gave him a puzzled look.

“Thanks for what?”

Stroud stared at her. The point seemed simple and straightforward: he was grateful that she wasn't mad at him. Why didn't she get it? If he'd said such a thing to Connie, they'd have spent days in an exhausting fight. But how could he explain this to Ophelia? Of course, there was no way to explain it—not without making Connie feel betrayed.

His phone vibrated and he reached into his pants pocket, glad for the interruption.

A ICE Connie Duchamp.

The mall. He'd forgotten.

In front of the K.B. Toys was a circle of black metal benches and potted tropical plants that Morris had been asking for several weeks to visit. It was one of his weird obsessions. He liked to wander among these plants, touching them and, to Stroud's embarrassment, sticking his face deep within their clusters of stiff green shoots and sniffing loudly.

Stroud silenced the phone and checked the time: it was almost ten past five. Connie was probably annoyed that he wasn't already out on the sidewalk. She was going to pick him up so they could beat at least some of the traffic. That morning, before he'd

left for work, she'd reminded him several times of this plan. Besides the plant circle, she wanted to return some clothes that her mother had sent for Morris and today, Connie had mentioned more than once over the past week, was the last day she could return them for credit.

"You don't have to keep telling me about the clothes and the credit," he'd said.

"It's not a big deal one way or the other. I do get paid at the end of each month. We can afford clothes."

"I wouldn't remind you, except that you don't hear half of the things I say, and the other half you forget."

"Whatever," he said, "you go on thinking that, since it's what you're going to think anyway, no matter what I don't remember or hear."

This comeback had been the best available to him before coffee, but it had left him annoyed with himself as well as with Connie, and he'd walked to work in a bitter mood.

It was understandable, he thought, that he'd forgotten about the mall, given all the drama with Ophelia and Mannheim. He'd been distracted. But Connie would not understand that, and he didn't think it would be a good idea to tell her about his disturbing feelings about Ophelia's abortion. But how else could he explain his lateness?

The phone buzzed again, and again Stroud silenced it.

He looked up at Ophelia.

"I just didn't mean to sound judgmental," he said, "that's all."

"Judgmental of what?"

At that moment, Mannheim came out of his office, helmeted, Spandexed, shouldering his bamboo-framed bicycle with its ultrathin disc tires. Immediately Stroud's eyes were drawn to the bike. He'd many times fantasized about owning a bamboo bike. He would fly to work every morning on the preternaturally light-yet-sturdy frame instead of trudging along. But there was no way to get such a bike without looking like he was sucking up to Mannheim.

"That's it for me," Mannheim said, hoisting the bike easily above his head, just shy of the ceiling. "Steve, don't forget to turn the lights out if you're the last to leave."

"Right," Stroud said, annoyed. Mannheim often gave Stroud this reminder. Someone had left the lights on once several weeks ago and, for some reason, Mannheim assumed it was him.

"The university still runs partly on coal," Mannheim said, not for the first time. "Don't want to use more than we have to."

"What's wrong with good old coal?" Stroud said.

Mannheim looked surprised. The handlebars of the bike bumped awkwardly into the wall behind him.

"Stroud's a joker," Ophelia put in.

"Right, I'm joking."

"I don't have to explain the greenhouse effect to you?" Mannheim said, lowering the bike.

"Of course not," Stroud said. "I really was only joking."

"Okay," Mannheim said. "Serious issue, though."

"I know. I agree. Serious issue."

Mannheim passed by them, heading for the door. Stroud turned back to Ophelia. He opened his mouth and the lights went out.

“I’m demonstrating,” Mannheim said. “The switch is over here by the door.”

“I know where the switch is,” Stroud said. “I’ll remember, I pwomith—promise.”

All of his life Stroud, when angry or nervous, had mispronounced words—stuttered, spoke in malformed consonants and vowels, lost entire syllables. This gave Connie a competitive edge when they argued: even though she always waited patiently, nostrils quivering, for him to finish articulating his points, Stroud sounded so ludicrous to himself that, as often as not, he surrendered, letting Connie have the last word.

The door to the hallway opened and closed. Mannheim was gone.

This job, Stroud thought, feeling as if his anger had propelled him into a state of intense lucidity, is a shit nothing job. What is wrong with me that this is my job?

Stroud and Ophelia were alone in the office. Stroud had slipped his phone back into his pocket; he now heard it buzzing again and felt it vibrating against his leg. Two calls meant Connie was pissed. What the hell was taking him so long? He slipped his hand into his pocket and silenced it again. At this point, he’d have to run through the hall and down the stairs if he wanted to be at the car by quarter past and running through the hall and down the stairs would mean, in all likelihood, running past Mannheim.

“I’m just going to finish up back there,” he told Ophelia, “and then I guess I’ll take off too. Have a little family trip to the mall today.”

He shrugged and raised his eyebrows in an expression of helplessness.

“Oh,” Ophelia said, “not into the mall?”

“Yeah,” Stroud said. “Not a mall guy.”

No. What had he said? Of course he hadn't meant *that*. He felt his face flushing and turned away.

"Does weirdo pwomith?" Ophelia said.

He'd hoped she hadn't noticed *pwomith*. He looked up, gave her what he intended to be a goofy, self-deprecating smile, faded through the doorway into the file room and squatted next to the open drawer of the cabinet he'd been working on.

In the other room, the telephone rang. It rang several times before Ophelia picked up.

"University of Florida Neuroscience, Dr. Fred Mannheim's office," she said.

"How may I help you?"

Stroud listened carefully. It had to be Connie. On the one hand, if she'd gotten to the point of calling the office phone, she was most likely in a state of fury. On the other hand, he could claim that his cell phone had died and he hadn't become aware of the time until she'd called the office, whereupon he'd immediately remembered about the mall and rushed downstairs. This was perhaps not a great excuse, but if he arrived at the car out of breath, waving his hands in apology, exasperated at his own absentmindedness, it just might sound convincing, especially if she was too angry to think straight.

He placed the unsorted folders neatly in a stack at the bottom of the open drawer where he would be able to find them easily the next day—all except one folder that had, for some reason, become separated from the others. This folder was lying on the floor, farther along the narrow space between the facing rows of gray metal cabinets, at the point where the file room opened up into a general storage space, in which were kept assorted boxes of paperwork and outdated machines shrouded in plastic dust covers.

Stroud stood up and moved toward this folder, but paused, standing over it. By his reckoning, Ophelia had answered the phone almost a minute ago but had said nothing beyond the greeting. What could Connie be up to? Had she instructed Ophelia to whisper? Was she trying to hook Ophelia into some feminine conspiracy, find out exactly what he'd been doing when she called his cell phone? That would be just like Connie, Stroud thought. Always had to know everything. So let her quiz Ophelia then, he thought. At worst, Connie would find out that he'd been talking to his boss and his coworker about energy conservation, and there was hardly anything to criticize in that. It was a serious issue.

He thought he heard, at low volume, giggling from the other room—Ophelia's giggling. She might have whispered "Stop!" He wasn't sure.

Not Connie then: there was no way Connie would be making Ophelia giggle. Pursing his lips thoughtfully, he bent down to pick up the stray folder. In the seconds before it happened, or began—the seconds in which he squatted down to retrieve this folder, grasped it by the fold, rose, turned back toward the open filing cabinet, nothing of the sort had been on his mind, at least no more so than usual. Maybe, if Stroud were to be completely honest with himself, *it* had been in the back of his mind. Maybe it was always in the back of his mind—but it certainly hadn't been, at that moment, in the front. If subjected to questioning on the matter, he could say in good conscience that it hadn't been in the front.

Ophelia materialized before him. Of course, as he knew, she had come out of office, but he'd been so absorbed in his task that he was startled by her appearance. That's what had kicked the whole thing off, he thought later—that feeling of surprise. It

had enveloped him in a sense of murky, slippery unreality, as if what was in fact happening were not really happening in the usual sense—as if the events that followed the moment of bending down to get the folder were not real in—he struggled, thinking back on that afternoon, to articulate the thought—in exactly the way that real things were real: in any case, the things they’d said and done seemed in retrospect to have a ghostly, hypothetical aspect to them, as if they ought not to count in the way words and actions usually counted.

Despite the giggling—or what Stroud had supposed was giggling—Ophelia looked on the verge of tears: her eyes were moist and downcast. He saw that, like him, she clutched a folder, a “forest green” one from last week’s supply order. Stroud himself had chosen that color because its earthy yet professional tone made him feel relaxed: a folder like that, he felt, couldn’t contain anything beyond his comprehension or control.

Ophelia seemed to be holding the folder out for him as if she were offering it to him or wanted him to look inside of it. Ted, he thought. It had been Ted on the phone. He was suddenly sure of this and felt a surge of hope—something had gone wrong with Ted: Perhaps Ted had hurt Ophelia’s feelings or maybe lied to her about something important? Perhaps Ted had acted in a cowardly, underhanded, disappointing way? Perhaps Ophelia would appreciate Stroud’s willingness to listen to the story of Ted’s misdeeds and even to engage in a serious conversation about the future of her relationship with Ted, assuming—he cautioned himself—she had one.

“Is something wrong?” he said.

Likewise fuzzy was his memory of Ophelia’s reply: had she really said, “Oh, Steve!”? In the days following he began to suspect that she might have said something

else—something he couldn't remember. But this uncertainty was characteristic of every attempt he made to summon a detailed memory of the moments leading up to...the thing that happened. When he tried to put the steps into a clear sequence, he was conscious of making things up, working from probability rather than from certainty. Had he committed an act willfully or had he merely found himself in a situation, the nature of which he did not, in the moment, immediately grasp—and so could not, as he might have been able to do under less murky circumstances, forestall the development of?

In rising from his bent-over position and moving toward Ophelia past the rows of filing cabinets, his intention, he was pretty sure, had been to comfort her—a natural, instinctive thing to want to do. And yet somehow, despite this innocent starting point, he had “found himself”—that slippery yet prophetic expression—pressing Ophelia against the cool bulky solidity of one of the filing cabinets. He recalled, after some seconds had passed, reaching out and touching the familiar, air-conditioned metal with his fingertips to confirm the reality of what was happening. The metal felt cool. Putting his nose to Ophelia's throat, he smelled deodorant, faint and artificially sweet.

Ophelia dropped the folder she was holding. He heard the spine of it hit the floor, and he heard the papers falling out of it and slide along the tiles.

He remembered also that, despite the surprising—to him—force with which he pressed Ophelia against the cabinet, his kisses were hesitant, apologetic. They asked her not to be upset with him for what he was, at that very moment, doing.

Ophelia, however, he realized only after a moment, was not angry with him. Instead, she was returning his kisses—she was forcefully, unreservedly returning his kisses. He felt, somehow, that their kisses signified forgiveness. But forgiveness for

what? For kissing her? That didn't make sense. For his terrible urges? No, he thought. With a sense of surprise, almost of elation, he realized that he was being forgiven for suppressing his urges, for suppressing the truest parts of himself—and for making himself miserable by doing so.

Stop suffering so much.

He got it now, he thought. He'd wasted so much of his life. But it didn't matter. For that too he was forgiven. If not by Ophelia—after all, he noted, she hadn't said a word—then by himself.

His cell phone buzzed.

“Hold on a second,” he said. He pulled it out of his pocket and turned it off, placed it on top of the file cabinet behind them.

In the next moment, Ophelia was everywhere, her lips approaching his face simultaneously from multiple directions, her hands on his arms, his back, the insides of his legs. She was smiling as she kissed him—as if, it seemed, out of sheer delight.

“This is nice,” she said.

“I love you,” he said.

“Damn,” she said, “Strood.”

“Stop calling me Strood,” he said.

“Strood, Strood, Strood.”

He pushed up the dull green skirt, slipped his hand along the smooth unfamiliar flesh of her thigh and then along the elastic lining of her underwear, which, under his fingertips, felt threaded, slightly bumpy. The sensations, the curves, were new and alien, different from Connie's. Ophelia was already emitting a kind of low-volume moan—

wow, he thought, wow, but the *wow* had an echoey quality. It seemed to come from far away. It was someone else's wow, the wow of a man in a dimly lit room full of dust-covered lab equipment awkwardly yet feverishly embracing a woman he barely knew. This man who was in the scene unfolding in some remoteness of Stroud's mind slid his fingers down and found Ophelia deliciously, alarmingly, wet and open. For a moment, he panicked. He pulled his hand away. Something was wrong. It was too much, too easy. What the fuck was he doing?

Ophelia looked up at him in confusion, brow furrowed. Her glasses had somehow been removed—where had they gone? Finding them, he thought, might help clarify this situation. He had an urge to hunt around for them. But she took his wrist firmly, gripping it firmly in his fingers, and guided his hand back to the place it had been.

Stroud pressed against her, and Ophelia tilted her head up and bit the side of his neck. Stroud was hurt and annoyed, but he let her do it. She held on to his neck with her teeth.

How long had all this gone on? Five minutes? Ten? Stroud couldn't tell. Stroud thought of Connie down in the car and needles of sweat broke out on his forehead. The muscles of his calves and shoulders ached. The side of his neck hurt sharply where Ophelia's teeth remained sunk into it. However, even though both of them were moving hardly at all, he sensed, he knew, that Ophelia was on the brink. It was obvious. Her throat and her chest pulsed with her breath, even as her teeth remained clamped on his neck.

Unable to stop himself, Stroud compared Ophelia to Connie, whom, lately, he would have to stroke for at least half an hour before she was ready—a tiresome, anxiety-

ridden procedure that filled him with doubt. Ophelia's responsiveness, by contrast, made him feel delightfully competent, in total control. As he gazed at her face, a look almost of relief passed across it and then—it seemed the most gratifying facial expression he'd ever witnessed—her eyes nearly crossed, her gaze turning inward, focused on some hidden source of pleasure (it was not altogether different from the noodle-eating look, some part of Stroud's brain noted)—and she began to shiver silently, as if caught in a draft, beginning to make a kind of low growling sound. Stroud felt as if he had stumbled into some clearing where grazed a bright mythical beast that would bolt the moment it sensed his presence. Cocooned in self-absorption, Ophelia was beautiful, her chin sharp and glistening with sweat, lips curled downward in a small thoughtful frown. And who was it, he thought, who had transported her to this state of animal-like pleasure, elevated her to this exceeding beauty? Who had manipulated her so skillfully and with such ease? He had done it. It was not some stranger, nor was it Ted: it was Steve Stroud.

He felt a creeping sense of triumph. Connie's face, even at the most extreme moments, was tinged always with self-awareness, the nose, solid, probing, a monument to the eternal persistence of her personality. Once or twice the nostrils had flexed outward, but he'd never been able to make that nose surrender. He'd never—in years of patient, thoughtful, other-directed lovemaking—reduced Connie to a growling animal state. It was frustrating, demoralizing. With Connie, even if she orgasmed, he nevertheless felt as if he'd left something critical unaccomplished. She grunted, rolled over. Always it was he who cried out in inarticulate pained bewilderment, hoping she would join him, knowing she wouldn't.

Connie always won.

Stroud too began to growl too—low and embarrassed at first, then in a louder, less restrained way. But Ophelia seemed not to notice. He grew uneasy. Her self-containment excluded him: he felt as if he were merely an instrument she were using on herself. Little dreaming expressions flitted across her face, and they seemed to him like characters in a language he couldn't decipher.

For a moment he had the dizzy sensation that Ophelia was big, very big, and that he, Stroud, was just a ghostly wisp, a nonentity, dangling from her. To assert his significance, he pushed his crotch against her thigh, pressing her harder into the filing cabinets. The cabinet tilted backwards, and Stroud changed his growl to a caveman grunt. This sounded calculated and unnatural, he thought, but the sound was obscured by the banging of the file cabinet against the wall and the sound of the cell phone sliding down along the top, falling behind the cabinet, crashing onto the floor—and anyway, he told himself encouragingly, it didn't matter, he could be natural, he could be calculated, embarrassed, self-conscious, triumphant, anxious, distraught. None of it was going to have an effect on Ophelia. The real work was going on in her head, where she was transforming even his mistakes into her own stepping stones. He couldn't fail, he could only succeed. It was a completely unique situation, unprecedented.

Except.

He was trying desperately to decide whether to unzip himself and put it in. Would that be okay? he wondered anxiously—or would it be going too far? Dour faces from Human Resources floated through his mind. Human Resources, he thought vaguely, would probably not want him to put it in.

What were the parameters here?

He didn't know.

Ophelia had been on the brink for some time now, but still she had not gone over it—she had not plunged to the other side. She needed a last push. If he didn't put it in, would he not be going far enough? Was she waiting for it, waiting for him to invade this sanctum of self-absorption she'd retreated to? Would she be unsatisfied, disappointed if he didn't put it in? That thought—the thought that Ophelia would not be satisfied—he realized, hovered, a thrum of anxiety, behind his tenuous feelings of personal grandeur. It threatened to ruin everything. It was the worst thought of all. For Christ's sake, Ophelia couldn't be disappointed—he could not let that happen. He would be dogged forever by a sense of failure.

But he was too nervous and uncertain to try it. There was the definitional problem, for one thing: he was vaguely aware that, if he went in, he would not be able to argue later on that he hadn't had sex with Ophelia instead of having committed the probably no less damning in Connie's eyes (not that he would ever tell her—of course, idiot, he reminded himself) but at least objectively lesser crime of having merely made out with Ophelia. And then—well, Ophelia probably had an IUD or else was on birth control—or—he imagined Ophelia sitting on an examination table, clothed in a greenish paper smock, wearing a kind of neutral expression...if it came to it, she would just do *that* again. But the idea depressed him, somehow. Not that he had a problem with it!

He succeeded in pushing away the Ophelia-in-a-smock image, but his mood was nevertheless on the verge of being ruined. He began to panic. He was making mistakes now, little off-rhythm movements. He was about to screw everything up, he knew.

But Ted, he thought. Ted had gone in.

A stiffening bolt of jealousy shot urgently through him. He was excited. Hurriedly, he undid his belt and pulled down the zipper. Although he had no idea what Ted looked like—he'd only vaguely imagined his sneering thin face as he talked to him on the phone or read his editorial notes—he saw this vague, thin-faced man from his imagination standing there watching them—then, although he tried to suppress the thought, he imagined Ted participating, positioned behind Ophelia.

On a sudden impulse, he put his head down and began to whisper this fantasy into Ophelia's ear.

"Wait, what?" she said, removing her teeth from his neck, her eyes opening, and, at that moment, Stroud came, grimacing as a sharp pleasure cut through his being.

He was done. He could do no more, he knew. Panting—straining his ears in hope of hearing Ophelia panting too—he stepped backwards. Ophelia remained leaning against the file cabinets, staring at him.

"That was unexpected," she said. Then she smiled brightly, leaned forward and gave him a peck on the cheek. "You better go wash your hand. Wait till I tell Ted!"

He ignored this last sentence, telling himself that he would process it later, at the earliest available opportunity. For now he was filled with an anxiety to move, to grab his backpack and run down the stairs and outside to Connie. But this anxiety was so overwhelming that he was paralyzed. And one way or the other, he needed to know. He stared at Ophelia, trying to think of how to frame the question.

"Did you—" he began.

She laughed, putting her hand to her chest.

“Are you joking again, Strood? Oh, don’t look like that! I mean, all right, almost maybe—”

Abruptly she turned her head. There had been a sound, and Stroud realized only after a long confused moment that someone had knocked on the office door, three or four solid impatient knocks.

“Beppi,” Ophelia said, “the grad student. He stays in C lab until pretty late.”

“No,” Stroud shook his head. “It’s Connie—my partner.”

“Oh, right, the partner. I’d rather not see her right now.”

But they heard the metal doorknob turning, heard the door opening.

“Hello?”

It was Connie’s voice.

“Anyone there?”

Ophelia slipped around the corner, and Stroud knew she’d gone to hide among the lab equipment. Quickly he turned away from the door, fastened his belt, zipped his pants, checked for stains—yes, there was one but he thought his pants might be just dark enough to hide it—squatted down and began to gather the papers that had fallen from the folder Ophelia had been holding. They were scattered around the floor, between the rows of cabinets.

“Is this where daddy works?” Morris said.

Connie didn’t answer; neither did Stroud.

He heard them coming into the room.

Stroud did not want to look up from the papers. He saw himself, a kid about Morris’s age, accused of some crime, his father standing before him grimly

reprimanding. The kid version of Stroud, too, had kept his face down, tried to hide it. But there was no way he could stop the treasonous upcurling of his lips. His mouth, it seemed, manufactured evidence of crimes he hadn't committed, motivations that had never been within him. His eyes were bright with a delight that he did not feel—or, at least, delight was not all he felt—no, the delight that filled his body, like a bright balloon straining against his insides, came from a source other than himself. It did not come from Steve, the good child of his parents, who was conscientious about helping his father vacuum out the car every day when his father came home from work and parked in the garage, even though there was never any dirt in the car to vacuum, Steve who also always helped carry the dishes from the table to the—

“Do you enjoy getting punished?” his father would say. “Is that why you’re smiling like that? Is that why you stole your mother’s ring? So we’d punish you and you could enjoy it?”

“No” was all Stroud could say. Frightened of his father, knowing he could say nothing that would counter the false evidence of his face, he tried to explain himself: “That’s not why. I took it because—”

But when he tried to think of why he’d taken it, why he’d waited till no one was around to snatch the ring from the little soft brown box on his mother’s dresser, he encountered, within himself, a blank pale whiteness through which he could see nothing. An impulse—obscurely akin to the bright alien delight within him—had driven him to take the ring. He would, he’d told himself, give it back to his mother as a gift, a gift from him—but that didn’t make sense. Was it somehow true? Even now, as an adult, he was uncertain. The theft had been discovered before he’d had a chance to give it back. He’d

been lying on his bed, turning the ring around in his fingers, gazing at the facets of the transparent jewel when his father came into the room.

No, he'd realized, this ring-taking was not something that could be explained. No explanation he could think of would sound believable...He knew that here had been some story the whole thing had been bound up in, but he couldn't unravel it, couldn't see the individual parts of it and how they fit together, not with his father staring down at him.

"Get away from me," his father said. "I don't want to see that face. That's not a face anyone should look at."

But Stroud insisted on standing before his father, trying again and again to explain himself.

His mother was more understanding--then again, Stroud had more than once considered, perhaps she was not.

"Relax, Cole," she'd said to his father, "he can't help it. He's just smiling because he's uncomfortable."

And she took him away from his father, they went outside or to another room, Stroud didn't remember, and maybe she sang him a song as she often did. He thought now of one of her songs. He sang it to himself in his head as he reached for Ophelia's papers and raked them across the floor to the open folder. When he was a kid, he'd thought it was his mother's favorite song, but of course that couldn't have been true either. It was a song that a million mothers sang to a million children:

The bear went over the mountain,

The bear went over the mountain,

*The bear went over the mountain,
To see what he could see.*

“I’m going to work too!” Morris said. And Stroud looked up to see Morris falling to his knees, sliding across the floor, and reaching for nearby paper—a grayish-red, double-folded service invoice from Ricoh.

“Daddy, we’re going to go see the jungle!” Morris said.

“Sure,” said Stroud.

He looked up at Connie, who was staring down at him strangely. “I forgot,” he said.

“What’s been going on here?”

Connie was standing in the doorway as if uncertain whether to enter, the door propped open against her shoulder. Her nose was working. He thought he saw her sniff, then she pulled a tissue out of her pocket and blew her nose into it.

“I called you like eight times,” she said, putting the bunched up ticket into her coat pocket. “It’s pouring out. Traffic’s going to be awful.”

Stroud put a finger to his lips—*shhh*—and shook his head at Connie, rolling his eyes in the direction of Mannheim’s office. Then he pointed behind her to the hallway and gestured for her to go out of the room.

Connie narrowed her eyes at him, he thought, suspiciously, but he waved even more vigorously and with the other hand pointed in the direction of Mannheim’s office.

He stood, took the Ricoh invoice from Morris, nodded at him.

“Thanks for the help, bud,” he whispered, grinning.

He put the invoice in the folder, closed the folder, placed it carefully on top of the file cabinet and raised his index finger at Connie. *One second.* Then he went into the office to his desk, checked his email, made sure a spreadsheet he'd been working on had been saved, shut down his computer, and gathered his backpack and sneakers. Behind him, he heard the door open and close. When he turned back toward the file room, he was relieved to see that the ploy had worked: Connie had taken Morris out into the hall.

“What was that all about?” she said, as he joined them, pulling the door closed behind him.

“Never mind,” he whispered. “I’ll tell you when we get outside.”

“Don’t you have to turn off the light?” she said, as they walked away. “I thought Mannheim was on you for that.”

“That asshole,” Stroud whispered angrily, “I’m leaving it on.”

At the top of the stairs he said, “You go ahead—I have to use the bathroom.”

She made an exasperated noise.

“The parking garage is like five dollars a minute.”

He escaped down the hall to the bathroom where, in isolation, washing his hands carefully with perfumed antibacterial soap, he spent several minutes gloating over his deed. The other feelings would come, he knew—the guilt and so on: there was no avoiding it, and he fully expected to be crushed by remorse. But he wanted to make his sense of triumph, fragile and incomplete as it was—

...all right, almost maybe...

--last just a minute or two before everything came crashing down on him. He grinned at his face in the mirror above the sink. For a moment, victory glinted in his rakish eye.

5.

A sign announced that Boston Market was being replaced by a frozen yogurt shop. Connie bought tuna subs, Morris's second-favorite mall food, and returned to the "jungle" to find Morris squatting on the back of a bench, singing "Jungle! Jungle! I wanna be in the jungle! I wanna pee in the jungle!"

"It's not a real jungle," Stroud argued.

Morris bunny-hopped down from the bench.

"It *is* a real jungle."

"No, it's not. I'm telling you. But whatever, you can think what you want."

"I'm telling *you*," Morris said, bunny-hopping aggressively toward Stroud.

She pointed to a box next to the bench.

"What's that?"

Stroud looked at her impatiently. "It's a keyboard. As the picture you see there on the box would have it."

"How much?"

"I know you think it's a piece of shit. It's not a piece of shit, exactly. The keys light up, so kids can learn. He could use it to get some of his energy out. It would be a good quality-time thing."

His eyes begged her to relieve him of his impulse-buy guilt. She decided not to argue. In his slightly guilt-ridden state, he appeared to be a basically good-natured daddy, shoulders slumped, a bit at the end of the day's rope, virtuously putting in a little overtime at the mall with the family. He was probably imagining, she thought, a bright new future of gratitude-inspiring father-son QT-ing centered on the magical new toy. The idea, she guessed, was that Morris would appreciate Stroud's patient willingness to pass on his musical knowledge.

She suddenly remembered he'd recently gone off tuna because he'd suddenly become afraid it would give him cancer. She saw that he was suppressing—a bit conspicuously, she thought—an impulse to remind her of this. He removed the sub from the paper bag, spread the wrapper in his lap and blinked a couple of times in a confused way that she remembered, at one time or another, having found attractive. Back in the college band days when the confused look would be qualified—turned into a playful affectation—by the easy confidence of his hands on keyboard or bass or whatever. *The confidence of his hands*. Had she really been such a cheeseball? “Steve can play literally anything,” she remembered gushing at some point, probably drunk, reminding herself of her mother. Everyone in her mother's social circle, it seemed, existed at some extreme of virtue or accomplishment: “His own column in *The Wall Street Journal!*,” “One of the very few who saw the whole thing coming!,” “The biggest collection of Native American headdresses in the country!” But undeniably, she thought, Steve could play: New Wave, krautrock, whatever, anything, as long as it was a cover or imitation. His own stuff? Working on it. Coming soon. “He's a bit of a perfectionist,” she would tell people.

Cruel as she knew the thought was, she couldn't help but draw an unflattering then-and-now contrast: Hungrily confronting the pillowy sandwich with its aggressive splurge of creamy toxic fish, Stroud looked perplexed, unsure how to play it. No longer skinny, no longer interested in getting up on stage, he seemed himself to be a pale eruption of angry, defeated flesh: pink-cheeked and pudgy, with a smeary, tense mouth and a loose strip of fat sloping from his chin into the shapeless collar of an ugly, crosshatched, button-down Eddie Bauer shirt that his mother had sent him when he told her he'd been hired to work in Mannheim's office.

Between increasingly voracious bites, he rattled on bitterly about his day at the office.

"Sorry about all that hush hush business," he said. "The big guy gave me too much shit to do again. I was so mad I couldn't trust myself to talk out loud. What happened with that folder, in fact, was I threw it across the room. I mean, it's okay, no one saw me do it. But it's not like I make \$250,000 a year is my point."

Two-hundred-fifty-thousand was what Mannheim made. Stroud had looked it up on the State of Florida website and had brought the fact up several times, bitterly.

"I can't be responsible for an infinite number of things. I just don't have the incentive."

"Why don't you tell him to stop? Just tell him he's giving you too much to do."

Stroud looked exasperated, chewed on. Swallowing, he said, "I gave him a look today. I was like I'm already in the middle of doing 35 things that you asked me to do."

"You said that?"

“I gave him a look that said it. I can’t exactly just come out and say whatever I think, right? We do need me to keep this job, right? For various reasons?”—he glanced at Morris, who was kneeling before a plant pot, his face in it—“our child, your degree program.”

“I got a call from Ophelia,” she said.

Stroud stopped chewing; his eyes widened. She’d been about to go on, but his look stopped her.

“What?” she said.

“You tell me. What did she say?”

“She has your phone. In fact, she called me from it. She said you forgot it—you left it in the office.”

“Oh,” Stroud said. He removed a hand from the tuna sub and patted his pockets. “I guess so. I was in a rush to get out. I was all flustered because I felt guilty about forgetting the mall.”

“She said she’d leave it on your desk.”

“Nice of her to call,” Stroud mumbled. He took another bite of sandwich.

* * *

“That plant is my friend,” Morris said, pointing to a small, hunched palm tree. “I don’t want to leave her.”

“We can come back next week and see her,” Connie said, “I promise.”

“Can I talk to her over the computer?” Morris said.

Stroud said, “I might be able to arrange something.”

“Goodbye, plant. I’ll see you on YouTube.”

On the way out of the mall, Stroud glanced at the necklaces in the jewelry store window display. Don’t be stupid, he told himself. He couldn’t buy her things. It was over. Besides, he might get her the wrong one, he might disappoint her. When he was a kid, his father would take him, on Sunday afternoons, to estate sales. He would watch his father stand stiffly, politely, in his good shoes and tucked in shirt, before folding tables, across which were spread necklaces of silver or gold, earrings or brooches inset with turquoise or onyx—or peer into precious little teakwood boxes or the top drawers of dressers. Stroud wondered: what were adults that they’d want these things? It was dead people stuff, the recent deaths of the dead caught in it, just beginning to decay and to float away to—wherever dead people went—a process that, the kid version of Stroud vaguely imagined, would unfold slowly forever, the dead spirit caught in the necklace or brooch never entirely escaping. Stroud, on being handed ornaments by his father for inspection, held them away from his face, thinking they would stink of dead person, but they never did: they had only the neutral, watery smell of metal.

“Do you think she’ll like this one?” his father would say.

Stroud would shrug his shoulders. Even as a kid he could see his mother disliked the things his father picked out for her at these sales. She preferred simple, modern jewelry, nothing heavily ornamented, and plain, solid, somewhat somber colors. Sometimes his mother would put one of these garish dead-person things on and pretend to like it. Stroud saw the tension in her lips and felt ashamed of and sorry for his father, who seemed oblivious to his mother’s distaste. She’d wear the thing—he remembered

one in particular: a tentacled bug with some kind of blue glass in it clinging absurdly to her chest—for a few days, and then it would disappear. Did only he notice these disappearances, Stroud wondered? Did his father see too? Probably not. His father's eyes were shrouded in webs of fantasy and abstraction. Reality was not his thing.

* * *

Connie didn't want to tell Stroud about TJ's calls. She figured he'd be jealous and suspicious and would harry her about her feelings for TJ. It would be frustrating and draining. But, on the drive home from the mall, she forced herself to recount the conversation, leaving out the part about her residual feelings. It was very dark out, still raining hard, the rain thrumming loudly against the window, and something about these things made it easier to talk, as if TJ belonged to one reality but now she was in another, walled off by darkness and water.

To her surprise, Stroud was dismissive.

"The old charmer's not such a bad guy—he just has some impulse control—"

Morris cut in.

"Daddy, guess what? I'm gonna be crazy!"

"Morris," Stroud said, "Let's just be quiet now. It's sleepy time."

"Being crazy! Being crazy!"

"He can sense that you're upset about something," Connie said, trying not to sound accusatory.

“I’m not upset about anything—I mean, I hate my job, I hate my life, I guess, but that was hours ago.”

“What?”

“Daddy, I can sense that you’re upset about something.”

“Whatever,” Stroud said. “Go to sleep or no light-up keyboard tomorrow.”

“I don’t care about the light-up keyboard,” Morris said.

“Of course you don’t,” Stroud said angrily. “But you will care about it tomorrow—because it’s a really cool keyboard. I’ll teach you some songs on it.”

Suddenly, Stroud twisted around in his seat. Glancing in the rear view mirror, Connie saw that Morris had managed to get one arm out from under the car seat strap. He’d then maneuvered himself sidewise and was attempting to free the other arm.

“Stay in your seat!” Stroud said.

He grabbed Morris’s wrists and forced his arms back under the car seat straps. Then he put his head down, looking for something at the base of the seat, and she saw that he was yanking on the pull strap, trying to tighten the belts, which wouldn’t move, she knew, until he’d depressed the harness release mechanism, a metal lever hidden behind a fold of fabric and difficult to see in the dark.

Finally, he grunted softly, with vague satisfaction, and she guessed he’d figured it out.

She became conscious of the wide strip of Route 441 unfolding into darkness, speckled by infrequent lamps, edged on each side by low shadowy vegetation.

The exit was coming up.

She searched the radio for soft classical music or jazz.

“Do you think we should drive around until he goes to sleep?” she said.

This was a way of asking whether he wanted to “make out,” as they both called it, later.

He didn’t answer, though she sensed that he’d heard her.

“It’s too tight!” Morris said.

“Stay. Like that. It. Makes. You. Safe,” Stroud said, then he pulled himself back around into his own seat.

He was breathing heavily, as if he’d been running.

“What’d you say?” he said.

She pretended not to hear him. He didn’t repeat the question.

In less than a minute Morris was banging on the window with his fist.

6.

Connie sat down on the couch beside Stroud’s feet and closed her eyes. Stroud, laptop perched on his stomach, paused the documentary he was watching, *Ten Realistic Ways Human Life Might End*. On the screen, a gamma ray was frying a large slice of the Earth black. No surviving that. Fortunately, after the gamma ray, there were three other apocalyptic scenarios to go—plenty to become absorbed in, if only Stroud could have a little quiet time with the laptop. For a week Stroud been waiting for an opportunity to watch this documentary, which Mannheim had mentioned approvingly, and now, on Friday evening, he thought he’d finally have time to relax. Morris was in his bedroom, watching his “friend,” the mall tree, on YouTube—Connie having, to Stroud’s surprise

and annoyance, gone back to the mall to film ten minutes of the tree on her phone, a four-hour loop of which video she'd uploaded to YouTube. But no, instead of losing himself in this documentary for a well-deserved hour or so, he would have to listen to Connie fret, yet again, about her overdue Shakespeare paper. At this point, the final was due in only another week, and still she hadn't touched the midterm.

Stroud became aware that he wasn't wearing pants. He retracted his feet. He'd been walking around the apartment in his underwear, a habit he knew Connie considered slovenly. He'd meant to put his pants back on when she came home, but when he heard her come in the front door at the bottom of the stairs with Morris, he hadn't remembered. Or maybe, he thought, he'd neglected the pants on purpose, out of passive-aggression. Connie was always telling him he was doing passive-aggressive things, and he was always denying it. Giving up on the documentary, closing the laptop, he peered along the length of the couch, assessing his legs with an attitude of brutal realism. Their hairiness satisfied him, but they were fatter and paler, less muscular—despite all his walking back and forth to and from Mannheim's office—than he imagined when he wasn't looking at them, and he pulled the blue folded blanket off the back of the couch to hide them. Poking out from beneath the end of this were his feet. The toenails were dirty and needed to be clipped. Was this too passive-aggression? he wondered. No, he replied, distractedness. He admitted to himself that he was in love, and love was distracting. Though usually love wasn't distracting in that particular way, he thought, lovers being stricter about hygiene, on average, than those who'd forgotten all about love and drifted into a groove.

Connie got up again and began to pace the room back and forth. Stroud followed her with his eyes. She would get annoyed at him, he knew, if he looked less than totally engaged in her monologue or failed to chime in on cue with a sympathetic comment indicating that he fully understood the many important nuances of her frustration. Pacing the room in an unvarying path—he watched her bare feet, which seemed to him somehow larger and flatter than usual—she rattled on: The goddamn putrid paper, she said, the necessity of sitting down and doing it, the horrid thing, always there in the background, hanging over her, poisoning her life, making it impossible to think clearly about anything else. And now the moment had come—she had to do it: so little time was left. Within weeks, she would have to hand it in. She still had no idea what to say about *Hamlet*. Really, hadn't everything about all of those characters been said? Gertrude, Yorick, the Ghost, Hamlet himself? She couldn't even think of which one to focus on. And, anyway, what was the point of it? To say anything about any of it was just to say something because she had to say something because somebody—Prof. Regan in this case—was making her say something, because, for some reason, she'd asked, by signing up for a master's degree program, to be made to say things that she had no real desire to say. Absurd. Graduate school was just another exercise in being an obedient, rule-abiding person. And why obey? But there was always some reason to obey, wasn't there? Whatever would we do without the feeling that we were obliged to obey somebody or something? She laughed cynically and blew her nose into a tissue. Squashed cream-colored wads of tissue littered the room.

Why, Stroud wondered, couldn't she just throw her used tissues in the trash instead of leaving them scattered everywhere so he'd have to go around later picking

them up? From the couch, he half-listened to her rant on, tapping his index finger agitatedly on his knee. Maybe, he thought, he could interject with a joke about how he wanted his feet scratched? No, bad idea. When Connie was on a roll like this, there was no way to distract her or to get her to shut up. He would have to hunker down and ride it out.

Whatever she said in the paper, Connie went on, would certainly sound stupid because it would be stupid, and Professor Regan, whom she respected, who obviously loved Shakespeare so much, was so passionate about teaching even though many of the students in the class made the dumbest, the most demoralizingly insipid comments imaginable, comments that made Connie flush with embarrassment. She was not one of these idiotic people, she wanted Prof. Regan to know. Prof. Regan should expect better of her—did, she suspected, expect better of her. Prof. Regan knew that Connie was, at minimum, a few cuts above the other students in terms of talent and intellectual ability. She would not, she could not, disappoint Prof. Regan by handing in some crappy paper that said nothing new or interesting. The disappointment in Prof. Regan's eyes! She could see it. But God, she went on, how pathetic, how small, to want Prof. Regan to think she was smarter than the other students, all of whom, she knew, had handed in their papers weeks ago and moved on with their lives, like normal fucking well-adjusted human beings. Why, she asked, was she so unable to live her life without not only the approval but the enthusiastic approval of some authority figure? She began to list and describe the many approval-withholding authority figures in her life, starting with her mother.

Stroud nodded at Connie. At a pause, he pointed out that Connie's father, likewise, never approved of anything Connie did, any of the choices she made: Stroud himself, in fact, was an example of a choice neither of Connie's parents approved of. But, as he helped Connie along this line of thought, in his mind Stroud saw Ophelia. For the last week, Ophelia had given him a big, sly, happy grin every morning when he arrived (she was now always there first, as if she didn't like to think of him showing up to a dark lonely office). Occasionally, when Mannheim wasn't looking, she ruffled his hair in a good-humored way, as if he were a pet or a kid. She'd even taken to bringing him his mug of morning coffee...and with three creamers, the way he liked it. Sometimes she'd even swipe his empty mug from his desk, wash it out in the bathroom sink, and bring him a fresh cup. It was great. He wanted to swipe and wash her mug in return, but the idea made him feel a bit shy—or was it guilty? He couldn't be held responsible for the affection she showed him, but it wouldn't work the other way around, would it? Incredibly, she'd told Ted what they'd done and Ted, she said, had laughed! He'd gotten a big kick out of Stroud's fantasy. This, Stroud thought, was incredible. How could it be? The gossipy, chuckly phone calls with Ted continued as usual, each one giving Stroud a pang of confused jealousy.

Despite this happy outcome, Stroud had been haunted for days—since the Event in the storage room—by a strange buzzing of his nerves, a pointless signaling.

Suddenly he straightened and stopped tapping his knee. Had Ophelia, he wondered, ever had a moment of finding Mannheim attractive? It was hard to imagine, but yet, disturbingly, not impossible. Mannheim and Ophelia had worked together for a whole year before he'd got there—in close quarters too, the office suite being not large,

just the two medium-sized offices and the file room slash storage area. He wanted to ask Connie whether she thought Mannheim could be considered to the slightest extent attractive. He knew what her answer would be. They had a routine: He would ask whether Connie found this or that man attractive, and she would answer in a surprised tone, as if she were taken aback that Stroud could think she might possibly find the man in question attractive. True, he could never be absolutely sure that she was telling the truth, but it was comforting to hear the no anyway, especially when, if pushed, she would amplify her response by producing a detailed list of the man's—usually satisfyingly numerous—unattractive qualities. The closest Connie came to identifying a man as attractive was to admit that the man was “charming” or “sort of charming” or that she could see how another woman of this or that type—definitely not the type she was—might find him charming. For his part, Stroud never mentioned to Connie finding a woman attractive or charming—why make her jealous?—though occasionally he experienced the disquieting thought that if the world was as full for Connie of “sort of charming to a certain type” men as it was for him of averagely attractive women like Ophelia, then he really didn't know Connie very well at all in a certain way—in fact, it was possible that a vast chunk of Connie's mind was inaccessible to him, off limits. Still, he found it hard to imagine that Connie found many men attractive: she was extremely picky about everything, and men, he'd always thought, were no exception. If her surprised refusals were designed to avoid conflict or to make him feel secure, she was, he thought, doing a great job of playing them off.

He was on the verge of cutting into the overdue paper monologue to initiate the of-course-he's-not-attractive routine when a thought occurred to him. He sat up, a cold

tingling sensation sinking through his body. It couldn't have been, he thought, Mannheim who had—no—done *it*—to Ophelia?

He looked up. Connie had stopped pacing. She was standing in the middle of the room, looking at him strangely.

“What?” he said irritably.

No, he thought, he was being ridiculous, paranoid—it couldn't be—

“Steve,” she said, “why did Ophelia call my phone to say you'd left yours at work? I'm talking about last week. You remember—when we went to the mall.”

“Of course I remember. What do you mean?”

“I don't know. It just seems strange. I mean, why didn't she just send you an email or something? Wouldn't that have been simpler?”

Stroud had anticipated this question days ago. The corners of his mouth turned down thoughtfully.

“Couldn't tell you,” he said, shrugging. “But maybe she thought I'd want to turn around and come back to the office to get the phone, and it would take me a while to check my email and get her message, especially since I didn't have my phone to check it on.”

“Right. That makes sense. Except that she didn't call until after six o'clock, and by then you would have probably been at home anyway, as far as she knew. There would have been no 'turning around.'”

“She knew we were going to the mall,” Stroud said. “I meant she probably thought I'd want to stop by the office on the way back from the mall—rather than go straight home.”

Stroud paused. Fuck. That was a mistake. He could hear the tumblers clicking.

“How did she know we were going to the mall?”

“I mentioned it to her.”

“But I thought you forgot about it.”

“I did forget,” Stroud said. “I must have muffed—mentioned—it to her in the morning and then forgot about it lawyer.”

He had to calm himself. Words were turning against him.

“The morning—you don’t remember when you mentioned it to her, what time of day?”

“Why would I remember a thing like that? Who cares?”

“It wasn’t that long ago,” Connie said. “It was only last week.”

“Okay,” Stroud said. “Let’s if I can remurmur.”

He closed his eyes, cocked his head, was silent. He opened his eyes.

“No, I don’t remember specially. Dam nit. Specifically. I just know I morphed—mentioned—it. Or at least I thought mentioned it. Maybe I didn’t gratify it. Maybe I just had it in my head that she knew we were having a ball. At the mall.”

She sat down on the couch next to him, very close. She turned to look at him.

“And Steve,” she said. “Why did you want us to be quiet before we left the office? Was that so Mannheim wouldn’t hear what we were saying?”

Then her voice rose slightly in pitch, becoming more tense.

“You couldn’t talk freely about your feelings about what had gone on that day, all the work Mannheim had so unfairly given you, because Mannheim would hear?”

Her eyes were boring into him now. He had to stop himself from shrinking back against the arm of the couch. He was mystified. His explanation for the shushing seemed reasonable enough, he thought. He couldn't think where she was going.

"I think I said as much already, didn't I?"

"And the lights," she said. "You were going to leave them on all night because you were angry at Mannheim, wasn't that it?"

He shrugged. "I know it's kind of blossoming—immature."

She shook her head slowly.

"God," she said, "I'm such an idiot."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't make me spell it out. It's too painful. I hate watching you hide it. I hate it, I hate it. It's so degrading."

"I still don't know—"

But he did know. He saw it clearly enough. A small mistake. He'd been talking fast. Guilt radiated through his nerves, and his scalp broke out in needles of moisture. He wanted to say it, he wanted to confess. But he could not. He simply could not say the words, even though everything, he suddenly knew, hung on just that.

"And did you not know, when you explained to me that you were too angry to turn out the lights, who *was* still there in the office?"

He looked at her blankly, shook his head in denial.

She put her face in her hands, and after a moment he realized she was crying.

"Damn," she said. "Damn, damn."

He reached out and touched her shoulder. The Kate Bush t-shirt she was wearing had a familiar, soft, worn-thin feel, her skin almost visible beneath the gray fabric. He said gently, “I’m sorry, Connie, I just don’t—”

But the crying was over. It hadn’t lasted long. She stood up and turned to stare down at him with distaste.

Then her phone rang. He watched her reach into the pocket of her jeans, pull it out, put it to her ear, listen.

“No,” she said into the phone. She looked at Stroud—looked, for a second, he thought, as if she were going to say something further, address some remark to him, something that would really cap things off. But instead she turned and left. He watched her walk out of the room, across the hall, heard her go down the stairs, heard her pause at the bottom of the stairs to slip her shoes on and then he heard the front door open and close.

Stroud sat for a few minutes on the couch. Then he got up and went to the kitchen table, turned on the light-up keyboard. He could think of some way out of it, he knew. There had to be a way, something Connie had overlooked—an ambiguity. Just give him a single good ambiguity. If he could relax a bit he could think of one, he was sure.

As he ran his fingers over them, the keys glowed red, purple, and green. Stroud tossed off a few chipper riffs, but soon the sound began to slow and darken. The image of blurring stars from the documentary’s black hole scenario—scenario number 6—had given him a vague idea for a faint, echoey piece, and he wanted to pin it down before it escaped him. It would be like wandering through crystal caverns, it would get at some

spiritual-mathematical thing that was out there. It would express—it would express something he wanted Ophelia to know about himself. It would be competent and impressive. Ophelia would be impressed. Mannheim might be very smart, but he was no musician. He couldn't—

Stroud gave up. He didn't feel like playing. He'd played the same riffs before—they weren't new, he knew where they'd go. Tragic, he thought, that this piece of cheap plastic was the only musical equipment he owned. All else sold to pay bills—keyboards, synthesizers, drums, guitars, amps—equipment enough for a band that, over the years he'd been in Gainesville hoping to get it on the psych-surf scene, had never quite come together. He'd watched young guys, college students, retuning his guitars and fucking with his settings, squatting in the storage center parking lot over chunks of electronics, asking skeptical questions about internal components. The last of it he'd sold to the locally famous—and, according to Connie, “somewhat charming to a certain type”—guitarist-singer of some alternative folk thing that had gone on, to Stroud's irritation, to national fame: a rangy, tattooed guy, a decade younger and an inch taller than Stroud, with a beard sculpted attentively (too attentively, Stroud thought) around a gently pronounced jaw line, and a way of holding prolonged sympathy-filled eye contact that Stroud guessed was supposed to signify intellectual intensity or perhaps spiritual elevation. Incredibly, the guy whispered to the equipment as he handled it. He's caressing it, Stroud thought, infuriated, feeling as if he wanted to snatch the mixing board away and chase the singer out of his storage unit. His storage unit!

But thinking about it now, he had to admit, although he'd played up the self-sacrifice angle to Connie, that it had felt good to see the equipment go. The fact was that

he hadn't sold the stuff merely to quell financial anxiety. After Connie got pregnant, something in him had wanted to see the polished floorboards of their bungalow duplex clear, free of cords, cases, stands. These floorboards were to be the material foundation of a new organizational scheme for a new, as yet unknown, class of objects that would be important in this new child-having phase of life. Besides, he'd told himself, he'd buy better equipment later on—once they were financially stable. He just needed some free physical and mental space to contemplate this upcoming life-event—this baby. Morris. He'd wanted to be able to consider things coolly, from a distance, and there had been so much clutter all the time everywhere. He would come back to music, to his music, once things settled down—

Abruptly Stroud stood up and wandered aimlessly around the apartment. He became aware that he was waiting for Connie to come back, but she wasn't coming back, he had the feeling—not anytime soon. He found himself in Morris's room. Morris was on his bed, lying on his side facing the wall, breathing snottily. The iPad's glow lighting his face, Stroud saw that his annoying personality traits were, for the moment, subsumed beneath a vulnerable, serenely trusting look that Stroud realized must be related to the tree.

Sitting beside him on the bed, Stroud glanced at the screen. There was the tree, someone walking by it, glancing up, no doubt at Connie, wondering what the hell she was doing. Even sitting in the private, semi-darkness of Morris's bedroom, it was embarrassing for Stroud to contemplate how Connie must have looked to people in the mall.

“That tree can't be your friend,” he said.

Morris rolled over and looked up at him, blinking distractedly.

“It is my friend. Why can’t it?”

“Because it’s a tree, and trees and people can’t be friends.”

“Yes, they can,” Morris said. “I’m friends with this tree. I’ll never say goodbye to my friend. I’ll take her with me everywhere.”

“Someday you won’t be able to take her with you,” Stroud said. “Watch.”

And he reached over and pressed the button to turn off the iPad. The screen, and the room, went dark.

Morris began to cry hysterically.

“Why did you do that?” he screamed. “Put her back on. She’ll be alone. She won’t know where I went.”

“No.”

Before Morris could grab it, Stroud took the iPad and stood.

“That’s enough screen time for today,” he said. “It’s not good for your brain or your eyes, especially in the dark. We’re going to have to think about limiting it from now on. You can say hi to your friend—to the tree—tomorrow.”

iPad in hand, he turned to leave, but Morris held onto his leg and managed to catch a corner of the iPad.

“Daddy!”

“Let’s not fight,” Stroud said.

“I’m not fighting,” Morris said. He held on tightly to the iPad. With an effort, Stroud wrenched it out of his grasp.

Suddenly Morris went quiet. He sat down on the bed, folded his arms and stared straight ahead.

“Sorry, pal,” Stroud said, “I didn’t want to have to do that.”

“Where’s mommy?”

“She’s just outside. She’ll be back in a minute.”

“Why is she outside?”

“She had to take a phone call.”

“Why couldn’t she take a phone call in the house?”

“She wanted to be alone. Sometimes grown-ups have private phone calls. Let’s get ready for bed. Your body needs to rest.”

“What if Mommy doesn’t come back?”

Stroud felt strangely alarmed.

“She’ll come back,” he said. “She’ll be back in just a minute.”

* * *

Stroud lay in the dark, listening to Morris’s wet, pugilistic breathing, which struck him as somehow theatrical, as if Morris were trying to work his sickness for the maximum pathos. But soon Morris was asleep, he could tell, and it wasn’t long before Stroud’s mind drifted to the Event. His forehead began to sweat. He was never going to tell Connie. He couldn’t. The decision had been made. Or—he amended the thought—maybe he would tell her at some point in the future, if the moment seemed right. As he lay beside Morris, his guilt began to seem stupid and pointless. Why couldn’t people just

do whatever they wanted? Monogamy was stupid—a hopeless case. It led only to misery, and everyone knew it...

There had, in fact, been three more such Events—Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. The succeeding events had all been more successful than the first. He went over each one in his mind now: Occasionally he visited a website devoted to ranking women's orgasmic facial expressions. If he could somehow upload his memory of Ophelia's face as her forehead scrunched and her mouth opened, seemingly involuntarily, to let out a quiet little gasp of pleasure, it'd make the monthly top ten for sure—at least the weekly. She was quiet, yes—she *couldn't* be loud, of course, even if she'd had the urge to be loud, which he guessed, he hoped, she'd had. But her quietness contained so much. That animal-like facial expression—it was the best thing he'd ever seen! As if she were floating on the surface of her own being, a tiny, perfectly contained self, gradually sinking into some blackness.

Yet over the last week it had more than once occurred to Stroud that there might not be an absolute need for two grants secretaries in the office. Possibly Mannheim had been trying to hint as much when he'd mentioned Ophelia's recent odd behavior. *She's been acting weird lately*, he'd said, *though her work continues to be excellent.*

It was possible, Stroud considered, that Mannheim had been indicating a possible opening for Stroud. After all, Mannheim needed his secretaries to be on top of things, not to be drowning in their own personal issues. Perhaps Mannheim had been setting out a challenge for Stroud, trying to motivate him. How competent could Stroud be? Could he do the work of two?

Can I count on you to be excellent, Steve?

Yes, of course. Of course you can, Dr. Mannheim. But can we talk about the issue of—compensation? Two is twice one, is it not so?...And wasn't it just possible that Ophelia had been in Mannheim's office, on the phone with Mannheim, on the office's highly sensitive speaker phone, when Connie came in with Morris? Maybe Mannheim had stopped on the way home—maybe just at an intersection, one of those long downtown lights, and called in to check on Ophelia's progress or something like that...Okay, it wasn't great, but it was something, it was maybe all he had...After all it took a few minutes to make coffee...

Stroud drifted off to sleep. When he woke, he felt gorged on long dreams, though he couldn't remember dreaming anything. He'd tumbled, fallen deep into the night, and it had all been forgotten. The apartment had a ghostly, wee-hours stillness to it.

The other half of his mother's song was going through his head:

*And all that he could see
And all that he could see
Was the other side of the mountain
The other side of the mountain
The other side of the moun-tain
Was all that he could see.*

“Daddy, I want a glass of ice water. Get me a glass of ice water.”

Startled—he'd thought Morris was still asleep—he was about to tell Morris to ask the nice way or he wouldn't get any ice water at all ever, ever again. Then he

remembered that Connie had told him not to issue what she called “crazy ultimatums” to Morris, and then he remembered about the flu: Of course the kid was thirsty. A little sympathy for Morris, he told himself, would be appropriate here. It wouldn’t be giving in.

Stroud’s own nose, he realized as he sat up, was now dripping, a thin film of salty snot collecting on his upper lip.

“Give me a second, all right?”

“And put ice in it.”

“Right.”

“And make sure it’s cold.”

“Please shut up, okay?”

Stroud cleared his throat and felt a sharp ache beneath his rib cage. Evidently, this was going to be bad...Suddenly he smelled cigarette smoke. Someone was smoking a cigarette in the apartment. But who? It didn’t make sense.

“Daddy, it better be really, really cold. It better be freezing. Like all *brrrrr*.”

Morris grabbed his elbows and shivered.

Stroud made his way out of the room, passing through a hulking cloud of smoke that wrestled with itself in the light from the bare bulb over the staircase landing. In the living room Connie sat on the couch, smoking one of the cigarettes from the special-occasions pack he kept on top of the fridge. Incredible. She’d quit years ago, back in college, and she strongly disapproved of smoking. She wouldn’t even let him smoke near the house.

It looked like she'd been crying: her reddened eyes shone dully. He opened his mouth to ask what the matter was, but she cut him off.

“Why don't you get Morris his water?”

She sounded on edge, and he felt a rising sense of panic. She knew, he was sure, and there was nothing he could say to make her not know. Who the hell had been on the phone? Ted? Mannheim? Ophelia?

He didn't move.

She looked at him levelly.

“Morris needs his water,” she said. “He needs to stay hydrated. You look like you're getting it too, I guess,” she added.

In the kitchen, he blew his nose into a soft mass of paper napkins and wiped his face with more of them. He filled a glass with water and carried it through the living room, not looking at Connie. He needed to regroup, collect his thoughts, before he confronted whatever was coming, but there wasn't time, he knew.

In the bedroom, Morris held the glass in both hands.

“Daddy, it's not cold! Get me a cold glass now!”

“I'm sorry,” Stroud said. Then, giving in to a sudden impulse, he grabbed Morris's upper arm and squeezed it hard. “Who cares if it's cold or not?”

For a moment Morris stared at him silently. Maybe he won't cry, Stroud thought—after all, squeezing an arm wasn't so big a deal. It wasn't hitting or pushing—it wasn't abusive. He was just being firm with the kid—that's all. The kid ought to just be thankful that daddy had brought him a glass of water, carrying it all the way from the kitchen, past Mommy, who was very angry with him.

But Morris's lips trembled, and he began to sob in annoying, pitiful little gasps, rubbing the part of his arm that Stroud had grabbed.

Stroud's panic began to return. What if Connie saw Morris rubbing his arm like that? She'd know he'd done something to it. He tried to think of a way to get Morris to stop rubbing the arm, but he couldn't ask him outright not to rub it. That, he was sure, would only cause Morris to make a point of rubbing it in front of Connie. Or perhaps he could give Morris the pity he was asking for—coo over him and say things like "I'm sorry" and "I didn't mean to" and "Are you all right?" But something in him revolted at that idea. It wouldn't do to let Morris think that he, Stroud, thought that he'd done something wrong by grabbing his arm.

Frustrated, Stroud went out into the hall, slamming the door behind him in the hope of creating the impression that Morris had done something particularly annoying. Connie emerged from the living room and passed silently by him in the hallway, disappearing into Morris's room and closing the door with a gentleness that annoyed him.

"Daddy's just upset," he heard her say behind the door. "He's having a tough time just now, that's all. He's not really mad at you. He's just a little tired and stressed out from work."

Morris sobbed on, refusing to be comforted. Stroud stood outside the bedroom door, massaging his temples. Was Connie, right now, noticing the arm? Maybe she wouldn't notice—unless she turned on the light. God, he was disgusted by the whimpering sounds Morris was making in an attempt to secure Connie's pity. Pussy! he wanted to yell. Whiner! He was glad Connie had shut the door to exclude him from her little make-everything-better session. It made him sick—sick, he thought, with

emphasis—to watch Connie coddling Morris, holding him and hugging him, stroking his hair, giving in to his crazy demands.

He went to the kitchen, poured himself a glass of water, dumped ice cubes into it, and sat in a chair by the dinner table, sipping the water and contemplating the pack of Camel Lights Connie had left on the table next to Morris's iPad. There was an ache in his left lung. How much worse would one light cigarette make it?

“He's asleep,” Connie said, coming into the room. She stood looking down at him. “What did you say to him?”

He stared at her. She had been crying all right, a real weep-fest by the look of it. The skin under her eyes seemed stretched and fragile, like delicate paper he could poke his finger through.

“Who was on the phone?”

“Answer my question first. What did you say to him?”

He told her what he'd said. He left out the arm grabbing.

She went out of the room into the hall and he heard her clearing her throat in the bathroom, spitting into the toilet, flushing.

She came back in and went over to the couch.

Seated, she looked at him and took a deep breath.

“TJ,” she said, “died.”

Immediately her arms and shoulders began to tremble. She put her face down and wept into her hands.

Stroud sat where he was, staring. TJ? How the hell had TJ got into this? TJ, he thought, who had dumped her when they were seniors in college. It had been awful for

Stroud to love a woman with strong lingering feelings for someone else, especially a shallow, good-looking twit like TJ, but selflessly tempering his resentment—as Stroud recalled it—he’d nursed Connie away from TJ, using a combination of patience, encouragement, and personal charm. That had been eight years ago. He knew Connie still talked to TJ on the phone once in a while. He knew TJ still had feelings for her—Connie had told him as much—and he figured they probably flirted a bit during these phone calls, but it was no big deal. TJ went around in an RV or something like that, Stroud knew. He was not someone who had a career or made a lot of money. Stroud had been convinced Connie was over him completely. Now, watching her cry, he was not sure.

Great, he thought, now TJ would be this heroic figure from her past who had died in some tragic, premature way. That was a serious upgrade from self-absorbed, Adderall-popping preppy who had dumped her for an also-rich tennis-playing artsy type. Dull old Stroud, erstwhile-amateur-musician-turned-grants-manager-and-travel-planning-expert, was going to look pretty mediocre by comparison. Thanks a bunch, TJ, he thought.

Then it occurred to him: TJ had, once again, given him an opportunity. Again he could nurse Connie, make her forget—both about TJ and about Ophelia. He could handle it. He just had to be firm and calm, to say the right things.

He got up, went across the room, and sat beside her on the couch.

“Anything else?” he said.

He was seized immediately with regret. The tone, for one thing, was wrong: there had been something hostile about it. Hostile? He couldn’t believe he’d managed to sound hostile. But the words, he realized quickly, both of them, were stupid too.

Connie stopped crying. She looked up and regarded him coldly. Anxiously he muddled in, smiling in a goofy self-deprecating way, attempting to engage her sympathy: She must realize his position here was awkward but that nonetheless he was giving it his best shot—he should get credit at least for that—although, yes, he would admit, bad moment to lose a soldier on the old tone-of-voice front.

But he understood that the moment was also not right for comedic backtracking. Connie was not smiling.

“There’s a video of it,” she said.

This sentence meant nothing to Stroud. He couldn’t think what it could possibly refer to.

“It’s gone viral,” she said. “TJ’s famous, at least for a little while.”

TJ famous? he thought with dismay. Not TJ, no. It should be he, Stroud, who was famous—a famous musician. Stroud was the one who had suffered, who had been the second-rate replacement, while TJ ran around being clever and good-looking. His own suffering, he thought in confusion, should have brought him fame.

Connie was pulling her phone out of her pocket.

“I suppose I ought to now—just get it over with. Yes, that’s what I need to do,” she said, apparently to herself.

“You don’t have to watch it,” Stroud said, nervous. What was he about to see? He didn’t want to see anything that would upset him even more.

Connie ignored him.

She held the phone between them cupped in one hand and pressed play on a YouTube video that had already been queued up. Although the video had just been

posted, Stroud saw, earlier that day, it had already collected hundreds of thousands of views. It was titled “Caped crusader daredevil trapeze artist falls to his death.”

“No,” Stroud said. “No, Connie.”

Connie said nothing.

Shot along the roof of a building. Sound of wind blowing heavily against microphone. First shot gazes down, down the length of the building—30 stories easily, Stroud estimates—taking in crowd gathered on the street far below. A few people in the crowd notice the camera, perhaps as it is exposed over the side of the roof. They point and wave.

Next shot, at angle perpendicular to the first, moves forward across the roof, focuses in on cable strung tightly from the top of the camera’s building to the top of a neighboring building, almost equally tall, maybe 100 yards away, the cable’s landing spot obscured by the camera angle. The trip across will be angled downward.

Looking at it, Stroud’s body goes rigid, his heart and his balls connected suddenly by a numb, squeezing sensation. How did they get the cables across? he wonders. That can’t be legal. Stroud tries to imagine the obstacles to just that part it, getting the whole thing set up. Yet there it is in actual fact, on screen—the cable.

Then TJ appears directly before the camera, looking a few years older than the last time Stroud saw him—that was years ago—but still trim, handsome, lightly bearded, wind ruffling his longish, messy, dark blond hair. He is dressed, Stroud sees, in a form-fitting aviator jacket, leather, covered in shining zippers and snaps and, covering his legs, dark blue tights decorated with white figures Stroud can’t make out.

Obligingly the camera dips down, as if to acknowledge that these figures are part of the attraction, and on closer inspection they turn out to be Zodiac symbols: on the lower leg, the deadlocked fish of Pisces; on the thigh, Scorpio. Between these familiar images are flashy silver stars and Stroud realizes—with a surprised, baffled sense of delighted admiration, for the moment only distantly chased by a shadow of jealousy—that TJ is wearing a short cape of dark purple.

Squaring his shoulders, TJ proceeds to speak to the camera in a practiced way, obviously a speech he's prepared: his lips move, his eyes flash theatrically, but the wind eats the words. His hair blows to the viewer's right, covering his eyes. He clears it away, shrugs, waves at the camera, tries to light a cigarette, several times the wind snuffs the match, he gives up, sticks an unlit cigarette between his lips, grinning around it sheepishly, with a touch of comic flair.

Connie is weeping.

He gives a thumbs up, turns, trudges soldierly across the roof toward the cable—which, Stroud sees, is secured by some complicated metal apparatus to something beneath the little, knee-high wall going around the roof's perimeter. A neatly looped pile of unused cable lies on the roof beside this tie.

A sudden, half-expected cut to a second camera. TJ's face from the side. Nice jawline. Very trim. Is his chin cleft? Stroud could swear it had never been so before, he didn't remember it that way.

TJ closes his eyes, steps up and forward, immediately sways away from the camera, steadies himself, the jaw line returning to full view.

Cut back to the first camera. TJ from behind, hair and cape blowing in the same direction. He has stepped onto the cable and spread his arms out from his sides. There are Zodiac symbols on the back of his pants too and its obvious, from this angle, that the blowing cape is hooked into the shoulders of the jacket.

“I’m not watching any more of this,” says Stroud.

But he watches.

TJ is far across the cable now. He is not TJ anymore but a shadowy, anonymous, abstract figure. He has joined the realm of symbols.

Cut to a third camera gazing up from the sidewalk. The symbolic man moves carefully across the cable, which is hard to see from this angle unless the wind moves it. The cape occasionally flutters out, a tongue licking at the grayish-blue sky. The sun is off to the side somewhere, probably to the left, out of the frame. The symbols on the legs are only just barely visible.

The figure is more than halfway across when there is a little slip, a kind of stumble, obviously a misjudgment of some kind—maybe a response to the wind, which never ceases to tease and poke the cable. Screaming from the crowd. For a moment the figure too sways, knees bent, the upper body, just for a second or two, at a dangerous, unrecoverable angle to the cable. But, miraculously, balance is restored, and the figure begins to rise from its crouched position. Then, very suddenly, it tumbles to one side, legs working awkwardly, Zodiac symbols blurred. There is a nearby gasp from behind the camera, probably from its operator, and the gaze too shoots down—but camera and subject are now out of sync, and the landing is not recorded.

The final shot is only the crowd again. Shrieks and shouts tinged by horror. Someone says, “Shit. Really? Really?” More screams, agonized. End video.

Stroud looked at Connie. She stared at the phone for a moment longer. A commercial for a new private college catering to the needs of middle-aged students with children came on. She turned it off.

Tentatively, Stroud reached out and put a hand on Connie’s shoulder blade. She did not move. There was, Stroud thought (though he counseled himself he might be badly mistaken), in this moment of stillness, of darkness, perhaps for only a few seconds longer, an opening, a way back. Say it, reveal himself to Connie, and she would accept him—if not in this moment of anger, despair, and revelation, then soon, eventually. Things would go on the way they had been—the way he wanted them, with a sudden desperation, to be. It would take only a little courage—he just had to step out on the line—

Connie turned to him. A horrid, mismatched expression, he saw, had broken out on her face: her eyes and mouth suddenly seemed to him to belong to separate, non-intersecting systems. She stared at him with loathing.

“You don’t care, do you? You’re glad he’s dead! You’re relieved as hell, aren’t you?”

Stroud shook his head slowly, confused:

He didn’t care that TJ was dead, not really, but he did not feel relieved at all.

Then Connie’s expression changed. She smiled at him almost gently, and he had a flash of the way she’d been when he’d first known her, when they’d lain whole days in bed together, late afternoon light slanting in, the day slowly, slowly darkening. Those

had been the band days—Connie had appeared on the sidewalk with some friends, grad students, outside the High Dive after Stroud’s band, The Dashing Mediocrities, had done a set of covers—Cramps and Modern Lovers, he remembered. Back then, in those days, he and Connie had—had they not?—promised above all things to be honest with each other, as much so as possible, even if the honesty of one would hurt the other.

“So don’t get mad at me if I tell you your songs suck,” she’d said. “Which they don’t, not totally. But they’re not great either, not yet.”

He’d assumed she was jealous of him—jealous and admiring.

It was impossible, they’d told each other, to love without honesty, at least without honesty about important things. They’d said things like that back then: heroic things that, like balancing on a wire strung between rooftops, made life harder than it had to be.

“What would you say,” she said, “if I said let’s move to New Zealand? If I said let’s do it tomorrow, first thing. Quit your job, or don’t even bother quitting, give Ophelia a peck on the cheek, put the tickets on credit cards, get there, build a tree house to live in. Are you listening?”

“I think I’m hearing you.”

“I have the blueprints—the blueprints for the tree house. They’re TJ’s blueprints and, frankly, they’re brilliant. Everything is in the right proportion. We just need to find the right tree. If I said all that, what would you say?”

The correct words were: *I’m in. Let’s go.* He had merely to say them, he knew. It was time to engage the romantic, adventurous, risk-taking version of himself—the version that had, for instance, sung The Cramps’ “I Can’t Hardly Stand It”—to much applause—at the High Dive the night he’d met Connie.

He knew just what she wanted from him: the proposition was clear. But the idea just didn't appeal to him. It sounded exhausting and uncertain. He liked it here in Florida. He thought they'd be all right here in the end if they just stuck it out a bit. He, Stroud, would be the first to acknowledge that things weren't perfect, that he wasn't perfect. Nothing, nobody, ever was. Connie seemed to have trouble understanding that—or maybe accepting it.

He'd hesitated, he saw, too long: Connie got up and strode quickly across the room, pausing only to grab the pack of Camels from the table.

Stroud stood too and hurried after her.

"I'm in," he said. "Let's go."

But she ignored him, hurried down the stairs.

"Did you hear me? I'm in! Let's go."

At the bottom of the stairs she slipped her feet into her sandals, went out the door, slamming it loudly behind her.

"Con!"

He hoped the door slamming hadn't woken Morris. Under the couch he found *The Lorax* and slipped it into the crack between the door of Morris's room and the doorframe so that if Morris woke up, he wouldn't be able to get the door open and try to come find them. Morris couldn't be allowed to wander around the apartment by himself, and Stroud had no idea how far Connie would have gone by the time he got out the door, or even in what direction.

Then he went to the bathroom, to the laundry basket, to hunt for a pair of pants.

7.

Morris wasn't really asleep. Or maybe he'd fallen asleep for a very short time when Mommy was in the room touching his hair and sending his favorite tingling sensation into his head and down his neck and back, but mostly he'd been fooling her, pretending to sleep. "Being a possum," Daddy called it. Usually Mommy wasn't so easy to fool, but tonight she'd seemed like she wasn't paying attention, like she was thinking about something else, some grown-up thing. He wished he could talk to his friend the Tree about it, but the Tree was all the way away in the Jungle and couldn't hear him without the iPad. Luckily, he still had the Light from the window, which said it would stay awake with him until he fell asleep. It was a friendly Light, and he liked to talk to it. They were talking about ice cubes. The Light was describing a plan to get lots and *lots* of ice cubes for Morris's glass of water, which still didn't have any ice in it. The way to get lots of ice cubes, according to the Light's plan, was to get out of bed and go down the hall very quietly, on tiptoe, and ask Mommy for one. Ask Mommy but not Daddy. Daddy would probably be angry to hear him ask Mommy for an ice cube, which was why he should go up to Mommy's ear and whisper very quietly that he still didn't have an ice cube and still needed an ice cube. For his glass of water. Mommy had said that she would get him an ice cube, but she must have forgot. He needed an ice cube because of what was in the closet tonight: Big Bunny. Big Bunny was hungry and unhappy. Even the friendly Light from the window was afraid of Big Bunny. Big Bunny would get his chance when Mommy and Daddy quit talking and went into their bedroom and went to sleep and couldn't hear him scream and yell. Or couldn't hear him in *time*. If Big Bunny's white furry hand got him by the ankle, he would pull him off the bed, across the

floor, and into the closet. At night, the closet was much bigger than when Mommy opened it in the morning to get his clothes. At night, the closet went back and back, farther back even than the house went, and it was full of the stink of pee and poop...and more bad things too, even worse things. And at the end of it was a very, very small tiny place, full of glowing red-hots: Big Bunny's Roasting Oven. The Roasting Oven was so small that when Big Bunny put you in it, you couldn't move at all, not even a tiny part of your little finger or toe: You were trapped. The only way to avoid Big Bunny's Roasting Oven was to hold an ice cube in your hand. You had to hold it even if it was so cold it made your hand hurt. If you had an ice cube, Big Bunny wouldn't even bother trying to get you into his oven. He would just go away.

Tentatively, Morris pushed his head out from under the covers. He could hear Big Bunny's soft, steady wheezing and could smell his thick sour rotting smell of old diapers. Morris knew Big Bunny was watching him, peeking out through the slats of the closet door. But he was so thirsty and he couldn't breathe very easily and his throat tickled and he kept having to cough even though he'd been keeping his head up on the pillow, like Mommy said, to make the snot drain out of his nose.

Very slowly and quietly so Big Bunny wouldn't notice, Morris sat up and took the glass of water from the bedside table. He took small sips, trying to make the sips not make noise, but they made noise anyway.

He listened to the sounds of Mommy's and Daddy's voices. Suddenly the voices stopped, and he heard someone going down the stairs. The sounds the feet made were stompy and scuffly but not heavy—Mommy. He heard the front door open, making its creaky, whiny noise, and then it shut with a big bang.

And then quiet. He knew he had to act now because Big Bunny would know Mommy had left again. He would get ready to come out. The Light said it was time to be brave and fast. Taking a deep breath, he slid off the bed, stood up, and ran across the room to the door that went into the hallway. He turned the doorknob and pulled, but the door wouldn't open. Mommy or Daddy had locked it to keep him in—or maybe *someone else* had locked it.

Then he heard more steps on the stairs, hard and heavy steps, and the front door opened and closed, and he knew that Daddy had gone outside too. If Mommy and Daddy were both outside, they wouldn't be able to help when Big Bunny came. Panicked, he screamed as loud as he could. He kicked and punched the door. He couldn't run back to the bed: Nowhere in the room was safe from Big Bunny. He ran to the window, to the friendly Light, and he climbed onto the sill. The warm pee and poop smell was close behind him now. A furry finger was on his arm. It was a gentle feeling, almost like Mommy's hand on his back. He looked up and down the street for Mommy or Daddy, but he didn't see them. They weren't there. He banged his fists against the window.

Afterword

In this afterword, I will discuss the writing problems that I have found most challenging in recent years; the psychological or, shall we say, attitudinal issues that go along with those problems; a few writers with whom I feel a sense of (literary) kinship; and my aspirations as a writer. It will be a bit of a hodgepodge.

Let's start with a writing challenge related to a psychological/attitudinal problem.

I've had a lot of difficulty creating narrative tension in my stories. Creating tension does not come naturally to me. When writing stories, I tend perversely to avoid, in fact, writing stories—in the sense of writing about a character with a strong desire for something who attempts to achieve or obtain that something and meets with obstacles along the way—as if writing a story like that were the worst thing I could possibly do. For example, a year or two ago, instead of writing such a story, I spent several weeks revising a few paragraphs centered on a guy removing his socks—first one sock, then the other sock.

Here is the first of these paragraphs:

Sitting on the edge of a dining room chair, I leaned over and removed one sock. I balled the sock up and let the sock ball drop to the floor. It wasn't a tight well-formed sock ball: the heel and most of the foot of the sock were wrapped up in the elastic part, yes, but the toe stuck out and pointed vaguely to the shadow cast by the corner of the table. The loose sock toe looked somehow not loose. It looked somehow as if there were still toes in it—I could even see the shape of an

overgrown rounded nail, the nail of a big toe, the approximate long wide shape of my own big toe, pushing out and straining against the somewhat dirty white cotton of the sock. It was weird, and as I stared at it, I traced my fingernails through the silky colorless follicles that grew out of the top of my foot.

I'll spare you the second sock. The point is that a lot of my stuff comes out like this. Clearly, the guy removing his socks ought to be seconds away from being attacked by some ferocious animal that has somehow got into his dining room—or his wife should be about to storm out of the house, abandoning him forever. But no. None of that is about to happen to him. He's just going to take the other sock off and continue sitting in that dining room chair. Eventually, he might move to the couch. After all, the couch would be more comfortable.

A long succession of well-meaning people have, with varying degrees of gentleness, pointed out this problem to me. My stories, they suggest, lack a sense of meaningful action and consequence. What exactly is at stake here? is a question I get asked a lot.

The conversation goes something like this:

“You mean it's boring?”

“Well, not boring exactly, but maybe you should have a no-guy-alone-in-room-on-chair-thinking-creepily-narcissistic-thoughts-about-top-of-foot-hair-for-20-pages rule for your stories. Just, you know, start with some other move.”

“Are you telling me that I need a character who interacts in a meaningful, consequential way with other characters in order to have a story?”

“Yeah, kinda.”

“Fuck that. I quit.”

“How about just having the guy drive around in a car and look at stuff in his hometown—not new stuff, stuff he’s seen thousands of times before, so many times that, by now, he barely sees it? That doesn’t sound too intimidatingly consequential, does it? On board so far? But then maybe he gets out of the car, goes into a convenience store to get one of those little bags of red spicy peanuts—or they can even be plain unsalted, if spicy sounds too attention-seeking for you—and has a conversation with the pimply, adolescent kid who’s mopping the floor there, who inadvertently reveals a dark secret about the guy’s hometown’s past, a secret to which the guy is somehow connected in a way that is about come back and—”

“Merciful heavens! Please don’t go on. I could never write a thing like that. It sounds *so* dramatic!”

“It sounds like a story, you moron.”

“But it’s not, you know, original—or, well, sophisticated. What about just having the guy drive around in the car for a little while until he feels very, very sad, but not as a result of anything happening right now in his life, and then he goes home and takes a nap?”

“Sure. You do you...or Beckett.”

You get the idea. When writing a story—or thinking about, maybe later on, in several days or a couple of months, writing a story—I carry on these debates in my head almost continually, playing both parts. As soon as anything threatens to *happen* in a story I’m writing—beyond the creation of the vague atmospheric sense that something

might happen—immediately a horde of masked, axe-wielding trolls of self-sabotage leap into my path, railing at me in French-accented English:

“You’re neglecting your children for *this*? Wait...*Vous...négligez*...Never mind. The point is it’s all been done before! It’s a cliché! A clichéd cliché! It’ll come out clunky as hell, you’ll never be able to mask the stitches! Think about how much less smart you are than David Foster Wallace! Everyone will be bored, annoyed, *désappointé*. Your friends will chuckle cruelly at you behind your back—and with much justice! Why not, instead...play *Castles of Burgundy* online, hmm? And have a snack, you old fatty?”

That’s if these inner trolls are just putting in time, not trying too hard. They know I’m easily distracted by snacks. For those moments when I show a little fight, when I put my hand to the grip of my rapier of just-more-or-less-thinking-about-the-story-I’m-writing-and-not-comparing-it-to-everything-else-that-anyone-has-ever-written, the trolls have in reserve the nuclear option, which consists of a simple, utterly demoralizing thought: the story, once I get it started—once something starts to happen—will inevitably fizzle out.

Gathering in a circle around me, they chant: “You might think you can make this story actually, unlike almost all the others, go somewhere, you might even be a little excited about it, but in a week, give or take, you’ll see your fragile hopes dashed yet again. The emptiness will claim you. You’ll be even more demoralized than you were to begin with.”

“And trolls with axes? How original,” they sneer. “Not to mention the French accents. Even your satirical image of internalized cliché-sniffing literary critics is a cliché! What a hopeless case.”

“What if I turned you into, I don’t know, antelopes of self-sabotage?”

Simultaneously, in disgust, all the trolls smack their foreheads—which are, by some surreal mechanism, my own forehead.

“Very cute,” they say.

We all develop antlers.

Prof. Robert Boswell and others have, very reasonably, suggested that I try out the bear-at-the-door story shape. Why not give it a spin? Something’s got to put pressure on those characters. Action or inaction must have consequence. Over the course of the story things that are important to the characters must be gained or lost.

Yes, they must. I agree. However, positioning the bear in his spot outside the door requires me to step out of my comfort zone—the subjective—and wrastle with the objective facts of the story. It involves writing about characters who have a somewhat definite object of desire (to have the bear no longer be near them, for instance) and who go about trying to obtain it. I’ve long had a bear of a time doing just that. And as long as I restrict myself to flitting around in the subjective realms of memory, perception, and emotion (I’m referring, of course, to close-third descriptions of sock removal) the antelopes stay behind their magical screen, twiddling their...thumbs. They know I’m not getting anywhere anyway. With a similar lack of progress, I can even write about characters who have strong feelings. For instance, I can write all day, or at least until snack time, about Self-Loathing Bob’s bitter longing for his ex-girlfriend who dumped

him, quite rightly, 20 years ago or about how Ted the Narcissist loves to examine his back hair in the gym bathroom mirror (everyone has, I'm sure, noted my somewhat embarrassing proclivity for narcissists and bathroom mirrors...in the stories). In the end of such a writing session, I'll feel very happy and self-confident—Hey, nice static description of futile longing!—but I won't have anything resembling a story.

It is exactly when I say *this is what happened, this is what Suzie did next* (regardless of the point of view, whether omniscient, close-third, etc.) that the most devious of the antelopes sidle up to me—a kind of special ops detachment of mild-mannered double-agents—and say in comfortable, scholarly voices, “Let's think about this: Why should Suzie do X instead of Y? Wouldn't Y be, in the long run, more interesting, surprising, original, and so on? And forget X and Y, there are really thousands of things, millions, that Suzie could plausibly *do next*. Let's have a look at them one by one. What fun! Or...have you considered just having Suzie stand there a while longer and have more feelings and memories? That would save some labor, wouldn't it? She could think witty things...Oh, snack time again?”

All of this leads to the question: Why should making things happen in a story (plot events) be so much more difficult for me than writing about thought, emotion, perception, memory (the relatively static, subjective stuff)? Why do I have so much trouble getting my characters to act or, alternatively, having important, plot-moving things happen to them?

Unsatisfactory answer: Telling what happens in a story, making the characters do things that are significant and important within the contexts of their lives involves commitment, the taking on of responsibility. I, the writer, must decide what's important

and what's not important for the story as a whole. I must assert that X is not some random event tossed in as a leaping-off point for more—of course, funny and psychologically penetrating—playing around in the world of subjective sock perceptions but a means to further the plot. And then, even worse, writing about objective events forces me to consider matters of form. Where is this story going anyway? Don't I need some kind of shape for it all? What shape? An egg shape would be cool, but I don't know if that's right—and I won't know unless I keep making things happen—unless I keep at it, trusting that a shape will emerge. What if, after much exertion, I find that I've created a story that is not, to me, interestingly meaningful or that only causes readers to sneer intelligently, "Oh, I see what this is. It's one of *those* stories."

In other words, writing action and dialogue—and doing so in such a way that puts pressure on characters—involves taking risks. The guy-with-a-sock passage does not—yet—involve much risk. It only vaguely asserts that something about this discarded sock is, at least at this randomly zeroed-in-on moment of narrative time, interesting to this guy, presumably the hero of the story. But then, other things might be important to him too—I mean, there would almost have to be something he cares about more than his sock, right? Maybe? But what? Maybe we'll find out eventually. At any rate, if you're the kind of person who finds guy-looking-at-sock stories interesting, then by all means read on.

I don't mean to sniff at my sock paragraph, by the way (couldn't resist). There are, of course, ways to develop it. It could be a set up for some situational irony, for instance. Wouldn't it be fun if, in the next sentence, a 400-pound wild boar charges through the sliding glass doors, slides across the recently polished dining room floor, picks up the discarded sock (in its teeth), and turns to rear threateningly at the guy in the

chair who, by now, looking surprised, is in a defenseless bent-over position, the remaining sock halfway down his ankle? (My knowledge of animal psychology—and also of animal glass-shattering abilities—by the way, is not extensive or particularly accurate.)

But here come the trolls:

“Situational irony involving scary animals—or, more generally, beasts you say? Like in *Jurassic Park*?”

“Hmm. Are you guys implying that my story will earn over a billion dollars at the box office once it’s turned into a movie? Because I could use some new socks.”

“No.”

I get that I might have some trust issues. Sayings like “Have faith in yourself” or “Trust the process” come to mind. But I’m of a reflexively skeptical disposition (sneering comes naturally to me), and I’ve never been great at following such advice, even though I have plenty of reason to recognize its wisdom, at least in the context of creative writing. For example, I wrote the first draft of “Truman” a few years ago in a workshop taught by Prof. Boswell. It was the first time in years that I’d been able to write a draft that had something resembling a beginning, a middle, and an end. The assignment, if I remember correctly, was to write three scenes that would eventually become linked up. Certain elements were to be inserted into each scene—for instance, in the third scene, a character from an earlier scene was to reappear (if I remember correctly). The process was, of course, self-consciously artificial, but the goal, as I understood it, was to produce something that would seem like—and for all purposes be—a unified whole.

As I worked on the various parts of the assignment, I felt I was inventing details, or little continuous but disconnected sections of story, at random. But in order to complete the assignment I did my best to fake connections between these random and disconnected bits. Eventually, as I continued to revise the story, I forgot that I'd "faked it," and the connections began to seem meaningful and even inevitable, as if they had emerged from some buried *gestalt*. Revising "Truman" to include in the dissertation, I continued the process, writing another 30 or 40 pages and rearranging much of the earlier material. I don't think "Truman" as it exists in the dissertation is a finished story—it obviously needs plenty of work (I won't bother to enumerate its many faults)—but I no longer struggle to believe that it is on its way to becoming a unified whole. I just have to keep plugging away at it, inventing, connecting, and rearranging as necessary. Also, certain elements of the story that I invented for the early drafts—elements which seemed to be random and unrelated—came eventually to seem not random at all...Or, at any rate, I've found it useful to think of them as non-random, since, as I've continued to revise the story, they've become gradually more meaningful, interconnected, and structurally important. The most obvious example of such a deceptively random-seeming element is, perhaps, the relationship between Benny and Michelle. In the first draft, this relationship was merely a way of getting in the third-scene character reappearance required by the assignment. Of course, having caused Michelle to magically reappear, I had to pick up the stitch (note: clever metafictional knitting / Donovan reference, with apologies to those who might actually know a thing or two about knitting) by justifying her reappearance. And having established the relationship, I was led naturally to think about how else the

relationship might be used in the story—about the ways, for instance, it plays into the dynamic between the brothers.

(I am aware, by the way, that in recounting that process, I am echoing some of the ideas from Prof. Boswell’s essay “Narrative Spandrels.” I can only say that these ideas held true in my experience of writing that story.)

A wise man would perhaps (I can only speculate) learn from this experience to accept a difficult truth about writing fiction. I—the aspiring wise man—must accept that the process often feels artificial, unlike the spontaneous and natural outpourings of the romantic genius. Like Neal in David Foster Wallace’s short story “Good Old Neon,” I must confront the challenge of making peace with my own apparent “fraudulence” as a writer (Wallace 146). After all, my job is to make stuff up. I must also reconcile myself to the fact that some of the things I invent while writing fiction will strike my critical sensibility as extraneous and random—or embarrassingly and even stupidly clichéd. But perhaps if I can leap through the fire-hoop of my own early-draft stupidity and fraudulence (rather than abandoning the effort of saying what Suzie did next or writing that sentence explaining what sock guy *did* in response to the invasion of the monstrous sock-loving boar) then there is at least some chance that my stupid, extraneous, clichéd inventions will, in later drafts, transform into less abhorrent versions of themselves—there is some chance that they will come to seem, as new context emerges around them, necessary parts of an interestingly meaningful whole. I must accept—if you will tolerate a deep thought—that, in the writing of fiction (and this is perhaps true especially in the early stages), that which seems intelligent, necessary, and beautiful is often inseparable from that which seems artificial, stupid, and ugly. When writing, I can spend a certain

amount of time impressing myself by dashing off only things that strike me (in the moment) as clever and witty and avoiding everything that doesn't convince me that it is so—but at some point, I have to let my inner 10-year-old (who has a taste for garish mythological symbolism, raw emotion, obvious ironies, and *actions*) help me do the real work: the work of creating—or revealing—the story's structure and, ultimately, total form (the distinction between creating and revealing not meaning a whole heck of a lot to my inner 10-year-old).

If you find the somewhat positive turn this essay is taking a bit exhausting, you are not alone. But I feel it must go on a little longer (the positive turn), and it's going to get even more tiresome—because I think I've actually made some progress, i.e., I've become a bit better with regard to some of the issues described above. Certainly by now, I've had to confront many times the problems created by my aversion to writing action sequences and meaningful, plot-forwarding dialogue—and, more generally, to writing lines that would build an objective world, with boundaries, for my stories to be set in. To take one of many such examples, when I submitted an earlier draft of “Love Week” to Prof. Chitra Divakaruni's master workshop a couple of years ago, she commented—I am paraphrasing—that there wasn't enough tension in the draft and not enough action or dialogue.

Whoa boy, you might be thinking, that means that the draft of “Love Week” I just read is Walsh's example of “progress” along the lines described above? Hmm. There's that scene where the guy gets lunch and looks at a cockroach, and then some argument scenes where the guy and his partner, suddenly bodiless, don't move around or do anything but talk—not to mention the long flashback sequence that doesn't seem at all

sufficiently connected to the story very slowly unfolding in the present moment. Etc. To which I reply: Well, yes. But you should have seen the earlier draft that Prof. Divakaruni was responding to. That draft—much shorter—consisted mostly of large blobs of internal monologue and flashback. There wasn't even a clear sequence of events, slow or fast, in the present moment. Naturally, I thought it was brilliant.

Revising for the dissertation, I added a lot more action and dialogue, and doing so forced me to confront questions I'd been avoiding—both practical and formal questions: Over what period of time do these events unfold? Why should this scene be first and that one second (and so on)? Should I cut that grocery store scene, which doesn't seem to contain a present-moment conflict, or should I build a conflict into it? What are the important parts of the setting with which the characters interact and which tell us something about who they are—for instance, the couch? Might those objects be deployed throughout the story—for instance, at the beginning and at the end—in a way that illuminates the characters' central problems and the story's themes (as Prof. Alex Parsons might put it, in a “dynamic” way)? Does the story seem to have any recurring shaping mechanisms, such as comparison/contrast (Stroud/TJ, couch/cable, perhaps Mannheim/Morris) that I ought to be exploring and exploiting more fully? The numbered sections of the story—are some of them too long and others too short? Would compressing these sections create momentum? If this is a story about not just Stroud but Connie and Morris as well, how many more sections should I add in either Connie's or Morris's point of view to make the story feel more balanced? By the way, how will this thing be classified—as a really long short story or as a novella? If it's a short story, will

readers tolerate the somewhat slow beginning or must I start at some more active point?
And so on.

Obviously, as of the draft included here, I haven't fully answered all such objective-detail and structure-oriented questions (and, of course, there are many more). My point, though, is that adding in much (more) action and dialogue—and thereby creating more of a definite dramatic structure—has meant that I can no longer evade these questions. I must confront the fact that, in order to properly develop and arrange the material, I will need to think as clearly as possible about the story's component structures and eventual shape.

“Love Week” still has a long way to go, as everyone will no doubt agree. But important things have changed in the way I am thinking about it—both on an artistic and on a motivational level. For years it languished in cloud storage. I knew that it wasn't done, yet I found the thought of working on it depressing. I'd tried many times to finish it, but most of the changes I made seemed not to lead anywhere—or, rather, they all led back to the feeling that important things were missing. And I had very little sense—beyond “keep working on it,” which I very much did not want to do—of how to figure out what was missing. But in revising the story for the dissertation, I realized that I needed, as Prof. Divakaruni was suggesting, to switch the focus of my efforts to what, for me, is less comfortable territory. I'd already created at least a working sense of the characters' personalities from the inside (the kinds of things they think about, the way they tend to perceive reality), so focusing exclusively on that business, as I'd long done, and ignoring the active, objective parts of the story was not going to take the draft to a new level (though, to be clear, I understand that more work on characterization needs to

be done). The story badly needed (and continues to need) a shape. The new action-and-dialogue sequences, and the new focus on being consistent and logical about the objective details of the world of the story, the timing of events, and so on, have, I believe, helped me to begin to conceptualize that shape. In my opinion, the story is now, after the last bout of action-and-dialogue-centered revision, a few degrees closer to being a unified whole—and, frankly, that feels good. No longer do I feel cynical about my ability to finish the story—I am genuinely excited about getting back to work on it, and I’m interested to see how I can make it better.

A case in point: The Connie strand of “Love Week” needs to be expanded. We see Stroud doing lots of things—performing acts that are consequential (e.g., making out with Ophelia). We see Connie doing a few things—pacing back and forth, buying tuna subs, etc. But there is no Connie-centered line of action that is the equivalent of Stroud’s, and, without one, the story will feel unbalanced and structurally unsound. So, I plan to address this problem by writing scenes that make Connie as active as Stroud—that show her doing consequential things. I want eventually to have two parallel strands—Connie’s and Stroud’s. So I’m looking for, I suppose, Connie’s equivalent of Stroud’s making out with Ophelia—or something like that: an act that would be consequential within the terms of the story. And, of course, my hope is that the two strands—Connie’s and Stroud’s—will come meaningfully together. I’m not sure how that’s going to happen, but writing active scenes from Connie’s perspective, I think, represents my best chance of finding out.

To speak more generally about writing scenes with action and dialogue, a.k.a. writing scenes, I would add that doing so over the last couple of months—with “Truman”

and “Love Week”—has felt liberating. Not only do scenes in which characters actually do consequential things usefully limit the story’s possibilities and give it shape, they also open up new possibilities for pretty much everything else: more action and dialogue, more flashback, more character development.

In other words, having sock guy flee, one-socked, madly through his dining room and hallway, pursued by a snorting, grunting 400-pound pig beast, creates opportunities for the narrator to dive back into the complexities of sock guy’s feelings and thoughts about his socks—and about other things too. For instance, backed into a corner, sock guy turns, terrified, to face this brutal four-legged leviathan, whereupon he sees once again, hanging from the boar’s maw, the captured sock, moist with drool and already half chewed. This causes him to recall that, rolled up in the top drawer of his bureau, are many nice, clean pairs of socks, put there by his wife, who always does the laundry even though they’ve agreed that it is unfair that she does so—a remnant of the patriarchal nuclear family structure—and that they should alternate weeks with the laundry...or something like that.

At any rate, this line of thought—all flashback and internal monologue—should not only add a dimension or two to sock guy as a character, it should lead back into the story’s dramatic structure. It should not just exist as some free-associative commentary on gender roles or whatever. Sock guy’s wife is across the hall, fast asleep behind closed doors. Perhaps, it occurs to sock guy, if he can somehow refocus the wild boar’s attention on her...

Putting in that bit about sock guy’s thoughts about not only the sock he’s just taken off but other socks in the house, his relationship with his wife, etc., without, in the

middle of these reflections, having him attacked by an insane animal—or having him acted upon by some equally pressure-exerting story element—probably wouldn't generate enough momentum to keep readers interested. Nor would spending more time paddling around sock guy's subjectivity help to shape the story.

To sum up: I have to do more of that sort of thing (focusing on the shaping, structure-bestowing active elements of fiction), *pace* the smarty-pants troll-antelopes or whatever. And I have, I think, recently been doing more of just that, and also thinking about ways to develop the plot while keeping the trolls at bay. For instance, an idea that has helped me to revise especially "Truman" and "Love Week" without hearing much from the trolls is that of developing the logic of the situations I have already begun to create. That is, in order to figure out what ought to happen in a story, I focus on what is already there on the page. I think about what a character is likely to do or not do, given his or her situation or, more generally, what is likely to happen under the conditions in which she already finds herself.

This, I realize, is an obvious point. But (A) I've spent a lot of time blithely ignoring it and (B) I've been telling myself that nothing in a story is necessary and that everything can be changed—which is, of course, possibly true (it's true unless there really is some buried *gestalt*)—but not always is it the most useful way of thinking about how to develop a story. It's a comforting thought—I'm never stuck with anything I've already created. And it allows me to get out of thinking very hard about what is on the page—after all, if it doesn't seem like genius, I can always get rid of it and start again, and that's much easier than believing there's a reason I'm writing about this guy and his sock issues, for instance. It's much easier than seeing clearly the flaws in what I've

created, sighing resignedly, and then digging in and figuring out what needs to be done in order to go from the imperfect to the less imperfect—from the sock scene to a viable story with suspense and a dramatic structure and all that. Telling myself to just start over with a clean slate is much easier than incrementally improving something that doesn't seem, at first glance, great or promising. It's an approach that can be summed up as "Nah. Sock guy obviously was never going anywhere. Bye, sock guy. How about guy in basement organizing screws by type? He sounds much more promising."

Anyway, it's hard (though, of course, not impossible) to think of a particular action or event as improbable or hackneyed if it seems to develop naturally out of a situation. An example from "Love Week" would be the cell-phone-call-make-out-scene-Connie-office-visit sequence, new to this draft. This was constructed out of probability and situational logic. There are many literary, cinematic, and television scenes in which two people are discovered, or almost discovered, in the midst of a liaison, so there is a cliché risk here. But my hope is that, because the actions of my characters seem likely (given who the characters are, their relationships, and the situations they find themselves in), the sequence and its individual parts will seem believable. Because the scenes in that sequence (except for the make-out scene) are new, they're perhaps not yet very richly constructed, but I hope that, as I revise them, adding details and creating more connections between them, the whole thing will come to seem even more realistic and inevitable. That's what happened, I think, when I revised "Truman" by making "fake" connections between the new parts—or, at least, I hope it happened.

* * *

An Interlude

“All this talk about the objective and the subjective or whatever,” says an old friend, interrupter of afterwords and fan of Hemingway and Carver, with whom I am having a hemp-milk-with-Stevia at an Austin gaming café, “you used to have no problem writing action and dialogue, as Prof. Divakaruni herself pointed out in the workshop referred to above.”

He shakes his head in bafflement—or possibly disgust.

“Look at the first two stories in your dissertation, the super oldies: ‘Issa’ and ‘Ostrich.’ Action, dialogue. So, what happened?”

“I-I don’t know, I guess I ah—“

“You started reading all these precious, internal monologue heavy people who want to nail down every nuance of a character’s thoughts and feelings, regardless of the poor reader’s desire to have the story move on. You were super impressed by all that in-your-head stuff. It seemed to be what all the smart kids were doing. Ha! Absurd. You’re very impressionable and have porous, insufficient personal boundaries. I’m glad to see that you’ve apparently checked in to some sort of recovery program.”

“Awright, ol’ pal. About me, point taken. I’ve got the self-deprecation game down to a science, or at least so I tell myself. But never,” I say, raising the Stevia bottle threateningly, “disparage Mary Gaitskill in my presence. Besides, you’re not being fair.

Let's look at the opening paragraph of 'A Romantic Weekend.' Naturally, I've brought it with me to this gaming café. Here it is:

She was meeting a man she had recently and abruptly fallen in love with. She was in a state of ghastly anxiety. He was married, for one thing, to a Korean woman whom he described as the embodiment of all that was feminine and elegant. Not only that, but a psychic had told her that a relationship with him could cripple her emotionally for the rest of her life. On top of this, she was tormented by the feeling that she looked inadequate. Perhaps her body tilted too far forward as she walked, perhaps her jacket made her torso look bulky in contrast to her calves and ankles, which were probably skinny. She felt like an object unraveling in every direction. In anticipation of their meeting, she had not been able to sleep the night before; she had therefore eaten some amphetamines and these had heightened her feeling of disintegration. (32)

"Given," I say, "this is just the set-up, the exposition, and so maybe not the best example to choose for the point I want to illustrate, but I like it a lot, and it will do."

"Throat-clearing, dude. I'm waiting."

"Notice, then, that, although no present-moment action takes place in this paragraph, each sentence ratchets up the tension by various means—first, by suggesting what a terrible mistake this woman is making in becoming obsessed with the loser she's about to go on a date with—e.g., she's fallen in love with him 'abruptly.' Obviously, this suggests irrationality and impulsiveness on her part. She is in a state of 'ghastly

anxiety’—clearly not an appropriate or adaptive emotional response to the situation that’s about to unfold. Then we find out that the guy has emotionally manipulated her by giving her reason to be jealous of his wife. Worse and worse. That’s only three sentences in which, again, nothing actually happens.

“In the fourth sentence, we find out that she half-expects this date to ‘cripple her emotionally for the rest of her life,’ and this represents another level of emotion and consequence altogether. Each of these details, moreover, is idiosyncratic enough that I am convinced that this is a character with a definite personality (she goes to a ‘psychic’ with, apparently, his or her own highly dramatic personality), by the way, even though I haven’t yet heard her speak a word or seen her take an action.”

“So your point?”

“It’s what I realize I need to do with my own passages of commentary on characters’ emotional states—and also my internal monologues and flashbacks. As in the case of dialogue or action, each sentence in a passage of internal monologue, if possible, should increase the level of tension in the story, should work dynamically to engage the reader, should not feel like dead weight borrowing or detracting from the momentum created by action and dialogue.”

“Right. Unlike your last line in this dialogue, i.e., what you just said. Anyway, obvs?”

“I say this because it’s an artistic goal of mine and I feel that, in this essay, I should talk about aspirations. I do have them. Also, I want to be clear that, despite my inspirational talk about the power of dialogue and action, I like my soft, subjective passages, and I intend to keep writing them. But I think this passage from *Gaitskill*—

among many others—provides a good model for revising such passages. If you would sit there passively and listen as I continue listing its virtues, note that it contains a mixture of different types of details: emotional, biographical, and physical. Also, it shuttles engagingly back and forth between the concrete and the abstract. For instance, we get Beth’s neurotic feelings about her ‘torso,’ ‘calves and ankles,’ and the fact that she feels ‘like an object unraveling in every direction,’ the word ‘object,’ by the way, being particularly suggestive, given the nature of her relationship with the guy...It’s foreshadowing via symbol: both Beth and her love interest want her to be an object, but she can’t keep herself in the form of an object—she unravels, which suggests an—at this point in the story—unrealized and obscure but intriguing point of tension. It works as what Jerome Stern calls an ‘intrigant’ (147). Not merely does this very abstract image—it can hardly even be called an image—give us a way to sort of visualize Beth’s emotional state, it introduces a theme and creates an expectation about how the story will develop. And then immediately, in a nice contrast, we get the very physical and much more immediately understandable details about the sleep deprivation and the amphetamines, the latter really capping the whole thing off: about the last thing this person, Beth, needs is amphetamines.”

“Beth could use a hemp milk with Stevia.”

“And I would also point out that Gaitskill does a great job throughout the story of balancing such internally focused passages with little snippets of action and dialogue that keep the story constantly in motion, even if that motion is not highly pronounced. In the next paragraph, Beth leans on a building, then she enters a flower store, etc. She is rarely

just standing there motionlessly thinking or being passively subjected to the narrator's ironic, incisive commentary.”

“And this, you want readers of your afterword to realize, is in contrast to, for instance, your scene where Connie, on the phone with TJ, just sits in the car. Even though there is a lot of dialogue in that scene, it still feels kind of flat because nobody is moving around and the momentum entirely dissipates when we come to the long flashback.”

“Exactly. Gaitskill finds various ways of, let's say, *dynamically contextualizing* rich, detailed commentary on characters' subjective states within a dramatic structure filled with tension, immediacy, and momentum. In the passage from 'A Romantic Weekend' quoted above in MLA format this commentary heightens the effects of these structural elements.”

“Do you think Beth would dig *Settlers of Catan*? Because I would totally like to play it with her.”

“Reflexively one would say no, but I don't want to rain on your parade.”

“Also, the setting. An Austin gaming café? What the hell does that have to do with anything?”

“It seemed like the kind of place that would sell hemp milk with Stevia. Which is a drink I like.”

“Yeah, but why don't you put us somewhere that would be meaningful given what this part of the afterword is about? Like we could stand in the flower shop of 'A Romantic Weekend,' creepily analyzing Beth (and Gaitskill's narrator's analysis of Beth) as Beth leans awkwardly—and therefore somewhat dynamically—against the wall of the

building? Got to connect the parts into a meaningful whole, partner. Consider the total structure.”

* * *

I realize that none of the observations I’ve made in this afterword are earth-shattering. This is a long walk off a short pier for everyone but me, I’m sure. I’m expounding on these particular writing problems because they are important to me. They reflect both where I’ve been in the recent past—the problems I’ve had—and where I want to go, i.e., how I want to develop as a writer. Right now, I think I am at a bit of a crossroads (Silence, trolls!...Well, okay, point taken). I see my error, at least some of it, and I am trying to be different and better in my approach to invention and revision.

It’s true, as my friend from the gaming café points out, that I haven’t always suffered from the problems I’ve described above. When I started out on my creative writing journey, I was obsessed with Raymond Carver, particularly the very minimalistic stories of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. Carver’s style made sense to me, perhaps because in the world I grew up in, people didn’t talk very deeply about their thoughts and feelings—or they talked about them in ways that often seemed to obscure—whether intentionally or not—what those thoughts and feelings really were. At any rate, Carver was a good obsession to have in the sense that, in imitating Carver, I produced drafts with much action and dialogue that weren’t bogged down by too much focus on the inner workings of characters’ minds. I still love Carver, and I still love *What We Talk About*, but my interests—maybe because I now move among much more talkative,

psychoanalytic people—have shifted along the spectrum toward maximalism, toward writers like David Foster Wallace and Saul Bellow. Or toward writers who, while not exactly maximalists, are greatly concerned with representing subjectivity in a rich, detailed, and direct way. I speak of, for example, Richard Yeats, Mary Gaitskill, Deborah Eisenberg, Françoise Sagan—and, of course, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Stendhal, Flaubert, Henry James, Beckett. I am tempted to throw into that list as well Shakespeare and Eugene O’Neill.

Of course, there are many things that draw me to writing and reading fiction (and plays), but if I had to isolate one quality, it would be fiction’s ability to show—and also to invent—the inner worlds of humans. I think this is an important power of fiction, and I will make the probably somewhat annoying suggestion that it is perhaps a bit overlooked or neglected in academic discussions (admittedly, ‘How has this novel or story changed the person you fundamentally are?’ is a weird, somewhat pushy question to ask). Am I the same person, after reading Wallace’s short story collection *Oblivion* that I was when I started reading it? I don’t think I am. My consciousness has, in reading *Oblivion*, spent a long time imitating the implied consciousnesses of Wallace’s narrators and characters. It would be hard, maybe impossible, to quantify or even define the changes (which is probably why we don’t talk about such things very much), but, having read *Oblivion*, my consciousness operates in new and different ways. I notice things that I wouldn’t have noticed before, and I say things, if only to myself, that, before reading *Oblivion*, I wouldn’t have said. I become aware of new patterns in my speech and behavior. I develop new patterns. My sentences become even more annoyingly hypotactic. Reading *Oblivion* is, for me, a literally consciousness-altering experience.

And though I think *Oblivion* is a particularly powerful book, it's an example chosen almost at random. I could be talking about *Revolutionary Road* or Mary Gaitskill's *Bad Behavior* or any number of novels or short story collections. Yes, perhaps any good work of literary fiction teaches us to see the world and ourselves in new ways, but some, of course, are more focused than others on the nature and motion of consciousness, and it's those that I seem particularly obsessed with these days. Not only am I interested in the accurate or realistic-seeming reflection of what goes on inside, I'm interested in the ways literature can show us new possibilities for what *can* go on inside. When I was a teenager, one of the stories that drew me toward writing fiction was John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse"—which, of course, famously shows (as does David Foster Wallace's work) how much can go on in someone's mind in even a very small moment of time, and how fiction can expand such moments toward infinity.

I'm not saying that *I'm* doing that work effectively in my own fiction—expanding the possibilities of consciousness, etc. Right—I'm a long way off from that. But it's an aspiration of mine to do just that in my own definitely very humble way.

So, perhaps I have a kind of outsized interest in a particular aspect of fiction. In terms of my own creative process, I have some balancing to do. I don't want to sacrifice my interest in detailed representations of subjectivity, but I need to think more about the external qualities of my characters, about action and dialogue, and about the structures and forms of my stories.

My wife, Kate Megear, reading over this afterword for me, points out that what I am saying here about myself is reminiscent of the poet Greg Orr's essay "The Four Temperaments and the Forms of Poetry." According to Orr, the four "temperaments"

correspond to “impulses” toward and away from order. The two “limiting impulses” are “story”—which seeks “dramatic unity”—and “structure”—which desires “the satisfaction of measurable patterns.” The impulses that resist limitation are “music,” which is concerned with the aesthetics of language (“syntax,” “rhythm,” and so on) and “imagination,” which loves the associative “flow of image to image or thought to thought” (33).

Each of these impulses, Orr argues, is capable, to a limited extent, of giving a poem “form,” and each poet tends to be naturally aligned with and particularly skilled at using at least one of them (Shakespeare, Orr contends, is the only writer “in English...[who] could be said to exhibit all four with equal vigor”). To some extent, a poet can develop her talent solely by developing her innate “temperament,” but the best poems, Orr argues, are those in which all four temperaments are fully present and working in a kind of unity involving dialectical tension (if I understand Orr correctly). Therefore, in order to fully develop his craft, a poet must respect, practice, and master those “form-giving impulses” that don’t come naturally to him (33).

On this point, it seems to me worthwhile to quote Orr at length:

The first issue is always one of self-knowledge or self-recognition. Once a poet has a sense of his or her fundamental temperament, the possibilities for growth are twofold. The first is to go further into the gift, but such a decision carries with it the risk of a narrowing as well as the promise of a deepening.

The second direction is to expand. Such an expansion can be understood as the poet's struggle to nurture and develop the other temperaments in such a way that their energies and constraints enrich his or her poems. (37)

Yes. That's helpful, though it makes what I've been saying look pretty inarticulate and unsystematic by comparison. If I'm aligned with one or two of these "impulses," I'm guessing those would be "music" and "imagination," if only because I'm definitely not aligned with the other two.

My task, in Orr's terms: I must, in the near future, expand—or continue my very slow and gradual expansion (and maybe also, if possible, speed it up a bit—after all, *vita brevis*). Of course, I'm also not a poet (Orr is addressing poets, obviously), I'm a writer of fiction, so the story impulse (it perhaps goes without saying) is particularly important to me. "Story" and "structure" are the "temperaments" that I must "struggle to nurture and develop."

Before this afterword ends, I'd like to bring up one more anxiety about writing that has to do with the fact that I at least *might* be at the end of my time in the UH creative writing program. Something that all four stories included in my dissertation, from the very ancient to the more recent kind-of-ancient, have in common is that they were all produced in workshops. Once I'm no longer being subjected to the threats of bad grades, professorial disapprobation, and so on—will I ever again be able to write a short story that has a beginning, a middle, and an end? The evidence, so far, does not present a rosy picture. Consider that these four stories do not represent all the fiction I've written over the 80 or so years I've been in graduate school. These are just the stories

that passed a critical completeness threshold, so to speak. They are the ones that I've managed to make (I think) at least viable. They've achieved *some* kind of form. In each case, I was forced, during a limited time period, to take a shot at completeness, and so I did. Take the oldest one—"Ostrich." I wrote the first draft shortly after Nixon resigned in a workshop taught by Prof. Parsons. It was hammered out under the firm directive not to hand in a story that did not include all three major parts—the beginning, the middle, the end. In the version of that story included here, none of those parts are the same as they were in the rough draft—but, from the start, I could set about the task of revision with the bracing knowledge that I had both a launching point and a landing spot. The dramatic structure was already more or less in existence—it just needed to be expanded and refined (so to speak). Consider also that, for the last year or so, Prof. Boswell has been generous enough to let me email him rough drafts of new stories. The idea was that I would be able to use some of that material in the dissertation—but none of those drafts made it in. None of them have so far become full drafts with beginnings, middles, and ends.

What explains this inability to produce—or, more accurately, to carry a production all the way through to completion?

Probably much of the answer to that question is implied above. I'll leave the question hanging, and I will just sum up by saying that, in the future, I need to practice those parts of writing fiction that I don't feel I'm good at, and that I don't always like very much to do (as Orr is suggesting); I need to accept the messy, ugly parts of the creative process, trusting that what appears random and artificial may in fact be part of a deeply meaningful structure that will come into existence if I just keep working at it and

thinking about what the story needs (e.g., action and dialogue) rather than just what I feel like doing (e.g., writing more about a character's feelings or perceptions of the immediate environment). But I will note that writing complete stories outside of a workshop environment will be challenging for me, and—I am aware this sounds a tad helpless—I don't know how I'm going to do it. I'm going to have to set goals for myself—artistic and professional—and share my work with people who will be willing to read and criticize it and get on my case if I'm not producing.

All this too is perhaps obvious. I want to continue writing, I want to get better at it, I want to finish the stories I've started, and I want to write new ones.

“Eh,” say the trolls, slightly friendlier now, if only temporarily, after this long self-haranguing, “maybe.”

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