

A momentary weakness

by

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CHUCK AMONG THE CRABAPPLES

As IQs went, Melody's was a sleek gray Mercedes doing 185 in a construction zone. While the other twelve year-olds battled basic geography at the middle school across town, she was breezing through biochemistry and Kantian imperatives at Zachary Taylor High. Melody was cloistered there in the Talented and Gifted room, with its thrift-store couches, its bean bag chairs, its lesser geniuses. Fridays were spent at the state university with a doctoral candidate named Carolyn Fizer, whose job it was to guide Melody through a battery of tests ranging from the standard Wechsler Series and Stanford-Binet to the more suspect MMPI and Rorschach.

Melody was occasionally taken to the medical center, where doctors CAT scanned her skull. "We're just trying to get to the bottom of things," a researcher told her once, as he held a CAT scan up to the light. Get to the bottom of things? Melody felt like the suspect in a TV mystery. Slick new photocopies of her brain were tacked to the wall each time she entered the third floor lab in Phillips Hall, and Melody's brain always looked the same to her—a colorful mutated cauliflower.

She'd march into the room and deposit her backpack in an empty corner amid dust motes and flecks of chipped paint. The laboratory was a study in white, like one of Picasso's early phases. White flecked tile, pale white walls, gleaming fluorescent lights. Papers blanketed every flat surface of the lab. There was a photo taped to the wall above Carolyn's desk of a man in a red polo shirt. Melody knew nothing about him, except for his name—Brad. Brad looked like a model in a Penny's catalog, fleshy but handsome. His hair was carefully combed, and the part running down one side of his head was yard stick straight. His teeth were well-spaced and gleaming. Melody envied him those white teeth. She knew her own hygiene habits weren't quite up to snuff.

The overriding scent in the room was that of mature chimpanzee, since a chimp named Charles inhabited a far corner of the lab. Depending on the source, he'd been named for either an English monarch or the title character of the sitcom *Charles in Charge*. The researchers in Phillips thought of the ape as a lovely bewildered relative—an institution of the institution. Charles was

plagued by arthritis; his hair was turning gray. He crouched in his cell with the concentrated look of a chess guru, emitting occasional *hoo-hoo* noises that went largely unobserved.

Melody stood now in front of the chimp's cage. "Hi, Chuck," she said, preferring this nickname to the more stodgy sounding "Charles." Like a dignified grandfather, he offered his paw for a handshake. His eyes were dark marbles that gave off a concave reflection of the room. "*Hoo-hoo*," Charles grunted. Then he began fiddling with his genitals.

"Not in public," Melody whispered. "Jeeze." She walked over and slumped down in a chair opposite Carolyn.

"Wash your hands," Carolyn said.

"I'd prefer not to."

"We've had this conversation before."

"So?" Melody folded her arms over her chest.

"It's a rule we have. After contact with Charles, we wash our hands. You know that."

"Chuck."

"Okay. After contact with Chuck, we wash our hands."

Melody examined her small freckled hands, sincerely doubting the presence of chimp germs.

"He'll see me," she said, her voice lowered.

"Who will?"

"Chuck. He'll see me wash my hands."

"I don't follow."

Melody gazed off into the distance and sighed. "How would you like it if people went around washing their hands after contact with you?" she asked.

"I don't know," Carolyn said. "I'd be offended, I guess."

"Well?"

“Well,” Carolyn began, “Char—Chuck is a chimpanzee. I’m a human being. There’s a big difference.”

“Not germ-wise there isn’t.”

“No, but feeling-wise there is. You can’t hurt Charles’s—you can’t hurt Chuck’s—can we please not have this conversation today? Go and wash your hands.”

“Okay.” Melody walked over to the sink and held her hands under the high-powered spray. Then she began shaking them as though afflicted by a damaging palsy.

“Dry them, please,” Carolyn said.

“I prefer to air-dry.” Melody’s entire body was now shaking. “Can we listen to Puccini?” she asked.

“Dry your hands and you may.”

Melody sifted through the cassette tapes beside the boombox. “You really need a CD player,” she said. “The sound quality of tapes is horrendous. Analog recording. Ugh.” She fiddled with the Puccini tape, fast-forwarding, then rewinding, to the section of *Madama Butterfly* she loved most. As the *contrabasso* began his first notes, Melody twisted the volume knob, watching Carolyn for signs of response. The seventh dot on the knob, in Melody’s opinion, was the only suitable level for opera.

“Not past five,” Carolyn said.

Melody rested her elbow on the boombox. “Did you know that on opening night, audiences hated *Madama Butterfly*?” she asked. “It was only after Puccini re-wrote big chunks of it that people started to come around.”

“Yes,” Carolyn said. “I think you told me that once before.”

“Oh.” Melody picked at a scab on her elbow. “So what are we doing today?” she asked.

“Finishing the questionnaire from last Friday.”

“Ugh. That was sooo boring.”

“I tell you what,” said Carolyn. “If you do a good job, I’ll let you feed Charles.”

“Can we let him out of his cage?”

“Not unless Dr. Janowitz is here. You know the rules.”

“Yeah, but Chuck needs to at least stretch his legs,” Melody whined. “Chimps need exercise, just like humans. Otherwise their muscles atrophy. Dr. Lovewick dedicates an entire chapter to the subject in *Erotic Entanglements of the Captive Ape*. His claim is that chimps and other primates in captivity must exercise on a regular basis. Otherwise they lose their desire to do, you know, monkey business.” Melody giggled at the “monkey business” pun, but Carolyn seemed unimpressed. She had removed her glasses and was cleaning them now in a slow, deliberate manner. Carolyn was pale, with hazel eyes and high continental cheekbones. Without her glasses, she looked beautiful in a secluded sort of way, like a beach no one ever visits.

Melody slouched in the passenger seat of Carolyn’s Honda, flipping the air vent open and closed with her toes. She wasn’t quite ready to step out into the sweltering heat. “Thanks for letting me feed Chuck,” she said, smiling up at Carolyn. “I think he and I are bonding.”

“He does seem to like you,” Carolyn agreed. She reached across to tickle Melody under the chin. “It’s because you’re as much of a monkey as he is.”

“I am not!” Melody giggled.

“Maybe you can drop by on a Tuesday and watch Dr. Janowitz try and teach Chuck sign language.”

“Chuck knows sign language?”

“No,” Carolyn said. “He’s not a super-genius like you. Actually, he’s not very smart at all, but Janowitz still gets grant money for trying.”

Melody gazed out at the heat shimmers on the pavement. She liked being here in Carolyn’s car. She liked the closeness of it. Being tickled under the chin, resting her feet on the dusty

dashboard, tracing the hairline fracture in the windshield. This was real to her. Carolyn could be real sometimes, too, in those unguarded moments when her laughter caught her by surprise, when her perfume hung in the air and Melody knew she was meeting Brad, with his polo shirt and perfect teeth, later on for drinks. This was one of those moments.

“I’ll see you next Friday,” Carolyn said. “Have a good week at school.”

“Have fun on your date with Brad. And don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” This was advice Melody’s father sometimes gave her. She found it could be applied to nearly any situation—it was the Swiss army knife of advice.

Melody lived in a large brown-bricked Tudor with numerous eaves and minor balconies. The front door was solid unforgiving oak. She walked straight through to the rear patio door, which hung open. As was often the case on hot, muggy days, her father had dragged the mini-trampoline to the edge of the pool to use in lieu of a diving board. He was now bouncing up and down in a pair of sagging swim trunks. The hair on his chest was thick and dark, narrowing to a trail that ran like a line of ants down into his shorts. Melody’s father had premature jowls and a beak-like nose, so he grew a long horseshoe mustache to divert attention from these lesser features. He resembled the *Smoky and the Bandit*-era Burt Reynolds in a bleary, drunken way.

“Hi, daddy,” Melody said, slipping off her clogs and heading over to the pool. The heat of the concrete made her wince.

Her father waved. “How was school?” he said.

“I didn’t have school today. I go to the college on Fridays, remember?”

“Of course,” he said. It was obvious he’d forgotten. Melody’s father bounced high in the air for a judo kick.

A line of Pabst Blue Ribbon cans stretched across the lip of the pool, and Melody began kicking them, one by one, into the water. “Daddy,” she said, “I told you not to use the trampoline when you’ve been drinking. Alcohol slows your reflexes. You could fall and twist your ankle.”

Again he leaped high in the air, this time squeezing his body into a finely-tuned cannonball and landing butt-first in the pool, drenching his daughter. “How was that?” he asked, grinning, as he pulled himself free of the water.

Melody put her hands on her hips, as she’d seen her mother do. “Patently unfunny,” she said.

Her father pretended not to hear. He was swimming instead to the deep end, toward the six-pack of Pabst he had tethered there earlier.

“Sorry, Carolyn. I’m not feeling inspired today.” Melody rose from the table to wander around the room, leafing through stacks of files, reading various lab reports. She was an incorrigible snoop. Now she began poking around by the stereo. “Where’s my Puccini tape?” she asked.

“Beats me,” Carolyn said, jotting notes in a legal pad. “Dr. Janowitz was playing it on Tuesday.”

“Janowitz is a Puccini fan?”

“I don’t think so. He was just trying to calm the monkey—”

“Monkeys perform in circuses,” Melody interrupted. “They are dirty uncivil creatures. Chuck is a great ape, one of our forebears...well, if you believe in Darwinism, anyway. You do believe in evolution, don’t you?”

Carolyn nodded.

“Did you know that Darwin trained as a clergyman before his voyage on *the HMS Beagle*? Don’t you find that ironic?”

“Uh-huh,” Carolyn said. “Extremely—”

“Wait a second,” Melody said. “What was wrong with Chuck?”

“Well, the sign language thing isn’t going very well—”

“How come?”

“Charles—er, Chuck—only knows one sign and it’s not a very...pleasant one.”

“The middle finger?” Melody asked.

“Yes.”

Melody smiled as she sifted through the cassette tapes. “Who listens to this junk?” she asked, holding up several cases. “Phil Collins? Lionel Richie? Huey Lewis? Who in the world listens to Huey Lewis and the News?” She slid a cassette into the tape deck and Chopin’s “Nocturnes” began playing. Melody stood for a moment, her head tilted, investigating the music. “Abbey Simon’s pretty good,” she said, returning to the table, “but I much prefer Helmut Ebnet. Don’t you?”

“Are you talking about the pianist?”

“Of course.”

“I guess I don’t have a preference,” Carolyn said.

Melody began flipping flashcards over and placing them in the proper stacks. Her mind was a beautiful aberration, a black hole that sucked in data like light, trapping it forever. “What’s a boner?” she asked. Melody had almost finished with the cards.

“It’s a mistake,” Carolyn said, covering her smile with a long, slender hand.

“A mistake? But that doesn’t make sense. Paul Tillman asked me to rub his boner. How do you rub a mistake?” Melody rested her chin in her hand, like a Rodin sculpture.

“Believe me,” Carolyn said. “A boner’s just a mistake, but I’d stay away from this Paul guy all the same.”

“Daddy, will you tell me again what happened to mom?” Melody was sitting Indian-style on the living room carpet, studying a tome on chaos math. Her father lay in the recliner, eyes closed, a copy of *Sports Illustrated* spread across his chest. He was wearing beaded moccasins and a pair of Hawaiian shorts. A doctor’s stethoscope hung around his neck.

“Huh?” he said.

“Tell me a again what happened to mom—the details of it.”

“Will you let me watch TV?”

Melody checked her watch. “I guess so. We’ve been reading for almost an hour now. Well, *I* have been, anyway.” She gave him a cross look. “But tell me about mom first.”

Her father cleared his throat and took a sip of bourbon. “Initially, I suspected she’d been kidnapped by a particularly sinister band of Patagonian pygmies,” he said. “I swear to this day that I saw them lurking behind the Elmores’ garage in their tiny loincloths, whispering to each other, their spears and poison-tipped arrows at the ready. Unfortunately, there was never any proof.

“I checked into ties your mother may have had with the Russian mob, but again—no dice. I even started thinking that aliens somehow snagged her. Late at night, while floating on my raft in the pool, I’d sometimes see rings of blue lights pulsing overhead. We’re talking UFO’s here, sweetie. Of course, the lights only appeared after I’d downed the better part of a quart bottle of burgundy, so I could have been mistaken—I was mistaken, in fact. The truth of the matter is that your mother ran off to Bakersfield with the Wal-Mart photo lab manager.”

“The photo lab manager?” Melody had heard the story so many times it had become a myth to her—something cordoned off, like an oil painting, from the truth. It didn’t help that her father constantly rearranged his side of things.

“Yes, dear—the one-hour photo guy. It seems he fell in love with Louisa’s breathtaking photographs. And her breasts. So they began their lurid courtship right under my nose.”

“Are you bitter?”

“Of course I’m bitter. I’m the cuckold here. But I have to admit I’m consoled, at least in part, by the gobs of settlement money she left us. Thank your grandfather for being a potato baron.” Melody’s father sipped his drink. “Turn on the TV and come sit on your old pa’s lap.”

“Give me a break,” Melody said. “I’m way too old for that. I’ll let you watch wrestling, though, if you put away the whiskey.”

“I have been putting it away.” Her father smiled, patting his belly, which blossomed from beneath his magazine. “I’ve been putting it away all night.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Melody said. “I’m going to pour it out again if you don’t behave.”

“All right, all right. Turn on the wrestling. I don’t want to miss The Rock.”

“What’s that stethoscope for?” Melody asked.

“Stethoscopes, my dear, are for listening to the overtures of our inner organs.”

“I know what they’re used for,” Melody said, “but why do you have one?”

“Curiosity’s sake, I suppose.” Melody’s father toyed with the cool steely head of the instrument. “I like listening to the rumblings of my stomach,” he said, “the beating of my heart. It’s a comforting reminder that I’m still alive.”

Melody was here at the lab on a Tuesday to see one of Chuck’s sessions with the linguist. The permission slip, signed by her father, was folded in her pocket. Carolyn took Melody over to meet Dr. Janowitz, a stooped man with a shiny bald head. His features had begun to slide slowly down his face. His whole body, it seemed, was being taken over by gravity.

“So you’re the precocious youngster Carolyn’s been telling me about,” Janowitz said. It sounded as though he’d just inhaled a balloonful of helium. Melody had seen kids do this at high school dances. She’d even tried it herself a couple times while sitting alone at a crepe-covered table in the high school gym.

“I guess so,” Melody said, suddenly bashful. She watched Janowitz drag a chair toward Chuck’s cage. The linguist cradled a clipboard and a clump of overripe bananas in his arm. As soon as he had arranged himself, he began signaling to Chuck in a frenetic way as the ape stared on, impassive.

It was obvious the session wasn't going well. At one point, Chuck scratched one of his sagging boobs and Janowitz took it as a sign. He handed a banana through the bars of the cage, then jotted furiously on his clipboard. Chuck accepted the mangled fruit with some reluctance, placing it behind him in a nest of straw. Melody edged closer.

"I've read about Washoe and Koko," she said.

The linguist didn't respond.

"Washoe knew a hundred and thirty signs," said Melody. "He was a chimp, just like Chuck. So how many signs does Chuck know?"

"A few," Janowitz muttered.

At that moment, Chuck began making a course gesture that was generally meant to imply intercourse. He bared his oversized teeth and hopped up and down, repeating the gesture again and again.

"Hey!" Melody said, pointing at Chuck. "That's a sign! I've seen Paul Tillman do that!"

"Charles!" Janowitz yelled. "You filthy ape! You monstrosity!" He drummed a banana against the bars of the cage until the banana ruptured. Chuck reclaimed his own spoiled prize from the straw behind him and began mimicking the linguist.

The clipboard rattled in Janowitz's angry hand. "Who's teaching him these things?" he said, his voice climbing higher and higher. "First he flips me the bird, and now this. I'm returning the grant money. I was going to buy a riding mower with that money. I was going to take Marta on a cruise, but it's simply not worth the effort."

Carolyn and Melody watched Dr. Janowitz storm out of the room. "Wow," Carolyn said. "I've never seen him blow up like that before." Melody approached Chuck's cage. "Bad boy," she said, wagging her finger at him. Chuck was picking straw from the banana chunks that had fallen into his cell. His mouth protruded from his face like a half-coconut. He offered a banana chunk to

Melody, who checked to see if Carolyn was watching and then popped it into her mouth. "Bribery will get you nowhere," she said.

Melody's photo of Watson and Crick had begun to come loose at the corners, so she was now taping it back into place. "Why don't you get some pictures of the Backstreet Boys or something?" said Paul Tillman, whose locker adjoined Melody's. "Save yourself the abuse." Paul was one of the lesser geniuses of the Talented and Gifted room. He and his buddies considered themselves filmmakers and had produced a number of historical epics, including *Hindenburg*, their latest, in which Melody played the role of Eva Braun. Paul was now making the transition to French New Wave cinema.

"What's your next movie going to be about?" Melody asked.

"It'll definitely be very Dadaistic," Paul said. "The star is this talking lamppost named Francois. We've already convinced Mr. Ruark to do the voice-overs."

"Yeah, but what's the plot?"

"Well, like I said...it's gonna be very...Dada. Francois is gonna solve mysteries and that sort of thing." Paul fidgeted. He was similar to Melody in many ways. They both loved riddles, trivia, crossword puzzles, anything to keep the wheels turning. But Paul was more socially adept. He managed to maintain an air of aggression or arrogance or maybe even boredom—Melody couldn't tell which—but whatever it was, people responded. Also, he had discovered aftershave.

"I liked being in *Hindenburg*," Melody said. The halls of Taylor High were filling with students, and she could tell that it pained Paul to be seen with her.

He pulled a calculus book from his locker. "Yeah, well, since you speak German, you were kind of a shoe-in for the part. So where do you go on Fridays, anyway?"

Melody was surprised by the sudden show of interest. She told him about Phillips Hall—about Carolyn and the chimp. Paul seemed particularly interested in Chuck. “So you’re telling me there’s an ape living there on campus?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“And you feed him, shake hands with him, stuff like that?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you conducted any experiments?” Paul said.

“What kind of experiments?”

“You know—operations, transplants... Sexual procedures.”

“Gross,” Melody said. “That’s disgusting.”

“You haven’t tugged on the ole’ monkey bone?”

“Chuck is a great ape, one of our forebears—”

“Yeah, I know,” Paul interrupted. “I was just kidding around. So you think I could come and see him sometime?”

“Well, they’re pretty strict about visitors at the lab.” Melody thought about Chuck, cooped up in that cage, fed those rotting bananas by Janowitz. He was a prisoner, really. She remembered what Fritz Lovewick had written about Chimps and their need for exercise. “You know how to pick a lock?” Melody asked, surprised by her own question.

“What kind?”

“A padlock, like on a chimp’s cage.”

“A chimp’s cage, huh? I’m sure I could figure it out,” Paul said, grinning, as the bell sounded and the halls began to empty.

Melody wasn’t sure she needed an accomplice—especially one so dubious as Paul. He was famous for his forged hall passes and doctor’s notes. She’d also seen his report cards, the long string of remarks which stood in striking contrast to his grades. NO RESPECT FOR AUTHORITY.

DIFFICULTY WORKING WITH OTHERS. OFTEN A NUISANCE IN CLASS. These comments were handwritten in bold block lettering, as though the teachers who wrote them gripped a pen in one hand and a bottle of Darvocet in the other—the effect of a school year full of Paul.

Melody didn't think she could open the lock on her own, though, and she'd never be able to steal the keys from Janowitz. "We'll have to go at night," she said.

"Okay. When do you want to do it?"

"Is tonight too soon?"

"Not for me. I'll meet you at ten in front of the student union."

That evening, Melody readied herself for the guerrilla-like raid on Phillips Hall. She changed into a black leotard and soft-soled shoes, relics of her long-forgotten dance lessons. Then she daubed shoe polish over her face and examined herself in the mirror. Something was missing. The beret! She'd nearly forgotten the most important part of her outfit, the felt beret she kept under her bed. Melody slipped it on, cocking the hat at a slight angle. She had now become, in her opinion, the spitting image of Che Guevara.

It was nine-thirty by the time she slipped past her father, who was snoozing in his Lazy Boy, the glass of bourbon on his sternum rising and falling with each breath. Melody moved through the neighborhood like a cipher, a non-entity, careful not to make a sound. The streets were wet from a recent rain, and they gleamed beneath the streetlights. Melody realized she was sweating.

She took a city bus to the university and walked the rest of the way to the student union, where she crouched among the dripping yews, pressing her hand against the cool brick building to steady herself in the darkness. She nearly lost her nerve when the bells of the carillon rang at ten o'clock.

"What are you doing in the bushes?" Paul asked. He stood eating a sandwich beside the fountain.

“Be quiet, someone will hear us.”

“Who?” Paul said. “There’s no one around.”

Melody emerged from the shrubbery. She was wet with rainwater and her nipples stood out against the tight fabric of her unitard. She crossed her arms over her chest.

“What’s with the outfit?” Paul asked. “You just get done with a dance recital?” He was wearing baggy shorts and an Iggy Pop t-shirt and was carrying a backpack.

“It’s for stealth,” Melody hissed. “We don’t want to get caught, so stop being so conspicuous.” She started out for Phillips Hall, sticking to the shadows, as Paul followed along on the sidewalk. Phillips Hall seemed to be deserted. They took the stairs to the third floor lab and Melody punched in the code, which she had come across some time ago while rummaging through Carolyn’s purse.

“It reeks in here,” Paul said, flipping on the lights. “Is that the monkey?”

“Chuck isn’t a monkey, he’s a—”

“Great ape. I know, I know. You told me already.”

Melody pointed to Chuck’s cage. He was crouched inside, staring out at them with his dark eyes, his overhanging brow, his half-coconut face. “There he is,” she said. “All we have to do is bust that lock.”

“And then what?” Paul took a few tentative steps toward the cage.

Melody thought for a moment. “I don’t know. I figured we’d just take him for a walk or something.”

Paul shook his head. “I’m not going anywhere with that monkey.”

“Great ape.”

“Whatever. I’m not taking him for a walk.”

“Well, what do you think we should do?”

“Beats me,” Paul shrugged. “I just thought we were gonna spring him or something—you know, set him loose.”

“Uh-uh,” Melody said. “No way.” Chuck’s survival instincts had surely been dulled by years of captivity. And besides, chimps weren’t meant to roam around college towns like wayward undergrads. Where would he forage for food? What would he do when the weather turned cold? She was convinced Chuck would be captured again, hunted down, maybe even killed. The thought of his death turned Melody’s stomach.

“Just get the cage open,” she said. “I’ll figure out what to do after that.” Melody imagined taking Chuck home to live in their guest room. She doubted daddy would mind. In fact, he and Chuck would probably get along wonderfully. They could hop on the mini-tramp together, sip bourbon in the evenings, skim leaves from the surface of the pool.

Paul was sifting through the cassette tapes. “Wow!” he said. “Huey Lewis and the News!”

Melody would have preferred some Puccini, maybe even a nocturne by Chopin, but instead it was eighties pop that began playing—harmonica, sax, Huey Lewis singing “Heart of Rock and Roll.” Paul pulled a crowbar from his backpack and walked toward Chuck’s cage. The chimpanzee crouched there with his eyes open, silently staring. But when Paul began hammering away at the padlock with his crowbar, the noise sent Chuck into a frenzy. He climbed to the top of his cage and hung from the ceiling, making a high-pitched screeching noise, as though the crowbar was meant for his skull instead of the lock.

“You ever heard of subtlety?” Melody yelled, but Paul ignored her. He was still pounding away, glancing up every now and then at the chimp hanging above him. Finally the lock popped open and dropped to the floor. Paul slipped the crowbar back into his bag and turned toward Melody. Sweat was glistening on his upper lip and his hair had fallen down into his eyes.

“Well,” he said. “There you go. You wanted to free the monkey and now he’s free.”

“Thanks,” Melody said, but her voice was lost to “The Power of Love.” At least Chuck had quieted down.

Paul pulled off his tee shirt, using it to wipe the sweat from his face. His chest was hairless and pale. “It’s warm in here,” he said, stuffing the shirt into his backpack. “You look pretty cute in your little outfit, by the way.”

Melody was conscious now of the unitard that exposed her jutting ribs and hipbones, her tiny breasts. “You remember the way out?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Paul said, “but I’m not in any hurry.” He took a couple steps toward her. Melody wasn’t entirely sure what he wanted. She’d never been approached by boys before, especially older guys, like Paul. He was in tenth grade and had his learner’s permit.

“I’m going to take Chuck for his walk now,” Melody said, trying to sound casual. She began to step past Paul, but he grabbed her arm.

“I bet you never even fooled around with anyone before, have you?”

“What do you mean?” Melody asked. He had ahold of her arm and his fingers were digging into her flesh. She was close enough to smell the pickles on Paul’s breath from the sandwich he’d been eating.

“You know what I mean. We could do it right here and no one would ever know.” Melody didn’t like the way Paul was smiling. It wasn’t a smile of friendliness or even hopefulness, but rather the smile of someone in love with his own lousy jokes, the sound of his own voice. Someone who would keep on gripping her arm till she relented. Melody tasted salt in her throat and knew she was going to cry.

Paul pushed her up against a table, spilling her flashcards onto the floor. Then he began fiddling with the zipper of his shorts. Melody shut her eyes to withhold the tears that were building now. Suddenly there was a crash, then silence—no more Huey Lewis. Paul let go of Melody’s arm

and slumped to the floor. Where he was standing a moment before, Chuck now stood holding the stereo, which he had used, apparently, to bash Paul Tillman over the head.

“Oh, Chuck.” Melody moved toward him and took the boombox from his grip. He allowed himself to be embraced, making soft *hoo-hoo* noises as Melody drew him to her. She was surprised by the chimp’s gentleness. She buried her face in the comforting tangle of his chest as the tears commenced.

Then Melody opened the door of the lab and they made their escape, leaving Paul where he lay. But Chuck became agitated as they approached the exit doors of Phillips Hall. Perhaps he caught a whiff of freedom in the air—maybe old memories of the savanna began flashing through his mind. He tugged at Melody’s hand, pulling her swiftly onward.

When they stepped out into the night, they were immediately spotted by a group of drunken undergrads who were sitting on the commons lawn. One of the students stood up. “What the hell?” he said. “Is that a...”

Now another student rose from the grass. “It’s a monkey. That little girl’s got one of our monkeys.”

Yet another undergrad stumbled to his feet. “Hey...you can’t...you gotta put that back.” As the group of vigilantes approached them, Chuck slipped from Melody’s grasp and began to lope across campus.

“Chuck!” she called out, and he stopped for a moment, gesturing to her. It was the same sign that had infuriated Janowitz, apparently the only one Chuck knew. Then the first of the undergrads reached him. He swiped at the student’s face, sending him backwards into a bed of tulips, and resumed his jaunt across campus as Melody followed behind.

After Chuck had run a fair distance, he stopped beneath a flowering crabapple to catch his breath. Melody could see his chest rising and falling. The chimp reached for one of the limbs, and a series of white blossoms drifted to earth. Then he saw Melody and began loping again, toward the

Quad City Parkway. “No, Chuck!” Melody yelled. “Come back here!” She turned to see a group of people moving toward her, the beams of their flashlights snaking across the ground. She thought she could make out Carolyn and Dr. Janowitz in their white lab frocks. Was that her father, carrying a flashlight in one hand and a glass of bourbon in the other? She even thought she saw Paul Tillman, holding an icepack to the back of his head as he walked, and her beautiful mother, holding hands with a man in a blue work apron. They were all coming for her.

Melody’s only chance was to rescue Chuck, to fix this terrible blunder. But it was too late for that. He was nearly to the Parkway now, past the runoff ditch, gracefully climbing the concrete abutment. It’s as though he had planned this from the start—as though he had choreographed his fate. Melody heard the whoosh of cars, the sound of horns, the screech of brakes.

The thud.

There was nothing left now but the Parkway, where Chuck’s mangled body lay, or the search party sent out to retrieve her. Melody returned to the crabapple tree and stood beneath it, just as Chuck had done only a few moments before. She gazed at the delicate blossoms, gleaming in the darkness, the last visible trace of Chuck’s existence.

Melody reached up into the tree and shook the branches as hard as she could. The milky flowers pirouetted in the air, brushing gently against her face, so many blossoms, falling, faltering. The entire tree was lit eerily now by flashlight beams. Someone took her hand and tried to guide her away, but Melody remained, clutching the tree, shaking loose its beauty.

THE SHRINE

“She won’t take care of it herself—not in a million years—but she’s always bugging me about it, day and night. The vinyl balloons are an eyesore; the plastic flowers shrivel up in the rain; then the lawnmower chews them up into a million pieces and Winston eats the little pieces—”

“Winston?”

“Yeah. He eats the pieces and they interrupt his digestion.”

“That’s your kid?”

“No, Winston’s our dog. Part beagle, part...something—I’m not sure. The vet had to give him an enema, a two-hundred dollar enema, to get the confetti out of his system. Next time I’m just going to use the garden hose—”

“Winston’s kind of a funny name for a dog.”

“Yeah, I guess. Anyway, Steph says we’ll never be able to sell the house because of the shrine—”

“She’s probably got a point there,” Randall says, prodding at the last of his empress chicken. Loren’s been going on about this shrine business for twenty minutes now. The two are having lunch, as they often do, at the Middlefield Mall dining terrace (“More than just a food court!”).

Randall watches a blind woman dab the edges of her mouth with a moist towelette. A German shepherd lies at her feet, licking a sticky spot on the tile floor. There’s a sign fixed to the dog—Randall squints to read the lettering—“Do not talk to me or pet me/I’m working.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Loren asks. “I mean, I respect this woman’s grief, but her son’s been dead for over a year. Why can’t she just put flowers by his grave like a normal person? Instead, she’s always leaving this crap in my yard. Balloons, teddy bears, little wooden crosses. It’s creepy. I think she’s had the shrine up long enough—more than long enough. This thing has reached the point of being unhealthy.”

“Tear it down then,” Randall says, still focused on the blind woman. She reminds him somehow of his sixth-grade teacher. Madonna Cruz. He remembers how Miss Cruz would lean over him to explain a difficult concept—she’d point to a spot in *Land of the Free* with her lacquered nail and her perfume would splotch down on him like a safety net. That perfume differed in vital ways from his mother’s, which was purchased from the locked case at Walgreens. The teacher’s calves in shimmering hose, the rustle of her silk blouse on his arm, produced in Randall a feeling of bewilderment.

He found himself mouthing her name into his pillow at night, the second syllable coming quick, repeating like a heartbeat, Ma-don-na, Ma-don-na. His dreams tugged him in strange new directions and Randall sometimes woke with a glue-like substance crusty on his stomach, afraid to tell anyone about the fluid that had slipped from him.

Miss Cruz wasn’t like other teachers. She wasn’t jowly, or wrinkled, or muted. And that name—Randall knew of only one other Madonna, the one who watched over him from her vigil in St. Luke’s. She was venerated, forever chaste, but Miss Cruz, this other Madonna... He wasn’t so sure about her.

Staring at the blind woman, Randall feels as though he’s twelve again, cut open by yearning. He’s about to look away, ashamed, when he remembers the woman can’t see him.

“—Take it down,” Loren is saying. “Yeah, that’s easy for you to say. You don’t have a conscience—”

“Wait a second. You don’t know me well enough to make that kind of judgment.” Randall perks up, feigns offense. Secretly, though, he knows it’s true. He’s never felt guilty about much of anything.

That day at Arlington Cemetery, for instance—the borrowed trench coat he wore (his father’s); the rain running through his hair; the kids standing nearby in similarly shapeless coats. Randall and the others had been suckered into this school-sponsored trip to DC over spring break.

Randall's buddies were in Winter Park, skiing very little but drinking heavily, bragging to him long-distance about the USC coeds in the adjoining townhouse. But he was HERE, at the grave site of the Challenger astronauts. The wind whipped at his collar, water slid down into his coat, and he felt cheated, bleary.

Randall was aware of what this occasion meant to certain classmates—it had been less than a year since the explosion, after all. Girls cried into armfuls of roses. So what made him turn to the kid next to him and tell that joke? "*What does NASA stand for?*" Before Randall could even finish, the kid started glaring at him as though he were a mutation, a medical mistake. Fuck it, Randall thought. This was all just sentimental bullshit. Who were these people, anyway, crying their crocodile tears over a pale granite slab?

"Look, I'm not some bleeding heart liberal," he says. "This is the way I see it: the shrine has been there over a year. It served its purpose. That's why I wouldn't feel any compunctions about taking it down. You don't need this lady's permission. The shrine's on your property."

"You don't know this woman," Loren says. "You don't know what she's capable of. Besides—technically, the shrine's on city property. She was sure to point that out. The lady said she called the city and asked to put a SMALL memorial by the curb, and they said okay. I don't want to get in any trouble here—"

"So lie. Tell her it blew away in a windstorm. Make up some story."

"Oh, I would. I'd lie through my teeth, but she wouldn't buy it. The lady would know it was me. She'd get pissed and slash my tires or something—she'd probably try and sue me. I can't handle litigation right now. I'm still making payments on my Accord."

Randall imagines the type of woman who'd slash a set of radials: probably some middle-aged mother of twelve in a ratty bathrobe, laughing a raspy nicotine laugh. Probably some kind of crackpot.

As Loren puts their trays away, Randall wanders over to the blind woman's table and stands there studying her long plain face. "Hello?" she says. Randall waits for that reminder of Madonna Cruz: the silky blouse, the *swish-swish* of panty hose, the ubiquitous perfume, but there's nothing—just the smell of the German shepherd's damp fur, the hot battleground of dog breath.

"Good boy," Randall says, scratching behind the dog's ears, feeding his fortune cookie to it.

Randall sits, swiveling aimlessly in his desk chair. Unlike most of the saps on the third floor, he's got his own honest-to-god office with (moderately) thick plaster walls, plate-glass windows cleaned periodically by a maintenance service, and framed prints of the "San Antonio Riverwalk in Spring" and the "Golden Gate Bridge Sheathed in Fog." He's even got a view of St. Joe's revival-style steeple and a few of the buildings beyond—slivers of the Ruan Center and the Tribune Building. It's not a great view, but the point is that there is muted sunlight and the illusion, if nothing else, of a world beyond.

Loren enters and stands inside the doorway. "I sent you an interoffice message," he says.

"Okay, I'll read it later. I'm pretty busy here." Randall looks down at the files on his desk, memoranda of a lost empire, actuarial tables-cum-mindless hieroglyphics.

"Oh, of course. I just wanted to make sure you knew it was there." Loren hovers there in limbo before heading back to his think tank (what cubicles are called here). He pauses at the drinking fountain, then again at Tracy Gidrick's desk.

Randall reads Loren's message, titled "The Shrine."

Randall,

Steph is holding out. She won't give me certain favors until I do something about the shrine. She says she can't do it with a man who has no balls. It's only been 4 or 5 days, but it's already like torture. Every day I come home from work and she's out in the pool floating on a raft in her bikini. She flaunts it around. When I approach her she says "You know the score." What the heck does that mean?

Randall finds it strange that Loren has unburdened himself this way—the two don't even know each other that well. He types:

Loren,

You guys have a pool?

Loren writes back.

Yes, above-ground. Still nice though. You should come over some time and swim. We're thinking about having a cook-out. What do you think? Might be a good time to see "the shrine."

Randall gazes out at the belltower of St. Joe's, wondering what the bells sound like. The windows of his office are sealed shut, so he can't ever hear what's going on outside. Randall flips over an interoffice memo and starts sketching the belltower: the coursework, rustication, molding. It surprises him that he remembers these terms. He adds the petal-shaped bell and shingled roof, but by that point there are too many intersecting lines, a thicket of black ink.

Randall tried his hand at architecture as an undergraduate at Iowa State. He leafed through the trade journals with some diligence (Randall liked the crisp drawings done in technical pen and even some of the theories behind the architecture), but he had to admit he couldn't draw, couldn't design, couldn't communicate his ideas.

And there was something more.

He'd seen the white-bearded professor shuffling along with his Supervalu sack full of god knows what. Once, driving past, Randall found the man lying on the sidewalk beneath a forsythia, shouting nonsense into the foliage and rattling the branches as leaves fell on his face. Others stopped to stare, but Randall kept going, afraid to check his rearview.

The ex-professor of architecture was rumored to have designed a building that collapsed. People died, and the culpability of it ultimately worked something loose in his mind. It was a rumor that haunted Randall. Here he was, engaged in this serious pursuit, yet treating it as little more than a hobby. Fellow students memorized equations and laws of physics like talismans to keep them safe,

but Randall didn't memorize much of anything. He spent his time instead at Lumpy's, playing pinball and pool, listening to Springsteen on the jukebox. Randall was young, undisciplined, steadfastly out of his element. So he turned to business, where there was money to be made and little room for such monumental failure.

Loren and Randall stand in the Pizza Hut line at the dining terrace. Loren mentions his wife again, how she's still holding out, still taunting him.

"She purposely bought a skimpy bikini," he says. "It's unbearable."

"Skimpier than before?"

"Let's just put it this way: if Steph wore it to the beach, she'd get arrested."

"Wow," Randall says. "All this because you won't take the shrine down?"

"Yeah."

"Why doesn't she do it herself?"

"I don't know; I think it's some kind of test."

"Oh, I get it," Randall says. "She wants to see how chivalrous you are—see if you'll stand up to the neighbor, that sort of thing."

"Exactly."

The type of woman who'd marry Loren has to be a real bulldog, one of those personal trainers or triathletes with the tan sinewy bodies—probably a closet lesbian. Randall pictures her face, how pretty it might be if not for the hard jaw line, the pinched lips, the pinprick eyes. Curiosity gets the better of him.

"I was thinking about that cook-out you mentioned in your email. It might be a good idea. That way, I can come over and scout out the place. You know, get a feel for the whole shrine situation."

The cook-out is on a Friday night after work. Randall heads over to Loren's house, stopping on the way for a six-pack. Loren lives on the east side of the city in an older neighborhood where the houses are small and box-like, taking on the defensive stance of buildings at a frontier fort. Many of the yards contain rusted-out bike frames and mower chassis with grass clumping up around them. Loren's house is simple enough to find. It's the one with the shrine in front.

Bouquets of plastic flowers lie heaped in the grass, along with wilted vinyl balloons tethered to a signpost. There's a hand-painted placard that reads "We love you Vince, 1981-1999." Randall examines the shrine for a moment, the six-pack under his arm. Loren comes around the side of the house carrying a spatula and wearing an apron (*If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen*). He looks like a guy in a television commercial selling bratwurst or charcoal briquettes.

"Nice apron," Randall says. "Very macho."

"Thanks." Loren motions to the shrine. "Well, there it is."

"Yeah," Randall says. "I was just admiring it."

"Admiring it. Right." Loren snorts and a small thread of snot dangles from his nostril. He scratches a mosquito bite on his arm with the spatula.

Randall tries to focus on the shrine, sensing this is what's expected of him. "It's pretty much how I pictured it," he says, finally setting his six-pack down on the lawn and opening a beer.

"Good news," Loren says. "I called the city this morning and they said they'd send someone out."

"Problem solved." Randall takes a sip of beer and clenches his jaw. Somewhere down the street, children yell "cocksucker!" at each other and laugh.

Randall recalls the past few days at work, his fantasies of Loren's wife in her skimpy bikini. He was mystified at first by the visions, even taken aback. It was the same hair-raising jolt Madonna Cruz once prompted in him. The sensation was clearly sexual, but also something more, an attraction to the implausible.

It had been more than a year since Randall's last sexual encounter, one that ended... not badly, but impersonally. His sister-in-law introduced him to a girlfriend of hers, Carol, a recent divorcee. There was something fragile about her: a constant, nearly imperceptible flinch; a gunshyness. Carol looked like the type of woman who'd been hurt repeatedly, not because she craved it, but because something in her face invited pain. The tentativeness of her features, perhaps.

Carol's hair was pulled back and held in place like a child's with plain barrettes. Her only glaring feature was the bright red lipstick she wore, purchased, Randall guessed, specifically for the occasion. Throughout dinner, Carol blotted her lips with a napkin as she and Randall struggled to make conversation. When she folded the napkin over her plate, Randall was bothered by the bloody splotches, like evidences of a crime.

Later that night, the two made love on Randall's couch as a television analyst droned on about the stockpiling of nuclear weapons in some splinter of the Soviet Union; its name bumped rhythmically around Randall's head as he moved above Carol. Afterward her smile was thin-lipped and benevolent, like a therapist's or guidance counselor's, giving him the impression that all this had been for his sake, that Carol had been unsure of the new ribcage on hers, the pelvic bones sliding against one another. Randall called her a cab, she left quickly, and he felt okay—not great, but okay. He'd seen the loneliness in her face, how it opened Carol's features like rainwater on a desert plant. In examining her face, Randall failed to consider that perhaps Carol saw the same openness, to a larger degree, in his own.

Randall stands beside the kennel, staring in at the beagle mix and its petrified turds. The other guests are arranged in little clusters, the men around the gas grill, the women and kids near the pool. Randall sees a few familiar faces from work. Tracy Gidrick sits with her legs curled beneath her on a chaise longue, talking to a man Randall knows vaguely from Group Claims. People squint against the light of the sinking yolk-colored sun. Randall can hear crickets starting up in the grass.

A woman walks toward him, barefoot, water beaded on her arms and legs, chlorine on her skin. “I’m Steph,” she says, extending her hand for Randall to take. He tells her his name and can’t help but notice her slight overbite when she smiles. She’s young—twenty-two, twenty-three—and her short slicked-back hair makes her look even younger. Steph’s wearing a blue swimsuit, not the skimpy one Loren described, but a one-piece competitive suit like an Olympian would wear. A sarong is tied at her waist. Her painted nails match the color of the suit.

“Loren told me all about you,” Steph says.

“There isn’t much to tell.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised.” Steph grins. “Did you see our little memorial out front?”

“Yeah, I saw that. Loren tells me the guys from the city are going to haul it away.”

“That’s what they claim. We’ll just have to wait and see, though.” She glances down at the six-pack under Randall’s arm. “Why don’t you throw those beers in the cooler and have a seat.”

“Sure,” Randall says. He spots an ice chest over by the grill.

“How many burgers you want?” Loren calls out as Randall walks past with the beers.

“A couple, I guess.” He opens the cooler and slides the Heinekens down into the ice.

“I see you’ve met my wife,” Loren says, his voice lower.

“Yeah,” Randall says. “She seems nice.”

“Nice. Yeah. Just think skimpy. Think g-string. Then you’ll see what I’m dealing with here.”

Randall glances over at Steph. The truth is that he *has* been thinking skimpy. He *has* been thinking g-string. She isn’t hard, as Randall suspected, not bossy or dikish. There’s a fluidity to her gestures, a confidence, like the way she held out her hand for him to take. Steph knew he’d focus in on that hand and learn it: the tiny green veins, the painted nails, the wrinkled skin around the cuticles from swimming. No matter that she was married to another man. Steph was used to a positive response.

Randall opens another Heineken and takes a drink. His eyes film over and he sees everything as though through frosted glass. A woman in a dashiki goes around lighting citronella candles. A large man twists in his lawn chair, trying to bugspray the backs of his legs. A woman beside the pool lights a cigarette as she dangles her feet in the water. She's wearing a swimsuit with a hemmed skirt to hide her cellulite. A boy jumps into the pool, soaking the woman, and everyone laughs. Then, when she thinks no one's looking, the woman flicks her cigarette into the water with a look of disgust.

"Steph was right. They still haven't hauled it away." Loren is talking about the shrine again. A week has passed since the cookout and he and Randall are now sitting in the dining terrace at Middlefield Mall.

"Any luck in the bedroom?" Randall asks, plucking the onions from his sandwich.

"*Nada*. It's been twenty-three days now, counting today."

"Not that anyone's counting," Randall smirks. "At least in a couple months it'll be too cold for that skimpy bikini."

"Steph already thought of that. She started ordering from Victoria's Secret. You should see our credit card bills. She wears these little...thingies around the house at night, just to watch TV or cook dinner in. She's stonewalling me. Honestly, I can't take anymore. I've had it."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm taking the bull by the horns. Tonight when I get home, I'm going to walk down to the curb, gather all that stuff into a pile, and light it on fire."

"Hallelujah," Randall says. "Nothing like the power of sexual frustration." He takes a bite of his sandwich and starts looking around for the blind lady before realizing she could be anywhere—doing a paint-by-numbers, maybe, or playing Frisbee in the park with her seeing-eye dog.

Randall sits at his desk, trying to focus on some reports, but his thoughts turn to Steph. Her small, soft body; her short blonde hair slicked back with the scent of chlorine; her overbite. He thinks of her hand gripping his, focuses on the little cellulose lines around her cuticles, the blue nail polish matching her suit.

It was soon after the barbecue—the following Monday, in fact—that Randall started calling. He wanted to hear her voice again, to join it with the images in his head. The first couple times, the answering machine picked up, Loren's dry monotone. So where was Steph? Working somewhere? Maybe she was out in the pool, bumping around on her blow-up raft, sunglasses on, exhausted by the heavy sun. Randall called once or twice a day.

Finally Steph answers, sounding out of breath, as though she has run to reach the phone. He pictures her climbing the pool ladder and sprinting across the patio, her wet footsteps little figure eights on the concrete. "Hello?" she says. "Hello?" Randall waits on the line, his hand flat against the mouthpiece. "Give it a rest, creep," Steph mutters finally, hanging up. He can see her there in her competitive suit, standing in the kitchen, dripping water on the linoleum. Randall gathers up a sheaf of papers and puts them in his briefcase. He locks the office door behind him and walks to the elevator, deciding to take the rest of the day off.

The afternoon is typical of summer in Iowa, temperatures in the nineties with a humidity that chips away at initiative. Here in his car with the air going, Randall is removed from the heat. The neighborhood is silent, people waiting for dusk before they venture out to sit on their porches or tinker in their yards. Randall creeps past Loren's house, hoping to catch a glimpse of Steph through the picture window. The beagle mix sits on its haunches out front, gnawing on a clump of daffodils. He makes a U-turn at the end of the block and drives past again, but the window is dark.

Randall pulls into the parking lot of a Methodist church and sits there with his window rolled down, listening to the tick of oil cooling in the engine block. The church is broad and flat, with

matching doors that make it look like a roadside hotel. A cornfield lies beyond, stalks unflinching in the still air. Randall gets out of his car and walks along the street toward Loren's house, his heart heavy as a cinder block.

He steps up onto the front porch and rings the doorbell, but no one answers. The beagle mix—what's its name? Winston?—comes to sniff at Randall's pantleg. Randall pulls open the screen door and knocks on the heavier storm door. Still no response. He tries to see in through the picture window, but the shades are drawn to keep the house cool.

Randall sits down on the porch to survey the neighborhood while the beagle mix keeps sniffing at his cuffs. "Cut it out," he says, standing again. Randall walks around to the side of the house, the dog following closely behind. Standing on an ornamental stone, he peers through one of the side windows into the kitchen at the refrigerator, covered with snapshots; the countertop with a few empty beer cans on it; the small table where Loren and Steph take their meals.

"Can I help you?" The voice startles Randall and his wingtip slides from the stone. He turns too fast, nearly falling. Steph stands in the driveway with one hand on her hip, the other shielding her eyes from the sun.

"Remember me?" he asks. "Randy?"

"Randall from the cookout?"

He nods. It's then that Steph seems to notice the accumulated heat on her bare feet and starts hopping from one to the other. "You looking for Loren?" she asks, stepping into the cooler grass, heading toward the back gate. Randall isn't sure whether to follow or wait where he is. But then Steph is holding the gate for him. "Well?" she says. "You coming inside or what?"

She's wearing the blue swimsuit with a pair of jeans shorts. Randall considers the fact that perhaps there is no skimpy bikini. "Did you have the day off?" Steph asks, as Randall follows her across the patio, on into the house itself.

“Yeah,” he says, glancing down at her body. “Sort of.” Steph’s legs are the color of brown sugar. The waistband of her shorts is curled over, the top button undone. The house is cool and musty, as though it hasn’t been opened to the light in some time.

“I’ve gotta get out of this swimsuit,” she says. “Have a seat.” Steph finds the remote and hands it to Randall. There’s a show about geese playing on television. Randall tries to situate himself on the couch, crossing and uncrossing his legs, slouching down then sitting up straight. He pinches some dog hairs from his trousers.

Steph returns a few minutes later in a T-shirt and a fresh pair of shorts, nothing too revealing. “So,” she says. “What’s up?”

“I was just in the neighborhood and thought I’d stop by.”

“Well that’s awfully kind of you.” Her voice is syrupy sweet. Steph sits down at the far end of the couch and the two of them watch TV.

Randall waits for awhile before speaking again. “How come you don’t just do it yourself?”

“Do what?”

“Ditch the shrine.”

“I don’t know,” Steph shrugs. “Bad karma, I guess. Some poor kid died there, after all.”

“What happened?” The narrator on TV describes how geese are fattened up and deprived of exercise, how their livers are used for pâté.

“He was going about eighty on his motorcycle one night and ran the stop sign out front.”

Steph keeps her eyes fixed on the television. “Plowed right into a Lincoln Towncar. There was this really loud crash—I remember it scared the dog. He crawled under the bed and wouldn’t come out.”

“Are you afraid of the kid’s ghost or something?”

“I guess so. Pretty stupid, huh.”

“I could get rid of the shrine,” Randall says. Steph awards him a look of genuine possibility. He sees open legs in that look, an open mouth, a bed with the sheets turned down. “All you gotta do is say the word.”

“I guess so,” Steph says, pushing herself up from the couch. Randall notices her fingernail polish is chipped. She goes out to the kitchen and he can hear cupboards opening and closing. Then Steph returns with some trash bags, thrusting them at him. “There are tools in the garage if you need them,” she says, sitting back down and tugging her knees to her chest.

It takes twenty minutes or so to clean up the debris. The sign (“We Love You, Vince...”) has been driven deep into the ground and Randall has trouble unearthing it. He wants to vamoose before Loren gets home. Otherwise, this might turn into a tricky situation. Randall goes over the site with a garden rake to smooth away the loose soil as Winston sits beneath a linden tree, deep in shade, regarding him. He cinches the trash bags and carries them to the curb. Randall’s undershirt is soaked through with sweat. For the second time that afternoon, he stands on the porch, wondering what to do. He opens the door and enters.

He thought Steph might have changed into one of her slinky outfits, but she’s still sitting on the couch hugging her knees to her chest. “Take your shoes off,” she says.

Randall unlaces his dusty wingtips and kicks them into the corner. He notices the overripe smell of his armpits. He sits back down on the couch, crossing his stockinged feet. Steph is a mere heartbeat away, brown legs, brown arms, brown neck, all skin and sun and tanning oil. She is Madonna Cruz, the blind woman at the mall, Loren’s wife. This is what he needs.

Randall reaches across for her shoulder. He grazes the flesh, feels the collarbone and the threads of tendon, but he’s practically lying sideways, his head near Steph’s arm, his feet dangling over the edge of the couch, useless as driftwood. Steph’s eyebrows dip into a V; her mouth turns small and tight. She slides away, hooking an arm over the arm of the couch, all this without turning from the TV. “What’s going on here, chief?”

Randall bristles at the word *chief*. "I'm just trying to cool off," he says, struggling to sit up straight. "You have anything to drink?"

Loren enters just as Randall is undoing the top buttons of his Oxford, trying to ventilate some of his underarm stink. Steph is out in the kitchen, mixing up a batch of instant tea.

"How's it going?" Loren acts as though Randall's presence in the house is as natural to him as his own heartbeat. Steph returns with a glass of tea for Randall, which he clutches to his chest.

"Randall dropped by to solve our little problem," she says, gripping Loren's waist and tugging him toward her.

"What problem is that?" Loren asks.

"Well, there isn't one anymore. Randall and I watched a show about geese." She reaches up to kiss Loren's cheek.

"Geese?" Loren says.

"Did you know that they mate for life?"

"Who?"

"Geese," Steph says, kissing her husband again, this time on the lips.

"Is there any more tea?" Loren asks. He seems flustered by the show of affection. He looks over at Randall, but Randall is focused, instead, on whatever's happening out in the yard. His glass is still pressed to his chest.

A woman stands at the bottom of the driveway, pulling open Randall's trash bags and scattering their contents onto the ground. She's a slender, slightly stooped woman in summer slacks and a lavender blouse. Her glasses are large and owlsh, shrinking the rest of her face. Flesh gathers in little folds around her jaw, and her glasses keep slipping down as she works.

"You didn't—" Loren says. They watch the dead boy's mother. She seems haunted by her son, condemned to live in this hot humid landscape of misappropriated blame.

"Bad karma," Steph mutters. Loren has already stepped out into the waning light.

He and the dead boy's mother fix the balloons to the signpost, arrange the bouquets around it. Winston approaches and the boy's mother lets him lick the salty sweat from her palm. As Loren talks to the woman, she laughs and touches his elbow. He is young enough to be her son. Loren reaches into his pocket for a handkerchief and offers it to her. The gesture seems an anachronism, a return to some earlier period of permanence. The dead boy's mother takes the handkerchief. She cleans her glasses, wipes her face, returns the cloth to Loren. It is easy to see, even from the cool remove of the living room, that they have come to some sort of agreement.

SEA OF HAPPINESS

When Jack Deeds heard the captain's voice on the PA, it was the everyman airline pilot voice, the sound of water gliding over stones. Soothing. Nothing but a purr. He was saying something about a "slight issue" with one of the engines—something about "diverting" to Chicago—as though it were just an inconvenience. But Jack had a high-voltage feeling. Something was thoroughly NOT RIGHT about the whole situation. He was convinced there were terrorists aboard, that terrorists had somehow sabotaged the flight. Why not? There were terrorists in the Gaza Strip, had been for years. There were terrorists in England, and now, after all these damned holy wars, these jihads, there were terrorists in America. The destruction of the Twin Towers certainly confirmed that. Jack stared out the window, needing to see inviolate darkness, but saw instead the jagged image of his own face: pasty, flat, an ugly rictus. He was scared of that face.

Jack couldn't seem to get his breath. The cabin was shrinking to ridiculous dimensions and the bomb in the belly of the 757 was growing—he could see it—one of those cartoon bombs, round, black, shiny, with the fuse burning away and then POW! There'd be that dumb red and yellow explosion, a gaping wound in the side of the plane, then a mad descent down into the oily basement of the earth.

A flight attendant was trying to calm him; she had her hand on his shoulder and he could hear her voice. It was just like the pilot's, that lush monotone that could mean anything. Her eyes were made up with mascara and she was glancing around nervously, even as her mouth kept moving. Did he need a pillow? A blanket? Maybe a drink would help calm him. Some 7-Up? Or something a little stronger—whiskey, perhaps?

It surprised him to see that pale face again in the window, for tears were sliding down its cheeks. Jack tried to hold the sobs at bay, yet they came up out of him, pressed from his body. Now he was being fed a tumblerful of whiskey; the bourbon made his nose burn. The people beside him watched as the stewardess tilted the cup ever so gently as he drank. The stewardess seemed more

relaxed now that her passenger, her patient, was docile, a sheep, a buddha, a slug. You could have fed him anything.

Jack had been, at one time or another, a Lutheran; an Elk's Lodge member; and a dealer of assorted floor coverings, including terra cotta tile, linoleum, and carpeting miscellany. Through it all, he'd been a Capricorn (ruled by Saturn: cautious, serious, sometimes pessimistic) and a confirmed bachelor. His fear of flying, over the years, had been poorly contained; now it was absolute.

This whole ordeal—the flight itself, then the self-imposed quarantine in Chicago— began when he met a woman online. Cynthia owned a little bungalow in the Cincinnati suburbs and was the mother of two young sons. Unfortunately Jack lived in Phoenix, which meant his relationship with Cynthia thus far had been characterized by keystrokes, the initial stages of carpal tunnel, and incontrovertible distance.

Jack stood now at Terminal C, outside O'Hare, trying to hail a cab. Finally he succeeded and was driven downtown. His wallet fat with airline cash and his thoughts gradually untangling themselves after the crying jag on the plane, he felt better than before. Still, nerves fizzled in Jack's gut like a child's sparkler. Maybe he'd catch a Greyhound to Cincy in the morning (flying was out of the question); maybe he'd take the train back to Phoenix. Meanwhile, he'd try and make the most of his time in the Windy City.

Jack asked to be let off at the corner of Michigan and Ontario—it seemed like the center of things. He checked for vacancies at the downtown hotels, but they were full of baton twirlers, insurance adjusters, and foreign-looking men in *liederhosen*. Jack wandered further from the hub, away from the lake, hunting for a place to stay. His stomach growled, and he realized he hadn't eaten anything today but the rubbery chicken kiev served in-flight. As he stepped between buildings, he braced himself against the wind gusts buffeting his back. Jack passed an alleyway and saw an Indian man urinating on the sidewalk. The sight was an affront to him; he was shaken by the openness of it,

the unconcern. More than anything, Jack was intimidated. He turned away quickly and felt the urge to run. He couldn't rid himself of the image in his head, the Indian grinning at him and winking.

Jack finally found a vacancy at an off-the-loop hotel, the Cass. He passed the bar, the Sea of Happiness, on his way to the elevator. The corridors upstairs reeked of cigarettes and mildew, and Jack sensed a constant creeping dampness around him, beneath the frayed carpet, behind the dappled wallpaper. He thought of water trickling down through an aquifer, but it was nothing so pure as that. This was something else entirely: something seminal, vaginal, a secretion. Jack noticed exposed pipes and tangles of bare wiring. His room key, linked to a large metal hoop, reminded him of a jailer's keyring.

Jack entered his room, which was small and drafty, with a view of a railyard and a construction site, and turned on the TV. Steven Seagal was beating someone into submission. Jack sat down on the bed and the comforter stretched taught like a frog's skin beneath him. He sat with his back to the TV, staring out at the railyard. Jack could hear the sounds of struggle on the television: bone on bone, grunts and curses. When he called down for room service, the desk clerk laughed and hung up.

Jack decided to take a shower. The water pelted him and he couldn't adjust the shower head, but at least the spray was warm. Things weren't so bad. But when Jack stepped from the shower, he found that there weren't any towels. He shivered in front of the radiator, drying himself with his t-shirt, trying to get warm.

Jack considered simply turning off the lights and falling asleep—marking the trip off as a loss. But he hadn't endured a disastrous flight, windburn and near-frostbite, just to wind up in some shitty hotel. He'd go down and have a drink, maybe scare up a good jazz club after warming himself with a couple beers.

Jack found an empty barstool. Here he was, awash in the Sea of Happiness. The thought amused him. Maybe he was even sitting in the Seat of Happiness. Jack had the jittery feeling of being in a strange place and waiting for something to happen. It was a feeling that, in its extremities, could be painful; he imagined it as the sensation of preparing for sex with a stranger, or the feeling of being in a war zone, buckled down for combat. He looked around the bar, at the Greek captain-cum-bartender and the marine life—a single lobster that had outlived the steamer. The lobster, with its pincers taped, bobbed in a murky aquarium.

Jack motioned for a beer, but the old Greek didn't see him. Jack was tired of waiting—he'd been waiting all night. He considered giving Cynthia a call to let her know where he was, but then he remembered the grainy photo she mailed him which he kept folded in his billfold, a shot of her on a ribbon of stone in some local park, posing for the camera in khakis and hiking boots, leaning on a knob-handled walking stick. Jack hated people with walking sticks—and fanny packs (she'd been wearing one of those, too).

In the photo, Cynthia's face had been eaten up by sunlight. Was this intentional? Jack didn't think so. Nonetheless, he'd never seen her face. He had, however, examined her body and for the most part liked what he saw. The legs were a little dimply; the shoulders drooped—gravity had started to cast its spell—but still.

Cynthia was waiting for him in Cincinnati. He pictured her quaint house, her elm-lined street. Maybe the trees were dying of disease. He'd walk through the doorway, set down his suitcase, and head for the stairs. Her two young sons would be at their father's. Scented candles would lead the way to Cynthia's bedroom, where she'd be lying, waiting. Jack pictured her in a racy negligee, her face turned away, demure. But then he saw the walking stick and the fanny pack. He glimpsed a million inaccuracies. And that mysterious turned-away face—maybe there were scars; a boxy, bulbous nose; dark hairs on the upper lip; an eyepatch. Nothingness offered perfection, so anything less (or more, depending on one's point of view) was bound to come as a disappointment.

“Excuse me,” Jack said, motioning to the bartender.

The old Greek shuffled the length of the bar to stand before him, to smile and nod and reach into the cooler for a can—a can!—of Budweiser when Jack asked for a beer. Jack could tell, up-close, that the guy was old—myopic, half-deaf, probably even depleted by stroke. One corner of his mouth did sag, after all.

The beer quickly worked its way to Jack’s stomach and chipped away at the hunger pangs like a blade cutting into ice. The alcohol fiddled with his synapses, the millions of nerve endings, dulling them the tiniest bit—the one-beer buzz of an empty stomach.

Something brushed against his sleeve and he turned to face a tangle of hair, blonde with ridges of black, streaks of blue, hair that wasn’t quite sure of itself. Jack saw the leather jacket, or rather smelled the thick oily essence of it. He listened as the jacket creaked and crackled; these were the sounds of a million moments, a secret history. Perfume inched toward him, mixing with the leather to form an elixir: Jack remembered cars idling in icy driveways as the sky turned endless and dark outside, a heart cleaved by betrayal.

“I’ll have a glass of wine when you get a chance, George,” she told the Greek, but he was already pushing her Chardonney across the counter, sliding a napkin carefully beneath. She smiled and was beautiful. No, she wasn’t exactly beautiful, but she might have been at one time. She seemed haggard now, in need of some serious rest. Her face had been exposed to life’s elements: the wind, the sand, the steady drip of water. Pains had been taken to cover up the lines, the blemishes, but they were there, just under the surface. The mouth was small and narrow, hard to approach. And the eyes, darkened till nothing remained—just a gleam at the center, like a coin at the base of a well.

Jack was lapsing into nostalgia. He was staring.

“You okay?” she asked, not unpleasantly.

“Huh?”

“You just looked...intent.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Jack said. “It’s been that kind of day.”

The woman lit a cigarette and smoked it down to nothing. Periodically she glanced at her drink, as though shocked by it. Jack finished his Budweiser and signaled for another. Again, the bartender seemed out of sorts, gazing steadily at the lobster, as though waiting for it to deliver some sort of speech.

“I know what you mean,” the woman said. But Jack was thinking of something else entirely: a desperate high school girl screwing two guys in the back of a schoolbus. She’d been the soccer club manager and the two guys were starting halfbacks; what she’d done to them had gone above and beyond the call of duty. The girl couldn’t have been more than sixteen or seventeen; it frustrated Jack that he couldn’t think of her name. At the time he had slouched in his seat, listening to the sounds lingering up from the backseat; other kids had watched. Jack recalled how he had felt at that moment—hot, turned on. His face was flushed and he was afraid to turn around, afraid the other kids would see his excitement.

But Jack also felt saddened. He sagged beneath the weight of the realization that he could never commit to something like that. He didn’t have the guts, the cajones. He couldn’t even ask girls out on dates when he was in high school. It was fear, the same bruising sound in his ears he’d heard on the plane while waiting for the explosion; Jack was always bound and determined for the worst.

“You’ve still got that intent look,” the woman said.

“Huh?” He knew she was confusing this look for something it wasn’t—a good story, maybe; crucial life experiences; cinematic bullshit.

“You staying here?” the woman asked. “Upstairs?”

“Yeah, just for the night. Everywhere else was full. Conventions and things like that,” he added, by way of explanation.

“Maybe you should have called ahead.”

“You’re right, I should have. I was just on my way to Cincinnati and got stuck here...inadvertently.”

“What line of work are you in?”

“Carpeting and floor coverings. Nothing too exciting. The money’s good, though.” He slurped at his beer. “What do you do?”

As Jack stared at the woman, he realized she was older than he’d first guessed. The cigarette in the ashtray was ringed with bruise-colored lipstick. “Just enough to pay the bills,” she said, laughing, and Jack saw her teeth, the dull little flecks of chipped enamel.

“Huh,” he grunted. Jack was well into his second beer by now, and he wanted to impress her somehow, but small talk zapped his energy. He looked away, out the window, at pincer-like shadows forming beneath the streetlights, prehistoric creatures emerging from the depths of Lake Michigan to seek vengeance on wandering souls, the nightlife. Some kids walked past, in their late teens or early twenties, and he could hear their muffled voices through the plate glass. The door of the bar opened, and two of them came in.

“I think I’ll have another glass of wine,” the woman said. “You want a beer?”

“Sure,” he said. This was extraordinary luck. A woman—not bad looking, either—was buying him drinks. Maybe his decision to drive into the city, rather than staying at one of those budget hotels near the airport, would pan out. At first Jack had merely needed a level of remove from the situation. He couldn’t bear the thought of lying in bed, listening to airplanes take off and land all night, with only the television to distract him. He’d had enough of flight, enough of that foolish reliance on something so ludicrous; planes could, and sometimes did, fall to earth as surely and dumbly as meteors.

Jack watched the woman beside him sift through her purse, placing a litany of items on the bar. Keys, some kind of ID tag, guitar picks, a cell phone, a worn copy of *Hit Parade*. The woman finally found what she was looking for, a stash of money-clipped cash. Jack eyed the bills—fifties

and hundreds, mainly—as she smoothed them out in her lap. One of the bills floated across the bar and the Greek was there instantly to retrieve it. His myopia seemed selective. “George,” she said quietly, “why don’t you freshen everyone’s drinks when you get the chance.”

“Sure thing, Ana.”

She swiveled on her stool to face Jack. “Let’s throw some darts.”

“I’m not sure we ever introduced ourselves,” Ana said, aiming at the dart board.

“I’m Jack,” he said, extending his hand and waiting for her to take it, interested in the way her palm would feel in his.

“Hi, Jack,” she said, filling his hand with darts. “You’re up.”

“Aren’t you going to tell me your name?”

“Maybe later,” she smiled. The dart board beeped and fizzled. “You believe in ghosts, Jack?”

It wasn’t one of those innocuous questions strangers ask one another. There was risk here, which bothered him. Jack took a sip of beer and rotated his head from side to side to loosen the kinks in his neck. He decided to tell the truth. “When I was a kid,” he began, “I lived in this old farmhouse out in the country. One night—I must have been six or seven at the time—I heard these heavy footsteps on the stairs. I could hear them on each step, very clearly. Whoever it was started walking down the hallway...”

“Here, hand me the darts,” Ana said.

“Oh—sorry. You want me to keep going?”

“Of course.”

“So anyway, I go down to breakfast the next morning and I don’t want to say anything about it. I mean, I’m just a kid—I know my family’s going to think I’m crazy...”

Ana returned the darts to Jack. He waited as the college kids passed in front of him on their way to the bar. "Sorry," they said, smiling, and Jack smiled back.

"No problem," he said, before realizing they hadn't been talking to him. The kids were looking past him, toward Ana, whose hand was now at Jack's waist, her pinkie finger tugging at his beltloop.

Jack remembered the night he'd gone drinking with Darci and Sid, a young couple who worked with him at a furniture store. He must have been twenty or so at the time. They were bombed on Long Islands, all three of them, when he drove them back to his apartment. Sid and Jack stayed up playing Talking Heads while Darci fell asleep in the guest room. Sid passed out on the couch soon afterward and Jack lay there on the floor, listening to "Psycho Killer," thinking of Darci. He was drunk, that's what it was. Drunkenness prompted him to get up and go into the guest room, lie down against Darci on the rollaway bed and start kissing her. She was receptive to the tug of his body on hers; Jack ran his hands up under Darci's shirt, down into her jeans, knowing all the while she mistook him for Sid. In her drunken state, she couldn't tell the difference.

Then Darci opened her eyes and Jack watched her appraise him in the meager light. "I've got to go to the bathroom," she said, struggling up. Out in the hallway, Jack could hear her saying, "I've gotta go; I gotta get going." He could picture Sid rising from the couch, scratching his head; it was four in the morning. Jack was scared that at any moment, the door would open and Sid would enter the room. Jack had never been in a fight before; he'd never been struck by another man and the prospect of it sobered him, more than the knowledge of what he'd done to Darci, or the realization that he deserved to be punched.

When Jack got up the next morning, Sid and Darci were gone. Jack called in sick to his sales job and spent the morning looking through the employment section of the paper. He never saw Sid or Darci again.

"Jack"—it was Ana. "Let's sit down at a table. I want to hear the rest of your story."

“There isn’t really anything else to tell. Everyone in my family—my mom and dad, my brother—we all heard the footsteps. For three months, night after night, it went on, always at two or three in the morning. The footsteps were loud enough to wake us up. The ghost—whatever it was—walked up the stairs and stopped at the end of the hallway in front of my parents’ room. Then one day the footsteps just stopped.”

“You never heard them again?” Ana asked.

“Nope.”

“You ever see anything?”

“No,” Jack said. “My mom claimed she saw something, though. She was in the kitchen one day, doing some dishes, and saw a man walking toward the house. She said he was wearing these clothes that seemed old, outdated. Supposedly, when the guy stepped up on the porch, my mom opened the door for him, but there was nobody there.”

“Huh,” Ana said. Her eyes gleamed in the murky bar. “That’s pretty spooky.”

“So you believe in ghosts?” Jack asked.

“No. I don’t think so. I’ve heard some pretty cool stories, though.”

Jack felt something twist in his stomach. “How’s mine stack up?”

“Well... The beginning was good. Lots of tension. But ultimately nothing happens. You never get to see the ghost. And that whole bit about your mom is more like a postscript—too little too late. If I were telling the story, I’d have you go and peek through the keyhole of your door one night. You’d see something—a shape—but don’t make it a farmer. Make it something more scary... like a guy with a hatchet sticking out of his chest. Something grisly like that. He was murdered in your house, and now he’s come back for revenge.”

Jack fiddled with his beer can tab. “I can’t... I mean, it didn’t really happen that way, though. I never would have looked through the keyhole. I was scared shitless.”

“Look,” Ana said, her palms open on the table. “All I’m saying is that it’s not the best ghost story I’ve ever heard.”

After several more beers, Jack found himself in a cab with Ana. The thought entered his mind, then flickered away, that maybe she was a call girl. The city seemed distant, like an exhibit under glass. Jack recalled a similar cab ride years ago—he’d dropped out of college and gone to Europe, the most reckless thing he’d ever done. Jack had been dancing in a club with a dark-haired English girl. They’d taken a cab back to the girl’s flat—he had no idea what her name was—and they had kissed passionately on the way. But when they reached the flat, the girl suddenly turned distant. “You’ll have to shove off,” she said.

“How come?” he asked.

“Because my fucking boyfriend’s upstairs.” The tone of voice never changed, the words spoken in a wilting West End accent. And she was gone.

Now he turned to look at Ana, who in turn was staring out the window. Jack wanted to reach for her hair, to brush it from the folds of her jacket. He wanted to kiss her ear, her neck. Ana turned to face him. “What do you fear?”

“Huh?”

“It’s a simple question. Tell me what you’re afraid of.”

“Clowns and horses,” Jack said without thinking. “And flying. I’m deathly afraid of flying.”

“What are you drawn to?”

Jack sat with his hands in his lap, child-like. “This, I guess.”

“This? What do you mean?”

“I mean... This cab ride. Being here in this cab, tonight, in this city.”

“As opposed to other cab rides?” Ana asked. “Other nights? Other cities? Other women?”

“No. Nothing like that.”

“Well? What happens next?”

“I don’t know. I was just going to play it by ear.”

The cabby pulled up to the curb in front of a Lakeshore Drive high-rise. Jack knew the water lay just beyond his window, but all he could see was darkness, a gaping seam. As he began digging in his wallet for cab fare, the photo of Cynthia fell into his lap.

Ana seized the picture, holding it up to the dome light. “Ooh-la-la! Who’s this?”

“Nobody,” Jack said. He considered snatching the photo back.

“Wife? Girlfriend?”

Jack shook his head.

“I bet this is your reason for going to Cincinnati, isn’t it?” Ana said.

Jack felt the color rise in his face.

“How much do we owe you?” Ana asked the cabby, who was twisted in his seat, grinning at her.

“You don’t owe me nothing, Miss Spencer. Can I get your autograph, though?”

“Wow! What a pleasant surprise. Of course.”

The driver passed a clipboard through the partition, which Ana signed and returned. “Thanks a bunch,” he said. “My daughter’s gonna love this.” Jack watched the whole thing in disbelief.

They slumped down in a sofa, high above the lake. Jack felt as though he was at the top of a giant springboard. Plate glass covered one whole wall of the living room. Jack could see red blinking freighter lights in the distance. “This is quite a place,” he said. The truth is that he was hypnotized. Expensive-looking paintings lined the walls. The paintings frightened him somehow, the crimson swirls like blood circling a drain. A few paintings leaned against the wall, still waiting to be hung.

“I just moved in a little while ago,” Ana said, pointing to the paintings on the floor. “That’s why those pictures are still there.”

“Ana,” Jack began. “I—I don’t know anything about you. You never told me what you do for a living. Or—you’re not married, are you?”

She smiled and patted Jack’s knee. “Of course I’m not married. Not at the moment, anyway.” She rose and walked to the kitchen. Jack could hear the staccato pattern of her flats on the linoleum. “You want a drink?” she called out.

He did want one, but he wasn’t sure it was a good idea. Jack felt like he was playing that game you play as a kid, taking your parents’ car out for the first time to see what it’ll do. You find yourself out there alone in the darkness, with the city lights in the rearview, out among the trees. Maybe you shut off the headlights, maybe you take your hands from the wheel. How far can you go and still be okay, before the alignment carries you to one side or the other? Jack couldn’t afford to see where this thing might take him. There was Cynthia to consider, Cynthia in Cincinnati, Cynthia with the mystery face; he was afraid again, afraid of that face, fearful of what might happen once the features filled in. But he was afraid to stay here, too.

“Well?” Ana asked. “What about that drink?”

“No,” Jack said. “I’m fine.”

“Suit yourself.” She returned with a glass of something cloudy. “What I do,” Ana said, sitting down next to him and crossing her legs, “is ask questions of the world. I figure people out.”

Jack shook his head, confused. He felt like he was headed toward something bulky and ominous out there in the darkness. “But what do you *do*? Like for money?”

“I’m in a rock band. You sure you don’t want a drink?”

“Okay,” he said. Ana got up and went back into the kitchen. “What’s the name of your band?” Jack called out.

“The Subatomic Jungle Bunnies.”

“Oh. I think I’ve heard of you.”

“Yeah, well, we’re fairly popular in Europe. And Japan, for some reason. You can always count on Japan.”

“Sure,” Jack said.

Ana returned with a glass of bourbon. “So let’s get back to the woman in the photo,” she said, smiling.

“I don’t know,” Jack said quietly. “She’s a long way off.”

“Come on now. There aren’t any secrets here. Who is it?”

“Just a woman I know.”

“Your wife?”

“No.”

“Girlfriend?”

“Not really. Just a woman I met. A friend of mine.”

“Ah. A special someone.”

“No,” Jack said, swirling the ice cubes in his drink. “I wouldn’t call her that.”

“Oh, well, so much for labels. How’d you meet?”

“We—we met...well, we haven’t actually met...yet.”

“How do you know her then? Don’t tell me this is just some photo you found in a library book.”

“It’s hard to explain.”

“Fair enough.” Ana kicked off her shoes and one stockinged foot brushed against Jack’s pantleg. “What do you want to talk about then?”

“Beats me,” Jack said. “Let’s talk about your band, or about this artwork up on the wall...”

“Nah, that’s boring.” She inched closer to Jack. “Tell me something you tried that didn’t work out.”

“I used to paint billboards.”

“Now that’s interesting,” Ana said. “What kind of billboards did you paint?”

“Ads for chewing gum.”

“What did the ads look like?”

Jack fidgeted and took another sip of whiskey. He noticed some of the canvasses on the wall still seemed wet, as though they’d just been finished, or as though they were oozing. Jack felt the need to rearrange the swirls into something linear, something solid, some kind of suture or bandage.

“The ads looked like crap,” he said. “There were these two kids kissing—probably high-school aged—and the slogan said, ‘Chewing Student’s Gum leads to extra-curricular activities.’ I read somewhere that three times as many accidents occur on highways with billboards as on highways without. Did you know that?”

Ana giggled. “I had no idea.”

“It’s true. Once I learned that, I had to quit. I felt... complicit.”

“A matter of ethics, huh? Like sitting here with me while your ladyfriend pines for you in little ole’ Cincinnati, Ohio?” She drew the words out, batting her eyelashes; he couldn’t tell if she was serious or not. Her smile surrendered nothing.

“I doubt she’s pining for me. She probably just figures I chickened out.”

“So she wouldn’t mind if I kissed you?”

“What could she say?”

Ana leaned forward and gave Jack a kiss. “I’ll be back in a minute,” she said, rising from the couch. “Make yourself at home.” Then she disappeared down the hallway.

Jack got up from the couch and felt himself sway—or was it the building itself that was swaying? He walked over to the stereo and thumbed through the albums until he came across one by the Subatomic Dust Bunnies. Jack began playing the record. Ana was singing, but he couldn’t make out the lyrics. It all sounded very guttural, very nearly sexual—she emitted a series of grunts and

screams while guitars thrashed in the background. Jack could feel himself becoming aroused; he turned down the volume.

“Come in here,” Ana said, standing in the entryway. Jack followed her down the hall to her bedroom, which was filled with guitars. A poster of Ozzie Osborne biting the head off a bat hung on one wall. Ana patted the bed and Jack sat down next to her. “Uh, oh,” she said, “you’ve forgotten your drink. I’ll go get it for you.”

“No, that’s okay.” Jack scratched his head. “I feel kind of... woozy.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

Jack unlaced his shoes and pushed them up against the end table. Then he laid down on his side with his back to the door, staring out the window at the infinite sky. Once more he thought of Cynthia, waiting patiently for him. He thought of her airbrushed face. What the hell was he doing here, so far from Arizona?

“Tell me the craziest thing you ever did, Jack.” Ana was leaning over him, snapping her fingers in his face. He blinked a few times. His thoughts were dark and sluggish as the lake.

“Went to Europe,” he muttered.

“Why’d you go?”

Jack was drunk now, he was sure of it—he could feel the high-rise swaying back and forth.

“My fiancé and I split up,” he said. “I wanted to get away.”

“Why’d you split up?”

“What’s going on here?”

Ana smiled. She was gripping his shoulders, like the flight attendant had done earlier in the day. “Why’d you split up?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I could never follow through with things. This guy was groping her at a bar one time and she looked at me—she wanted me to say something or do something, but all I could feel was this terrible fear, like concrete or something. That’s how solid it was.”

Ana climbed onto the bed and wrapped her arm around Jack's shoulders. It was the gesture of a mother caring for a sick child.

"Leslie—that was her name," Jack said. "Leslie started fucking around with other guys, being real obvious about it. That was her way of telling me. It made me sick to think of her with those other men. I had to go somewhere. What a great way to solve a problem."

Ana ran her fingers through his hair. Guilt, some vacancy, was gradually pushed aside.

"I don't ... I don't... You put something in my drink, didn't you?"

"Why Europe, of all places?"

"I don't know. I, uh..." Jack felt himself drifting now, to the window ledge and beyond, out into the night sky, out over Lake Michigan. He could smell the crisp air and hear the squawk of a lone gull. Leslie was there, floating in a life raft on the obsidian water. He came to rest there, to watch her row. She was beautiful, just as he remembered her—twenty-two, the love of his life, flawed.

"I keep rowing," Leslie said, "but I never get any closer to shore." She never took her eyes from the harbor lights.

"Must be the current," Jack said.

"What was that?" It was Ana, and he was back now, lying on her bed.

"You put something in my drink." He tried to rise onto his elbow, but she eased him back down.

"Yeah, I slipped you a mickey." Ana seemed pleased with herself.

"How come?" Jack asked.

"I don't know. It's a mystery, even to me."

"Am I going to be all right? You're not going to steal one of my kidneys, are you? I've heard of that happening."

Then he was drifting again through the empty streets of the city, past the Wrigley Building, the Sears Tower, past Chinatown and Comiskey Park, on toward the suburbs. Dogs strained against tethers, barking at him. He moved so fast the wind whistled in his ears and numbed his face. Jack moved out into the countryside: the tall slick grass, the ditches teeming with possums and skunks, the solitary leafless trees.

Was he dreaming this? He entered a farmhouse and all the women of his life were there, living some sort of communal existence, sitting around the kitchen table in cable-knit sweaters and corduroys, waiting for their tea to steep, like something from a Land's End catalog. Maybe this *was* Land's End—the shores of the Sea of Happiness. More happiness than any one person could stand.

Ana stood among the women.

“Is this it?” he asked her. “Is this where I need to be?”

Pity asserted itself in the features of her face. “What you need is to be stronger. You need to follow through.” The words affirmed something Jack had known for some time. Still, he wasn't sure how to move in this world, where history mingled freely with the present. He found that his features, once more, were solid as concrete; the fear was thickening in him, and he was powerless against it.

LESSONS I LEARNED FROM MAURY POVICH

The whole ordeal started a few months ago. I was sitting on the couch one day, talking to Susan on the cordless, and she was telling me about Tony's shirt—how it ripped in sixth-period PE while the guys were playing basketball, so he took it off right there in the gym. "The girls were drooling all over their tank tops," Susan said.

"Oh my god. Was he hot?"

"Totally," Susan said, and she was about to elaborate when mom came waltzing into the living room, fresh from one of her late afternoon lunches at the club. I could smell the gin, strong as diesel fuel, on her breath. She was blabbing so loud I couldn't hear Susan's voice and I had to hang up. I glared at mom, trying to make her feel like a jerk for interrupting, but she was totally oblivious.

"Let's go on a talk show," she said.

"Huh?"

"You know, one of those daytime talk shows—like Oprah. We'll pretend we've got problems. We'll give you an eating disorder or something."

"I don't want an eating disorder."

"No, honey. You won't really have an eating disorder. It's an act! Acting! The theater," mom finally said, drawing out the word. She was obviously exasperated by my thick-headedness.

"Oh," I said.

I figured this was one of mom's too-tipsy-to-think-straight-but-okay-to-drive- schemes—that she'd forget everything by the time dinner rolled around. But the idea stuck, and the next day she was calling 1-800 numbers for tickets. Ricki Lake, Montell Williams, whoever she could get. A week later, we started going to shows.

On the day of the taping, Mom would call up the secretary at William Fremd High and tell her I was sick. Then we'd hop in the Beamer and take I-94 down to the studio. Mom carried a steno pad and tape recorder in a crocheted handbag, like some kind of investigative journalist, Diane

Sawyer or something. We usually stayed and watched both tapings, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The whole time mom would scribble like crazy in her notepad.

After each taping, she'd rush down to the stage, interviewing anyone willing to talk to her—technicians; cameramen; fidgety, red-faced interns. When mom slipped into her high-gear interview mode, I usually high-tailed it for the door. I ducked outside with the ushers and stood under the marquee, smoking. Then I'd go back into the lobby and sit on one of the comfy leather couches, eating Junior Mints while I waited for mom to come out.

We started going to a bunch of these shows. Mom called it the “research” phase of the plan. If dad knew how much school I was missing, he would have killed me. He was a big-time lawyer for some insurance company. The only time he ever called was to tell me how I should study hard and pay attention in school so I could get into Northwestern and maybe, just maybe, law school at Penn, like him. After dad divorced my mom, he moved to Phoenix and started playing a startling amount of golf.

It didn't seem to bother my dad that he had chosen golf over mom and I. Mom tried not to let it bother her, either. “If your father wants to spend his life chasing little white balls...and bimbos...then let him.” She said this with some enthusiasm, a dramatic flair, as though it had been rehearsed in front of a mirror or something.

Outwardly, the transition to single life had been a smooth one for Mom. She joined the group of martini sipping divorcés at the country club. (I thought it was kind of ironic how my mom kept going to the club, even though she hated golf—for obvious reasons.) But then there were the schemes. First, mom was going to join a troupe of belly dancers and travel around Chicago, performing at senior citizen centers and business conventions. Then she was going to go cliff diving in Mexico. Oh, and let's not forget the hothouse she paid a fortune to have built in our backyard so she could grow rare orchids.

But none of mom's schemes were as elaborate and devious as this one: to go on network television and dupe an audience of millions. Also, none of her schemes had directly involved me. Which begs the question—why'd I go along with it? That's a good question, one I haven't totally answered myself. Maybe a part of me wanted to be on TV. Maybe I was just trying to keep Mom happy. And maybe I thought this was the granddaddy of all her schemes. What could possibly top it? I figured that if we pulled off the talk show hoax, then mom would go back to leading a normal life.

She made me vow not to tell dad about our talk show scheme. In fact, Mom made me promise not to tell anyone about our little treks into the city. She was like an alcoholic at an AA meeting who wasn't quite ready to admit she had a problem. I, on the other hand, wanted desperately to confide in Susan. She was my best friend, after all.

One day I was talking to Susan on the phone, and she asked why I kept missing so much school. "I don't know," I said. "I guess I haven't been feeling well lately. Mom says it might be the German measles or ru-something. Ru-anda, maybe?"

"No," Susan said. "Rwanda's a country. I think she means rubella."

"Rubella. That's right." Susan was smarter and prettier than me, but she never made a big deal out of it. I think that's why I liked her so much.

"Aren't German measles and rubella the same thing?" she asked.

"Beats me," I said honestly. I'd only mentioned German measles in the first place because I remembered Aunt Gladys had it when she was pregnant and everybody worried that Stevie, my cousin, would end up being handicapped or retarded or something. I always thought he *was* retarded—he liked pro wrestling and heavy metal, after all—but everyone else seemed to think he turned out fine.

"The guys in Major American Writers are wondering why you're gone all the time," Susan said. "Were you there when we took the quiz over *Red Badge of Courage*?"

"No," I said. "I think I missed it. That was such a lame book anyway."

“We’re reading *The Great Gatsby* next,” Susan said.

“Yuck. Why do we have to read all these books about men? Why can’t we read, like, *Valley of the Dolls* or something?”

“Good question. Hey, speaking of men—Tony says you’ve been showing up for work every night, even though you weren’t at school.”

“You talked to Tony?” I felt the blood rushing to my face.

Tony was the guy I thought about pretty much every waking moment. I knew that sounded dramatic (like something the heroine of a Danielle Steele novel would write in her journal as she pined for her boyfriend who was lost in the jungles of South America), but it was true. I made it true. I was on a strict Thinking-Of-Tony regimen, like a diet plan or exercise routine. I disciplined myself to think about him while I was doing the really mundane things in life, like painting my fingernails or reading those infinitely uncool books for lit. class.

The bad news is that Tony had a girlfriend, some pale, skinny chick with big boobs who went to Palatine. I’d like to say she was ugly, but she wasn’t. Tony brought her to the homecoming game and Susan and I were forced to sit behind them for the whole first half, watching Tony and Big-Boobed girl make out. Then, when William Fremd scored a touchdown and Vice-Principal Baker shot off the cannon, Tony and Big-Boobed girl left to go God-knows-where—under the bleachers, maybe—and the butterflies in my stomach turned to something else—big, clumsy bats swooping around, blindly bumping into vital organs. The rest of the game, I made Susan stand with me down by the chain link fence, right in front of the track. We watched the cheerleaders mutter to each other as our team got trounced, forty-two to six.

“So Tony asked about me?” I said.

“Well. . .sort of. I mean, I asked him if you’d been going to work, and he said you had, so he’s definitely been paying attention to whether you’re there or not.”

“I need the money,” I lied. “That’s why I’ve been working so much.”

“Come on, Nicole. Doesn’t your dad, like, practically own an insurance company or something?”

I chose to ignore this. “I guess I feel sick in the morning,” I said, “but I’m better by afternoon.”

“That’s kind of weird,” Susan said. “Maybe some guy snuck into your bedroom and knocked you up while you were sleeping, and now you’ve got a killer case of morning sickness.”

“That’s horrible,” I said. Secretly, though, I liked the sound of it—*knocked up*. I imagined the act to be painful, but exotic in a way—much more interesting than simply having sex or making love. I closed my eyes and pictured Tony’s silent face, the dark bangs hanging down over his eyes, as he climbed through my bedroom window. I imagined him standing there in a tight pair of jeans and his ripped basketball jersey, staring at me tenderly as I lay beneath the covers, pretending to sleep. In one smooth motion, he would peel off the jersey and climb into bed, hovering over me. I tried to imagine Tony knocking me up, the strange sensation of it, but I couldn’t.

Susan already lost her virginity to an older guy, one of her brother’s friends, a total creep. She tried to describe it to me afterwards, but I couldn’t relate. After it happened, I figured Susan would change somehow. I searched for little signs: new gestures, expressions; new ways of saying the same old, threadbare high school phrases. *Study hall*. *Spanish Club*. *Lunch money*. After all, Susan had experienced something vast and permanent, something much more important than making the varsity tennis team or getting an A in Chem lab. I kept waiting for the change, but she remained the same old Susan.

Mom came home from one of her three-martini lunches one day—this was long before the talk show brainstorm—and said, “You need to be more responsible, and the only way to learn responsibility is to get a job.”

“You don’t have a job,” I told her. “You haven’t worked in years.”

“That’s different,” mom said. She started to say something more, but then she changed her mind and went into the kitchen.

I decided to follow her. Mom was pulling onions and green peppers out of the fridge. “You want an omelet?” she asked.

“No thanks.” I stood leaning against the counter, watching her. Mom had begun dicing the vegetables and her hair kept falling down into her eyes. I loved my mom’s long hair. It looked good against her narrow face, the high cheekbones. It made her look young and radiant. All my friends’ moms had long since cut their hair short when it started thinning or turning frizzy. But mom left hers long, and not just out of some weird old-lady denial thing—her hair really looked good that way, thick and luxuriant, like the girls in the Clairol commercials. “How come I have to get a job?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” mom admitted. She edged the chopped vegetables into a skillet and added some olive oil. Then she started dicing up ham. “I had a job when I was your age,” she said. “It’s a good way to meet people.”

“I’ve already met enough people in my life. In fact, I’ve got more friends than I can handle right now.”

“It never hurts to meet new people.”

“Why don’t you get a job?” I asked.

Mom cracked an egg into the skillet. “I had a job for fifteen years. It was called being a housewife—picking up after your father. It was hard work, and now I’m retired. With a nice pension.” She laughed at that.

“Well, my job is being your daughter. You think that’s any kind of picnic?”

“No, probably not,” mom sighed. “You want one of these?”

I looked into the skillet. “One of what?” I asked.

“One of these omelet...thingies.”

“Uh-uh,” I said, shaking my head, trying not to smile.

I figured I’d work awhile at the theater and watch free movies while mom came to her senses. But then Tony got hired, and suddenly I had the incentive to stay and sell popcorn to the masses. “You want butter,” I asked, a million times a night. Dad was thrilled when he found out I had a part-time job. It didn’t matter to him one iota that mom was forcing me, against my will, to work at the Rivercrest Cineplex.

After mom’s “research” phase ended, she crammed her steno pad and tape recorder into a shoe box on the top shelf of the guest room closet, behind the scarves and stocking caps, and proceeded to what she called her “craft of acting” phase. These phases were like periods of the earth’s development—Neolithic, Paleolithic. I guess we had finally stopped dragging our knuckles on the ground and were now walking upright. Mom and I were evolving.

She saw a guest plug at the end of the Jenny Jones show calling for mothers with overweight teens. “This is our golden opportunity,” she told me. Mom phoned the studio and set up an interview, a pre-interview.

“How are we going to pull this off?” I asked. “I’m not fat.”

“Don’t you worry about that, Nicole. The first thing we’re going to do is take a little trip to the Drama Workshop.” The Drama Workshop was a half-restored Victorian mansion on the outskirts of town. It was owned by two middle-aged lesbians with matching gray flattops. They had turned the basement and first floor into a theatrical shop, and were living in the rooms upstairs.

“Rose, do you have padded suits?” Mom asked one of the women as we stepped into the shop. It appeared she had been spending some serious time here—she knew the owners by name.

“We sure do, Kathleen!” the lesbian said. This was scary. The owners knew mom’s name, too. Rose and her partner disappeared down a set of dimly-lit basement steps and reappeared lugging a fat suit. New age music—pan flutes and water gushing over stones—played in the background.

Mom and Rose strapped me into the suit, wrapping the Velcro bands around my body. I looked down at the mammoth breasts that eclipsed my own nearly non-existent ones. The suit's puffy gut protruded and I poked my fingers into the black hole of the belly button, which seemed as big and round as a yo-yo.

"This is stupid," I said. Mom glared at me and then smiled brightly in the direction of Rose and her partner, Helga.

"It's acting!" she said. "It's going to be fun!"

"Oh, indeed," Rose chimed in. "Acting is *such* an adventure." She and Helga set off in search of makeup to turn my face chubby and swollen. I stood there in the shop as mom circled around me, inspecting the suit. My arms hung uselessly at my side like flippers. I felt hideous. What if Tony walked into the shop right now? What would he think? He'd probably injure himself from laughing so hard. He'd rupture something in his stomach, get a hemorrhage, die, and I'd be the cause of death.

"This is never going to work," I said.

"It'll work."

"No it won't. What if someone bumps into me? I'm all...cushiony. What if someone pinches my belly?"

"No one's going to pinch your belly, Nicole. Why would anyone want to go and do something like that?"

"I don't know," I said. "People do all kinds of crazy stuff. Why can't we just wait for a different episode—like one about eating disorders?"

"Because," mom said, staring off in the direction of the tutus, "you're not skinny enough. No one's going to believe you have a disorder."

A week later, I was lying on my bed, trying to read *The Great Gatsby*. I couldn't get into it, though. I kept thinking of Mom's Jenny Jones scheme which, I hated to admit, hadn't gone over very well. The truth is that we didn't make it past the pre-interview. One of the associate producers led us into a room where a video camera was set up. The producer asked a bunch of questions while taping us.

Then a trio of lawyers in identical pinstriped suits walked in. They wanted baby pictures, birth certificates, names, addresses, and phone numbers of friends and relatives. The whole time, I sat in my chair, sweating beneath the bulky padded suit. The lawyers reminded me of dad. They were tan like dad—extremely tan.

I wondered how three lawyers from Chicago got so dark. Maybe they'd just returned from a cruise to the Bahamas. Or maybe they each owned a tanning bed. That was it—I bet they lived together in an apartment overlooking the lake. I imagined them going home and hanging up their identical, pinstriped suits in a closet full of mothballs and identical, pinstriped suits. I pictured a living room, empty except for three big tanning beds that lay with their lids open, humming patiently. I wondered what the lawyers would look like in their matching BVDs, climbing simultaneously into the open mouths of the beds. The idea creeped me out. Droplets of sweat started to gather on my forehead. When the lawyers pulled a series of consent forms from their briefcases, I split. I struggled up from the table and waddled out of the room. Mom found me later in my usual spot, smoking beneath the marquee. Needless to say, she wasn't pleased.

The pre-interview disaster happened days ago, but Mom was still pouting about it, giving me the silent treatment. She waited by the phone for the Jenny Jones people to call and say they were willing to give us another shot, but no one called except dad. As usual, his timing was terrible. Mom yelled at him for several minutes, and then handed the phone to me, like a terrier yipping at the mailman and then suddenly losing interest. "What's wrong with your mother?" he asked.

"I don't know."

“Well, it sounds like she’s on the verge of a nervous breakdown.”

“I think she’s been stressed out lately,” I said.

“Oh.” I could hear ice rattling in a tumbler on the other end of the line. “Guess what,” dad said.

“What?”

“I was in a best shot tournament the other day, and I won a brand new set of irons. Can you believe it?”

“What are irons?” I asked.

“Never mind,” dad muttered. I could hear him taking a sip of his drink. Then I heard an unfamiliar woman’s voice say, “Come on, Marty, we’re going to be late.”

“Anything new with you?” dad asked. The conversation tailed off after that.

Now mom was trying to devise another scheme. She had gotten her steno pad down from the closet and was flipping through it at the kitchen table. I decided to try and read some more of *The Great Gatsby*. I hated it, though. Gatsby was such a chump, making Nick do all his dirty work for him. I looked up at my walk-in, at the padded suit hanging from a hook. Talk about skeletons in your closet. I got up and shut the closet doors. Then Susan called. “Guess what?” she asked.

“What?”

“Tony and his girlfriend are having problems.”

“They broke up?” I asked.

“No, they’re not breaking up. Not yet, anyway. But their relationship is definitely in trouble. Tony told me so at lunch today. He said they haven’t been getting along, so they decided to see other people. That’s the nail in the coffin, Nic! Once they start dating other people, they’re done for.”

“You guys had lunch today?”

“No. Well, not really. I mean, you were gone and I didn’t have anyone to sit with. And Tony was sitting there, at the same table, so we just started talking.”

“What’d you have for lunch?” I asked, ready to change the subject.

“Potato bar,” Susan said. “It was gross. Someone dropped their potato in the melted cheese and Tony said it looked like a floater.”

“What’s a floater?”

“You know... like a turd.”

“That’s disgusting,” I said, giggling.

“Yeah,” Susan said. “Tell me about it.”

The next night at work, Tony invited me out to his car for a cigarette since we were both going on break at the same time. We walked out to the car, this really nice Camero with a kicking stereo system. Leaves that had fallen from the sycamores along the street were swirling into little eddies by the curb. The sky felt wet and heavy. I climbed into the passenger side of Tony’s car and pulled the door shut. I was wearing a thin ankle-length skirt without tights, and the vinyl seats felt cold on my butt. I didn’t want to say anything, though.

Tony pushed in the cigarette lighter. I tapped a menthol out of the pack and held it between my fingers. After Tony lit his Marlboro, he handed me the lighter. “Aren’t you friends with Susan Reed?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “She’s my best friend.”

“Oh. Right.” Tony sucked on the cigarette and exhaled a thin trail of smoke. “My locker’s near hers,” he said finally.

I nodded. “Yeah, I know.” It seemed to surprise him that I would notice something like this, and I suddenly felt like I had somehow said the wrong thing.

“What’s she like?” Tony asked. “I mean, outside of school.”

"I don't know. Pretty much the same," I said. He was looking at me with his dark Italian eyes. Little lines appeared on his brow, and again, I felt like I'd said something stupid and irrevocable. But then Tony started talking again, telling me about how he'd once seen the manager pop a zit on the restroom mirror when he thought no one was looking.

I tried to listen, but I realized that even when Tony was talking—even when I was sitting here in his Camero alone with him at this very moment—I was still on my Thinking-of-Tony regimen, and I noticed that my Thinking-of-Tony regimen got in the way of my Listening-to-Tony regimen. Because all I could do was sit and shiver and watch his lips move, or the way he held his cigarette in his fingers, as though he'd been smoking since birth, or the way he fiddled with the ignition, twisting the key so he could listen to the stereo.

I thought about how it might feel to slide across the seat until the only thing separating Tony from me was the gear stick, and the shoulder of my coat would brush against the shoulder of his leather jacket. But when I imagined these things happening, the blood started rushing to my head.

I thought about the homecoming game, how Tony and his girlfriend had simply disappeared. I remembered the sound of the cannon going off after Fremd's lone touchdown, and it seemed as though the cannonball fired at the game had been sailing around the city for weeks, soaring out over Lake Michigan, and had finally come back to nail me in the gut.

Then these huge flat snowflakes started to fall and Tony turned on the heater. The air coming in was cold at first and some of the snowflakes filtered through the vents and floated past our faces. "Wow," Tony said. "I guess we better go back inside. I've still got to take the trash out and switch the reels in theater five."

"Okay," I said, pushing the car door open.

"Say hi to Susan for me," he said. Tony's back was to me and he was already walking toward the Cineplex. I looked at the way his leather jacket stretched across his shoulders, at the wavy dark hair that hung over his collar and the silver earring shining in his ear like a flashlight beam.

“Okay,” I called out. “I’ll tell her.” But Tony was already gone.

“Great news. Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful news,” mom said. She’d been laying in wait for me to get home from work. I could tell she’d been watching old talk show videos. Tape covers were heaped on the living room carpet. Mom’s steno pad lay open on the coffee table next to a wine glass, the remote, and a half-eaten quesadilla. She watched as I shook the snow from my coat and hung it up in the hall closet. “You’ve got another chance at stardom, my dear.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Maury Povich is what I’m talking about. ‘My Slutty Daughter is Out of Control’ is what I’m talking about.”

“What?” I asked again, suddenly alarmed.

“It’s the title of the show! ‘My Slutty Daughter is Out of Control.’ We’ve got a pre-interview on Monday at two, and we’re not going to screw it up this time. I’ve got it all figured out. We’ll give the lawyers the names and addresses of my girlfriends at the club. I’ll let the girls in on the game, and they’ll vouch for us.”

I stepped around mom and went into the living room. The volume on the TV was turned down, but I could see Jerry Springer shaking his head in mock disgust as a bunch of transvestites beat up a bunch of Catholic priests. I picked the quesadilla up from the coffee table and examined it. Then I sat it back down. “That’s not fair,” I said finally. You get to tell some people at the club you barely know and I can’t tell my best friend? Susan doesn’t even know why I keep skipping school. She thinks I had the German measles or something.”

“You mean what Aunt Gladys had?”

“Yes!” I said. “Exactly.” I looked out the darkened bay window at the yard beyond. I could see two sets of eyes in the distance. Eventually I made out the shapes of a couple raccoons that were wandering through. Their bellies were fat with neighborhood garbage—KFC remnants, bread heels,

pizza crusts—so it almost looked like the raccoons were wearing miniature padded suits under their fur.

I felt like getting my own padded suit from the closet and joining them in the yard. Maybe I could make a career out of roaming the neighborhood, rattling trash cans, sleeping all day. The raccoons stared back at me, inviting me to their big all-night bash. “Come on, Nicole,” I could almost hear them whispering.

Mom wrote a script of the things we should say at the pre-interview and made me study it all weekend. I had to memorize lines like *Don't you get up in my face, bitch* and *I'll sleep with any man I want to*. Mom went to the mall and bought me a new outfit, which she told me to wear on Monday. I squeezed into the leather pants and halter top, and when we got to the pre-interview (thanks to mom's coaching) I was able to convince the producer that I was indeed a slut. It wasn't exactly my finest moment. After the audition, the producer invited us back for a second interview. “If your references check out,” he said, “then there might just be a spot for you next week.” Mom gave him a hug.

Later she waited patiently under the marquee while I smoked a cigarette and didn't even complain that I was smoking. She was too caught up in this talk show stuff. “I'm so proud of you,” Mom said. “Your performance was just so . . . plucky.” She gave me an awkward hug then, trying to avoid the lit cigarette in my hand. Afterwards I shook a cigarette from my pack and offered it to her and she took it, even though she quit years ago, and we stood like that, smoking and watching the city trucks as they rumbled down Columbus Drive, spraying salt over the icy street.

The next day at school, I decided to tell Susan about the interview. If mom could blab about it to all her drinking buddies at the country club, then why couldn't I tell my best friend? So before lunch, I headed for her locker. Through a herd of freshmen in marching band outfits, I could see Susan talking to Tony. Then I saw Tony lean over and kiss her. I couldn't believe it. He had his arm

around her and she was leaning into him with her eyes closed. I looked past them, toward the open door of her locker. I could see my yearbook photo pasted inside, right next to the *Teen Beat* fold-out of Ricky Martin.

I left school early and drove home. All the shades were drawn and the house was dark. “Mom?” I called, but she didn’t answer. I walked around the house, bumping into things. I knocked a framed photo of Aunt Gladys onto the floor, but it didn’t break. Her magnified face simply sat there on the carpet, staring up at me from beneath the glass. “Sorry, Aunt Gladys,” I said. As I picked the frame up off the floor, I noticed a strange light coming from my mom’s bedroom, like the lights of a UFO that had come to carry her off to the mother ship.

When I walked into the room, I saw that mom had installed a series of hundred-watt bulbs above her bureau. She was standing in front of the mirror, reading lines from a tattered script. “Hi, honey!” she said. *On the Waterfront* played soundlessly on the TV in the corner. I walked around the bed and shut it off. Then I stumbled back to my own room in the dark, where I proceeded to sob, muffling the sound of my crying with a pillow.

But that’s all in the past. We’re on our way to the Maury Povich taping now. I sit in the passenger seat and finish reading *The Great Gatsby*, which was due over a week ago. The book is so depressing. I mean, the ending was pretty good, but I still can’t believe Gatsby died. Danielle Steele never kills off her heroes—you know, the guys who are hacking through vines in some South American jungle to get back to their lovers. It would be so easy to have one of them get devoured by a giant snake or shot with a poison arrow by some tribesman. But it’s just not cool to kill off the main character. Our English teacher claims that Gatsby isn’t the main character in *The Great Gatsby*, but that it’s actually Nick Carroway. I don’t know, I’m still not buying it.

I crack the window and light a cigarette, and Mom lets me, since all she’s thinking about is the show. But smoking reminds me of Tony, and how I should have kissed him in his Camero when I

had the chance, because things would have turned out totally different, so I flick the cigarette out the window. I look over at Mom. She's still reciting her lines as she glances in the rearview, swerving from lane to lane, even though all traffic is moving at the same speed. I can't believe she cut her hair for her appearance on Maury Povich. She always said she'd keep it long, so no one would confuse her with one of those damned soccer moms. But sure enough, when I got home from work last night, she was sitting at the kitchen table drinking a cup of coffee and her hair was chopped, right up to the ears. When I asked why she did it, she said in this Julie Andrews voice that we must sacrifice for our art.

I look down at the sequined halter top and stretch pants I'm wearing. Sadly, I notice my belly jutting out—barely, but it's definitely jutting. And you know the whole deal about TV adding 20 pounds. Mom also made me wear a wig and tons of make-up.

At the studio, we do a run-through in the green room with the other guests. The real teen sluts scare the crap out of me. They keep giving me evil looks, like they can sniff out my fear or something. I'm the impostor, the outcast. I leave to use the bathroom and that's when I get my first glimpse of Maury. He's sitting in a canvas fold-out chair with his eyes closed as a make-up assistant rouges his cheeks. Some Kleenexes jut from Maury's shirt collar to protect the lapels of his jacket from stray bits of powder and the tissues make him look like a bald eagle, perched on a tree limb at the edge of a river.

When the taping begins, the other mother-daughter combos start laying into each other right away, making accusations, cursing, pointing. Maury stands silently among the audience members. It looks as though the lines of his face have been carved with a pocketknife.

Mom nudges me to say something, but I just look at her and shrug. Then Maury turns his attention to us. "So, Kathleen, you say your daughter is a slut. Can you explain why you think that?"

“Well, Maury, she’s out all night, for one thing. Every week, she’s with a new guy. They’re all much older than she is. One guy was twenty-seven. Can you believe that? My little baby is only sixteen, and this guy was twenty-seven. That’s not even legal, Maury.”

“That’s not true,” I say quietly.

“I’m sorry, Nicole,” Maury says. “I didn’t catch that. Can you repeat what you said?”

“I said it’s not true.”

“You mean the part about it being legal? Because actually, that’s true.”

“No,” I say. “None of it’s true.”

“Nicole,” mom says softly, warning me.

“None of it?” Maury asks incredulously. “Are you calling your mom a liar?” He’s trying to bait me.

“I guess so,” I say, “because I’m not a slut. I’m not like these other girls.” I wave my hand in their direction as they glare at me. “I’m not fat. I don’t have an eating disorder. I never dated any twenty-seven year old guy. I never dated anybody.” I feel my face turning red as I say this. “There was one guy I wanted to date, but he’s probably making out with my best friend right now, for all I know.”

Maury looks confused. “So, uh, what you’re saying is that—”

“You bitch,” Mom says. She seems shocked by the words coming out of her mouth. “You just had to go and ruin this, didn’t you.” Then she slaps me across the face. It’s the first time mom has cursed at me—the first time she’s risen a hand against me.

I’m not sure what to do. I jump up and run from the set. I run through the maze of rooms backstage, searching for an exit. Finally I open a door and find myself in an alley. I lean against the brick wall. My hands are shaking and I desperately wish for a cigarette. My cheek is still burning from my mother’s slap.

It is here in this alley, with the smell of garbage and the sound of barking dogs, that I realize I don't want to be a lawyer like my dad. I don't want to be an actress, either. I don't want to get knocked up, by Tony or anyone else, and become a topic on a talk show. I'm not sure what I want, but I know it's not any of these things. I lean against the wall, rubbing my bare arms, and wait for mom to find me. I wait here, wondering if she will.

NIGHT OF THE PERSEIDS

I shouldn't be checking Sheila out, but I am. The dinner rush just ended—all those lonely commuters grabbing a Crazy Combo on their way out to the sticks—and I'm hosing down the burger rack, biding my time till the manager leaves so I can sneak out to the storage shed for a joint. Sheila's up at the front counter, restocking napkins and straws. When she bends down to grab another bundle of napkins, her pants tighten around her ass, showing her panty lines. I'm way too old for this, but I can't help it. I stare.

Then I look over at the trio of goth girls manning the registers, who are watching me watch Sheila. They shake their heads pityingly as I give them the finger. The goth girls are dumpy and downtrodden, with their pierced everythings; their pale, deathly skin; their cassette tapes of The Cure and The Posies. They cluster around in shared disdain of the straight world and go home at night to carve little gashes in their arms, dabble in black magic, and gossip about so-and-so's latest suicide attempt. Or so I suppose. But Sheila's not like them. She's not like me, either.

She's a joiner for one thing, a type-A; in other words, not Crazy Eddy's material. Sheila's nice to everyone, even Superdoug, the guy with Down syndrome who washes dishes. Her kindness seems constant and irreproachable, the type of kindness you expect from some heroic figure you read about in a textbook, like Florence Nightingale—the type of kindness that rarely crops up in real life.

I know I don't have it.

I finish up the burger rack and move on to the grease traps. Then I head out to the mildewy darkness of the storage shed, sweet salvation. A narrow line of moonlight falls across my shoes, and as I light my joint, I make out the dull outline of shelving, boxes, the leering face of the mannequin in the corner, a lame Ronald McDonald rip-off we prop outside the store sometimes. The clown's face bugs me, especially when I'm high—something about how it hovers there in the darkness, ethereal. It reminds me of all those sad clown paintings John Wayne Gacy did.

I hear somebody's footsteps outside and crack the door open to see who it is. Sheila's face appears in the doorway, inches from mine. "Shit," I say, startled.

"Hey. I just came out to grab some carryout cups."

"Oh, okay."

"Having a smoke?" she asks, glancing down at the roach in my hand as she wedges into the shed.

"Yeah. You want some?"

"No, I'm not really into that."

"Oh." I try to think of something clever to say but worry I might come off sounding stupid. When I smoke marijuana, my mouth starts moving faster than my brain. "You like working here?" I finally ask.

Sheila reaches for a box on the top shelf and I find myself checking her out again. "Yeah," she says. "It's okay. The last job I had was at this hospice for terminally ill cancer patients, and the work there was a little more... gratifying, you know? But this is okay."

"Yeah. Okay. That's a good way to—"

Suddenly Sheila lets out a little scream and the box she's been struggling with drops to the floor. "First time you've seen Crazy Eddy?" I ask.

"Yeah. Well, I mean, this is the first time I've seen him at night. God, he's creepy, isn't he?"

"Yep."

"Can I have a hit off that joint?"

I hand the roach over and Sheila examines it as though it's something of great scientific value. "No," she says, handing it back. "I better not. It's just that... clown. He freaked me out." She brushes a strand of hair from her face and smiles. "What about you?" she asks. "You like working here?"

“I guess. I’m providing a service, right? Like helping capitalism and free enterprise, all that stuff, you know, the Berlin Wall, the Cold War. I’m helping people...clog their arteries, sure, raise their blood pressure. I mean, yeah, that might not be so great, but if I quit, somebody else is just gonna take my place, right? But if these people, I mean, what they choose to do is their own problem, I guess. And the uniforms aren’t that bad. I mean, they could be worse. Like at Albertson’s, they make you wear a clip-on tie. And the managers here are pretty good about giving you time off if you need it. But you know, what’s weird is the smell of the grease and the burgers and stuff. It won’t come out of your clothes. I mean, you literally can’t wash it out. Isn’t that weird?”

I’m not entirely sure I’ve made myself clear. Sheila stares at me, nodding every so often, and I can smell her perfume. She doesn’t have that burger smell yet. I think of the goth girls for a moment, how they reek of incense and clove cigarettes. And disaster.

“Yeah,” Sheila nods. “That’s definitely weird.”

Crazy Eddy’s is one of the half-dozen fast food places clustered around the mall like satellites. It’s easy for me to walk home on nights like this after work, when the weather’s still warm. It rained recently and water drips from the trees, splatting on the pavement. Leaves lay in tangled bunches on the ground. I smell the detergent of clothes turning in a washer somewhere and stop for a second to look up into the trees. I breathe in the fragrance of the detergent. Everything tonight is crisp, delineated, clear. When I take a drag off my cigarette, I hear the sound of the paper burning.

It seems like time has stopped for a second so I can gather meaning from the night, some formula or equation that’s floating around up there, just waiting for me to grab hold. But time hasn’t stopped. I’ve merely managed to forget its presence, but now I’m thinking of it again—the way the wind will come up; leaves will keep falling; ice will gleam on the sidewalk and old ladies will slip and fall, dropping their purses and groceries, busting hips, dislocating shoulders.

Grandma's asleep on the couch when I get home. Her legs are curled under her and for a second she looks like a little girl sleeping that way. I try to picture her as a child, living a free and easy life. She had no way of knowing her only son would die before her. She didn't know she'd get stuck with me.

Grandpa has passed out in the recliner with a drink in his hand. I gently lift the glass and carry it into the kitchen. The drink smells fruity and tropical, like something you'd order on vacation.

Pookums is curled beside Grandma. The toy poodle is old, like everything else in the house—the macramé wall-hangings; the organ in the corner; the TV, with its heavy oak case and spindly legs. The dog opens her beady eyes and glares at me as I return to the living room. Her bizarre little dog-life alternates between periods of frantic activity and dreamless sleep.

Maybe that's what I'm looking for. Frantic activity and dreamless sleep.

The TV's running with the volume muted so I sit down on the far end of the couch, away from Grandma, to watch for a few minutes. Bob Eubanks is asking three newlyweds a question. The women laugh as they scribble on their note cards.

Now the husbands step onstage. They sit down next to their wives as Bob starts talking. Maybe he's teasing them—I can't be sure without the volume. One guy's face reddens as the women hold up their cards. *Making whoopee. Feeding the monster. Delivering the mail.* It's obvious from the contestants' feathered hair and rayon shirts that the show was filmed years ago. I wonder if these couples are still married. I wonder if they're happy. I wonder why Grandma watches this crap in the first place.

She used to read all the time, Victorian crap like *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. When I'd come to visit (before dad died) I'd see books laying around, their spines creased, the pages dog-eared. But when I came here to live, it seemed like the books disappeared and the TV stayed on longer and longer. Grandma grew more like Pookums, flighty and distracted. That's when she started the Polaroid project and most of her other obsessive compulsions.

I drift into semi-sleep and dream I'm a contestant on *The Newlywed Game*. Sheila's my partner. I'm wearing a lime green three-piece and she's wearing some kind of cheerleading outfit (letter sweater and pleated skirt). God, she looks great in that outfit. I scribble something on a note card and hold it up for the audience. *Love*, the card reads. *Simply Love*. But Sheila doesn't see my card. She's too busy doing a cheer. Her pompoms sway in the air, Eubanks tells one of his corny jokes, and the studio audience erupts into laughter.

Sheila discovered the dead guy at work this morning. She was wiping down tables in the dining area and stopped to ask if she could take his tray (something we're not even required to do). When he didn't respond, she touched his arm lightly, then shook it; that's when the guy's head lolled to one side and you could see his empty blue eyes.

I was assembling Crazy Burgers when I heard the scream. Sheila let out one of those quick, high-pitched yelps, like before, when she saw Crazy Eddy in the storage shed. Later she told me she wasn't freaked out or anything, since she'd come across dead people while working at the hospice. It was just the shock of it, to find this guy, stone dead, in the midst of his pancakes and sausage links.

I went to check things out. The dead guy was sitting at a corner booth with the morning paper folded in front of him. His ballcap rested on the table and the guy's head was cradled in his arms. It was a busy Saturday morning, so he'd probably been slouching there dead for quite some time.

I was intrigued by him—I admit it. He was wearing some kind of sheepskin jacket with faded jeans and a tooled belt, and I felt the urge to sift through his pockets. The guy had thinning hair and jackboots. There was a crescent shaped scar under his left eye, and his mustache was carefully trimmed. It struck me as odd that he had shaved this morning and slicked back his hair. I sniffed for some kind of death-smell, but all I could catch was the faint remnant of Old Spice. Up to this point,

I'd only seen corpses in funeral homes, after they'd been embalmed, spruced-up, made presentable. This was something new.

The manager called for an ambulance and two medics showed up with a retractable stretcher to cart the dead guy away. None of the customers seemed all that disturbed by the commotion. They kept placing orders for Crazy Combos. I picked up the dead guy's newspaper. He'd been reading the box scores from last night's baseball games, which struck me as sad somehow. I kept his hat as a souvenir.

The goth girls are sitting out on the front curb, smoking while they talk about how "surreal" and "totally metaphysical" the whole thing is. Sheila walks back to the office area, where I'm playing solitaire on the manager's computer. Without asking, she nicks a cigarette and lights it. She holds the thing jauntily, like an aristocrat on one of those programs on public TV, but I know she's not really smoking.

"You want me to teach you how to inhale?" I ask.

"No."

"How come?"

"I know how to smoke. I don't want to get addicted, though. I don't want to be a slave to any bad habits."

"Why'd you light up in the first place, then?"

"I don't know," Sheila says, blowing out a cloud of smoke. "I just need something to take the edge off."

I finish my solitaire game and watch the cards cascade across the screen. "I've got something that might do the trick. You interested?"

Sheila studies me for a second, then smiles. "I guess I could be persuaded."

“Damn straight,” I say. We head out to the storage shed and Sheila waits while I fiddle with the padlock. “After you,” I say, feeling quirky and dumb as I hold the door open for her.

Inside, I grab the joint from my shirt pocket and hand it to her. Sheila lights it and takes the first drag like an old pro, then hands the joint back to me. We alternate that way in silence, intent on what we’re doing. When we finish up, I douse the nubbin and flick it toward a corner of the shed.

“You got any more?” Sheila asks.

“Sure,” I say, surprised. I wade through boxes to the back of the shed and search Crazy Eddy’s pockets for a joint I stashed there earlier in case of emergencies.

“You keep your stockpile in Crazy Eddy’s pants?” Sheila says.

“Yeah. Who’s gonna check? Besides, it’s safer to stash stuff here than at home.”

“You think anyone will come out here?”

“Nah,” I say. “The rush ended, so the manager went home. It’s just the goth chicks now, and they don’t care where we are.” We light the second joint and I can feel the familiar cobweb sensation stretching across my thoughts, slowing everything down, though I keep on talking. “My father died suddenly, like that guy today.”

“Really?” Sheila says. “That’s awful.”

“Yeah. I mean, it wasn’t instantaneous; we had a little bit of warning, but not much.” I wonder why I’m telling her this. Is it simply that I’m stoned? Or am I making some play for her sympathies? “He just got sick one day. He came home from work, took off his suit coat and hooked it over a chair, crawled into bed and stayed there for awhile, getting worse and worse. My mom and I took him to the clinic, but the doctor there couldn’t figure out what was wrong, so we took him back home and he crawled into bed again. I remember my mom getting more and more frantic, because it was obvious dad was sick; I mean, you could smell it in the room; it was stagnant in there, like nothing was moving around or even breathing. But no one knew what was wrong.”

“So what happened?”

“Well, my mom finally decided to take him to the hospital, and by that time he couldn’t even walk. I remember putting his pajamas on him, then his bathrobe, and then he literally crawled down the hallway, out the door, and kept going, right across the yard to where the car was parked. Me and my mom were on either side of him, and I remember dad being really ashamed and worried because he thought the neighbors were watching. He didn’t want us to help him, but I did finally have to lift him up into the car.”

“That must have been horrible,” Sheila says. I can smell her perfume again. She’s close enough to touch, but I simply look down at her arms (her arms, of all things!), the pale beautiful hairs. I note the delicate way she pinches the joint between her fingers.

“It was pretty awful,” I say. “We took him to the hospital and no one there could figure anything out. They did all these tests and kept drawing blood; they pumped him full of drugs, but his temperature never went down, and then he died. That’s when I went to live with my grandma and grandpa.”

“What did he die of?” Sheila asks.

“I don’t know. Some virus. That’s what the doctors said.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense. He must have died of something. You can’t just die of some unknown virus. People don’t do that. They die of cancer or heart attacks...” For some reason, Sheila gets more and more agitated. I take the joint from her and snub it out on the concrete floor. Then, unexpectedly, she rises from where she’s sitting and leans over, catching me in an embrace. I reach one arm over to pat her on the back while my other arm hangs down at my side like I’m crippled or something.

Sheila’s body feels light and sharp, bird-like. I can feel the outline of her bra underneath her shirt and can’t help wondering what color it is—probably something exotic, like fuchsia or chartreuse. I picture myself fumbling with the hooks as the two of us sit on my grandma’s couch and some godawful late night movie plays on TV, something with Harry Hamlin or Angie Dickinson.

But then I realize it must be somebody else's job to unhook Sheila's bra—the captain of the football team or the senior class president. I've forgotten that Sheila goes to proms and winter formals and gets bad grades in algebra class. She has a locker with sack lunches and wrinkled gym clothes inside.

All this time, Sheila's been hugging me because she imagines some thick layer of grief wrapped up inside me, and I feel guilty because I haven't been grieving; I've been fantasizing. I wrap my other arm around her and hold her that way and try not to think of anything but the overpowering aroma of her shampoo, her perfume. She's seventeen and I'm twenty-six and I feel genuine love for her at this moment.

When I wake up this morning Grandma's outside taking Polaroids of the flower bed. I pour a bowl of cereal and go out to sit with Grandpa under the willow tree. He's gripping his drink like a crucifix, his face half-covered by the hat Dr. Stapoulis makes him wear (melanoma). Beneath that hat, Grandpa's head looks like a finger painting. Every day he sits in the yard, keeping an eye on our quotidian neighborhood. I picture his mind as a swirling dustcloud of counted cars and eavesdropped conversations.

"Good morning, Brad!" Grandma calls out, waving her stack of Polaroids at me. *Trollius europaeus, dodecatheon meadia*. This is what she'll write on the little white strip at the bottom of each photo—the name, in Latin, of the brown leafless plants. I give a half-wave.

"Brad," Grandpa says, as I'm munching the last of my Lucky Charms. "This neighborhood is going to shit. People drive by and nobody waves, not even the neighbors. Punks give me the finger, or else people pretend like I'm not even here. Everyone keeps to themselves." He stops to take a sip of his vodka-cranberry. Pookums has come around to sniff at the pitcher resting in the grass at his feet. "The other day I saw a lady pull out of her driveway with her baby on top of the car. It was just

sitting there in its car seat, innocent as can be. Luckily she didn't get too far before she figured things out."

I slurp at the milk in my cereal bowl.

"And your grandmother," he continues. "She's in there right now, fiddling around with those damned Polaroids. What do you think she's doing?"

"Beats me," I say.

"Beats me, too." Grandpa pops a couple Sinutabs and chews them slowly, ruminatively. Then he reaches over and rests his hand on the back of my neck. Grandpa's eyes are bloodshot and he's looking at me with great determination, like he's about to tell me something important. But suddenly he kicks at Pookums, who's slurping vodka-cranberry from the pitcher. Then he pushes himself out of his lawn chair. "I gotta take a leak," he says.

I carry my cereal bowl back inside and Grandma's there at the kitchen table, stooping over her photographs and her guidebooks of perennials. I rinse the dishes and go downstairs to my bedroom in the basement. Izzy's shifting in his cage so I lift him out and drape him around my neck. Izzy is my pet snake—*Python reticulatus*—nine feet long and scarier than shit to just about everyone but me. When he sheds, I save the skins, dry and brittle as onion paper, and hide them in strange little cubbyholes around the house, one in the freezer, another in the folds of the couch, one in my grandparents' bedsheets. You get the idea.

I notice that Izzy's getting fat—too many half-dead mice from the Pet Barn—so I decide to put him on a crash diet. Let him starve for awhile. Let the bastard get mean and aggressive. Grandma won't come down here anymore, partly because of Izzy, but also because of my heavy metal music and the posters on my walls. Bikini babes with fake boobs, psychedelic marijuana leaves. Truth be told, I'm sick of the posters myself. They do work well as talismans, though, to ward off unwanted visitors (Grandma, for instance). Don't get me wrong, I love my grandparents.

It's just tough to live in their world, filled as it is with game shows, Polaroids, and Five O'clock vodka.

I think about what Grandpa said. Maybe this neighborhood *is* getting weird. Maybe the photo sessions are a little bit over the top. But since when did Grandpa turn into some kind of social critic? He's a Sinutab junkie, for Chrissakes; a compulsive liar, a poodle kicker. I wonder, suddenly, what it feels like to be his age. The idea, however lame, hits me like a punch in the solar plexus. I look around the room, at the posters, the overstuffed python, the crumpled work clothes lying on the floor with grease stains, like Rorschach blots, on them. The empty feeling in my stomach grows, threatening to suck me in, like a dying star in outer space.

It's eleven o'clock and Sheila and I are finishing up at Crazy Eddy's. I sit on the front counter, smoking, while she reconciles the register. Sheila puts the cash in the safe and shuts off the stereo. I can hear the fans whirring in the walk-in cooler and ice settling in the ice machine. It makes a strange shattering sound like a distant car wreck.

"You ready to go?" Sheila asks. I hop down from the counter and walk over to set the alarm. The two of us remain totally still as I punch in the combination.

It's cooler outside now. The trees have dropped their leaves and they look gray and ghost-like beyond the power lines. I finish my cigarette and flick it away, exhaling the last of it. I can't tell where the smoke ends and my breath begins.

"Where's your car?" Sheila asks.

"I don't have one." It embarrasses me to say this. "I usually walk to work, since I live right over there." I point in the general direction of my neighborhood.

"You need a ride home?"

"No, I'm okay."

I'm too old for this, too old for her, I think, sticking my hands in my pockets and standing there in the parking lot, looking around at the other fast-food joints and the darkened shopping mall. I watch a car in the parking lot peel out and speed away. "On second thought, I guess I could use a lift, if you don't mind."

"Sure," she says. "No problem."

Sheila has one of those sports cars with bucket seats and a spoiler in back. It's the perfect high school car. I envy the captain of the football team or whoever it is who has earned the right to sit here with Sheila. I know it's not me.

There are some crumpled papers on the dash (homework assignments?) and a bunch of cassette tapes strewn about. The upholstery is cold and leathery, sports car appropriate. Sheila starts up the car and lets it run for a minute or so. Neither of us speak. We just listen to the radio and stare out the window at nothing in particular. On the way home, Sheila says, "I keep thinking about something you said the other night. You said you went to live with your grandparents after your dad died. How come?"

"It's a long story," I say.

"So?" she shrugs. "I've got time."

I tell her about my high school buddy, Billy Thyne, whose parents owned a lake house at Okiboji. One weekend—this was early August, too hot to do much of anything—Billy and I were sitting on the back steps, drinking beers we'd swiped from the fridge, when we hit on the brilliant idea of stealing road signs.

"So we go out driving in Billy's dad's truck," I say, "collecting signs—stop signs, yield signs, you name it—"

"I don't mean to interrupt," Sheila says, "but which street do you live on?"

I tell her the address and go on with my story. “So anyway, we steal these signs and hide them in Billy’s garage, but Billy’s dad finds them and gets pissed. He tells Billy to return the signs or he’ll call the sheriff. Billy’s dad is serious about this stuff, since he works for the DNR.”

Sheila slows to a stop in front of my house and parks along the street. “But what does this have to do with your father?” she asks.

“My dad got sick right after we stole the roadsigns—about the same time Billy’s dad found them in the back of his garage. Billy called to ask if I’d help return the signs, and I said okay.”

“Yeah, but your dad was dying,” Sheila says. “Why didn’t you just tell Billy to put the signs back himself?”

I sit in the parked car for a moment, considering her question. Looking over at Sheila, I notice goosebumps have risen on her bare arms. Our breath is fogging the windows. “You want to come inside for a minute? It’s pretty cold out here,” I say.

“Sure,” she says. “But first, tell me why you didn’t just tell Billy Thyne to forget it.” Sheila places her fingers on my wrist and something sharp passes through me, like a piece of shrapnel.

“Billy was my best friend, and I was equally to blame. Besides—I didn’t know my dad was gonna die. I thought he had a bad case of the flu. I thought they’d pump him full of antibiotics and send him home. You have no way of knowing how things are going to turn out.”

“Fair enough,” Sheila says. We get out of the car and she follows me through the wet grass toward the house. When we go inside, Grandpa’s asleep in the recliner, but Grandma’s not around. She must have gone to bed. I turn off the muted TV and Sheila and I sit down on the couch. She glances nervously at Grandpa. “Is he gonna care that I’m here?”

“No,” I say. “Once he hits the recliner, he’s out for the count.”

“Okay. Keep going with what you were saying.”

I tell her about the night my dad died. I was riding around with Billy in his dad’s pickup truck, putting up road signs. We had a brown paper bag of bolts between us on the seat, along with

some of my dad's wrenches. Billy and I drove the back country roads, trying to remember the route we'd taken before. We kept getting lost and would have to pull to the side of the blacktop, turn off the radio, and try to picture things in our heads.

We saw possums on those quiet roads, dumb animals with searching faces, along with rabbits and raccoons. But what I cannot forget were the meteors that night—the Perseids—constantly dropping to earth, so clear in that part of the country.

"That's it," I say. "That's the story."

"But it's not. You still haven't told me why you went to live with your grandparents."

I shift my weight on the couch. "It was my mom," I say. "She hated the fact that I wasn't there when dad died. She called me a lot of names and told me to get out, so I called her a bunch of names and left. I came here to live with my dad's parents, which was weird, I'll admit, but they were pretty cool about the whole thing."

"Sure," Sheila says, and then she leans over and kisses me delicately on the cheek. Again, there is that sharp steely feeling in my chest. I lean to kiss her back, but then I hear footsteps on the basement staircase. It's grandma, coming up from my bedroom. She stares right past the two of us, looking old suddenly, out of place in her own home. I have the strange feeling she's sleepwalking. She looks around the room, searching for something.

I look over at Sheila and shrug. Grandma disappears into the kitchen and comes back in with her camera. She's practically running now, headed back to the basement. Sheila and I follow behind.

Grandma is taking Polaroids of something at the far end of my room. A late-night photo shoot. This is strange, even for her. I hear the crisp sound of breaking pencils.

"What's that box-thing for?" Sheila asks, pointing at Izzy's cage.

It's then that I realize what's happened. The top of the cage is unlatched and Izzy has escaped. I move across the room toward the camera flashes. Grandma's taking one photo after

another, creating an eerie strobe effect. She flips the Polaroids onto my unmade bed as I peer over the edge at Izzy, who's stretched out to his full length with his jaw unclasped.

He's in the process of eating the toy poodle. He has devoured Pookums.

I can still see Pookums' legs extending from the python's mouth. One of them twitches slightly. The sound of breaking pencils is the sound of Pookums' bones snapping as she's eaten by the snake. At least the dog is dead, squeezed, I'm sure, by Izzy's coils.

Python reticulatus.

Sheila lets out a gasp. She puts her hands over her mouth and I'm not sure if she's more repulsed by the snake itself or the sight of my grandma taking Polaroids, helplessly documenting everything. Grandma won't put the camera down. I think she's run out of film, but still she keeps pushing the trigger. The flash makes a thick burning smell and a sound like a cough.

For the first time in years, I see tears on Grandma's face, catching at the corners of her mouth, and I realize I don't know what to do. I haven't known what to do for some time now.

But then I look at the creature on the far side of the bed. It's a repulsive thing, with its dark, perpetually dying skin. It has killed my grandmother's pride and joy and will never know anything but hunger.

I go over to the stereo cabinet, yank out my receiver, and use it to bash the creature. I beat its dull, instinctual brains to a bloody pulp. Grandma lies down among the Polaroids and is lulled to sleep by the rhythmic thud of hi-fi equipment on tendon and bone. Eventually the stereo splits apart, exposing a mass of electrodes and computer chips.

I tear down the posters on my walls, all those juvenile paeans to pot smoking and half-naked women—women I'll never know, women who will never age. I wrap the creature in posters and drag him toward the basement steps.

I go crazy, I'll admit it. Sheila's the one who finally stops me. She calls my name over and over, never raising her voice, like some kind of chant. She reaches for me and I grab hold. The past is nothing now but a photo on a bed, a corpse on the basement floor.

THE CYPRESS

He lifted the trapping basket from the upturned nail and hooked it over his shoulder. The leather was smooth, smeared with haloes of grease. Traps rattled inside, along with the hatchet, the hammer, the black handled setting tongs. He was leaving to run his line.

I lift the envelope flap and read the ticket, read it again, until the letters and numbers merge in a collision of ink. *NapervilleElkoDeparture4:09AMArrival4:25PM*. The train slows outside, and I wince from the grating of steel on steel. I picture some sort of catastrophe, maybe even wish for one. Faded tiles buckling, paint chips flaking and dropping, the station itself engulfed by an ever-widening maw. I think of the letter, the most recent one, his cramped fist forming the words, the idiot's scrawl. *Lizzie, I bought you a ticket so you could come see your father*. There was no apology extant in that letter.

Duddee set the first deadfall near a sagging fenceline. A coil of fur dangled from the wire, twisting in the breeze. He scraped away a patch of soil with the hammer claw for his next set. The dirt was deep black and mucousy to the touch. Earthworms curled into question marks under the steel. He placed the snare delicately into the hole and threaded the woven wire in a tight loop. Then he sprinkled coyote urine to cover his own musky smell.

I need help boarding the train. The attendant reaches for my elbow, reluctant to touch it. I stare down at his pants, pressed smooth with a crease running down each leg like a length of taut string. His shoes are scuffed, the heels worn. I look at his long drawn-out face, pushed in on itself like a rotting pumpkin. "Hurry now," he says. I can hear people shifting behind me, coughing in the darkness. Someone spits on the pavement. These people are thinking *Lose some weight Get on the damned train*, but I don't care what they think. My flesh protect me from the feral gazes of men.

He walked the trail line, checking each trap. The first two were empty, undisturbed, but a shape lay still beside the third, dark in the waning light. He could make out matted fur from where he stood, and muddy haunches—most likely a coyote. But when he drew nearer, Duddee found it was a dog. Shit. He'd have to kill the thing and bury it quick, before its owner came hunting for it. The dog's pale belly was crisscrossed with scrapes. It had probably followed a coon through the thicket onto his land. The dog, a lab-retriever mix, had started gnawing at its tangled leg. The fur was torn away and the flesh beneath was raw, already teeming with deerflies. The dog was passed-out or dead. Duddee knelt and yanked hard on its tail. Nothing. He loosened the wire circling the dog's leg, then reached for the tag at its collar. The dog's eyes opened and were dull as an icy pond, nothing visible under the surface.

I slide down into a window seat and rub my arms against the cold air piped into the train. I rise to smoke a cigarette, but then an old man with a birdcage sits down beside me and I'm afraid to disturb him. He sits with the cage in his lap, but there's no bird inside, just a change of clothes, along with some folded underwear and a sandwich wrapped in cellophane. He silently demonstrates how the birdcage opens and shuts, like a magician revealing a trick. There's a look of profound happiness on his face. I'm trapped here with the old man separating me from the exit. The train rocks back and forth as cars decouple. Lights flicker and dim. Some sort of factory glimmers in the distance, giant storage tanks lit up pale against the darkening sky. I stare at the lights till they slip from view as the train lurches forward. My mind is eaten up, as if by cancer, by thoughts of revenge.

The dog bit into Duddee's outstretched arm and remained that way, steadfast, the entire time he dug in his packbasket for the hammer, extracting the hatchet instead; remaining that way, even as he brained the creature, opening a clotted seam in its skull.

I try to picture the mountains rising fortress-like in the distance beyond the house. Those mountains were deceptive, the Santa Rosas, always distant, no matter how far I ran; they offered little in the way of protection, so when I finally ran for good, I ran not just from him, but from the sight of those mountains, from deception itself. I ran to Illinois, for no other reason than that its name sounded smooth as butter on my tongue. Now, returning, I'm already tired of the trees, one after another. So many trees to Catamount County. Elms, hickories, spruces, and sycamores with white leafless limbs drifting up into the sky. The trees will shift and become an altogether foreign species. Then there's the cypress, its limbs casting shadows over the water. That's the tree I care about, for that's where I'll take the old man. Duddee. I think of how he got the name: a mispronunciation of Dudley that stuck. Dummy is more like it. I'll force him up against that tree and show him what he was aching for, what he wanted all these years with his hungry grave yearning, what he took from me each night in his heart, more gnarled than the limbs of the cypress. Here I am, I'll say. Not what you expected, huh? My flesh will shine in the moonlight and I'll look monstrous, like some kind of creature culled from the deep.

You never come upon a trap unawares. I was dumb. Careless and dumb. That's the only way to explain it. You're always prepared, especially with leg holds, with your gauntlet glove and hammer in hand to brain the poor bastard. You're always ready. But my mind was on other things. All I saw was a dog, some guy's pet. My mind was on other things.

I sit in the lounge car, smoking. Kids watch a TV bolted to the wall; two men in dark identical suits pass a bottle of Beck's back and forth. The train stops suddenly, shuddering, in an Omaha freight yard. Rails spread in either direction like cracking ice, reminding me of him. The leafless tree in winter, the first awful steps, the sound. The sound was proportionless, like a tree splitting apart at the trunk. I turned around. "Go on," he said, his hand fluttering, bird-like. I could tell he was annoyed.

“Keep going.” Maybe I’ll kill the bastard. No one would ever know or care. Duddee lost his wife to cancer and his friends to reclusion. I’m the last one, but he lost me, too. If he died, no one would come to investigate. Bulk-rate mail would fill up the box. Food would sour in the fridge. Still, no one would bother to check. Certainly, no one would question the daughter. I’m invisible, see, nothing but a gray hulking ghost.

The dog was a mess to carry. I couldn’t afford to drag it behind me—the blood would taint my trap line for months—so I finally bundled it in my arms like a load of kindling. The dog was dripping blood from the head wound, penny-sized drops. I carried it far from my traps to the pond, to the silty soil, where it’d be easy enough to bury. As the hole grew deeper, it filled with black water, and when I tossed in the carcass, the water made a gurgling sound. My arm was red, inflamed, with two clear puncture wounds beneath. The dog was underground now, at least. I hung my trapping basket in the shed and walked to the house. Once inside, I poured kerosene over the bite from a bottle I kept under the sink. The sweet smell accumulated in my head and I felt somewhat queasy as I wrapped the wound in gauze and fastened the bandage with steel pins. The nerve of that dog. I should have snapped its goddamned neck.

The food on the train is expensive and the helpings are small. When they call the old man and I to the dining car, they seat us together as though we’re a couple. The old man brings along his silver cage to perform the magic act between bites, but I’m the one who’s stared at. *Fat. Fat. Fat.* I can hear the word hissing through the grates like cold air as I struggle into the narrow booth. The tabletop presses a red indentation into my stomach and I can’t help but notice how the fat quivers on my arms as I slice my food. Passengers with failed appetites make crosses over uneaten lambchops with their silverware. They stare at me, then quickly down at their plates if I glance up. I don’t care. I’ve got the scenery, sheep grazing on terraced slopes; irrigation lines running off to infinity; and the trees, so

many trees along the railway turning dark now, swallowing up the light. But I care I care I CARE. I don't want to be stared at, ever. I want to be invisible, a nothing, a zero. I squeeze from my seat and leave the dining car, pretending I'm full. Later I buy a sandwich at the snack bar and eat it while the other passengers are sleeping. I'm careful with the wrapper, so as not to make a sound, so as not to wake the birdcage man. He curls up like an infant when he sleeps and his face is always twitching—dreams of canaries and parakeets? I consider what I'm moving toward. The cypress, alone by the pond. It's a strange incongruous tree, better suited for swampland than foothills, that region between desert and mountain. How did the cypress come to grow there in the first place? Maybe he planted it. Maybe he planned this thing from the start.

I felt tired today, worn-out, though I hadn't done a thing. I should've run a trotline or checked my snares but I couldn't seem to rouse myself from the couch. It was an odd unsettling feeling, my arms folded over me, heavy as foundation stones, and my legs jittery. I didn't even feel much like eating. I thought of the dog in its silty grave, lips curled up in a smile. He got me good, I'll admit it.

"Climb," he'd say, and I'd climb to the first low branches of the tree. A breeze fiddled with my skirt, raising it past my knees. He was watching, of course. "Keep going. I'm coming after." He'd say, climbing after me like a damned monkey. I scrambled out to the furthest limb, bowing over the water. He'd never dare follow me; the branch would snap. But he did. His face was inscrutable, the jaw working at odd angles and the tongue a thick bloodless organ, like a piece of veal you see in a display case. That's how I remember it. I was scared, now that Mom was gone. She'd never come back, never save me from falling. I jumped from the tree. I jumped each time to avoid him. Each time I somehow thought he'd leave me alone, but he never did. What was there to do but leap? My hands were pressed tight against the folds of my skirt as I fell straight down, landing in shallow water, my bare feet sinking into the cool ageless mud. I struggled free of the stoneworts and silt and swam

toward the center. It was warm near the surface, then cool as I let myself sink and light faded away. He sat in the tree sneering as I stumbled to shore. My dress was soaked, tight across my jutting ribs and the breasts that hadn't yet formed. It cleaved to the narrow space between my legs, cold as ice, as he appraised me. His eyes moved over me and that jaw twisted at odd angles, joints cracking. And did he touch me then, pulling the dark strands of hair from my eyes, smiling at this game he'd invented, looking for any excuse to keep on moving those hands of his that reeked of trap dye, gunmetal, fox piss? I think so. I really think so. I'm almost certain he did.

I go to the shelf and pull down a guidebook, try to read, but my thoughts spring to Lizzie, my daughter. She's gone now and has been for some time. I wonder if my letter reached her, the latest one urging Lizzie to return. I included a train ticket and what little cash I had, so what reason might she have to stay away? I raised her to hunt and fish and grow her own produce. I taught her to bury the butt of a rifle in her shoulder and take steady aim. I'll be damned if those are criminal acts, but Lizzie seemed to think so. She disappeared from here, bound for Illinois—didn't forward her address for more than a year. Now she works in some government building, all central heating and cooling, glass and steel, nothing really alive in there at all. She shops at the Super Value and buys those tomatoes grown in labs, the corn and green beans and onions sprayed with pesticides and insecticides, every manner of poisons. She does this to defy me but I don't care. Let her eat processed food not grown in the ground. Let her eat beef from cows packed so close together they can't even rustle around. I tried to raise her different, to show her a world without all this man-made rubbish. TV, telephones, fast food, shopping malls. And what was the first thing Lizzie did when she got to Illinois? She went out and bought herself a television.

We stop in the middle of the desert for some freight cars to pass and the conductor lets us off to stretch our legs. I stand in the slim shadow of the train, sweating furiously, smoking one cigarette

after another. The attendant warns us not to wander too far. Scorpions and rattlers, he explains. A young boy locates a coyote skull near the tracks and carries it around for each person in turn to examine. He holds the skull up with both hands, poking a finger through the eye sockets. "It's a coyote," he says. "Uh-huh," I nod. He gives me the same clinical appraisal he gave the skull as he turned it over and over in his delicate hands. I know what's coming, the inevitable question. *How come you're so big?* But the boy surprises me. "I put my ear to the tracks," he says, "and they were vibrating." Sure enough, the freight train whizzes past, its air horn going, close enough to stir the air. The boy counts eighty-three cars. I hurry back to my seat, squeezing down the aisle ahead of other passengers so I don't have to bump against their elbows and knees; so I don't have to weather the abrasion of their stares.

Goddamn this bite on my arm. I keep changing the dressings, struggling along with pins in my teeth. If Lizzie were here, she'd re-wrap the gauze with her slender fingers. Lizzie used to flit around here like a bird, so delicate I thought she might take flight one day. I suppose she did, in a way. I went to check my trap line earlier and the strangest thing happened. I couldn't recall where I'd set the snares. I wandered in the woods a long time and ended up at the far shore of the pond, near the hillock. I hadn't been to that edge of my land in years. There was no reason behind it. Even now, inside, I reach for flour in the cupboard and come back with baking soda or molasses. I stood earlier, holding a broom and looking at it as though it were some strange artifact of the past. But worst of all, I carried my trapping basket into the house and laid out my Conibears on the living room floor, nearly ready to set them. Now all my gear is tainted. What the hell was I thinking?

I ran toward shore when the ice started to crack and Daddy stood with his arms open to gather me in. This was his plan all along: create a tragedy and insert himself as the hero. But the ice shelf gave way, my knee buckled, and I fell, up to my armpits, into water so cold my heart nearly seized. I tried

to scream or even breathe, but nothing would come. I pictured catfish and walleyes milling sleepily around my calves. When I went to pull myself forward, the ice snapped further and I was back where I began. Then he was there, wading through, gathering me up so easily. I was his porcelain doll, pale and mute, susceptible. Together later, we lay wrapped in the hide, and his callused hands kept brushing my legs, bringing up gooseflesh. The hide was itchy, bristled, thick with his rampant smell. This was part of the plan, too. He touched my thighs, moving his hands up to pry apart my legs, moving in under my nightshirt. No. That never happened. He held me under that deer blanket, but as a father holding a daughter, feeling her heartbeat, repentant, knowing he'd gone too far.

Hungry vermin run in the walls, their sharp little claws clicking across the joists, their teeth constantly gnawing. I hear them eating away at the house. They come out at night to scuttle over the floorboards, building nests in darkened corners. I've glimpsed their tails slipping away into closets and cupboards. I set snares for them under the faucets, the dining room table, even the potbelly stove in the living room, and I've taken to laying newspaper down in front of the door before I go to bed; now I sleep with the .410 next to me in the blankets. Last night I woke from a dream and a bark scorpion was crawling across my chest, its tail gently wavering. I swept the thing away and heard it crack against the wall, but when I rose to hunt for it, the scorpion was gone.

I rent a car and begin the drive from Elko, through that narrow stretch of desert. The whole while, I think of him. I can't stop it now, this plan I've set in motion. Duddee: what will you do when you see me again after all these years? What will you think of my body, once so slender, now heavy and smeared? Will you be shocked by my appearance? Or will you try and wrap your stinking arms around me as though the time we've spent apart was nothing but an accident? Your love was a cinderblock tied to my chest, dragging me down to the dark weeded bottom of the pond. You may as well have killed me then, for what you did was worse. Look at my leg. Look at the horseshoe scar,

expanding as my ankle swells. You snared me in one of your goddamned traps, caught me like an animal, and I lay there in the dust, sobbing against the pain. You took your sweet time to find me: all part of the plan, I'm sure. You came upon me and in my pain you turned me over with your red knuckled hands and pushed my face down into the dirt and slick grass. Pebbles imbedded in my knees and my mouth filled with dust. You left the trap jaws on my leg while lifting my skirt. I could feel the light fabric drifting over my back like a gentle breeze as I coughed saliva into the dirt. Your fingers found my hip bones. Your breath was warm as a furnace in my ear. And that was you, Duddee. That was the rain falling, too late to save the barren, wilted tomato plants, too late to save the trampled grass, the leafless trees. Too late to save me from your snare.

A crow crawled from under the bed, dragging its fractured wing across the floor, making a three-fingered trail in the dust. The crow squawked once and disappeared. A coyote nurses a litter of young downstairs on the living room couch. My right arm won't move from my side. I vomited on the kitchen floor and can't lean to clean it up. Now I sit outside, leaning against the cypress, watching the pond. Ripples spread as fish rise to the surface. A snapper crawls shoreward to sun itself. Then the water ices over and I'm suddenly cold in my shirtsleeves. Lizzie is there, walking out toward the center, and I can hear the ice groaning as I call to her, "Lizzie, honey, come here. Come here." She turns toward my voice, but the ice opens up and takes her and she is swallowed by it. I pull her out and carry her to shore and she is light as a bird in my arms. I wrap her in blankets and wait for her body temperature to rise. Why has she done this to herself? Why doesn't she know any better?

I rent a hotel room in Jack Creek and spend the night there, watching TV, eating packets of potato chips from the vending machine, drinking whiskey and water in a Styrofoam cup. The mountains are there beyond the windowshade, a dim reminder. I'll reach the house tomorrow and nothing will have

changed: paint flaking from the siding, faulty warped floorboards, buckled cement. The cypress tree will stand there, misplaced, a sentinel over the dark, inscrutable pond. He'll be the same too. Tall and wiry with his face gridded by those lines—work lines, he called them. Guilt lines, more like. His eyes will be blue and clear, reaching far back into the past, but he'll never let on he remembers.

Lizzie isn't here in the house I've been through each silent room dust motes in the sunlight flies buzzing against windowsills *and she is gone* her baby dolls lined up in a row untouched she's not in the kitchen carefully huddled over her coloring books nor on the porch coaxing the half-wild kittens I'm nervous now walking faster toward the pond oh god don't let her be floating in that pond face down but she's not at the water Lizzie I call Lizzie girl but there's no response just birds taking flight in a fierce collective and I'm out near the fenceline now steadying myself with a hand on the barbed wire one of my fingers bloodied and I look down amazed by the sight of the blood and keep going I see her she has somehow stepped in one of my Conibears and it snapped straight down to the bone poor sweet Lizzie half-conscious lying in dirt and matted grass I pry open the trap my hands slick with blood mine and hers lift her into my arms she is so slight and beautiful with her dark hair matted against her face her translucent eyelids and I start to cry as I carry her into the house cleanse the gash best I can stitch it closed and bandage the leg *I cry for who I am.*

Driving north on back roads now, I make an inventory of weapons. The hatchet and hammer he keeps in his basket, the coils and file-toothed snares, the rifle, the shotgun. I picture them in my mind and imagine the weight of each in my hands.

All night I walked in the woods. Thirsty, real thirsty, no water. My throat cleaves up. The hand, good hand, dips lower, lower, and suddenly I'm down on the ground, leaves rustling under me, dead branches buckling. There are. There are all manner of creatures in the soil, thousands of them. I

never knew it. All you do is dig. All you do. Just beneath the surface, dig with your fingers, your nails. Earthworms, crescent-shaped grubs, colonies of ants, termites, black-shelled beetles, I don't know, maybe muskrats, gophers, a long-sleeping black bear, sidewinders, scorpions, a dead dog. I remember it now. A dog somewhere back there in fine silty soil.

I pull into the long gravel drive and see the house in the distance, partly obscured by windbreaks. The spruces have grown tall since I was here last. I park the car and walk to the house. Duddee is nowhere in sight, and I'm unsure whether to knock or walk right in. I call his name through the screen—no answer—so I open the door and step inside. My throat tightens from the smell. There's vomit on the floor near the sink, dry now, and a slick film of spilled kerosene. One of Duddee's traps has been set beneath the cupboards. I walk further into the house and find traps set everywhere. Chairs have been upended. In the living room, a hole has been opened in the wall, revealing arteries of wire beneath. "Duddee?" I call, and my voice sounds hollow; I struggle with the next word. "Dad?" Trudging upstairs, my heart sounds heavy in my ears. I push my bedroom door open and find the room strangely cold; the curtains have been pulled, but otherwise things remain exactly as I left them. The easel is still standing, with a slowly fading watercolor clipped to it. I open one of my dresser drawers and breathe that odd commixture of bleach and lye soap, the smell of assailing images. Fold-outs from *Teen* and *Tiger Beat* cling to the wall, fold-outs Duddee hated but never bothered to tear down. I leave my room and move on to his. A shotgun lies on the unmade bed, its barrel open. Duddee's outline is framed in dark sweat on the sheets. The room reeks of sickness. The closet has been emptied, its contents spread across the bedroom floor: stacks of musty books—Finnerty's *Trappers, Traps, and Trapping*, *The Environmental Gardener*, Irving Stone paperbacks—along with fishing rods and rain-warped magazines bundled in twine. The toys I played with as a child are lined against one wall, part of some odd reverie. My God, I think. He's gone.

Pretty warm, even at night. The earth. The earth is here, hard to see beneath the leaves, the fallen branches, but I see it. I see it in my hand breaking apart, taste it in my mouth and choke. The coyote is back to sniff at me, her nose cold and moist, her eyes matronly, limitless. I'd like to reach for her gray coat, but my arms aren't working as they should just now.

I hunt for him everywhere: the house, the outbuildings, the smooth lip of the pond. I almost wish to find him floating face down in the water or dangling from the cypress tree, his thin neck snapped. That's too easy, though. Duddee needs to suffer some for holding me here against my will, alone in this place, or at least explain his reasoning to me—make me try and understand. I wanted to go to school with the girls from town. I wanted boys to chase me on the playground and pin me down and plant kisses on my lips as their hearts thumped against mine. I wanted a radio, a TV, a newspaper to tell me about the outside world, but there was no other world, just mine and his, and I was a beautiful girl ruined. He snared me, couldn't bare to look at my brittle face, my pale chapped lips, my eyes iced over with tears—too much of my mother in that face—so he turned me over to face the ground. It hurt bad and I might have passed out, but I'm sure he was there, clutching me by my hair.

*Sleep today, oh early fallen,
In thy green and narrow bed,
Dirges from the pine and cypress,
Mingle with the tears we shed.*

Duddee is singing when I find him in the woods, not far away. He's lying on the ground, dirt smeared across his face. When he opens his mouth to sing, I glimpse his blackened teeth. "Daddy," I cry, and I'm twelve years old again, lost in frigid water. He stops singing and turns his head in my direction, but the eyes are milky and off-kilter. "What is it?" Daddy's voice sounds low, tangled up.

A crow takes flight, its wings flapping against tree leaves. "It's me," I say, breathing heavy, struggling to my knees for a better look. He sings again. *Sleep today, oh early fallen, in thy green and narrow bed.* I place my palm to his forehead and find he's burning up with fever. I'm not quite sure what to do. Maybe I shouldn't do anything. But finally I grasp his bare ankles and drag him along the trail. He's much lighter than I expected, but even so, I have to stop every few minutes to catch my breath. Daddy keeps singing as his head bobs gently over the soil and his voice takes on a strange otherworldly quality. At the clearing I drop his feet and breathe deep. A sharp pain grips my spine and I know I'll never make it as far as the house. Daddy stops singing suddenly and looks at me with those hazy eyes. "What the hell?" he croaks. Then Duddee breaks into song again, his jaw working at odd angles. Again, the hideous teeth. The lone cypress stands nearby, so I drag him there to its shade.

She hated me. For what. For trying to make her into something. Different. True they tell us wreaths of glory. She liked wild berries. Cool, cool, soaked in water from the cistern. You boil your traps before first use. Most people don't know that. Boil them in water. Not just water. Baking soda. Boil them an hour then rinse them off. Leave them outside overnight and let them rust. Sounds crazy but rust helps the trap dye stick. One pound dye for five gallons water. Boil the dye water. Let it simmer. Drop in those traps and let them turn blue-black. Dry them in the air. She used to follow me on the trap line. Brought her .22 along to pop rabbits with. That's my girl. Wouldn't carry them though. Hated the smell. Watched me skin them on the kitchen floor on newspaper. Cleaned the parts in a basin of water. She watched but wouldn't help. But this soothes the anguish only. Sweeping o'er our heartstrings now. Wouldn't. She wouldn't. Wanted a different life. Wouldn't she want a different life a different

I lean him against the tree trunk and Duddee sings as I unwrap the gauze on his arm. The skin is dark as pumice, swollen up miserably, and I know enough to realize what has happened, what's bound to happen next. *Dirges from the pine and cypress*. Daddy's tongue pokes from the edge of his mouth, swollen, and he bites into it, two, three times, blood speckling his shirt. Then he is still, and I think for a moment he might be dead. Again, I think of the weapons at hand and sense their futility. Time is its own weapon. The cypress leaves a reflection on the pond's surface, its limbs stretching out like the ribs of a starving animal. "Lizzie!" Daddy says suddenly. I'm surprised by the sound of my name, how clearly it's spoken, but when I turn toward Duddee his eyes are trained on the pond, remembering. "Come back here, girl. Come back." It sounds as though he's calling a dog.

*Sleep today, oh early fallen,
In thy green and narrow bed,
Dirges from the pine and cypress,
Mingle with the tears we shed...*

I smooth Daddy's hair and pull an engorged tick from his scalp. He's unconscious now much of the time, incapable of drinking the water I bring from the house. Daddy's jaw shifts back and forth until finally his face freezes in a look of perpetual surprise. He's no longer the same. This man is different from the one I came to kill or confront or maybe just question. Yet his face is the same and I'm sure that beneath the façade of sickness lingers that same desire. If he could, he'd bury me with him beneath the hides of deer he killed. He'd trap me and break me apart. If he could. I'm sure of it. I can't see Duddee's heart—too much scar tissue—but I know its mechanics. I drag him down to the edge of the pond. Duddee's eyes open and he tries to speak, though nothing comes but an empty gurgling sound. I push him over onto his stomach, drag him face-first into the water. Air bubbles

mar the pond's surface as I hold Duddee's head, a fistful of slick dark hair; he makes no effort to rise.

My face is wet, my body quivering. Ultimately Daddy doesn't struggle.

NAKED AND FREE

They spent three days in Rome, The Eternal City. Or was Paris the Eternal City? Benny Hauptman couldn't remember. Rome, to his way of thinking, was dust-filled, decrepit. The Armpit City. The air was slick with exhaust from *motorinis* buzzing like dragonflies through the piazzas. The drivers were suave and merciless, punks in dark glasses, and Benny feared them no end.

He and his classmates explored the Vatican museum on their last day in Rome. They hunted for the Sistine Chapel, but found themselves in rooms full of tapestries and statues instead.

Ho-hum. Benny was bored.

He carried along his camcorder, viewing everything through its cyclopic lens. Porcelain and canvas, cold marble and mosaic. Enough headless statues to fill the Bensen High gymnasium. Benny walked behind The Trio, the beautiful-est of the beautiful at Bensen High: Carol, Jamie, Tina. The Holy Trinity. Benny pictured them in togas with olive sprigs in their hair—no, entire branches sprouting forth like something from mythology. His image of them was angelic, unholy. He filmed their delicate backsides. They turned around and glared.

“Benny!” they squealed. “Cut it out. Gawd.” It was amazing, really, how The Trio often spoke in unison, how they wore the same lip gloss, the same candy-colored t-shirts to show off their belly button piercings. Benny found himself in front of a tapestry—Our Savior kneeling in some garden—and felt the need to cross himself: impure thoughts again. He videotaped Jesus' beard, which was well-trimmed as a topiary. He'd grow something similar if he could, but no dice. Benny tried, sophomore year, with sub-par results. The hairs had been singular and pubic, and people had laughed.

The Bensen High youth choir reached the Sistine Chapel, finally, after miles of Renaissance mastery—after Paris and Madrid, a full year of car washes and pop can drives. They stood with their heads tilted back, gaping. This was the protocol. People stared up at the ceiling, searching for the section of Michelangelo's fresco in which God and Adam reached toward one another, fingers forever not-touching. It seemed to Benny that Adam could've made an effort. He could've joined fingers

with God if that's what God really wanted, instead of just lounging around on his fig leaf, naked as a jaybird.

Benny stood there wondering what to do with himself, where to plant his hands and his ABC gum. He listened to The Trio compare fitness routines. They were whispering something about anaerobic thresholds and glycogen contents. He looked around for the gift shop. There was always a gift shop in these places. So what was this one selling? Sistine Chapel trading cards? Bobbin' Head dolls of the Pope?

Every few minutes, messages went out over the loudspeakers, first in one language, then another, warning tourists not to talk or take pictures in the chapel. Everyone was talking; everyone was taking pictures. It infuriated Benny. He glared at the people behind him who kept snapping away, oblivious, their faces lit like Roman candles.

Benny hated photography. Photos were mosquitoes that sucked the lifeblood out of life, misquoting memories, divorcing images from their contexts. Films, on the other hand, took in movement and change. Benny considered himself a cinematographer, an *auteur*. (He wasn't sure what the word meant, but he'd heard it applied to Spielberg.) Benny's plan was to capture the highlights of the tour on video and make a documentary for his class. The most interesting things he'd filmed so far had been a cat with a lizard in its mouth, a woman with a metal hook for a hand, and a man in an ape costume driving a moped.

They were done with Rome now. *Finito*. No more sweaty tram rides. No more worries about gypsies, pickpockets, motorbike kamikazes. No more ruins. Benny thought he'd puke if he saw another ruin. They took the train to Naples, passing beneath the lumbering shadow of Vesuvius. There were olive trees and grapevines, countless sheep. Old women sat in the coach car gripping crucifixes, their faces folded over like anemones. The entire scene was sublimely creepy.

The Bensen youth choir crossed the Bay of Naples by ferry, headed for the island of Capri—Eden on earth. This was where movie stars came to spend money, where princes and oil

heiresses danced together in nightclubs. Meg Ryan and Tom Cruise had been here. Even Madonna had been here. Suddenly there was sunshine everywhere, and possibility.

Benny felt a shiver pass through him as he sat beside Tina. He'd lucked into this seat, the last one remaining on the ferry. From here, he could smell her herbal shampoo; Tina's leg brushed against his. She turned the pages of her book, sighing theatrically every few minutes or so.

"What are you reading?" Benny asked. The inside of his mouth felt like rolled-up gauze, and it took all his courage to speak. Tina was, after all, the ringleader of The Trio, a finalist in the Miss Teen Iowa pageant and a one-time catalog model for JC Penny's. The guys at school called her Miss Tina Iowa, though never to her face. The pageant was still a sore spot.

"Celine," she said, after another heavyweight sigh. "He's French. You probably wouldn't like him."

"What's the story about?" Benny persisted.

Tina closed her paperback and shifted in her seat. She gave him one of those looks that people give to the cats in anatomy class—the ones splayed out on the table, waiting to be sliced open. It was the rigor mortis-formaldehyde look. "You remind me of a toadstool," she said. "It's your hat, I think. And your head. It's so...bulbous." He was wearing a beret he'd picked up in Paris. Carol and Jamie, who were listening in, twisted around in their seats.

"Yeah. Like a portabella mushroom," Jamie said.

"Like fungi," Carol added.

With that, it seemed to be settled. Benny took off the beret and stuffed it under his seat. What the heck was fungi, anyway? He picked up his camcorder and filmed their approach to the island. Capri seemed to move toward them like some barnacled monstrosity, the creature that washes up on shore at the end of *La Dolce Vita*. Benny smiled at the thought of it: a sea creature to devour them all.

They weren't even supposed to go to Capri. This was all the last-minute brainstorm of Miss Calgiers and Mr. Marsh, their chaperones, who fell madly in love on a Boeing 767 somewhere over

the North Atlantic. Benny had witnessed some hand holding and awkward kisses at the Tower of London, some light petting at the Eiffel Tower (which he managed to capture on video). Miss Calgiers was their choir conductor, so he could understand her side of it. No one who listened to Bach all day could survive without passion. But Mr. Marsh? He taught driver's ed and the industrial arts. It just didn't make sense. Nonetheless, the lovebirds wanted to see Capri, and itinerary be damned, they would.

The group was led from the ferry and ushered along the dock. Stands selling touristy doodads lined the waterfront. Seagulls dipped low overhead. Benny and his classmates were corralled by Mr. Marsh, who at 6'8" loomed above the crowd. His face was strangely hairless and pink from the sun, so that he resembled a giant mole. "Okay, kids," he said. "Ms. Calgiers and I are going to rustle up a place for us to stay tonight. In the meantime...go explore the island. Go swimming. Get something to eat."

The choristers glanced at one another. They'd never been abandoned before. Here in this strange place, they were meant to scatter like dandelion fuzz, to act like grown-ups so their chaperones could act like kids. Benny felt as though he were back in the Sistine Chapel, looking up at Adam and God. It was the feel of a bad spark, a failed connection, of something falling short.

The others wandered off in search of food, pay phones, restrooms, a place to stow their luggage. Benny pictured himself as Captain Cook, alone in this place without map or compass. He turned from the water, toward the limestone cliffs that stretched up into the sky. How would he get across to the beaches at the far end of the island?

Eventually, a large dark-skinned man approached wearing deck shorts, flip-flops, and a faded-gray t-shirt that said PIZZA MAN on it. The shirt stretched threadbare across the man's stomach; his belly button underneath was as big and dark as a drain spout.

"I AM PIZZA MAN!" he bellowed. Sweat pooled on his upper lip, and capillaries swirled like wallpaper patterns across his cheeks and nose. "I TAKE YOU ON BOAT TOUR, ALL OVER!"

He was yelling for the benefit of the Japanese tourists who stood behind Benny. "I TAKE YOU TO BLUE GROTTO!" Pizza Man screamed. "I LET YOU JUMP OUT AND GO SWIMMING!"

"All right," Benny said, embarrassed by the stares he was drawing from passing tourists.

"How much does it cost?"

"*CENTRO MILLE!*"

A hundred thousand lira was a lot—nearly fifty bucks. Benny wished he could just evaporate into the crowd. He wished he could be like Michelangelo's Adam, lounging around on his fig leaf, cool as a cucumber, not even spooked by God and his band of angels. But Benny wasn't cool. The beret, which he was wearing once more, seemed to confirm it. "All right," he muttered, digging in his wallet for the bills.

"*BUONO! BUONO!*" Pizza Man beamed. He squinted into Benny's face. "YOU EATEN ANYTHING?" he asked.

"No," Benny admitted.

"COME WITH ME!" Pizza Man had his fleshy hand on Benny's shoulder and was guiding him away from the dock. "I TAKE YOU TO BEST SANDWICH IN CAPRI!" He said it as though the sandwich itself were sitting at a table somewhere, reading the paper, enjoying an iced latte, waiting to have a chat with Benny. They came to a small deli and Pizza Man ordered on Benny's behalf. The clerk wrapped a hoagie-like concoction in waxed paper and handed it across the counter. Benny cradled the thing in his arms.

"OKAY!" Pizza man yelled. "I CALL MY SON NOW. HE GOOD BOY. HE'LL TAKE YOU ALL AROUND ISLAND." He dug a cell phone from the pocket of his shorts and waved it at Benny. "*CIAO!*" Pizza Man said, stepping outside. He became a dark shape in the sunlight, then he was gone. Benny was sure he'd been taken. He sat down at a table and began picking apart his sandwich—arugula, tomatoes, cucumbers, asiago cheese. Where was the meat? Now Benny felt doubly swindled. He reassembled the sandwich and videotaped himself eating it.

Afterwards he stepped outside and stood in the shade of an awning. A vendor nearby was selling remnants of the sea: conch shells and bits of coral. Benny watched a sunburnt German couple argue over a shark jaw. It looked like the husband wanted the jaw but the wife didn't. Their language sounded cut-off, remote, each word as sharp as the shark's teeth. Benny felt far from home and alone.

But then the feelings of loneliness passed and he felt renewed. Here he was, free to do as he pleased, free from the burdens of language. Benny couldn't understand the people around him, but they couldn't understand him, either. He could call them all shitbirds or fuck-ups right to their faces and it wouldn't matter. If one of them happened to figure out what Benny was saying, he'd just split—vamoose—and they'd never see him again.

An older boy who looked to be about nineteen or twenty pulled up on a Vespa. "You taking the boat?" he asked.

Benny nodded, surprised.

"Hop on then." The boy patted the seat behind him, but Benny was reluctant. "Come on," the Italian said. "No big deal."

Benny climbed on behind him. The boy took one of Benny's arms and wrapped it around his shirtless stomach. Benny could feel the hard muscles, like stones, moving beneath. He held the camcorder with his other hand and shot some documentary footage as they whizzed down the street.

When they reached the boat, Benny saw that it was filled with the Japanese tourists he'd seen earlier. They sat patiently, legs crossed, solid as tree stumps. It was a small boat with an outboard motor that sat low in the water. Only one seat remained near the prop, and Benny struggled to keep his balance as he moved toward it. Captain Cook never would have taken a seat near the prop. He would've stood at the front of the boat, with one foot up on the prow, his sword rattling against his leg. But was Captain Cook really the ideal role model here? He did get murdered by savages, after all.

The boat began to pitch back and forth in the choppy sea as the Italian guided it away from shore, in between larger vessels. The tourists took snapshots of the boat, the pilot, the ocean, the rock, but mainly of each other. Benny filmed it all and was behind it, like a dream. Once more he felt comforted by his own strangeness. Then a gust of wind took his beret, lifting it into the water, and all he could do was watch as it floated away out of reach.

One of the tourists, a young woman with long hair, became sick and was vomiting something brown into the ocean. Benny videotaped the event; he watched the gunk dilute and ultimately dissolve in the wash. Then he zoomed in on the woman's face. Her eyes were closed; her lips were moving. Benny realized she was frightened of the water and was praying. An older woman held the girl's hair away from her face and whispered in her ear.

The tiny boat rounded a bend in the coastline and entered a wide shallow cove. The water calmed. Their tour guide cut the engine and they drifted into a grotto. The light inside was as blue as a new bike, factory-fresh. The roof of the grotto was waffled like a honeycomb. If you looked straight down, you could see the stones that made up the ocean floor. There was something unblemished about the cave, something pure, and Benny felt like an intruder.

The Italian guided their boat back out into the cove and dropped anchor. There were other boats nearby, all of them filled with people like Benny. "Jump out," said the Italian boy. "Swim. Have good time. For...one half-hour. Then we go." The Japanese people looked around, chatting nervously and shrugging at one another. They looked to Benny for help, so he put his hands together and bowed to indicate a dive, but the gesture came out looking more like a prayer. The Japanese were confused. Benny approximated a crawl stroke, slicing the air with his arms. He was beginning to feel dumb. He had always hated charades. Finally one of the Japanese men smiled. Eureka! He stripped off his shirt and cannonballed into the water while the others took pictures.

Benny wanted to swim. He was sweaty and dusty, his hair was greasy, and dirt had somehow gotten caked beneath his nails. But there was the issue of his body to consider—the zits on his chest and back (there were some real doozies), the pale skin, the absence of muscles. It wasn't a pretty

sight. The sense of freedom Benny felt earlier had slipped away, lost to the wind like his hat. The beret had cost nearly twenty bucks, but Benny was determined not to dwell on it.

He sat in the boat with the Italian boy and the seasick girl, filming more footage for his documentary. The others had put away their cameras and had stripped down to their swimming suits. They were now bobbing up and down in the surf. Benny scanned the beach with his camcorder, zooming in to look for pretty girls. That's when he stumbled upon THE IMAGE, a single glimpse of which eclipsed anything the Sistine Chapel had to offer. This was monumental, a gift from God—Carol, Jamie, and Tina lying on the sand in skimpy bikinis, the top-halves tossed aside. This was meant to be documented.

Benny, for awhile, was content to do just that. He crouched in the pitching boat, trying to focus in on the fundamental toplessness of the girls. But then he felt the change, something inside his shorts that felt heavy and awkward as the anchor that had just been tossed to sea. He couldn't let anyone see this—especially that poor girl who was still on the verge of puking. Benny took off his shirt and wrapped his camcorder inside. Then he stuffed his wristwatch and billfold into his tennis shoes and tumbled overboard like a diver repairing to the deeps.

The water was warm and clear. Benny could see the fluttering legs of the Japanese tourists and the murky sunlight, coming down in ropes. There was a low distant droning sound, probably from the outboard engines. Benny made his way up to the surface.

He treaded water, wondering what to do. The girls were at the far end of the beach, so it might be possible to sneak in for a closer look. Benny swam to shore and trudged through the sand, trying not to be noticed by The Trio. Their eyes were hidden behind sunglasses and he could see the Bermuda Triangles of their tan lines. Their cute little ta-tas rose from their chests like, well, Benny couldn't think of a suitable comparison, since he'd never seen real live ta-tas before.

On the beach, some guys kicked a soccer ball back and forth, and a man selling *gelato* pushed his cart across the sand. Benny couldn't believe that everyone was so oblivious. Why didn't they

recognize what was at stake here? This was Methuselah, water into wine, the fishes and loaves, all rolled into one.

Benny snuck around behind some shrubs that were growing near the bathhouse. His burning foliage. Here he was largely hidden from view but could see The Trio perfectly. There was that gauzy feeling in his mouth again. Benny looked to see if anyone was nearby. Then he reached down and began fumbling around in his shorts.

There were flashes of light, the sun reflecting off the water. Suddenly God was there on the beach with him, reaching out, and Benny reached back with all his might. The Holy Trinity lay there before him, seventeen years old, topless, flawless, inspiration for the Renaissance Masters. At long last, art and religion made sense to Benny. This was his miraculous insight, his road to Damascus, hallelujah, world without end, amen.

It was over now. Benny remained in the bushes for a moment, knowing he'd never see anything like this again. The thought saddened him. He was wedged up against the cinder wall of the bathhouse and could hear voices on the other side, running water, someone whistling. When he freed himself of the bushes, Benny was covered with sand and there were twigs and leaves in his hair.

He crept back to the far end of the beach. A breeze had begun to blow, giving him goosebumps. Benny squinted out at the ocean, searching for his boat, but he couldn't see it. Maybe it had drifted to another part of the cove. He kept checking the various boats, but none of them looked familiar. Benny started to wonder how much time had elapsed.

He considered the possibility that he'd been abandoned. The thought wasn't exactly a pleasant one. If Benny had indeed been left behind, then his billfold and all his money was gone, along with his shoes, shirt, watch, and (perhaps most importantly) his camcorder. Benny had no idea where he was; he had no idea of the time, though he could see that the sun was sinking lower in the sky. Half of it was already obscured by the horizon. How would he make his way back to the harbor?

Benny gazed out over the water, at the lush orange sun dangling there, and the mainland, smoky as a dream in the distance. He couldn't help but sense the onrushing beauty of things. There was a sense of loss, but also a sense of openness, of a barrier lifting and majesty being received.

Benny knew he needed to ask The Trio for help. From a distance, he watched as they gathered up their things and got dressed. Then he approached, trying to appear as though he'd been wandering aimlessly along the beach and had happened upon them by mistake. "Oh, hey," he said. "What are you guys doing?"

The girls looked at one another. "Nothing," Jamie said. "What are you doing?" She seemed suspicious.

"I went on this boat tour and the guy let us off to go swimming. There was a grotto and some other stuff. I swam up to the beach to get some water at that little shop over there," he pointed toward the concession stand, "when I realized I didn't have my billfold, 'cause I left it on the boat, and when I went back for it, the boat was gone." Benny fought off an irrational urge to flee in terror.

"So...how long have you been here?" Tina asked. She had stopped chewing her gum, which was a bad sign.

"Just a little while—I don't know, ten minutes, maybe?" Benny's voice cracked.

"Bullshit," Carol said, her eyes narrowed. "You've been spying on us, haven't you?"

"No—I haven't—I mean, I just got here, seriously, and it's a good thing I found you, 'cause I'm not sure how to get back to the meeting spot and I don't have any money 'cause of my wallet being out on the boat and everything..." Benny was stirring up sand with his foot. The act had a calming effect on him.

"I'm not sure I believe you." It was the ringleader, Miss Tina Iowa, the one he feared most. "I think maybe you followed us and you've been here the whole time. I think maybe you're a little perv. Come on, you guys," she said, motioning to Carol and Jamie. "Let's get a taxi. We're supposed to meet Mr. Marsh in half an hour." The Trio began walking toward a shady-looking beer joint by the road. Benny followed behind. After a few steps, Tina stopped and turned around.

“Look, stalker boy—we don’t want you tagging along. Find your own way back.”

Benny looked around. Shadows were creeping up onto the beach. People were packing up their things, and the man with the *gelato* stand had disappeared. “No—come on,” he said. “I just need to hitch a ride back with you guys, or else borrow some money for cab fare...”

“Well, maybe you should have thought of that before you started spying on us.” The girls were walking again, flipping up sand behind them. Benny struggled to keep pace. He was painfully aware of his pimpley chest and his heart beating frantically beneath.

“Please,” Benny said. “I’ll pay you. I’ll pay you double when we get back. Please don’t leave me here. I don’t know the way.” He thought he might cry.

“Tough shit,” Tina said over her shoulder. A row of taxis waited at the side of the road. The drivers leaned on their cars, kidding around with each other while they smoked. Benny watched the girls dig *lira* notes from their shoulder bags and hand them to one of the drivers. Then they climbed into the back of the taxi and closed the door. He knew they would drive away. As beautiful as these girls were, their hearts were as black as cancer.

Jamie rolled down her window. “You saw our breasts, didn’t you?”

The taxi driver got inside and started the engine. Benny shook his head and kept on shaking it, long after it was necessary to do so.

“Just tell us the truth and we’ll let you in,” said Carol. Her voice was sugary sweet. Benny faltered for a moment.

“You did!” Tina screamed, pointing at him. “You lying little scum! You saw them!”

Benny nodded.

“Well then,” Jamie said.

“Well then what?”

“You’ve got to show us yours.”

“Show you my what?”

“Your thingie!” they giggled.

“No,” Benny begged. “Come on, please—you said you’d let me in if I admitted it.” He reached for the door, but Jamie held the lock down.

“Not until you show us,” she said. The other two girls were leaning forward, as though they were looking out at a car wreck. Benny couldn’t help it: a tear rolled down and tickled his nose.

“You big sissy,” Tina said. “Crying isn’t going to help anything.” And she was right. Crying wouldn’t do any good. There was only one course of action. Benny thought about the kids at school, and knew he would never be allowed to forget this. He took a deep breath and tugged his shorts down to his knees. The girls doubled over in fits of laughter.

“Oh my god,” Carol said. “He really did it.” Benny looked at the cab driver, who stared back at him unmoved. Something snapped inside him. He could almost hear it, like a tree branch—that’s how loud it was to him. Benny pulled his shorts down to the ground and stepped out of them. Now he was naked as a jaybird. The girls stopped laughing and stared at him.

“What is he doing?” whispered Tina—Miss Tina, the be-all and end-all of Benson High. People from the beach gathered around to watch as Benny crumpled up his shorts and tossed them through the open window of the cab. They watched as he lifted his hands in the air like a champion prizefighter, twisting around for everyone’s benefit. All that could be heard was the sound of the surf moving against the shore.

Benny looked up at the darkening sky. It was beautiful as a painting. He thought he could make out Adam, stretched on his giant fig leaf, with God reaching out, the great grey beard, the folds of time. He looked at the dull slate face of the rock, this island of Capri, this Eden. Here he was, in a place where the language and customs were inscrutable, and he was naked. Naked and free. This wasn’t so bad after all.

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