

**Good seeing you: a collection of short stories**

by

**Brian Douglas Burmeister**

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Program of Study Committee:  
Barbara Haas, Major Professor  
Donna Niday  
Amy Slagell

Iowa State University

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## WHAT CAN WE DO?

“This is wrong,” she says. “What you’re doing, it’s wrong. Terrible. No good.”

And the boy pulls back, frozen.

“All you’re doing is pressing,” she says, clapping her hands together so that only the balls meet. Her fingers stretched rigidly back so as to avoid the contact. “Can’t you see that?”

The boy turns his head. He palms a wad of blanket into each of his hands, smooth and soft, rolling and rolling the worn, old cotton. Rolling and rolling and--

“Pressing,” she says, again, smacking her hands together one final time.

The boy’s eyes blink rapidly. His hands continue moving over the blanket, petting, swimming, though they no longer feel it. He says, “I read it in a magazine.”

“And it’s wrong. Like you’re smashing us together. All sloppy and weird. Awful. I don’t know how you can possibly think that that’s right. Not possibly. Who the hell would write such a thing? Tell me. Smashing like that.”

His head rolls back to face hers; eyes dancing about neck and ears and hair. The long, pulled-back hair. The blanket remains in his hands. He grinds his front teeth slowly, loudly, slicing them side-to-side till they hurt. The girl misses this. She runs a couple fingers over the tip of her right pinkie, up and down, up and down, as if holding a ring that won’t fit.

“Mashing us up like potatoes,” she says.

The boy looks to the foot of the bed. “It’s what I read.”

“God!” She clasps the fingers tight about her pinkie and slams both hands into her bronzed, exposed thigh before shaking them at him. “Listen to me. Please. Are you listening to me? I don’t care what you read, I don’t. Or saw or heard or anything.” She stabs an index finger into his chest, causing his head to cock back. Releasing a hand from the blanket, he adjusts the crotch of his pants. “Look at me, look. You’ll make out with girls,” she adds, “not magazines.”

The boy says, “Okay.”

The girl nods. “So we’ll try something different, better, yes? I need you to stay absolutely, positively still, got it? No joking at all, not around, not nothing. What I’m going to do, I’m going to move slow and place my lips over yours, I am. That’s all I’m going to do. And I’m going to squeeze a little bit, like I’m biting with my lips. And then I’ll slowly slide off. Then repeat. And you’re not to do anything. I don’t want you to do anything; you’re *learning*. You need to pay attention. What I’m going to be doing is pretty much slow-mo of what you’ll have to learn to do. Okay? Okay. You do this right, Kayla Henderson won’t know what hit her.”

“Fuck,” says the boy.

“I’m being cereal,” she says. “So pay attention, please. You don’t know anything yet, not anything--and that’s the first thing you need to know. You got it?” she says. “*That*,” she continues, “and that girls are completely stupid when it comes to guys.” She nods in short, rapid, confirming bursts, her mouth hanging open about half-an-inch. “Now I only want to do this the once.”

The boy closes his eyes.

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The knob fails to turn.

Outside the door, Mrs. Kelly releases her hand and takes a breath. Slow. Deep. Then she holds off breathing altogether. A moment later, she knocks.

“Yes?”

The woman twists her foot in repeating arcs across the floor, curling the toes in her shoes. The boy says, “Hello?”

The arcs continue and after a time Mrs. Kelly says, “Dinners ready, you two.” Adding softly: “If you care.”

The boy answers quickly, “We’ll be down in a minute.” And Mrs. Kelly remains standing. She remains silent.

So does everything else.

She wets her lips and snorts, begins walking down the hall. Behind her, the girl yells, “Thanks, Mom.” Mrs. Kelly pictures herself nodding, simply nodding, a continuous rhythm of empty thought, though the only real movement in her face is a flexing of the jaw. She continues to the end of the hall, down the shadowed steps to the livingroom.

Mr. Kelly is, as he had been when she last passed him, lolled across the couch watching T.V. He is a large man with a bright mustache and dark eyes. He glances to his wife, the woman whose face he scratches each time his touches hers, and then back to the overpriced set. “How’s studying?” he asks.

Mrs. Kelly continues on her way to the kitchen.

- - -

“What,” says the teacher, “is the problem with conformity?--is there a problem with conformity? T.J.?”

The boy shifts his head to the side for a moment. Beyond the window, on the track, a class is running laps. Kayla is there. In tank top and shorts. And yet the boy’s vision drifts about the entire group of girls of which she is a part. “I don’t know. I think it depends,” he says, and brings his center back into the room. “I think it depends on if it’s a good thing or a bad thing. Like, if we’re talking about everyone reading a book or”-- he frenetically flails a hand through the air-- “running five miles a night, then it’s good--peer pressure wouldn’t hurt anything, right? It’d make everyone better, I think, really. But if we’re talking about something like stealing or . . . or doing drugs, or something, then it’s bad, straight up, no question.”

The teacher’s eyes widen. “So, conformity can be both good or bad, not based upon the act of conforming *itself*, but based upon the behavior one is being conformed to: bad behaviors mean conformity is bad, good behaviors mean it’s good.”

“Yes.”

“All right. Thank you, T.J. *But--*” she turns and begins stalking the room. “What if we have something less clear? What if what we have is a gray behavior? Do you know what I mean? A gray behavior. What then? Something that’s not good or bad. Something that’s just something--something you do. Like flying a kite.”

“But flying kites is awesome.”

“Yes!” The teacher snaps her fingers into a gun, pointing at the pony-tailed girl. T.J. turns and stares and smiles. “Okay, good, thank you,” the teacher says, moving her thumb quickly forward then back, recoiling, firing the imaginary shot. “Let’s stop there. I’m actually glad you said that, Erin. Who thinks flying a kite is awesome? Really? I mean it, go ahead and raise them up. All right, and who doesn’t?” Her lips curl. “So we’ve got about half and half,” she says, and pauses a moment. “This is good, seriously. Really good.” Her hands flip open, palms up, fingers spread. “Now, who’s right?”

Mrs. Kelly nods. She passes the casserole to her left, to T.J. He eagerly takes it and scoops several heaps onto his plate before setting the dish down on the empty end of the table. Mrs. Kelly watches this and then turns and holds her eyes on the girl.

“So, how much better are you doing?”

Erin looks up, hurriedly, repeatedly splitting her attention between Mrs. Kelly, the boy, and her food. “Better, anyway,” she says, then stops, swallows, clears her mouth. “I’m not totally for sure how much though. I haven’t seen my actual grade yet. Not since midterm. But the teacher stopped me one day to say she was pleased with my--I don’t know--God! what was it?--*newfound focus*. And the one test we had, I passed.” She smiles, stirring her food into a collage. “So that’s something.”

The boy nods.

The phone rings.

“Let me just get that.” Mrs. Kelly wipes her mouth before crossing the room and picking up the cordless. “Hello,” she says into the phone.

The girl and boy look at each other for some seconds, faces empty, before Erin scoots back her chair. As she stands up, T.J.'s head tilts to the right. "Girl business," she says.

The bathroom is freezing. So much so that Erin doesn't want to wash her hands at all, and ends up doing so without soap. When finished, she exits the room and screams, "Fuck!"

Mrs. Kelly stands before her, leaning, waiting against the opposite wall, the phone still in her hands, though no longer in use. Erin falls over herself back into the door. "Sorry, sorry," she says. "I am. You scared me. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to swear like that. I really didn't. I didn't think anyone—you just scared me."

Mrs. Kelly waves off her daughter's apology. "I have something," she says, darting her eyes across the girl's midsection. "There's something I want to ask you?"

"Okay?" says the girl, stepping forward, back towards the kitchen.

"No, here, stop, please." And, sighing, the girl agrees. "This is probably going to sound weird, but," Mrs. Kelly stops and sucks her lips into her mouth momentarily, the girl watching on with hidden amusement, "I think that you're better than T.J. and the things that he does. So. And I think that--I know that--it would be in your best interest if you didn't hang around with him so much." She says this quite slow, as if it's a question. "I know this is probably weird."

"I thought you'd be glad."

"I know. I am. I should be. But, there's just--I didn't want to mention it, but--we found some things. A bottle—pills—in his room. In a shoe box. And some other things.

Worse things. He's far too young. And maybe you knew, maybe you must have known. But, I don't want him pulling you down."

"I'm not exactly a weak person."

"That's not it--what I meant, that's not what I'm saying--I know you're not. I'm sorry if that's--"

"Why are you doing this?"

"Despite what you think or . . . whatever it is you think, I really like you a lot, I do."

The girl cranes her neck forward, shaking just enough to draw notice.

Back in the kitchen, Mrs. Kelly attends to a boiling pot on the stove. T.J. tells her it was boiling over terribly, and that he turned the burner way down. "Sorry I didn't have these done sooner," she says, and drains the water off. "Could you grab me the milk and butter?"

Obliging, T.J. gets up from his chair. He doesn't ask what the scream was about.

A short time later, when all is prepared, Mrs. Kelly carries the new dish to the table.

"Potatoes?" she asks of Erin.

"No. Thank you." And so the dish is handed to the boy.

"Anyway," he says, scooping half-a-plate full, "getting back to the school thing, I just wanted to put in my two cents--or my cent-and-a-half--or whatever it's really worth." Erin looks up, eyes exploding. "I think it's going really well," he says. "I think this whole tutoring thing is phenomenal. Stupendous. Preternatural. Other big words." His eyes swell as he smiles. "Her grades are going up like she said, and she's talking more in class, for two. I mean, she's really adding to discussion. Really. You should see her in action."

Mrs. Kelly smiles to her son. "I'm glad to hear it."

There is no one else. The lot is empty, and as the kids wander from the theater, only their car exists. Kayla Henderson and T.J., laughing, step into the front. The others: Erin, Tim Montana, and Dennis Canton, squeeze into the back. Tim's arms drape all over Erin. T.J. asks what they should do next. No one says a thing.

So they go to Dennis's.

Dennis Canton and T.J. have been friends since Cub Scouts. Once, Dennis told T.J. he was half in-love with Erin, which was okay; T.J. knew he meant it as a compliment. T.J. thinks Dennis Canton is the best person he has ever known.

But young Canton is pushing 300 pounds.

At Dennis's, they hang in the basement. Kayla's head rests on T.J.'s lap, and he curls her hair behind her ears. Across the room, Erin lays soundless and still on another couch. Tim Montana rests on the floor before her, asleep or something like it, his head uncomfortably pressed against the armrest near her feet. T.J. looks at them, staring, dying with thoughts.

He wishes to be a ghost.

He pretends that he is across the room, that the hair his fingers curl is Erin's, not Kayla's. *Not Kayla's, not Kayla's, no.* He loses and loses himself in this. Closes his eyes. Wills himself to be a ghost until what he feels in his fingers is ponytail perfect . . .

T.J.'s eyes reopen. He watches and watches and strokes. Running through her hair with his fingers. Touching her hair with his fingers. Having a piece of her in his fingers.

But things are heating up in the room, and T.J. tunes in just as Dennis Canton speaks the only negative words he has ever heard from his mouth. Dennis Canton says, “I don’t have anything going for me.”

T.J. wishes he had caught the beginning of this.

“Good Lord, of course you do,” says Kayla. “You’re really nice, everybody thinks so. If Stephanie—”

“Whatever! She knows me, she knows I’m nice. That’s all I’ve got. Being nice. And she knows I am. The rest of you guys, if you didn’t have each other, you could go anywhere and just meet people--do you know what I mean? Tim or Erin, or you two. At school or somewhere. I can’t do that. All I’ve got is *nice*, so it takes time. I took time. She knows me. Nice is crap.”

Kayla says, “You can’t really believe that.”

“But I can! And I know you don’t see it, but this world’s a joke. You can say that it’s not, and you can keep saying what you’re saying, but you’re full of it. I’m sorry, and don’t hate me for what I’m about to say, but you don’t know anything. All right? I’m sorry. But you’re not me, none of you know what it’s like to be me.”

Kayla starts to sit up, her head relocating onto T.J.’s arm near his shoulder. “Dennis,” she says, “you’re just upset. There’ll be--”

“I’m not just upset. Everything’s *ridiculous!*”

“You are upset, and you need time.”

“You’re so full of it!”

Kayla savagely waves her arms about, shaking her head; it is if she has suddenly found herself in a downpour of bees. “I’m full of nothing!” she says. “You’re not even thinking! You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Dennis rakes back his lower lip. It quivers fiercely under the pressure and, for a moment, T.J. thinks he might bite so hard as to draw blood. The darkness would stream down his face--and he’d *keep biting*--and more would pour, and would keep pouring, until the lip itself would tumble off. T.J. imagines the others sitting and gasping and discussing how this was even possible. Instead of figuring out how to help.

But Dennis doesn’t bite hard enough.

He simply lets the lip slingshot forward as a queer, awkward smile overtakes him. “What you have is all I’ve thought about every minute of every day. Can you grasp that? What you have--what all of you have means to me?” Dennis drops his eyes and his voice. He is always lowering his voice. “Until you dream of my life, don’t tell me what I know and don’t. None of you have ever had any trouble--and never will!--when it comes to being loved. So when I say it doesn’t matter--the things I do, like being a good person and--” He laughs, but he isn’t really laughing.

No one says or does anything. Kayla sits pale and still and silent; the bee storm has passed.

Dennis tugs hard against the front of his hair, raising a field of tiny, ivory bubbles of flesh towards his wrists. “It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t--I’m sorry, but there’s something going on. Beyond my control. I’m cursed or something,” he says.

Kayla drops forward, hunching over horribly. “Oh, p-lease, all right. Just stop it! Just stop it. You are a great guy,” she says, crisply, “a *great* guy. Someday some girl will see that. She will. I’m not making anything up. I don’t want to be all cliché or whatever, but real beauty really does--it really is from within.”

Across the room, Erin bursts out laughing, her tongue dangling from her mouth. T.J. had been sure she was sleeping. Still smiling, she sits up into the others’ stares, leaving the ghost fingers empty. “No, it’s not,” she says.

Dennis says nothing. He holds his eyes just in front of his feet. But there will be nothing, no hope there.

Erin looks hard at her brother. “I need a ride home.”

“What?” he replies.

“Now! I need a ride home now!” she yells, kicking her date in the shoulder. “Tim!”

Erin steps out of the car. She and Tim walk, groping, playing, not saying good-bye. T.J. watches on. He rubs his thumb furiously at the underside of his nose. Erin and Tim kiss at some length, then embrace, then kiss again. T.J. no longer watches. He squeezes tight his eyes, his nose and upper cheeks hurting from the aberrant pressure. He imagines a place, dark and shallow and dank, where he and Erin sit, staring at what reflections exist in the raven waters before them. Here, words would be wrong. She nudges him softly and points to the faint outlines of shapes. Leafless trees hang low above them, casting the impression of snakes just below the waving surface. These serpents dance an adagio and, watching them intently, T.J. rolls his head back and sways to their rhythm. Erin laughs. They laugh. She sits up

sharply, points to something else: an elegantly-moving diamond. And then comes a light from above, a star. Then another. And another. The darkness dissipates in dream-fashion along with the trees. T.J. turns to face her. She holds a string in her hands and nods to the sky. Behind the floating diamond, all is bright, gloriously speckled white. She hands over the string. He breathes in a huge but delicate breath. Erin knocks her hand on the glass of the car.

“Move the fuck over,” she says before taking the wheel of the car.

“You’re a piece of work,” she says, minutes later, still driving. “You know that? I’m telling you so you know. So you can think about it. I thought you were his friend--you’re supposed to be. But you sat there like a piece of garbage. A piece of shit. A real piece of work. You’re no friend. Not when you should have stopped it. And you could have. You could have, you know that--you know you should have said something back there.”

The boy tugs hard on the ball of his ear.

“And don’t think I don’t know what the deal is. I do, I do--so don’t think that. Frickin’ Kayla has you screwed up, is what. Frickin’ made up hope. Garbage. You could have said something--why didn’t you? You could have stopped her lies, hope, everything. And all you had to do was speak up. That’s it! Nothing else! Not nothing.” Her head bobs back and forth, the muscles in her neck stretching until rope-taut. “You could have said something back there, but no. No! Can’t say nothing! Not in front of Kayla. Not you.”

The boy cranks up the radio.

“You ass hole!” she says, and turns the music off. T.J. reaches for it again, though she instantly, furiously slaps his hand away. “What’s your problem?”

“This is my car,” he says.

Erin shakes the wheel in her hands, unleashes a grunt through clenched teeth.

And the boy says, “What was I supposed to do or say?--that his life’s garbage?”

And Erin screams, “Yes!”

They keep driving and driving, not even in their town now:

“So,” Erin pauses, nodding, half-staring at T.J., “are you going to see her again?”

T.J. sits with his head pressed firmly against the seat behind him, eyes closed.

“Are you?” she says. “Because first loves are stupid. Very. And I hope you saw that tonight. I don’t want you planning on seeing her, or thinking about seeing her, or anything. So you better damn well write down every word I say. I don’t want you thinking you like her when you don’t.”

T.J. quietly laughs, trembling. He says some things, weaker than whispers, but building to one, single, audible word. He says, “Slim.”

“*What?*”

His eyes pop, but don’t move towards her. He repeats the word.

She shakes her head, licks her upper lip.

“You don’t even know,” he says. “You don’t have a clue.”

Erin’s mouth stretches Pacific-wide momentarily. “I’m asking, nicely, if you plan to see her again.”

T.J. slams a fist against the door. “Where the hell were you when Tim called him Slim?”

“Jesus Christ,” she says, and focuses on his face. “Are you going to see her again, or what?”

And then it happens.

T.J. sees what she does not; he reaches over her, across her, and spins the wheel hard to the right. The car smashes into and over the curb, both wheels on the boy’s side planted on grass as the car slides to a stop.

There is a deleterious moment of silence.

“Are you all right?” he finally asks.

Erin nods.

“Did you see what happened?” she gasps.

But T.J. is already out of the car.

He steps quickly around and behind the vehicle, building to a sprint. He slips in the wet grass and falls, pounding both knees square into the earth and spraining a wrist. But he doesn’t stop until he sees it.

His face doesn’t change, but he sighs. He forces a hard breath to exhaust what feels like cement filling in his lungs. He breathes again. Deep. Then again and again. It does nothing to lift the biting in his chest. Around him, all remains quiet except for the now perceptible hiss of electricity, flying through the lines and illuminating this mess. Up and down the street there is otherwise nothing but darkness and quiet. And T.J. waits for something to happen. There must be dozens of persons within an earshot of this scene. *Must be, must be*. But nothing does happen. No lights come on. No doors open. Not a soul shouting, “Jesus!” On the ground before him is a woman, maybe forty. She lies on her

stomach and does not move. Her eyes find T.J.'s feet and her mouth opens and closes then opens again, but no words escape. T.J. shuts his eyes and returns to the car. Erin hides her face with her hand.

“How is she?” she asks.

T.J. takes his seat and stares forward, examining the lettering on the dash. His eyes focus then cloud, over and over, but he cannot change what is spelled. He wipes his hand over his mouth. He swings his door shut. It is very, very late.

“How the fuck is she?” she asks.

T.J. drifts his sights out the window. His fingers tense into painful claws inches away from his face; he bangs his head on the glass; he snorts a series of high, cutting breaths.

“What the hell can we do?” The girl sharply raises her hand to her own face, accidentally slapping herself, hard, before pulping the hell out of her lips. “I’m asking,” she says.

The car lurches forward.

T.J. goes back.

The problem has managed to pull or push itself nearly out of the street and onto the curb. What streetlight there was earlier has disappeared, the product of malfunction, and what light now exists shines down solely from the moon. And yet blood reflects brilliantly. T.J. approaches slower and closer than he had before.

A breath!

Despite the broken frame and loss of blood, life still remains in the woman. This T.J. knows. But he knows it is temporary. He knows it is painful. This, T.J. also knows.

*And so there must be . . . Something, something . . .*

He swings about himself. Everything blurs and blurs. And he keeps spinning. Something. A promise. And he knows he is right. He knows that it's somewhere. He slows and steps backwards. His mouth reaches for words, but finds only jagged, incomplete thoughts. Soft drops of rain tickle his face and hands. He shakes them off and turns and breathes and walks further down the street, looking for houselights.

If he stays focused, *yes*, he will stay focused; if he looks confident then he will look natural; *yes*, no one questions natural.

A block later and he finds a house with no lights and no cars. There is an engraved rock by the porch. It reads: THE VANDENBERGHE'S WELCOME. T.J. studies these words. He thinks and thinks and plays with them, tracing them over the roof of his mouth. Van-den-berghe's. There is a delicious comfort in them. T.J. does not know these people. He sucks in enough air so that he cannot tell his being is made up of anything else. He takes up the rock and runs with it as well as he can.

The girl throws newspaper at the boy. The pages spread in midair and settle to the ground like confetti. "There wasn't a goddam thing in there!" she screams.

T.J. crouches, grabbing, attempting to place the paper back together. He says to her, "Quiet."

She is all energy, shaking with it, pacing. “No! I went through different ones. Today-- yesterday. Today. Nothing. Not nothing. Don’t you hear what I’m saying? Not one damn thing on it! Not in there. Not one!”

The boy extends a hand towards her. “Try to be quiet,” he says. “Please.” he says. “Sit.”

“No!” She continues marching--back, back, forth, back, erratically. “What the hell can I think--can I think?--I don’t know what to think. Why isn’t there something? There should be something--there should have been something by now, right? Right? Talk to me. *Right?*”

T.J. stands up. “You think you know everything,” he says.

Erin winces, finally stops, smashes both her hands into fists. “We’re dead,” she says quickly, her breathing shortened to that of laughter or dogs.

T.J. tells her, “Don’t.”

He crosses the room to her. She turns and keeps moving. But this does not stop him. He places his arms around her from the back and spins her sharply so that her front is pressed into his; she nearly topples over, it happens so fast.

“Why did this happen?” she says.

“I don’t know.”

“People aren’t just out that time of night. People aren’t--” she says. “They aren’t! This stuff doesn’t just happen.”

“No, it doesn’t.” T.J. places a hand to the back of her head. His lips find their way to her forehead. Then a second time. Afterwards, she places her head just under his chin. He

raises the angle of his neck to ensure his jaw doesn't dig into her skull. They each take giant, shaking breaths.

Still holding her, he sways his torso back. She looks up. He moves decisively towards her mouth.

She shoves him in the chest.

“What are you doing?”

The boy's eyes instantly glaze over. “Please.” And he moves towards her again.

“No! What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Nothing.” He wipes his mouth before throwing that hand into the air. “There's nothing wrong, see? See? Nothing! So, please,” he says and stops. “You don't know what I feel.”

“We're dead!” she says. “That's it. Everything.”

He challenges her gaze. He says, “I'm sorry, but you don't have anything to worry about” and steps towards her with certainty. “They're never going to find her.”

Mrs. Kelly wakes from her nap. The voices, boy and girl, are strange and muffled and loud. Sounds, not words. And growing louder. Mrs. Kelly swings her feet onto the floor. She speaks to herself in short, mercurial bursts and proceeds to the hall.

“You're so goddam stupid!” she hears.

The boy's door bursts open. She hears the boy yell, “Erin, I did this for you!” But the girl, crying, storms past the woman.

Mrs. Kelly steps to the side as if her daughter has not already passed her, is not already going down the stairs. Mrs. Kelly's jaw rolls forward as she stands and watches and hears Erin disappear. Mrs. Kelly takes a single step after her, raises an arm. T.J. shuts his door. A moment passes and Mrs. Kelly hears the front door open and slam and the quiet which follows. It is in the silence that her mind sets to work. She pictures Erin before her, beautiful and calm and patient, and says to her, sweetly, "What on earth is wrong with your brother now?"

## GOOD SEEING YOU

Jim's return from Naples came with more fanfare than had his departure. It was August then, barely, and we'd not talked since he left. That was in April. That was the kicker. In April he left under the pretext of business: one month in Britain. But he had no business, something everyone knew. His money wasn't really his, not in the earned sense, and I never questioned that he lived those weeks from one bar or club to the next. Much as he did at home.

"All right," he said, that first time I saw him again, "right this way, right this way. Come on." He was careful to lead me by the sleeve of my shirt and not by my hand. We passed through hall after hall of what, at least once, housed paintings and photos a former girlfriend spent a year working on, before being dismissed. In any event, I couldn't see them, even if they were there—my eyes were closed. "You're doing good," he said, laughing as there came a heavy glass rattle up on my right—the third object I tripped over; he was intentionally steering me into things. We were and still are both damn near thirty-five.

I thought, what the hell.

"Okay, stop. *Stop*. You can open them."

And what I said was, "Oh."

"I spent a week driving it around in my car. Can you *imagine*? Absolutely imagine? In the passenger seat, all through Rome—Roma. Her hand raised, waving. I'm a genius, I swear to God—to Einstein." He smiled. "But, as they say, all good things must come to an end, and so I figured it would probably be a good idea to send her home before she got ruined or stolen.

Damn Italians will steal anything, I swear it—don't even let me get started on that. So I sent her off in a giant crate and left myself almost immediately afterwards. My fun was done, you know. So I got on a plane. And now I'm here, and you're here.” He smiled and took a slow breath. “And isn't she something?”

“Definitely.”

His hands pointed here and there, and he bounced in a triumphant arc before it. “I feel lucky to have found her,” he said. “It sounds corny, I know; it is corny. But I just happened to be there a few days when this dress shop was closing. So I know a thing or two about luck.” He nodded like crazy and sidled up beside it. “She's from the fifties, I guess—not that you can tell. Can you tell? You're a liar if you say yes.” But I said nothing. “What's crazier is that they only ever made like a half-dozen of her. All by hand. All by one man. What a job! Making mannequins all day. Someone really took their time on this one.” He moved in even closer and slung his arm about it. He was talking to it as much as he was me. “The old woman selling her said no matter what she was wearing it always sold right away, straight away. Like *magic*, she said. I gave her twice what she wanted for it.” He nodded repeatedly and with gigantic range of motion; you'd have thought he'd just nailed a game-winning shot. He asked me, “Have you ever seen one look so real?”

I mouthed the word, no.

“Well, I knew I had to find the perfect dress for her. I knew it, just knew it, absolutely knew it—it would be a complete shame otherwise. So when I was driving around, that whole time I was driving around, I was checking out stores. Twice I even carried her in to try things on. On the street people stared. In stores they pressured the hell out of me.” He shuffled

backwards a bit, laughing, and it was then I noticed the lights. There were four of them total, two on each side, and held nearly as high as the ceiling; each with a red shade or glass. What he had done was turn the shades inwards, towards the room instead of against the walls. From the way he had things positioned, a flattering tangerine glow showered over the figure. I thought, with the exception of being so heavy on top, it had a sort of Hepburn look.

“Finally,” he said, “I almost gave up. There just wasn’t anything, you know. Stores full of crap. But after I sent her off, sent her home, I got a second wind. I had nothing to do then, and I figured I’d best keep looking. That’s maybe the best thing, too. That’s when I found it. The perfect dress. Feel this. Really. I’m seriously serious, it’s amazing.”

I obliged him. The dress was far more a chemise than anything. Black silk and silver. With a plunging neckline. I said, “It’s nice.”

“Oh, come on, show some enthusiasm. Show something. Get excited. This is amazing. It’s better than nice.”

“It’s very, very nice.”

He was pleased. “Now, how hard was that?” He stepped away from the figure and began striding to the other side of the room. “Thirsty?”

“No, no,” I said. “But thanks.” He was helping himself to his bar by then, and he continued to bring out two glasses. I said, “I’ll have to drive home at some point.”

“You and *driving*,” he said.

I moved around to the sofa, some feet diagonal to the bar, and took a seat. He was out of my line of vision then, crouched behind the counter. I could hear a frantic shuffling of objects, glass and expensive.

“When’d you lose the beard?” I asked.

“Oh, *that*,” he hollered. “Another lifetime ago. Forever ago. Right after I got there. Do you like it?”

I told him he looked like a kid.

“I hope to God so!” he said, popping back into view with a bottle and smiling. “I don’t know how you’ve stood keeping your face clean all these years. Too much work. The whole process is awful. I can’t even go two days—two days!—anymore without itching.”

“A Shakespearean tragedy,” I said. “MacBeth at the least.”

His mouth still hung wide, though, from the nervous little nod he gave, I was sure he’d not heard me. He was intensely admiring the label. “You sure you don’t want any?”

I shook my head, no.

He poured the drinks with focus and style, a combination I’d seen in years past bring other men tips and phone numbers. Only now, the benefit was his to give himself: a skill learned for the sake of learning it. When finished, he held a drink in each hand and came out from the bar. I watched as he approached, nearer and nearer and nearer. He smiled. Passed by me. Kept walking. He returned to the figure. Carefully, carefully he slid a martini glass into the mannequin’s upturned fingers. It balanced and he stepped back, disengaging, appraising the situation: in addition to the drink and dress, he had the figure sporting several thin and expensive-looking bracelets, a gold choker, and—somehow!—earrings in its ears. He clanked his glass against its. “Betcha by golly wow,” he said. “Isn’t she something?”

Jim's party was that weekend, and I was telling Tina about it. She was in the kitchen folding towels, and, really, I'd been yelling to her. I was otherwise relaxing on the couch. "It's supposed to be big," I said, "something quite big, lots of people we don't know. To celebrate his return." I stopped my explanation as a man on the TV used a knife to cut through a tire-iron. All it took was one fluid swipe, as if it had only been air. The gorgeous blonde next to him was astonished. I held out one finger, pretending, and sliced the space in front of my mouth. There would be no applause. "He doesn't even want to have the thing," I continued, "which I can't get over. But I guess he sent out the invitations, or whatever it is he does, like weeks ago. He wouldn't even have the thing except some friends of his parents are supposed to be there. So he feels like he has to. A sense of duty. We're supposed to dress up."

Tina took her time before speaking. "You get your suit from the cleaners?" she eventually asked.

And what could I say?

"I'm not getting it for you this time, do you hear me? I'm really not. It's closer to your office, anyway." And with that, all was quiet for the longest time.

I'm not quite sure what compelled me, but I made my move to the kitchen then, slowly, furtively, my movements veiled by the soft hum of the fan above her. Once I was in close, I put my hands to her hips—"I'm working here," she said—and I brought her mouth to mine. She didn't move at all, gave not even the slightest ounce of forfeiture. I could barely taste her coffee.

I pulled back.

"You think I forget things," she said. "You think we're totally okay now."

“Tina.” I said.

“You really *actually* think things.”

“I don’t.”

“You promised me.”

“I know.”

“You think we’re totally okay now.”

“Tina,” I said, and turned to the window, searching.

At twenty, we agreed; we made a pact; we were on the five year plan—so within five years, it would happen. By then Jim and I would be settled and ready and able to do it, able to coordinate our lives for two weeks of one year. We’d pick somewhere and go. An adventure in the making. Jim never cared where it was.

But I had plans, specific plans, and so they were ours:

If and when we would go, it would be the Down Under.

I’d seen a show on it once, caught totally by random. The men in the program drove around in jeeps and trucks and were amazed every second. They slept in tents. They made fires. They ate the plants that they found. Once they set the wing of a broken bird. For two hours I was their friend, their brother, and the life I lived with them on that show seemed more real than anything I’d ever known. The narrator and my conscience were one: “Here there is but the cohabitation of independence and adventure. A country and culture bred by mystery and exclusivity: the aborigines, kangas, and bugs. Dangers and rarities. The

remnants of a world long gone. Here there is so much beauty, so much beauty, and *such* isolation.” And the men came away from their journey greater men.

At twenty, I was goddam well sold on Australia.

The black sea of people at Jim’s party was even denser than I had remembered was custom. I stood off to the side, scanning the crowd, counting numbers. Beautiful people, all of them, all dressed in emblematic ebony suits and dresses. They moved in waves, touching and laughing and knowing how important they were. I laughed, too. Briefly at my own insignificance, then at the recognition that I stood in the midst of a voyeur’s dream—though I cut myself short on the latter: there were as many men as women.

Jim, I thought, had lost his touch.

Tina made a face as she returned from God-knows-where. She handed me a glass of water and a small plate of food. “Have you talked to Madsen yet?” she said.

“No,” I said, mouth full. “What? He’s here?”

“He’s looking for you.”

“Damn it,” I mumbled. “And he doesn’t even like Jim at all.”

Some minutes later, Jim asked if I remembered Liz. We were in a small room then, alone, just off the main hallway. The door he had locked.

In response to his question I said, “Yeah, why, of course, what’s up?”

“Her sister’s here.”

Bingo. “So you think she’s here too? You’re hoping?”

He shook his head, his eyes skipping across the floor. “But her sister’s here,” he said.

“With a *guy*.”

“Huh,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“That’s interesting.”

“Very.”

He pocketed his hands in his jacket. He was the only one at the party wearing a white suit, yet, alone with me in this darkened room, he stuck out all the same. He swung each half of the coat towards the other, overlapping the two till his hands passed each other. He held them there, snug around his torso, a sharp fabric V forming at the sunken part of his chest. Headlights poured into the room for a second and we both turned to face it. When I looked back, Jim had his lower lip tight in his mouth and was grinding the ball of one foot into the floor as if smashing out a cigarette. He certainly could have used one. His eyes were still caught out the window, staring at air and silence. After a time he began shifting his weight in quickening intervals, leg to leg, leg to leg, dancing.

I took a breath. I said, “Though it could just be nothing. It really could be. This could just be nothing. Think of it sort of in reverse. I’ve gone lots of places with you—do you get what I’m saying? Reverse it. Point is, they could be friends, or work together, or—”

Jim grinned like a madman. “We’re not on the same page,” he said. “I know what you’re saying, but that wouldn’t matter at all. Not with what I’m thinking.”

He might as well have been a drug addict then, the way he began clawing the hell out of his arms. He dug and dug, and seconds later his face flexed, hard; his mouth wide-open, teeth clenched. When the release came, it was with a heavy blow through the nostrils and his arms streaking upwards, the forearms forming an X across his chest. Then falling. “Not at all with what I’m thinking,” he whispered, and moved to the back of the room. There, in that darkly shadowed corner, was the mannequin. It was dressed exactly as before, and I can only assume he relocated it there in order to hide it from the guests.

He placed both of his palms to her face and shook his head slowly from side to side.

I thought of forcing myself to smile, conjuring it, willing it into existence, but didn’t. He wouldn’t have seen it anyway. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to say to you right now.”

He turned back to me then, arms flailing in gesture. “He’s a goddam big guy,” he said, and never left the room the rest of the night.

Madsen was orbiting closely near Tina when I returned.

“Johnson, hey, how’s it going, how are you?”

“Good,” I said, “yeah,” forced to shake his hand. Even now, stuck in that present: Shaking, shaking. Aching. Dying. Instantly noticing Tina’s retreat. “Excellent,” I said, “really.”

“Same here, same here. I’m in the city a few days for a conference and then I hear about *this*. One hell of a party.” He looked about himself with the overwhelmed wonder of a child. Then back at me with something far less—though still the retarded grin on his face.

“J.’s doing well, too, she is. She’s this close to finishing her dissertation—*this close*—which I’m sure you know is going to be a huge relief off her back . . . And there’s some strong leads for her already, some strong leads. A couple we wouldn’t even have to move for. So that’s great. And then Dan—he’s still doing really well in school. Really well. He just got into TAG—”

“That’s what I’ve heard,” I said. “Jill wrote me. It’s great.”

“Thanks, it is. It really is. And he’s going to be in the play this year—which I thought you’d like.” He stopped and nodded and smiled. “So how about you, though? How the hell are you doing? T. said business was really starting to pick up for you. Said you were able to add on some more people. That right? That you might even open another office?”

“Yeah, well—”

“Said, too, if things keep up you were thinking of finding a new place for you guys as well. That’s good. Something out of the city. I’m pulling for you. After everything that’s happened, you know. That’d be great, be real good for you guys. Real great.”

“Yeah, that’s—” my head swung like a carousel, the neck and shoulders following suit. I must have looked brilliant. “I guess that’s the plan.”

“D’you lose something, tiger?” he said.

“Yeah,” I said, “no.”

We stood there nodding like morons. Him smiling. Goddam tiger! I got the fantastic notion to look at my watch. “Ugh,” I mumbled.

“What is it?”

“Oh, nothing, nothing. It’s just we’ve got a sitter right now,” I said, and he was completely, appropriately dumbfounded. “A little girl, really, and she has to be home by a certain hour.”

“A sitter—for the house?”

“No, no. Sorry. We’ve got her sister’s kids, this weekend.”

“T.’s? That’s nice of you. Must be nice for you, too. You get to see them often?”

“Heavens no. God no! Maybe once, twice a year.”

You’d have thought I murdered his favorite childhood pet. “And,” he froze up, sorting this out, “you both came to the party?”

I damn near burst out laughing, my smile was so huge. “We don’t really know any better,” I said.

He clapped his hands together and held them there, in front of his chest, pressed and shaking. What he wanted to say, he couldn’t. “Well, I’ll be sure to say hi to J. and the kids for you. I’m sure she’ll be glad to know how well you’re doing.”

“That’d be nice.” I shot my right arm up and rubbed the hell out of the back of my neck. From what I could tell, there was no one resembling Liz anywhere, let alone some giant beast of a man lurking about to harm Jim.

“Well, I better . . .” he said, and nodded his head back and behind himself.

“Good seeing you,” I said.

I practically broke my ankles, and then her arm, racing back to Tina. “Why the hell do you let him call you T.?” I screamed.

When the rumors came in, they came in with smiles. “Jim got a girl pregnant back there,” claimed the first. And Tina thought I should ask him. I shook my head, fierce. I told her, that’s not what friends do.

The second came right from her mouth, direct from what she called *a good source*: So and so said Jim had taken up a male lover while in Rome. Said the situation began when he was sleeping with the man’s sister. Said things sort of just carried over.

This, conveniently, came some days after I mentioned to Tina how few girls there were at the party.

And then there were more.

“This is probably stupid,” Jim said, some weeks later, long after everyone thought him a homosexual father-to-be, “but I’ve been wanting to ask you for a while. Can I ask you? It’s really dumb. But I keep thinking it, all the time. It keeps coming into my head all the time, and, so—”

“No,” I said, and immediately regretted saying it, “I’m not pregnant.”

He flipped his head back slightly then, all of it shaking, his eyes and mouth twitching as if a pill he couldn’t swallow was dissolving in his mouth. “No,” he said. “No. Do you remember drinking Hawkeye in college?”

“Yeah,” I confessed. My head swayed to one side, mouth agape. “But you were always too good to drink it.”

“That’s why I’m asking *you*,” he said. “Do you remember it?”

“Yes. It was terrible. I mean terrible; I drank it because it was cheap. We were kids. It wasn’t good. I only had it a few times—and when I did I had to mask the hell out of it with Kool-Aid or something.” He stared at me as if I had just lodged a knife into my face. I said again, “Or something.” He wet his lips. “Where are you going with this?”

He flashed me a smile, his perfect ivory blades gleaming momentarily, but he became instantly more serious. His voice then tired and rough: “But you remember, not just the fact of it, but doing it, actually doing it—where you were, whose party, things like that. You can put yourself there. You can do that.”

“Yeah.”

“You can taste it. If you try, if you think, you can—” Jim nodded. He was nodding at his own words, and I said no more. What could there be? I didn’t know what else he was looking for, and he took some time before speaking again.

“This,” he finally said, swirling his glass sloppily in front of his face, “is good. Very good,” and the same brief smile he’d used seconds before came upon his face. “And you know how many glasses or bottles—or storerooms—I’ve had of this in my life?” He waved his free hand through the air as if searching for a word, *the* word, the wrist and fingers flicking all over the place. But it wasn’t a word he wanted, and it couldn’t have been three seconds before he dropped his arm. He seemed suddenly exhausted. “This is practically all I drink,” he said. And with that his eyes, so electric weeks earlier, anchored some feet away from me. He wasn’t smiling or frowning or anything. I wished he would’ve been. “You remember Hawkeye,” he said. “I don’t remember shit.”

That's when I did it. I regret the hell out of it too, but that's what I did. I made the second major in what would be a long line of mistakes. I began walking towards him.

"I'll drink to that," I said.

Another two days and the call came from Jim.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Right now, what are you doing? Can you come over?"

"No, why?"

"I really need to talk," he said.

"I can't come over right now. Can't we do it on the phone?"

"No, the phone's no good."

"Why?"

"It's not. Are you coming over or not?"

"I told you, I can't. I need to be here. I have to."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I can't come over. I can't. I have to be here."

"What the hell are you talking about? . . . Because of Tina?"

"It's just the rule, okay? I'm not to leave or—"

"You've got to be kidding me."

"No. It's just the way things are. It's the rule. To and from work. Nothing else, I'm not to go anywhere else. So I have to be here."

Silence.

I said, "Hello?"

"Yeah."

"No, I can't."

Another silence, but longer.

"I can be there tomorrow."

Tina made a point of it during the following breakfast that she was going to put me to work the moment, the very second I got home. She wanted me to help her get ready for her mother's remarriage. I left a message for Jim.

What Tina seemed to want more than anything was my help with her hair. The wedding wasn't for another four days.

That night I asked her, "Don't you normally pay someone for this?"

"Yes," she admitted. "But once you learn it, you can do it. All. The. Time. It's called teamwork."

I asked how long it was going to take.

She said, "Do you want me to lie?"

She threw me a book. There were arrows with numbers and the smiling caricatures of average-looking women who, in reality, would never get looked-at twice, no matter how their hair was done up. I did them a favor and glanced, top to bottom, the page over again.

She said, "This will guide you right through it. An eight-year old could learn this. Simple."

I said, “I don’t know anything about hair.”

But I did, in a way.

I recalled, instantly, insanelly, two prior occasions. Both taking place at Jim’s parents’ home. Both involving his mother. The first one was brief. We were walking up to the house, his parents on the porch. It was midday. His mother sat on the steps, sandwiched between her husband’s legs, reading a book. Jim’s dad was simply enjoying the day, *but*—rather than cradle his arms around her waist, or rubbing her shoulders—as might be expected—he had both hands busy swimming, one after the other, through his wife’s hair. The palms facing outward, the strokes smooth and quick, racing from the bump of the skull to the square of her back. Then repeating. And repeating and repeating. Occasionally he’d interrupt this to flip the hair in the air as if he were tossing and catching a ball. I slowed my steps. She was substantially older than him and several years past the age at which most women are wise enough to wear their hair short. We nodded hello and continued into the house. I didn’t say one damn word.

The second occasion was a year or so later. We skipped our day’s classes and drove the four hours out to Jim’s house. We wanted to borrow the Jag, and the folks were to be gone for a week at the Lakes. So this was to be golden: us, the car, the Adams sisters! God! But when we got there, his mother was home. Playing computer games. At first she didn’t even know we were there. Jim thought he heard something as he fished through a bowl of keys in the kitchen. “D’you hear that?” he asked, and crept upstairs. She was in his room, her back to the door, playing on his computer. Jim always claimed she was a softy, and so he didn’t even ease into asking the favor. I knew how he was, and still this blew me away. There

was no “I’m surprised to see you home.” Only, “Hi, Mom,” and the asking for the car—to which she smiled. And we should have been in school! She darted her hand, pointing, explaining where the keys were, not knowing they were already secure in his pocket. Jim nodded and I turned; the night before us was to be one of the best of our lives. I started my exit, irrevocably trapped in visions of thighs and mouths and glory! But his voice continued. When I turned back, he had not moved, but instead sunk into an attack on our college—and this stands out as much as anything. Until the moment he was awarded the car, he had been completely and unmistakably upbeat that entire afternoon. Then, streaming from his mouth, there was this: There was an incident, some weeks prior, for which Jim, myself, and an acquaintance spent a night in custody. Let me just say it was nothing. We spent the night, paid our fines, and were home in time to watch football. So it was nothing. The event occurred off school grounds, and no disciplinary actions involving the University ever followed. But Jim was convinced it was the University, not the city, who was screwing him over. He felt his department was trying to squeeze him out, that somehow they’d known—and cared—what he had done; that his advisor and professors wanted him out of the program; that everything was a trap against him; that he wanted to transfer to another school. That fucking killed me. He never, not once, not ever mentioned the idea of going anywhere else. And he wouldn’t again. “Goddam this school,” he said, this one time, “and everyone there. It’s all bull crap. Claiming to be liberal arts! It’s not like when you went there. You must have had it so good. They just want us to live in a time capsule like we’re preachers’ kids.” I thought of digging my knuckles into his face. But that’s not why I remembered this time.

“James,” she said, “I want you to come here. I want you to listen.”

He went to her, bent down.

She whispered in his ears. For some minutes he nodded and grunted. He seemed to calm down. I watched, hearing nothing, surging with dreams and boredom.

At the end of it, she said, “I hope you understand all of this.”

He nodded. He leaned in and kissed her on the back of her head. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I love you. I do. You know that, right. I love you. I’m sorry.” He held his head there, eyes, mouth, nose pressed into her hair . . .

Tina snapped and snapped her fingers in front of my eyes. “You’re an asshole,” she said.

There is a sign in Jim’s yard. A big white and blue sign with a woman’s smiling face. I throw the car into park prematurely—metal grating, tearing, breaking other metal. I slam the door and sprint for the house. I must feel like my parents the first time I brought home a *D* from school. I don’t even ring the bell.

I fly into the house, stamping feet everywhere. He is the one who finds me.

“I thought that was you. I’m so glad you made it.”

I shout, “You’re selling the house!”

“And the cars.” He is beamingly pleased with himself, and waves for me to follow.

All I can think or say is, “What?”

He leads me through the main hall, towards the back of the house. Along each of the walls he has arranged a series of black-and-white photographs of the mannequin: her playing

pool, her smoking a cigar, her tying a tie. Jim makes no mention or motion towards these. There are more photos, too—but I miss the specifics, save that they're her, all her, all in varying shades of gray—Jim's pace is quick and loud. The slap-slap-slapping of his sandals dig like nails in my brain; I scratch and can't get them out. He flings open the doors.

Outside, everything is as it has always been: bright and white and blinding. A long row of recliners forms a barrier between the house and the pool. I remember the second chair from the end, and Liz. Liz lying, her chest exposed in that chair. Then Jim lying with her. Jim and Liz. And Jill and me. I will always remember that. Tina will never lie in these chairs.

Jim raises his arms as in prayer. "Is this not grand?"

Before us, the early fall rays disperse through the water. They form ever-changing ivory veins through the transparent blue, and almost all is quiet. The only sounds are that of a chair, large and comfortable, floating, scraping, failing to press its way onto the ground at the other end of the pool. Jim keeps walking until we are practically in the water.

I say to his back, "I thought you wanted to talk."

"I did."

"And?"

"Now it's fine. I worked it out. It's nothing. N.B.D."

"For Christ's sakes, you're leaving!"

"I'm leaving tomorrow," he says, correcting, and turns his vision back to the pool.

"Could you *even* ask for a better day for a swim?"

Before I can breathe, his shirt is off and over his head. "Don't worry about your clothes. There's plenty in my room up stairs."

“No, Jim, really.”

He kicks his sandals high into the air and in the direction of the house; one hits the siding with what I am sure to him is a solid, pleasing thump. He says, “Or you can swim naked for all I care.” He steps several strides back then fills his lungs with air before attacking the pool in a sprint. He submerges head first.

I have to wait for him to surface. “So you’re back to Europe, I assume.”

“God!” he screams, but it seems more of an act than anything; his smile has gone nowhere. “Don’t even judge. You don’t know.”

“No, I don’t.”

“What’s there, you’ve never seen. You’ve never been anywhere.” And his smile somehow broadens. “But that’s not even where I’m going.”

“Then where? What would you do? Where will you go?” My muscles instantly relax and I slouch in epiphany. “Australia,” I say without even the slightest hint that this could be a question.

But he dies in laughter. “What the hell is there there? I mean really?”

What is there there? “Then *where?*”

He raises a finger to his mouth, shakes his head, waits. “But the real question,” he slicks the overgrown hair out of his eyes, “is *what’s here?* In this place? In this town? Really, what is it that’s here?”

I say, “I don’t even know.”

He snaps his fingers into a pretend gun. “Exactly. A nail on the head.” He fires at me, takes a breath, then bobs back under. When he comes up, he spits water high, high into the air. “Now, are we going to have a nice swim or not? I’m quite bored of words.”

He swims effortlessly to the other end, to the chair, and climbs aboard. He gives a strong kickoff back into the water.

I stand here, staring, waiting, as if there’ll be more.



low; I have been remaindered against my will. Yet it is the same me as always, same me that once sold, only less of me now, and going for cheap. One can see this helps nothing. She got her story and was done with me. So: she's not buying. My head, she says on page 216, "is not all right." Though, in her defense, I use this quote out of context, somewhat.

*rappity tapitty tap (a-dap)*

My father says not to funnel things. He says this. It makes for a messy affair, he says. Nothing is so simple. Pressure always builds and/or there is a backlog or something. Really awful, anyway. So we are NOT to take something large and make it small. There is simply no sense in this business. This bad, messy business. Funneling.

Once, I laughed at this. At my mother's birthday party. My father, the eternal magician, appeared with flowers and a present. And words. The man wouldn't stop talking. So I was gestured to stay with him. My mother spent much of the evening in her bedroom with her sister. I was fourteen and not good company. My father spat on the driveway. The present was promptly thrown away. My mother took it upon herself to do something. She had her stomach pumped the next morning.

Funnels *are* a joke.

True blame requires memory examination, trouble and sorrow. And despite its apparent gloom, such is not entirely bad. Such gives me a purpose, a reason to be especially good in the coming weeks so that I can look through my journals. Yes! And with this, a flash of a thought: "Remembering is good if you don't let it be the fear in you."

MEMORY 17: *That thing of things. (And dreaded.)*

I consult the records for verification.

August 20 [the year we met]

Note to self: I'm pretty sure this girl occupies my mind because she is, as of late, the prettiest girl I've seen.

Yes, yes! Indeed this is a staggering *no*. Somehow, I keep turning back to this—over and over and over—and yet, I do not buy this rationalization. All the paperwork in the world wouldn't convince me this was an exogenous love. Long before I met her, I had her in mind and settled on her as the focus of my love. She was always intangibly more than a curio, so there really is no answer here, no single words, only theories. Mine. The Professor's. My friends'. No true articulation of why she is what she is. Yet all agree she is something. Yes! of that there is no denying. M: Something. Something . . .

A testament to this: the first time I saw her I about died. I about died and the moment she was gone I found myself drowning in air. Glorious trauma! I had no need for swimming lessons before that day. I never breathed before her. That was my natal moment.

This is a diary of love.

*Before her book*

Before anything, M. and I lived in the same city. It was nowhere, yet all our lives we attended different schools. I should have never met her—the system was aware of this fact

from the beginning—but even they were unable to protect me from myself. The law made nothing perfect. So I took a job at Johnson's. The local Opera House Theatre.

Without fail, M. came each weekend with her friends to see some new film. I used to make time to watch her watch the movies. Then, later, I would watch the same film myself, in the seat next to where she had sat.

One day I decided to be brave

•

*My first encounter with M:*

Waved to her. Did not talk.

*Later:*

Pretended I did.

•

THE PLAY'S THE THING

*[From stage right, a young man enters the fold.]*

THE ME OF THE PAST: Behold as I embolden myself for M.!

*[He smiles and sets fast to work.]*

That night I felt compelled to write in my journal that she and I had talked, at length, about a great many and fascinating things, and that she found me, most certainly, extremely engaging. I was sure that following a healthy duration I would dissolve real reality with my contrived journalistic efforts. The latter of which would give me immense self-pride and pleasure. Given enough time and the nature of the human mind, I would transform into a man other than myself: someone M. could love. And in this instance I was convinced *could* meant *would*. (Poof!) A certain magic.

Lost in this, I had for the first time—in monument form—a motive in my life.

### *Facts*

I saw her speaking with a group of boys.

Later that night, as M. and her gang were leaving the theater, I managed to catch a few words with one of her friends. What I said was stupid (as hell), but girls, it appears, even now, sometimes don't care. And I was flowers and puppy dogs that night. Flowers and puppy dogs! A few weeks later, M. and I were going to dances, seeing movies together.

Do you see, don't you see?

I should have stuck to the script.

*The time I went to John's house*

I wish I never went to John's house.

We watched TV for a bit, then went up to his room. He wanted to show me something—the very reason I came over—a *very big deal*: he had just bought the new *Superman* comic in which Clark, after 50 years of sporting unsporty glasses and a different haircut, reveals to Lois that he is, in fact, no other than Superman. Poor Lois. Poor ace. How she let that one escape her, I'll never know—but that's not really the story here. The story is, I can't remember if John ever actually showed it to me or not. Between one of his walls and a nearby desk he must have had 8,000 pictures of this girl I knew who went to another school—she lived across the street from my grandmother, and as children we played together quite often. In any case, I had a good idea of what he did with those pictures. When I returned home, I destroyed every picture of M. I had ever cut out of the newspaper.

*Transparent Courage*

September 17 [the year we split]

Someone said something. I listened. Yes, yes. Sound advice, indeed. Sure I can do that. Thank you. Someone left and left me feeling inspired. Finally something I can believe in. Motivation in hesitation. Nothing could be more perfectly perfect:

I'll become a ghost.

There but not. And ever haunting.

Out of sight, into mind!

So when M. finally decides to, I'll let her conjure me up.

### *Anniversary*

The night of our 100th kiss:

I expressed a concern that this needed to be special. She seemed unable to move past the idea that I had *really* been keeping track and that I was not simply inventing this to impress her (though the term she used was *vex*). It took some work but she agreed to my plan and we held the kiss, awkwardly, for some 100 seconds (me, holding a stopwatch in my hand). I failed to consider breathing before we began, and with the kiss came the realization we would have to intake heavily through our noses. When M. came to the same conclusion, she unleashed a violently splendid chuckle that almost cost us the kiss. The best part—by far!—was M.'s attempt at explaining this discovery: muffled words, her very thoughts, passing directly through my mouth.

### *Affection*

It was our second date we became murderers. She was driving my car and we were but three blocks from her house when it happened.

What there was, was a cat lying about the middle of the street.

We would have swerved out of the way, but there was a car coming from the other direction, and with no headlights. We were actually but a hairsbreadth away from something far worse. I recognized this immediately. But what-ifs don't cure the pain of what-happeneds, and M. took it pretty hard. She cried and cried uncontrollably. I said I'd be back and went door-to-door trying to locate the owners. I was prepared to give them money. I must have had a hundred bucks on me. Or more. But I never did find them.

When I returned to the car, M. was still crying. We didn't go out that night or in the week that followed.

As I pulled into her driveway, she looked at me for the first time since the incident. She put her hand to my face—the first time she'd ever touched it—and traced my jaw-line with dream-slowness. God! What a night for hyphens!

"I'm sorry," she said. "You probably think I'm awful now. But I'm not. I don't mean to be. I'll make it up to you. I promise. Are you free tomorrow?"

### *Simple*

Professor tried telling me there is reason behind simple things. Grass does more than blow in the wind, he said. *Much more.* I stepped to the window, but couldn't see it. He wasn't surprised, he said, and walked away mumbling something about cutting eyeteeth.

"What kind of expression is that?" I asked.

"A good one," he said, and began his exit.

I stayed at the window, searching. "The eyes are used for seeing," I said.

"I want you to see this doctor friend of mine."

This was the first he ever mentioned such a thing to me. "You're asking me to see to see a doctor?" I said.

He patted me on the back, made me feel better for about two seconds. "I want you to see a friend," he said. He smiled and smiled. He said, "But yes," and went home to his wife.

From what I could tell by the red-and-white rotating pole outside the office, this doctor friend was no doctor at all, but a barber. And, confirmed by looking through the window, a woman. Still she ran a test or two. Mostly she asked questions. All kinds. And it was during the misty midst of which she suggested we go for a drive.

We kept circling and circling, swirling through sameness. Blocks, faces, buildings—all broken. All circling and swirling. And her: persisting I talk about women—as if one thing had something to do with the other.

“You really are a love sick pup,” she said. And though her tone was different, I remembered my second-grade teacher calling me stupid.

I said thank you.

She kept looking at me instead of the road. “So what is it you find particularly attractive in a woman?” she asked. “Breasts? Eyes? Personality? I know there’s something. Child bearing hips? The curve of a back? You can really help me here, if you want. There has to be something.”

I feigned a smile as a sunburnt old man on a stoop flipped us the bird—we were driving by for the fourth time. I wasn’t surprised she missed it.

“What good is this going to do?” I asked.

Her tongue glided over her lips, “Who’s the doctor here?”

At the end of such fun, we returned to her office/shop. No sooner did I take a seat than she vanished to another room. I could not discount the possibility she had left in order to get, as so many television shows have taught me, more comfortable. I could never consent to

what luridness might follow, but . . . all the same, just being there, what would M. think?  
Not good things, for sure. For sure, not good things.

Then—

From the corner of my eye, a plaque materialized. A shining golden stamp in its lower right corner. All of it calling to me. Upon closer examination, I found it to be a certificate of some type from an institution I had never heard of—in addition to being a barber, she was apparently a practicing etiologist. I had to ask to what it meant. This she explained through the wall, the only yelling in my life to ever clear any tension.

A moment later she returned wearing, thankfully, the same horribly uncomfortable clothes she had on earlier and carrying with her a bowl of fruit. “Apple?” She smiled.

“No, thank you,” I said.

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“You sure?”

I grinned, shaking my head. “I’m strangely still sure.”

“Suit yourself,” she said, “but you’re really missing out.” She set the bowl down on a small coffee table and grabbed one for herself. Took a huge, loud, obnoxious bite. Slurring as she chomped: “Really, really missing out.”

She kept at that apple, and then another one, and somewhere in there she said everything pointed in the same direction. My case, apparently, was not hard to diagnose.

“Not hard at all,” she said, “and this is to be good. It will give you some ground upon which to start. And you’ll *certainly* need that.” She handed me a notebook with some

scribbled words on it. “Perpetual Depression,” she assured, tapping beneath her script as if I couldn’t read, “formed from Perpetual Deception.”

“Does it really need capitalization?” I asked.

She frowned. “Well, yes,” she said, lowering her head with the trained descent of a disappointed parent, “it is rather serious.”

So that was the prognosis, my lot. “And with no cure,” she added. She shook her head slowly, slowly and seemed to expect me to say or do something. I stared and stared. And amidst all the staring I think I was nodding too; all I could see was the past. Parhellic bursts of technicolor. I said some thanks and left. Sitting in my car was no better.

The radio reminded me that M. had paved the shit out of my paradise.

Or I had done it for her.

Yes, I had done it for her.

*Shoo, bop bop bop bop. Shoo, bop bop bop.*

As the music played on, I could see there were children down the street building a rather muddy snowman. Crazy: there was no difference to them between the snow-speckled dirt they played with and the perfect snow we hadn’t had for days. They took that snow and smiled and built wonderful things with it. And as they did so a second group of children walked by and laughed and threw snowballs at the mudman. After what I assume was a cruel exchange of words, one of the new arrivals made a charge at the artificial man, tearing through the middle hump, and utterly destroying him. These new and mean children high-fived the results and left. Yet the original pair did not cry. They looked at each other and

pointed about and immediately set to work building another Frosty. I must have gone four days without sleep after that.

I want to lift things up the same as them, I do; but this dog's paws are too heavy for anything sleight of hand.

*Bowling with M. (and her friends)*

Strikes were rewarded with piercing shrieks. Gutter balls with tap dancing. In between and always, singing. Wonderful and prophetic renditions of Hall and Oates. Humming of verses complete with imaginary drums. Always breaking out in the end: "*Go back to school, it's a bad situation. Oh yeah. Oh yeah. What you want is . . .*"

*Calling*

M. asked me to go to church with her, so I went; I gave it a chance; I took a good look; it made me mad. I have never seen such a collection of fakes in my life. Everyone was so nice and so good and so in love with God. So I despised it. These people weren't real—but I've seen the real ones. They treat their kids like crap in stores, go to bars on weekends, and cheat on their wives. And more. Yet come Sunday, make a production out of loving God. So I quit going. I don't need to surround myself with people like that, and I don't need Church to worship. We talk. He knows that I love Him. M. doesn't know why I stopped. I thought it better that way. I'd rather see her happy. I much prefer she think me an atheist than have to

argue with her over something she is so passionate about, no matter how much I want to scream to her that maybe some faith would do them good.

MEMORY 48: *The mystery, continued*

We were sitting on beanbag chairs, her hair pulled back in a ponytail—something she almost never did, something that made me crazy. The gazelle neck showing . . . She was staring at me, too.

“Look at this,” she said, meaning her hair as she flipped it about. “Seriously. And we’re not even horsing around.”

I spent the next hour not getting the joke as we watched TV. At the end of which time—

“What’s your favorite 19 letter word?”

“I,” and I stopped to think for a moment, “don’t have one.”

“Gobbledygoo,” she said.

But I didn’t. I said, “I don’t.”

She stood up. Turned the TV off. Her look was that of a child whose parents fight in an adjoining room. “Liar,” she said.

She went to her room and slammed the door, hard.

I walked home.

*The greatest smile*

One time before her mom passed we were at the hospital. M. was sitting with her when I happened to catch it. I waited in the hall with her brother and only saw it for a split second through the door window—her hand swiftly raising up and hiding it. All I have is that moment, and the angle could have been better. I don't know what her mother said, and, given the circumstances, I didn't exactly inquire. I'd never seen M. smile like that.

*Complications*

M.'s brother pulled me aside for the first time:

“Jenny and I are getting married.”

“That's great! Wow. Congratulations.”

“Thanks, yeah . . . She's pregnant, so . . . And anyway, that's why I wanted to talk to you. Things really haven't been that great since my mom died, you know. It's been real tough in a lot of ways—and now money—and I'm going to have a family. And we're going to lose the house—did she tell you that? And I can't take care of my sister like I should. She's got school, you know, and I can't do anything . . . Am I making sense?”

“You want me to take care of her?”

“You're a good guy—I really think so. You seem so together. You're so together and so much better than some of the other guys she used to go with. And here I am, a real asshole for asking this—especially being in the situation I'm in—but she doesn't really have anyone, not now, not anyone who's going to look after her.”

“Yeah, but—”

“She’s got plans, good dreams. Do you want to see her lose that?”

“I don’t . . .”

“Well?”

“. . . know . . .”

“You have to do something.”

“. . . exactly . . .”

“You’re all she has.”

“. . . what it is you think I can do.”

A sigh erupted through his nose. With one hand on my head, he drew me close and slung his other arm about me.

“More than me,” he replied.

### *Question*

M. at 26, on the topic of children: “I’m not about to board a train I can’t get off.” Then, adding with *her* smile, “Least not yet.”

### *Thanks to Ann Beattie*

“She was just joking about the cure thing. My doctor friend,” Professor said. “You’re not hopeless. No one is. She just wanted to put a good scare into you.”

It was very, very funny.

Professor handed me a list of “recommended reading.” He seemed to think it particularly important I read *Gatsby* and this short story by Ann Beattie. So I read “A Vintage Thunderbird.”

The main couple of the story basically waste their lives in meaningless relationship after meaningless relationship—when it’s really very clear that they should be with each other. In the end, after everything’s ruined, the woman finally recognizes her mistakes and desperately reaches out to reclaim the past that never was.

*Gatsby* will forever be my undying hero, but this particular story left me quite inspired, so I made a few phone calls. It took a few days, but I was able to track down M.’s old Corsica.

Doug didn’t get it.

The thing with Doug is, he’s my best friend. The other thing with Doug is, he’s a terrific liar. He says, all the time, “If there’s one thing I could get back in my life, it wouldn’t be my wife.” He says, “You have to let things go sometimes.” He says lots of things, and all like this. And on the surface they seem right. If we see Sam in public, he’ll nod or at the most say “Hey.” So this type of talk appears far from big. But at the same time, I know he’ll do anything just to be near her.

When we were still together, M. told me she had heard through her friends that Sam had caught him stealing her mail and later returning it with their old address on it, and Doug claiming it was sent there by mistake. And this, I’m afraid, came after we heard about her throwing a divorce party. With *dancers*. So while Doug wants to pretend he’s a wall with me,

I know better. And despite his protestations he went with me to get the car, and even drove the thing back to my house.

When I saw it, I about cried. It was beat up pretty bad and much of the driver's-side door had rusted away. The owner wasn't looking to sell at all, so I did as the situation demanded, and really got jacked on the deal.

M. doesn't know that I've bought it, and can't. But as I refuse to drive it, and I doubt she'll ever read this, I don't fear too much. But if she did find out, well, I'm sure she'd kill me for being *sick*.

So it's just sitting and sitting in my garage, this one thing of M.'s I have.

#### *On dreams*

"I can't remember mine," Doug said. "Most of the time I wake up and it's like nothing, like I'm left with nothing. Like I go to bed, then get up--with nothing in between." He ran an index finger repeatedly, deliberately over one of his sideburns, something he grew out post-Sam. "I tried writing them down for a while," he continued. "Someone on the TV said keeping a dream journal was a good idea—it'd help you know yourself better or something. It didn't do me any good. I tried it for a month or so and all I could write down were fragments from a dream, maybe two. Can you imagine? I'm dreaming every night, I have to be, but once I wake up, they're gone. Washed away. Nothing."

This was the type of insanity I'd dealt with for years.

"I've written down some," I said, "but I should be writing them all down, all of them. Take the other night, I dreamt there was a ghost outside the kitchen window, a little girl. And

she seemed like she'd be friendly, but she was a ghost. And she kept saying she wanted to come in the house because it was safer. But I wouldn't do it—because as soon as she'd come in, I was sure she'd turn on me. Then this other ghost showed up, a woman, maybe thirty-something, that turned out to be the girl's mother. A moment later, this man appeared in the distance, and he was scary-looking too—like Paul Bunyan or something—only he wasn't a ghost. And he had an axe in his hand, and the ghosts were scared of him. And then somehow I ended up finding out this guy had killed both the mom and the daughter, and somehow I knew I was to help them. So this was my job in the dream, my task, the thing I just had to do, my saving grace or whatever. But I didn't know what was going on. Do you get this? The awful weight of all of this? They were ghosts and it was scary, and I just desperately wanted someone to show up who knew magic or spells and could stop the whole thing.”

Doug said, “What happened then?”

I didn't know. I didn't even know. I said, “I woke up.”

Doug bobbed his head, then continued eating—an apple, of all things. “I don't need dreams” he said.

*2:08 A.M.*

M., asleep—or half-asleep—or something, and rolling onto her stomach: “Rub my back so I can unhitch the trailer from the truck.”

*Gloss*

We decided to try out a new restaurant at the outskirts of town. As we waited in line, M. noticed several people coming in and joining a wedding reception underway in the back. She pulled hard on my sleeve.

“Come on,” she said, “it will be such fun.” But she could tell where my thoughts were. “Besides, look at us.” We had just come from a play and were dressed up anyway; she was wearing a gorgeous greenish number for the first and only time. Her face stretched Pacific-wide: “Please. It’s not like we’re doing anything wrong. You know how much food will go to waste if we don’t? Tables and tables of it.” She stood up, tugging excitedly at my arm. “It will be fun. Please. Pretty please with sugar on top.”

I left the sandbox.

She told everyone she was Elly Higginbottom, rookie journalist from Chicago. I suppose that made me Mr. Higginbottom, not that anyone asked. Not that anyone cares about the person next to M.

“What sorts of things do you write?” an older woman asked of her.

“Investigations mostly.” M. put up a finger as she finished her drink. “Into business malpractices, corporate wrongdoings. Things of this nature. Boring, really. Occasionally I write reviews—which is kind of what I’d like to do—but as of now I haven’t done anything major.”

The woman’s husband was staring down M.’s dress. He must have been eighty.

“Did you and Helen go to college together?” the woman asked. Helen, of course, was the bride.

“Yes, yes,” said M. “Yes.” She signaled for me to fetch her another drink. “I hear it was a wonderful wedding. Just splendid. We had to miss it because our flight was delayed. Terrible, really. The airports in this country are dreadful.”

“We’ve had trouble ourselves, too. Perhaps there’s a story in it somewhere, why things are the way they are.”

“Yes.” M. shot me a look and snapped her fingers. “Are you going to get that?” she said, right before she turned her attention back to the woman, laughed, and said, “Perhaps.”

#### *Dinner Conversation*

M, amidst flowers and candles and eating the parmesan-crust ed eggplant premavara I made special for her: “I’m probably going to leave you this week.”

#### *Imbued Blue*

January 15 [the year we split + 2]

I’m done with hiding. It’s been 16 months and I’ve nothing to show for it. She’s been through eight guys. She’d rather have six months [this, apparently being how long she kept one of them] with some jerk than accept my Calypso-an offer. Which means I may have to go above her on this one. I’d put a bullet in my head, today, if I thought it’d mean we’d be together in Heaven. So while she may fight it, Time will see us together.

It just goes to show there’s some pain a bullet won’t cure, no matter how much better the breathing would be with one in my face.

*My last encounter with M.*

“What are you doing?”

The patio door swung open. I panicked and jumped about ten feet. She was near me, a car’s length to my left.

“What, are you stealing my trash?”

“No.” I had been trying to look in her windows. I hadn’t gotten a good position and didn’t see her coming. My hands were empty and I was nowhere near her garbage. She didn’t care. “Well, someone has been!” she said.

A neighbor rolled into sight, mowing the grass next door. I had to restrain myself from waving.

She said, “You can’t keep doing this, you know.”

I nodded. The phone was ringing and ringing and robbing me of this moment. All I could do was nod.

“No, I don’t think you do.”

She floated back towards the door.

She said, “I am going to get this, and you are going to go.” But she stopped just inside the house. “You’re not supposed to love me anymore, you know.”

She hurried in and answered the phone. I stayed on the porch, waiting. But she came immediately back, phone in hand, and slid the door shut from the inside. Locked it. “You are going to go.” She turned back to her conversation on the phone, leaving me to leave.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and began the hike back to my car.

Some seconds later I heard the door slide open behind me.

“And quit sending me cats! I just have to give them away.”

### *Dedication*

Professor asked me, “What’s with the preface—the dedication at the start of her book? That zombie girl business? I couldn’t follow it at all. Dedicating her book to a zombie, I mean.” I threw my head back hard as I let out a breath. “You *know* something,” he said.

I do. And I get this a lot. But most of the time, when faced with this question, I’ve simply played dumb.

“The girl is real,” I went, “for starters. So I can tell you what it stems from, but I don’t get what she means by the dedication myself, so, I don’t know how much this will do for you.”

“I’m sure it’s better than nothing,” he said.

But I wasn’t.

“In college,” I said, “I had a couple of classes with that girl, the zombie. And I came to find out not only did she live on her floor, on M.’s floor, but that she had gone to high school with her as well. So I thought the coincidences were something. And then I made some comments to M. saying how I thought this girl was cute and smart and everything. Never even dated in high school, I guess. And, well, M. gave me a bunch of crap about it, which was fine—she was really actually pretty funny—saying how I was in love with the girl and all that. Then . . . some time passed, a few months or something, and this girl started to

see some guy. A real jerk; another story. And that spelled the end of that. She was still cute and smart, but—”

I really lost it then. I really started to laugh like a madman; I felt awful about it, too—Professor probably thought I was crazy and sick—but I was thinking ahead to the rest of it.

“Then that summer,” I continued, “M. and I went for a walk, a long one, from our town to the next town over and then back again; and while we were gone we joked around that our town was being destroyed by giant birds, and that as the birds attacked they were killing all the people. Only what happened was the girl from M.’s dedication got turned into a zombie; she went around biting people, the dead people, turning everyone else into zombies. So, of course, the idea was that upon our return to town we would have to kill her to stop the legions of undead. That done, we could focus on the larger problem of the birds. A pretty sound plan. Unfortunately, when we returned there were no birds, no zombies, nothing, just the girl.”

Professor digested that for a while, then more than a while. He must have been disappointed or something. “So that’s it? I mean, that’s it? That’s the story?” he said.

I smiled something brilliant.