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As We Forgive Those

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CUT HIM

Most all the stories Ted tells are quoting movies, and some of the movies are even movies we've seen together, but I don't let on that I know. Problems are intrepid to all of us. Like last month, we're at the Silver Dollar Stack pancake house, when bang! We've reared right back into this guy's minivan. Guy gets out real steamed, saying he's going to call 911 and get the police over. My mind is spinning like bicycle pedals on a downhill. I've got a D-Dub from driving home from a high school party nine months back, and here we are in the parking lot not having learned our lesson, Ted drinking rum in his orange juice. I can see the whole scenario in cop eyes.

"Dump it," I told Ted.

"Keep your shoes tied," Ted said and got out of the passenger seat. I was going to lose my card to going anywhere, and even if I was going nowhere in the first place, you want to feel American, like you could hop on the highway and find a new life if you just ride enough exits east. Like my old girl Marlene. I wanted to club Ted, but he was already taking the perimeter of the car.

So the guy pumps his chest up, starts telling us about how he won't tolerate any kind of nonsense from a bunch of troublemakers, bunch meaning us two, and how we'd better lawyer up because we are going to pay. He's pointing to nicks on the sheen of the ass of his car that we can't see nearly as well as the crushed up back of Ted's money pit. Ted, of course, doesn't have enough to pay for anyone's damage, even his own.

“Looks like it’s time for you to get on the bus,” Ted says. There is no bus in this nowhere town, USA, but I know where he’s going, breathe easy again; he’s going movie on the guy. “And if I see your fat self on this corner again, know this: I do not play. Maybe I don’t like the cut of your jib or maybe I’m just a crazy motherfucker. You don’t know. Well I’ll tell you something. I am a crazy motherfucker and you don’t want to know what happens when you don’t step off my corner.” This is a movie from way back, like three years ago, about a gangster from the Bronx who gets rich to wearing furs kind of rich by setting hood rats straight who try to push a little business on his block, then gets turned in to the law by his own best friend. “Your wife. Your daughter. Your wife’s daughter. I don’t care who has to— how shall I say it? ‘Take the message?’— so I’d suggest you step off, because I will comb every inch of the PJ’s until you know that nobody moves weight on my block. Got that?”

“PJ’s?” Minivan doesn’t know that’s the projects. I guess he never saw The Boroughs Never Die.

“Did you hear me? I’m a crazy motherfucker!” Ted screams. He swigs his OJ and spits it on the ground.

“Yeah, he’s a crazy motherfucker!” I scream. Then the guy just gets in his minivan real fast and rides away. We were laughing about that one until the tow truck came. Still were tell the truth until Moira showed face. Ted was calling “Mush! Mush!” and swigging the bottom of the paper bagged bottle when his wheels were being pulled away.

Moira. Hell, the name says it all. Watch someone's mouth when it's said, and you'll see pursed lips up front, then a retreat second syllable. My mother is one for pursed lips at the sound of Moira alone. Pops just walks away rubbing his bald dome and muttering, "Face like a burnt chicken wing." It is not unlike their stance on me, their one son.

Point is, when Moira gets up in the Silver Dollar Stack lot, we can see she's cloud nines past London fog, not to mention the car is reeking reef smoke something dank.

"Yoohoo! Theodore Teddy Bear Roosevelt! Moira's here for you honey!" she cockadoodles. Ted starts biting on the neck of his T-shirt. He does this when she uses his middle name. I'm serious. It's there in the hospital papers and everything: Teddy Bear.

"Your mom's got pipes," I say.

"And an undiscovered brain tumor," he says. He's prone to aspirations.

So we get in the back and buckle up. Moira tells me I am handsomer every time she sees me, the spitting image of Jesus Christ himself.

"Or else a young Alec Baldwin!" she adds. "Yes! That's it! That's the ticket! A young Stevie Baldwin."

"Make a commitment, Ma," Ted says.

"I got fat to give you life!" she says, turning to the backseat to smack his thigh and taking the whole car with her for two lanes. Beeping and braking noises insult us, and Moira straightens out the car. "Stepford wives," she says and keeps going.

We go mum for a while to let Moira keep her head steady on the road. Ted looks out the window and draws songs with his finger in the window condensation. Man shreds and learned the notation too. Sometimes when we're bumming around his basement drinking beers and they've done their job of visual multiplication already and everyone's passed out somewhere around, he pulls out this map and points to all the cities we're going to go on tour someday. I'll be seeing like three Milwaukeees and a couple Austins. The world seems bigger then but with more ways to move through it. Musically, together with Richie, we're called The Geographers.

"We've got to replace Richie," I tell Ted as we pass an empty strip mall.

"More like your lady parts," Ted says. "Richie's been in The Geographers for years."

"And gone months now too," I said. My only explanation is we'd been logging a bunch of abuse at the hardware store and the worst part was they were the best jobs around. Usually there was some puffing during lunch and when we came back inside the walls would be swelling with mechanical parts, screws and nails and hammers. By the time I got home home, my bedroom would be a faux mahogany tunnel down to the tube, and television, well, it was just a box with three colors. Red, green, blue. And then there was that the girls weren't what the used to be, not worse, just not as many as before so many cut town. I wanted to cut town too, but we needed a third for our three-piece.

“Richie!” Moira shrieked. “Did you say Richie? Where has that boy been all my life? Now that boy is a man!” Once, Moira gave Richie a squeaky wet one right on the mouth. Ted pulled her off, and then she started crying in her cup, rocking back and forth, apologizing for all the love in her heart, which was bigger and more breathtaking and more connected to all the stars in the universe than air. Richie told her it was no big deal, that we all made mistakes. So she slobbered all over his lips again, Ted dragged her off and locked her in the bathroom half an hour, and he’s always referred to that night as The Time Richie Tried and Failed to Give It To Moira.

“College, Ma.”

“College can’t keep two people in love apart.”

“We’re talking about the band.”

“Well excusez-moi, Theodore TB! I thought this was a democracy!”

We knew enough to play amnesiac when Moira got talking pidgin French. Ted’s dad moved to France to be with his people fifteen years ago. I don’t mean he’s French. I mean he went to live amongst cheese-breath snobs like himself. He had a lot of airs and charcoals around the house when he lived with Moira and Ted, but all the artistic masterpieces I saw from him looked like the work of someone trying to get a dry pen going on scrap paper. Now he teaches English to French businessmen and writes to Ted once every few moons about all the fabulous cognac he’s been drinking. When Ted turned ten, Alexandre, who used to just be Lousy Lex to everyone, sent him a snifter and

we shot it together with a BB. “Bonsoir, Papa!” we said and threw our noses up to the American sky.

But sometimes, Ted tells this terrible joke when he and Moira have drawn a few new Mason-Dixons between themselves or she’s shown up at home half naked and fully drunk when he’s had friends over. “Why’d my dad move to France?” he says. “Because he had nothing Toulouse!”

A few weeks after the bangup, Ted’s truck had been repaired enough to drive it, though it still was a sight in the back. Richie came home from college for his spring break, and it was like The Geographers had never gone anywhere. I made the drums pay for all the weeks Richie was learning. Ted howled like an injured coyote to the down low heavies of his bass, and Richie was streaming up and down octave latitudes, a guitar pilot. We could have moved Michigan out into the middle of the ocean with our loudnesses. We moved empty glasses on rickety tables with our loudnesses. This was vehicular music; we were on our way to anywhere. We could have kept on forever if it weren’t for a snapped string and wanting to get out before Moira got home. On our minds, food was the only thing by the time we were done. We’d smoked and played past two meals, and the only place open was going to be the Silver Dollar Stack. Richie and I looked at each other with the sorry knowledge of certain greasy food poisoning.

“Just because it’s the only option, doesn’t mean it’s not the best,” Ted said. He had a long-standing stiffie for one of the waitresses. “Come on! We’re not getting any younger!” Ted said and shook his keys at us. “Or are you pussies gonna stay here and get yourself some manicures?”

At first Ted tried to ask about what exactly Richie was studying at college, but the whole car ride Richie wouldn’t stop talking about this new girly he had tied up in his bed sheets. His claim was she’d been a model who had decided to retire at the age of twenty-two because she was tired of traveling every other week. She missed her old arrondissement and expensive airline seating but liked the nighttime walls of silence in the middle of our country. “Did you know in business class, there’s a menu?” Richie asked. I didn’t see what the Trivial Pursuit angle was about. We had menus at the Stack too— with pictures! But now Richie was naming off a bunch of leather-stitching Italians like a walking, talking resume. I thought he was referring to a ferret as a mink until he reached a photo over from the backseat, his arm over my shoulder.

“From Haiti!” Richie explained. “Her voice bounces sweet as her behind when she dances.”

Ted glanced. “You’ve done pretty well, Richie boy.”

I was staring, and I couldn’t keep looking. Every woman I was never going to meet, the whole wide world of them minus a couple skinny darlings drying up in their mascara tubes around here, looked up at me from the Haitian’s eyes in that photo. I wondered how she handled a pickup. I wondered what her hair felt like hanging over

your crotch. I am not a handsome man. It wasn't something we talked about, same as how I never called Ted what Richie and all the rest did: Fat Ted. To ration words, a name such as Fat anything doesn't do much to galvanize intersex lower body exercises. My own, Carm, is not much less loveless. We, unlike Richie, have to invest elbow grease to get a pair started.

"Juicy, right Carm?" Ted said.

"Amen," I said. I don't need to rearrange any lineage trees to know that the pretty bastard is and always has been my brother. We were quiet just the same the rest of the way.

Inside the Stack, Ted was his kingly self, kissing the hand of the hostess and asking for their most picturesque booth in his Donna's section, requesting with lots of pretty phrases their finest cups of cola. We were sat far away from the pisser and the kitchen, and they didn't gyp us on soda with excess ice either. The laminate gleam of the menus swam as I moved my head around the pages reading club sandwiches and the like. The stiff pages wobbled in my hands, and when I dropped the thing, there was Donna over with her little notebook taking orders from a neighbor table.

“Oh my Donna, oh my Donna, oh my Donna Clementine!” Ted began singing. She turned this head of out-of-the-box red curls over, and put her hands on her hips. For someone who can bother a guitar into such expansive goodness, Ted’s voice, or at least the volume, can really make you want to clock him something stupid sometimes.

“You keep it down, you, and wait your goddamn turn,” she said.

He raised his baseball cap up, and swirling it declared, “Your scorn could make a man hit the high notes.” Though she didn’t say anything, Donna smiled at her sneakers just the same, and this got Ted grinning as he flipped around from appetizers to Greek Specialties.

“Her French is all mushed together and honks out of the nose like she was born there,” Richie said suddenly. How he’d know how a real French talks, I didn’t know. He was raised in the town too, and I didn’t know how suddenly he’d become a connoisseur of accents. Now that I thought about it, though, there’d always been a whiff of anal grandness about the white austerity of his family’s yard fence. It was a paint job that announced their borders with care. I thought we were done with the Haitian.

“That’s a nice quality, pronunciation,” I said. Then I went back to studying my wavering allegiances to the turkey club and chicken finger platter, weighing the importance of their respective sides. It was becoming a matter of coleslaw and French fries.

“And it’s not just talk,” Richie said. “I mean, she knows how to sauce a chicken with wine. She knows European manners. Such as, did you know in France they drink coffee out of a bowl?”

“Like dogs,” I said. That shut him up. On the television by the coffee station, an orange ball was getting thumped up and down and the stadium was full of people screaming for their boys to raise the numbers. Someone was going to have to lose. I’d already decided to call out of work tomorrow.

“Alright, what’ll be for you baboons?” Donna had finally come to take our order.

“Donna, Donna, a little a little syrup on your waffle, please?” Ted said. “Your words have got my intestines in the shape of a noose for my neck.”

“And I’ve got plenty of paper for your suicide note,” she said, fanning her order pad.

“Point taken. Well, looks like it’ll be Lumberjack Breakfasts all around, extra sides of sausage each, and pie of the day with a scoop of vanilla and chocolate apiece because this is a bachelor party, you know.”

“A bachelor party?” Donna said.

“A bachelor party?” Richie said.

“Sure, Richie here’s got a beauty queen bride-to-be!” Ted beamed. “And we’re having a little celebration— followed by a party at my place tomorrow. Bachelorettes are invited too, you know.” This was the first I’d heard of a party, but I guess that’s what had been happening at Ted’s since we were in middle school. You could always guess

that Moira would be bumming puffs off us, but how could we complain when she was the only parent around who let us drink and green, even if she kept the change after the liquor run? She didn't even try to take our keys.

"You're getting married, Richie?"

"Rock like a baseball and not a shotgun thing either," Ted said.

Pretty soon Ted had gotten everyone in the diner up out of their booths and cola toasting and shaking hands and giving Richie advice about joint filing status on taxes and keeping a stash of cards and chocolates in case you forgot a birthday and being man enough to tell your wife your whole world would start raining down until it drowned you if she ever left, even if you weren't the wrong one. The kitchen sent out disco fries with a candle stuck in the middle that melted into the gravy. Donna said she would attend the party. This little old couple got their cheeks together and started dancing until his teeth fell out and we all got down on our hands and knees looking under tables. When we left, though Richie wasn't even really getting married, Ted drove five towns over to pick you up, college boy. He gave you the six-degrees-of-separation, Richie's-are-mine friend rap and everything. You whistled at the crunched up behind of the truck but got in anyway. I slept through or forgot or made myself forget most of the stupid things you said on the way back. What I do remember is that Ted insisted on bringing us to the girly bar to pay twenty dollars to have this orange lotion-tan girl sit on your lap in her underwear and talk about all the things she'd do to us if she wasn't a nice girl.

"I guess nice girls just talk about what bad girls do," I said.

“No one’s calling her a lady, but she sure isn’t a man,” Ted said. “Converse polite, man.”

Null on resentment was I, though. I looked around at the little cocktail cups and the jiggling cheeks, this squalid theater, and I knew I had the kind of friend who will throw a proper bachelor party for his boy even if he isn’t really getting married. He bought you filthy promises she never intended to keep because you were a friend of a friend.

At eleven past two, we’d been out of ice for hours. Our boss was passed out on the couch, sheep into sleep with a high school girl legal from staying back two grades. Richie was wasting weed with drunk-clumsy fingers. Donna had come and gone already, but Ted kept searching the kitchen and TV room for her, turning over throw cushions and looking in the refrigerator hopefully because some bastard told him to retrace his steps. What she’d said to me when she left was, “Tell your boy to grow up before I meet someone taller and handsomer, which shouldn’t be all that hard.”

Marlene, too, had had a whiff of the imperative about her. Tie your shoelaces. Sleep it off. Respect yourself. She was always telling me about the positions of planets and compatibility. She thought she had insider information on my static future— her term— because she checked the commas and question marks of this lady who wrote horoscopes for the local rag. Then the lady suddenly moved to Maine to live with her brother, which I think showed a lot about what kind of creep she was, and Marlene

packed up her thesaurus book and got in the station wagon with her. "The map of your future is only a very few miles," she said. "Stay and remain unto your humble soul." I warned her about Scientologists and watched her drive away. Sometimes I think about her, the way she knew every part of me that wasn't there yet, and I wish I'd caught up to those parts and slashed that published psychic's tires. But all I told Ted was Donna wasn't around.

"Also, they tell time in twenty-four hours instead of twelves," Richie said.

"The days aren't any longer in France," you said.

"Are sure," said Ted. "Long as the pit hair on the girls. And they eat cheese for dessert."

"I bet you've never even been to Houston, let alone Paris."

"I tongued my way through a squad of cheerleaders when the University of Texas bus broke down on the way to the University of Georgia," Ted said.

"Richie?" you said.

"Wasn't a pom-pom wasn't shaking." He licked the rolling paper to seal off the fatty and dried it out with a lighter. You opened your mouth like some two-bit opera singer with stage fright. But then there were lights from the driveway coming in through the windows, and we turned off the music for the probability that we were the biggest problem in town at the time for the enforcers of order. You started crouching down behind a coffee table and sucking breath mints.

Ted went outside, stood on this huge rock by the door squinting at the car. It was black, not cop colors, and he told us to wait there while he went to see who these were who we weren't expecting. For strangers, he had a scary way of swaggering like he had a load in his pants and a piece in his pocket. I watched the hulk of him shrink as he got closer, but then he stopped halfway to the driveway, and though he'd said to stay, I wasn't a dog. I had half a mind to pull my pants down and grab a measuring stick; he'd mothered me.

But when I got close, Ted was tossing nasty on the ground in front of him. I smacked his back some and let my voice sort of tremble in the cave of my throat in a comforting sort of way. As I gave it to his expunging organs, I saw through the car window that this scratchy mop was bobbing in and out of view. The stranger had reclined the chair back, as though he was some kind of guy so rich he didn't even need to steer anymore. He didn't. He had Moira doing all the work. When Ted was vertical again, he'd lost height, didn't even wipe his mouth off.

"What's going on?" It was Richie, followed of course, by you. Boss, we'd learn later, had run out the back to get home to his wife. The girl, well, she graduated eventually anyway.

"Who's that?" you asked.

"Hey, man, come on, come away," Richie said. But Ted just stood. It hurt me to see the defeat pulling his shoulders down in the curvature of a geezer. The guy started gripping the steering wheel now, then pounded it a couple times with his fist on the

circumference so the sound didn't come out. "Let's go inside, dude man. Come on. It's okay." But it wasn't okay. He wasn't okay. So I grab up some gravel from the ground, grab as much as I can, and run over to the car and hurl it at the window.

"Hey spit crotch!" I scream. Then another handful and another. "Still like the bleached raisins, the burnt wings, Uncle Shmo?" I don't know where I got the uncle part, except for the slang of giving up, but then I kept it up. "Uncle Shmo! Uncle Shmo! Uncle Shmo!" It felt good to give the jerk a new name.

Pretty soon Richie and you had come up spraying little pebbles too, hurling and cursing and baring teeth. The guy was so scared at first, he didn't even pull his pants up, just pushed her head away and stared. Then he gets nervous about his retreating thing being out for all us crazy motherfuckers to see, but he's butterfingers freaked. Nothing's working, and his world's become just this little tin box with windows and static radio. Moira starts shrieking nonsense, like not even any language, and Ted's up there pitching too. And we were together and busting and out in space against the smallness of spit crotch's sedan. Our lives elongated so we were stupid kids again but men too, and all the stars were twinkling down on us in mirror images of our pebbled offense. Then Moira pulls it together, and we can hear this muffled scream from inside: "Theodore Teddy Bear Roosevelt! I am your mother!"

I guess I noticed Ted go back toward the house, but I didn't think anything of it. Or if I did, I thought he was going for the hose. But what he does is he comes huffing and limping back with that enormous stone from by the door. He bends his knees, takes

a deep breath, and for a moment he is a legend holding the tough stuff of earth above his head before drops it through the windshield.

“Bonsoir, Papa!” he said. And he walked inside to wait for the cops.

And now, it’s the day after and no charges pressed what with the leaves and powders the guy had in his car. We’re ripping butts in the diner parking lot, with the only witnesses silent criminals and pill poppers. Same as always, we went to work earlier. Hauled planks and sorted screws eight hours. But now, a cut under Ted’s eye from a little windshield shard is being explained. He’s telling Donna about some guy who came to pick his mother up for a date last night.

“So I tell him, ‘If I see your fat self on this corner again, know this: I do not play. Maybe I don’t like the cut of your jib or maybe I’m just a crazy motherfucker. You don’t know. Well I’ll tell you something. I am a crazy motherfucker and you don’t want to know what happens when you don’t step off my corner.’” He’s getting to the part where there could be a shoving match or even an honorable brawl when you open your mouth.

“Hey, hey, I was there,” you say.

“And then?” Donna says. She’s impressed. I pull you aside to tell you know what I know.

You've got a girlfriend and college, never ate a microwaved meal in your life. You got to get a whole new world this year for the price of tuition. But this, what didn't happen, is all he's got and more than you'll ever do anyway. So know this. I am a crazy motherfucker and a friend; I'm asking you to be a good man. You have the world. Just cut him a story.

THE IMPERFECT

I meant to buy a gift on discount, but the coupon expired before I wasn't hungover anymore. My girl Jolene read somewhere that a man's relationship with his mother shows which black and white movie star he is like. I think she wanted a Jimmy Stewart, but all I wanted was to remind my mother that I'm good for more than bedbugs, which is what she got for Mother's Day three years ago when I gave her a wooden bench that I found on a curbside.

"Eighteen months," my mother told me. "That's how long they can lay dormant without feeding." Then she put our pillows in the oven. The exterminator told her that one hundred and twenty-five degrees would bake the life out of them, so she set the oven to two-fifty. This time would be different, I thought, because I could afford a present from somewhere besides the curb. I now have a job at a medical clinic down the street from my mother's house, where I am a telephone representative.

"That's why they call it the silent STD," I tell callers time and time again. "Because there are no symptoms." Most of the callers want to know how *it* happened to them, whether it is a disease or burgeoning life. For all but the life-

starters and life-enders, a round of prescription medication can be obtained at the clinic. I advise people to carry prophylactics at all times because I see the things for which there is no cure yet. Sometimes the responsible thing, these kids should know, is not to become a responsible party to human life.

I have quit more jobs than I can enumerate: construction worker, ice cream scooper, rock star— too hot, too cold, just not right. My guitar teacher told me a lot of people go through this phase.

“What phase?” I had to ask.

“The phase where you can’t do anything with a guitar.”

“I quit a job shucking oysters for this!” I said, nudging him in the arm, but the guy just frowned and said I should have asked; he would have told me not to quit my day job. The truth of the matter is, it was too late for me to be a prodigy. I was starting out at the age when Mozart composed *Idomeneo*.

“Forget starting salary,” my mother said later. “And ask are you gainlessly or gainfully employed? From there you can go to anything.” So I put down the

guitar, and now I try to keep sex gainless for helpline callers.

Besides condoms, mostly what we get in the mail at the clinic is apparel from democrats, but I let the others fight over the size medium shirts. My shoulders make a skinny showing, and anyway there is only one registered voter in our household.

It used to be the same political argument at our Independence Day party year after year. Usually her old friends from the music department averted their eyes and tried to concentrate on their own conversations about the allocation of the university endowment, Charles Mingus, atonal theory. Or there was last year when Jolene, for perhaps the only time in her life, failed heroically to capture a room with stories of her father's confederate flag collection rendered in the sticky languor of that southern belle drawl.

"It's just accepting the lesser of two evils," I told my mother, and the guests spoke louder out of courtesy.

"So pick your poison," she said, throwing large veined hands in the air. By the time we got to laissez-faire, I'd reached twice over the card table behind her

to help myself to more punch.

After the party, I shuffled around the house with a trash bag, picking up empty red, white, and blue cups, but in that dark refuse of the day, all I wanted was to wake up again. So I covered myself with a blanket on the couch and sipped from a flask, lying prone, and Jolene went home. My mother wandered in, told me she didn't know what to do with me. "That makes two of us," I said.

* * *

A week ago I tried to buy my mother a present, but all I ended up with was a rash. The store claimed to sell forty-five different scented candles, which altogether is one big reason for antihistamines. California Sunset, Midnight Stroll, Autumn Crush— all these wax fragrances intimating the rhetoric of personal ads drove me to another wing of the mall.

Past novelty stores and lingerie boutiques, after a cheap salon and furniture emporium, I found the familiar gray fluorescence of a chain drugstore. I searched for the easy-to-swallow caplets, and when it was my turn to check out, a boy wearing a nametag asked if I was picking up for my

mother. He said he wanted to thank her for getting him and his girlfriend together.

“Who are you?” I asked, scratching my arms.

“Frank,” he said and pointed to his nametag. “Your mom told me to shit or get off the pot before it was too late. I’ve seen you in here picking up her prescriptions before. It must be great to have a mother like Cheryl.”

“I owe her my life,” I said.

* * *

At a payphone outside the pharmacy, I called Jolene to explain the holdup, and she said with an excuse that stupid my dog had better be shitting homework. When I arrived at the second-run movie theater, she had been waiting in the lobby forty-five minutes, and since going to the pharmacy my rash had cleared. It was true I always seemed to be running late from some appointment or spat with my mother, but Jolene wouldn’t even look at me, and I was beginning to think it wasn’t better late than never.

“He’s telling me he’s allergic to shopping,” she told the girl behind the movie ticket booth.

“Typical,” the girl said, shaking her head and refunding Jolene a twenty.

“Just for the record, it was candles,” I said into the window microphone piece. The girl snapped her bubblegum. Jolene was already walking out the door to the parking lot.

I ran ahead, crouched behind the car, and ducked my head up from behind the trunk, waving the pharmacy receipt like a flag—I surrender—but couldn’t even rack up a smile. So I told her she was prettier than a dirty picture show and cartwheeled. I leapt in an incompetent straddle, chanted that she put the love in “If the glove fits, you must acquit.”

And all of it was sincere. We didn’t used to be like this. At restaurants when she’s gone to the restroom, I have smelled that girl’s dirty napkins. She had me the first time she touched my scalp. “Back again?” she asked when I returned for a trim two, then four, then six days later. I could’ve joined the

military service by the time I managed to see her outside the salon. If I could make it through Basic anyway.

Holding my arm out like the neck of a guitar and riffing against my stomach, I told her she plucked my heartstrings. Jolene sighed. "So what did you end up getting her?" she asked.

"I don't have anything for her yet," I admitted, and she touched my hand.

"It's going to be okay. You'll find something," Jolene said.

Against the horizon, the sky sunk from pink to black. I asked if we could go to her house, where we could lie still, not living up to anything or living mistakes down. She rubbed my head. "As long as this romance will never be candlelit," she said.

* * *

If they were fair at all, they'd say All You Can Fit. Instead, they say All You Can Eat and give small plates. An obfuscation, not a lie, is what my father called the sign. That word was also his justification to my mother when she caught him not on a business trip during her pregnancy.

We were at the buffet so we wouldn't have to agree on what to eat. It had been a problem each year when he saw me for my birthday. From aluminum trays he chose the foods that would keep him celebrating birthdays. I chose the ones that looked like they included chicken. He nodded his head towards a table with a booth resembling a bowling alley bench, and when we sat down, I told him about the doctor's appointment the next day.

"If people would stop desecrating their bodies with saturated fat, they would reduce their medical expenses by half," my father said, slicing cold tomatoes. "You only get one body to do what you will. This is something your mother never understood." I gave him a look. "Don't get me wrong," he said, as though I was the one calling lies obfuscations, and he began speaking of my mother as though she were dead—*she used to dream of touring across Europe. She used to spray champagne on the crowd when she performed. She used to say what promise you had.*

The more he spoke in the imperfect, the more I thought of Ella Fitzgerald, of her song my mother used to sing while she cleaned the house: *You used to do. I'm so lonely. Every road I walk along, I walk along with you.* I thought for years the lyric was *I walk alone with you.*

A girl who looked to be a year or two younger than me, maybe the same age as Jolene, came to refill water in our glasses and slid a lemon slice on each. They were garnishes too thin to squeeze, and I put mine on a napkin. "You two must be brothers," she giggled. My father sucked a lemon sliver graphically, looked up and winked. I looked down at my buffet-slop chicken. Never had I thought this would be the lesser of two evils.

"He's old enough to be my father," I said finally, still holding a speared cube of chicken. "And this is a reality I'll have to live with for the rest of my life." The girl put a nail between two juicy lips, crumpled pad paper in her apron. Through a puddle of sauce on the plate, I spelled my name in cursive with a fork. Before she got pregnant, my mother had thought she'd be the last Hache. It wasn't until my father told her the Super 8 Motel with his secretary wasn't specifically not a business trip that I inherited my mother's last name.

The waitress moved to another table, and my father leaned over his plate of vegetables. "I remember when we used to be friends, kiddo."

"That makes one of us."

"Remember when you used to come over and we played hide and seek or listened to old records?" he asked. "We made forts and flags and pretended we were at Shiloh." And I did remember those days before my mother was tenured, when I asked her why our house was so much smaller than his and she said, "Because I am a bohemian queen!" She could make lemonade out of overqualified poverty.

My father pushed away his plate of greens. "You know, we used to be friends then, and I'm still the same person." I kept my eyes on florets of broccoli gleaming with vinegar and grease.

"I'm not," I said.

The truth is I lose years around the guy. My voice cracks and I forget what

they taught during clinic training, that even with precautions, accidents happen. I want to drive fast and run red lights and think, I can't wait till summer comes; I can't wait to get away. But with my mother I keep the years so she can sense them. I'd rather she know I'm not the kid she remembers, and I'm sure she would too.

When I first moved home after dropping out of grad school, I would find her crying on the couch and think: It must be me. Usually, it was a movie she barely remembered, though. I'd ask "What's this?" and my mother would say *An Affair to Remember* or *Gone With the Wind*. The television would still be turned on, and she'd be sitting with a roll of toilet paper unraveling in her lap. These days, it's easier to check the TV Guide than to speak. "Humphrey Bogart," she said when it got more difficult to remember what wasn't right in front of her. Or "Deborah Kerr." Now even the stars often evade her.

"Right turn on red: legal or illegal?" she asks some days.

"Legal."

"Bingo, just keep on going," she says. Then she'll try to sign me up for the

driving test, and I tell her I already have a license, though I know she won't believe it. In her mind it's all expulsions and detentions. It's the time I was kicked out of school for setting off fireworks in the gymnasium. It's the day I was suspended for crossing out the BE in a FREE TIBET poster. "Only one? You have low expectations," she said that afternoon, but it was the voice she used to congratulate old friends stopping in town to play a show on tour.

Mostly I don't want to lie, but it's easier than fighting. She asks where I've been when I come home late from the bar, and I tell her the library, studying.

* * *

When I returned to the clinic from lunch with my father, Jolene had dropped off a department store coupon and cake. The coupon promised fifteen percent off where terms and conditions didn't apply, and through the frosting she'd stuck twenty-nine candles. Robin, an older woman from human resources, wouldn't accept cake when I offered it.

"You don't know this yet," she said. "But after thirty, it's another year older, another year wider." She arranged resumes into two piles that had little to

do with competence, one pile of prospective candidates and one pile of prospective felons stacked on an aluminum desk. “And I’m thinking there’s something my caboose needs a lot more than cake.”

“Who’s after thirty?” I smiled, and she said her mother warned her about men like me, by which she meant liars.

Back at my desk, I ate cake and brainstormed slogans. “What comes up can come down” had been unsuccessful in the anti-date-rape campaign, and other staffers had noticed a false sense of security from venereal diseases in my suggestion, “Sex before consent, never sicker; consent before sex, you’re in the clear.”

The telephone rang. “Planned Unparenthood, how can I help you?” I said.

“Say yes,” said the caller. And because it was Jolene, I knew the answer would be no. She had been asked to style hair on a Hollywood zombie thriller set and wanted me to move with her. Sun and bleach blondes, avocados and stars, beaches and the undead—how could any reasonable person say no? she asked. I

told her reasonable people have mothers too.

“Why won’t you even consider a home?” she asked.

“I have considered. What you want is a decision.” I could hear hair dryers blowing heat on her end and ringing phones on mine. The second line blinked green to alert me to another caller. A pamphlet on my desk bullet-pointed nausea, headaches, fatigue.

“You are a Clark Gable,” she finally said. “A Rhett Butler.”

“The greasy-haired guy?” I asked.

“He’s the one who says, ‘Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.’ And damn it Luke, you’re almost thirty and living in your mother’s basement.”

“Is he also the one who said, ‘I can’t think about that today. I’ll think about that tomorrow?’ Or was that Scarlett O’Hara?”

“Keep this up, and one day you’re going to wake old and alone. You’re

going to wake up and realize how good you had it, and it's going to be too late."

"That's why I still live with my mother," I said.

"Forget it," Jolene said. "Your mother's made your bed. Now you can go lie in it." Then she hung up.

* * *

After work, I watched a guy at a local bar pound his fist raw. The jukebox was playing "Midnight Rambler" when he'd wanted "I Was a Teenage Werewolf." His friend told him he should just put in more quarters and try again, but all he kept saying was, "I want The Cramps." I tossed back a Maker's Mark and showed him how to get his money back by fiddling the coin slot with a flattened straw. When his song had finished sinking into the swampy shadows of the bar, I gave him another quarter, cuffed him a little, and said, "Play it again, Sam."

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he said. "Touch me again and I'll have you screaming mama."

A few hours later, I made my way home. Really, it might have been more. I opened the door and looked at my mother looking out the front window. Evergreen trees studded the yard. I had skidded on the cement, and where my car had faltered there lay a piece of gate I'd upset punctuating the rubber burn fishtail squiggle inscribed on the driveway. In the foyer I tiptoed as quickly as possible toward the staircase.

"Who are you and what have you done with my son?" my mother screamed. I saw her duplicated, a series of round-shouldered bathrobes in bleary vision. I leaned on the banister to brace myself from listing side to side. Somehow she had made it to the hallway. "Get out," she whispered, and I knew she couldn't even know what she was saying. "Mom," I said. "Mommalove, Mommalove." But she shoved me, screaming, and I grabbed her arms and held them away from me, though I knew I was hurting her. I told myself it wasn't her I was wrestling. It wasn't her, those spotted crepe wrists. "You don't belong here," she screamed. "I want my son back. I want my little boy. I'll kill you if you don't get out of my house." I told her give up because I wouldn't let her get away.

* * *

I was halfway through “Middle East Peace Negotiations at Standstill” and thinking that wasn’t news when the doctor motioned for me to follow him into a side room. The hand gesture I recognized as the one given to HIV-positive testers at the clinic. Maybe it was something I’d have mastered if ever I’d gone to medical school. On a table I left a newspaper for a row of people for whom civil war would be a welcome diversion.

The medications she’d been taking were no match for the disease, the doctor explained when we sat down. The tiny room smelled of insecticide. Dizzied, I thought of her wrinkled fists and the blue imprints of my fingers left on her wrists. He could write new prescriptions, he said. I could install an alarm that would alert me if she wandered out of bed at night. She could have good days, but the bad would increasingly outnumber them. She would continue losing faces, names, days. It was only a matter of time before I would have to put her in a home.

“Assisted living? And what exactly have I been doing for the last two years?” I wanted to know.

“Your best,” he said because he was kind. There were better options than what we’d been doing for the past two years, he explained, but the plans he described were neither better nor options to me. He handed me a card— “If you change your mind”—then shook my hand to let me know it was over.

So you see I could have made the expiration date, but my mind was elsewhere. And after it was elsewhere, I tried to get it nowhere. And after it was nowhere, I was in the john losing my lunch or hiding crushed pills in ice cream. By the time I wasn’t hungover, the discount wasn’t valid anymore.

But I don’t need to lie. She doesn’t remember that I ran over the gate or that I threw up in the toaster oven. She doesn’t remember my juvenile revisions or when I threatened to slice off every finger of a man who cut in line at the pharmacy; it is a new day. In this new day she names no movie titles but there are no tears either. In the living room, I brush her hair in front of the television and she says, “Jimmy Stewart.” Then we listen to jazz, and in the chaos of notes, the screeching highs and down-bottomed lows, feel a sad swell spread to the dimensions and angles of our home. “I meant to,” I begin to say, but she holds a finger to her lips and sings. To Ella Fitzgerald, I spin her by a bruised wrist,

singing along wrongly—*I used to. I used to.* We have today and maybe tomorrow too.

READYMADE

Sometimes still, when my boyfriend is fucking me, I can't help but think of Ollie, and this I know is shameful. There's a moment where I forget decency: there instead is Ollie above me the way no one else ought ever see him. Ollie, Ollie, Ollie rising. Ollie, Ollie, Ollie invading. Ollie, Ollie, Ollie all over. Then suddenly, I'm screaming and pulling him closer, my legs like vises, and the poor thing thinks it's him. He thinks it's beautiful the way I close myself fetal-like in his body when we sleep.

But never could I have become such a hack if I hadn't been a poor typist first. Two letters can change everything. Hyperthyroid, hypothyroid. Excess, dearth. One typo and my old boss, the doctor, was advertising in the classifieds section for a new medical transcriptionist, and I was calling my father for money again.

"You had a job?" he asked.

"Yes, I had. I had one," I said. He sent me money enough not to have to talk for months.

The movies I saw then echoed each other. Hysterical women smoked compulsively when they caught their husbands with another woman and they'd gone to surprise him with a home-baked cake. Or else after the irrevocable

expression of an affair, a woman sat dragging smoke through shaking hands, rain pouring down the sides of a sedan, stricken with the grief and guilt of returning home. Lights lowered, seats reclined, and I hoped finally to see a story I hadn't already seen.

Mostly I didn't leave until people with children or respectable marriages were home sleeping. I became a lady of the night, and I didn't receive compensation. I walked walked streets swallowed by shadowy streetlights and took wrong turns on corners embossed by chain stores.

September, October, December, November, and when the new year was rung I was stuck for resolutions. If old acquaintance be forgot, revelers sang. Confetti littered the sky. I heard festive popping from apartments overhead and thought the champagne opening to be gunshots. I kissed no one at midnight and thought of what my father said when I asked for money, how it made me want to give my life away. "This is the first world, Pansy," he said. "Americans have choices. You can work hard for a good life and you're free," and I thought how if there is always a choice, it's this country with all of its rags to riches fortune or else the rest of the world where inevitability is still respected. I've had savings bonds my entire life, and they've had Fate.

January, February, March, and art books gleamed museum photographs in the tepid gray of my apartment through unemployed days. Then still, life

happened in films illuminating black winter nights.

“Could you spare a dollar?” a bald man named Clarence asked outside the movie theater every evening. He held a sign with the words “The Best Nation is Donation” on one side and “Vietnam Vet, Would Appreciate Kibbles or Bits” on the other.

“I’m real down on my luck these days,” he would say. Then I’d say, “Yeah, tell me about it,” and buy sandwiches for him and his dog Pooch.

“Life’s tough,” he remarked, while we sat on a bench outside the deli giving Pooch bits of bread and ham. “There’s no free lunch out there.”

“What about that sandwich?” I asked.

“Well I have to sit here with you, don’t I?” Clarence would say, and we could laugh.

I kept the sandwich change in jars by my bed. I woke to an alarm clock surrounded by crumpled bills and greened pennies. Silver coins formed pillars beneath my lamp. Then one night when I arranged these savings I saw what could pass as art. I submitted the piles to a community art show and got drunk on kitschy cheap beer at the opening. Girls in moth-eaten dresses multiplied before my eyes. The exhibition organizers complimented themselves on my genius when interviewed in free local weeklies.

Soon I walked through converted factory lofts spattered with color in

crude dedications to gestural abstraction. Soon I was naked and pacing and calling my body avant-garde, while strangers swirled wine in plastic cups. I jangled grapes in these faces and tasted mashed redness behind my teeth. And when beside hung photographs, beneath choreographed light, I scraped them from my palate and hung my tongue out until it dried like beef jerky, there were people who saw love.

One of them was my boyfriend before he was my boyfriend.

“You’re beautiful,” he told me when I shook the fruit in his face.

“I’m not beautiful. I’m just a woman who dresses for men that aren’t her husband,” I told him.

“You’re married?” he asked.

“You’re disappointed,” I said, and that was that.

Tonight he tries to be gentle. He strokes and moves slow until I feel what it is that has brought us to this point desiccate inside me. Slobbering over my mouth, his tongue lolls wet and invertebrate as the inside of a clam. I shove him off and smother myself with a pillow tight to the face. He tries to save me from

suffocation, but this is no place for heroes. When he manages to pull the pillow away, I spit and claw and show my teeth. His reflexes are forced; fists and face meet.

“Look what you made me do,” he says when I cover my socket, but I am a woman, he is a man, and even disgust can’t stop him.

Harder, faster, frontal, finished, and still Ollie is there, marking another hour in the vast plain of my stupidly monochrome life: cuckoo! Cuckoo! Mothers are putting their children to bed or undressing them for warm baths or drying their tears, saying, “It was just a nightmare, darling; you’re okay now,” and regardless Ollie is ticking, he is tocking, he is striking the midnight toll.

The next day Harlan doesn’t stop apologizing for what he has made. He buys me a bag of green peas. I show him his work, the purple and blues, the artistry blooming through my face, and he closes his eyes.

“I didn’t mean to,” he says, and I know he is faultless as Everest itself, that mountain that Sir Edmund Hillary said he climbed simply because it was

there.

We lie on pillows, gray and goose-stuffed in my bed. With one hand he holds the frozen peas to my socket. With the other he turns the television to a program recounting the story of a hiker trapped three days beneath a boulder. When it gets to the scientific explanations, he says that hyperthermia would be a terrible way to go.

“Hypo,” I say. “Hypothermia would be a terrible way to go.”

“When you lose your fingers,” he says, “whatever that is, that would be a terrible way to go.”

The peas go warm and mushy between his hand and my eye. Droplets dribble down my cheek, heating to human degrees. The weight of his leg lies across mine. I am too much by at least three degrees. I could scream.

“I could never,” he says. The survivor describes cutting off her own arm to escape.

“What about mine?” I ask. “If I could be saved, would you save mine?”

“Yours,” he says.

“If I could be saved?”

“I love you,” he says, and it is just a way for him to admit that he couldn’t bear the sight. At least Ollie was honest enough to promise me monstrosities. *I would mince my heart like steak tartar so you could eat in a famine. I would melt*

my fat into a candle so that you would never be afraid. I would cut off my feet, so you could run away. His love was braver than revulsion.

Harlan falls asleep, in love. I turn off the TV and touch my feet. These are the real sneakers, socks. The undersides will catch filth that will fade gray in the wash, but he won't hear me from the bedroom. Toe walk. Close door like a set of silent lips. Breathing won't wake him from sleep. I slip down the hall over linoleum and slide the receiver from the cradle, standing in dirty-bottomed cotton.

The dial tone drones to the beat of desire until I could die. Ollie Ollie Ollie all over. There is no answer, but I try again.

"You know better than this," Ollie says once he knows it is me. His words are like a father's scolding a child and I moisten between the legs. So many times I've imagined him sitting behind his desk, dressed like a big man with a scarlet tie noosed around his neck, drawing me up a balance sheet of cost to yield. One column so exceeds the other, like his body and mine when it was then. He circles the deficit with a red pen.

"For better or worse, I do."

"She's going to be home soon, you know," Ollie says. "You're too smart a girl for this. You practically did my calculus homework for me in the eighth grade for Chrissakes."

“I was doing a lot of things in the eighth grade that I don’t do anymore,” I say. I am thinking of when my cousin babysat me as a child and we ripped newspaper to hear the sound of something that wasn’t word or music and tussled through shredded headlines. I am thinking about when we fondled cheap plastic things in the discount store. I am seeing time round and embryonic until Ollie replaces the telephone roughly in its cradle.

I dial again, but he will not pick up. Silence is the last word. And that is that.

A few days later, a writer for a failing Brooklyn gazette named Cecilia Uno meets me at a café named Les Halles after the French market. The name, I think, is meant to make jet-setting as populist as eating. “Boy, boy, please, boy!” a woman at the table next to us calls out in French. The waiter idles by the bar sipping a Shirley Temple mercilessly.

We are seated at two individual round tables pushed together to make a larger one like an eight. Cecilia approximates a friend, or at least was one of the ones who wrote about my first show. What I envy is how she doesn’t seem

to keep secrets.

Cecilia tells me she is trying to buy love. For three hundred dollars a month, a woman finds her matches. Unions, she calls them. The last date, Cecilia was united with her boss. He brought her nose to his fly and pretended he hadn't the next morning at the office, so she began coming in late and eating jelly donuts at her desk. She left sticky pink fingerprints on galley markups and demanded a raise. She insisted on writing an article about rectified readymades, and I am her source. She is unstoppable as years.

"When you're not, I know," she says. "They always say it happens when you're not looking. But I'm sure as hell not paying three big ones a month not to look."

"You're paying to have someone look *for* you," I say. "At least you got a raise."

"Yes, yes I did. I paid to get a raise." She picks at gray sludge beneath her fingernails then bites an éclair until it releases pale cream through the bottom. She asks about my next piece, and I rake and rearrange steak tartar on my plate.

"I'm not really a Duchamp expert, you know," I tell her.

"You're a disciple," she says, laying a tape recorder on the table. "An artistic daughter." A daughter needs a father. I prefer this French father to my American own, my own whose voice rose to girlish notes as he told me of Ollie's

engagement then bottomed out in reproach: “Why can’t you be happy for him?”

So I tell her the term “found art” is oxymoronic. What Duchamp did was make art; preceding the physical object was the idea. He didn’t find. He selected. He transformed a toilet with his choice and glimpsed beauty in the hard arms of a bottle rack. When finally we finish the questions, it is already midnight. I sip to the finish my Shirley Temple.

Once home, Harlan tries to please me. He grabs me by the throat and throttles me from behind. He pulls my hair like reins so that I am unnatural in the curvature of my neck. He bites white divots into my shoulder. But it’s Ollie, awful Ollie, until it’s over.

The truth is, Ollie was already my past from the very beginning. He deviated from my path the very day I stole pool toys from the dollar store, the day he bought deodorant while I took the bright plastic rings that sink to the bottom of the pool to grab from deep underwater. It wasn’t yet warm enough that day to swim comfortably but the sun was out and we couldn’t wait for the

seasons to change, so we rushed off the diving board screaming like animals and rummaged through the pool for the bright colors. The chlorine stung my eyes underwater, but even when I closed them, I could feel the rings as we snatched them up, pinks and greens and blues sliding the short length of my arm. Pulling up for air, my T-shirt weighed down my small frame.

Later we ran inside, still screaming and tickling, slick with pool water, and he dried my whole body with a towel in his big arms, arms as big as the American Dream, arms manly and ambitious that chose me.

“What about here? And here? And here?” he asked of all the tight openings. I was laughing until he had me pinned to the living room floor.

I saw sinking pool toys by my face. I saw his body eclipse squares of afternoon sun: Ollie Ollie Ollie rising; Ollie Ollie Ollie pushing me to the rug. I squealed like a pig, and he put his mouth close to mine. “Shut up, baby,” he said. “Be quiet, baby. Shut up.”

In the pinkest part of me shot something like the wild, nauseating glee of sledding down ice until I ran warm with blood, me tingeing him, and the rhythm of my head against the floor striking light in my eyes. Then he shivered damp as he held me, whispering, “Oh baby, my baby,” rocking me close, hand wound through my hair, whispering, “I would cut off my feet so you could run away.”

Afterward, Ollie's fear crawled over my skin like bugs. Someone would be home any minute. He kept scrubbing my stain from the floor, and I was crying for some reason, saying, "Just go. Go and leave me alone." It only made him work the soap harder.

But we were never caught, that time or any other. He sneaked me when he could. Once, I was ashamed, so I told him not to touch me. I told him if he touched me I would scream. But I didn't scream. I closed my eyes. He held his palm over my mouth and I bit it until he bled. He had mine, and I had his, and I thought: he is my blood; the stuff of us has coursed each vein of my self all this life.

The last of it was like the beginning; it happened before I knew it. One week we were sneaking, the next he was gone to the smallest state in the union. Later my father told me he'd left to study at Brown; and when years later, I read in a book that all happy families are the same but all unhappy families are different, I remembered Ollie taking checks from my father, resenting my child's play, never really free.

The climbing special is playing again the next morning on the television. I scratch Harlan's hardened drool from a pillowcase, and my nail scrapes the gray cotton paler in an ooze shape where it had adhered.

"Don't go," he says.

"I'm going."

"But why?" he asks, and I button my sweater.

"I want to see the Baldessari retrospective. I want to see that piece of his where he burned all his paintings and baked them into cookies, *The Cremation Project*." It is a lie I lay because I want to be kinder than I am.

"Why would anyone destroy their life's work?" he asks. "And why is this beautiful to you?"

"Freedom," I say. "That's what I need right now, freedom. I'll be back eventually, soon even." Then I pick up my purse, and that is that. He can only be himself, and this is the problem.

At the museum, I think a room must be in transition between exhibitions until I read the wall. The light in the room itself is art, when I thought it was empty. Two women swaddled in cocoon coats sneer with satisfaction.

"How adorable! They think they're so radical!"

"You'd think it was still the seventies."

“Poor souls don’t know what’s post postmodern.”

“Counterculture died with dada.”

“What are the little lambs to do to rebel from perversity?”

“Move to upstate New York.”

In the next hallway rich young mothers yank at their children until they cry and grab at their arm sockets. This isn’t a place for them, but neither is it safe to leave them at home. There are corners that can’t be proofed, head trauma hazards everywhere. You can’t find a decent sitter anywhere. They’re growing up so fast. Look at the pretty pictures. See the nice painting. Get that thumb out of your mouth. Stop crying. Don’t be a baby. Shut up, baby. Be quiet, baby, shut up.

And then I’m on the train to Ollie’s engagement party. It’s the day after a former child prodigy turned public menace dies. On the ride, a drunk man picks his nose beside me. I try not to look, to read instead about how the networks are making a killing documenting various family members vying for the dead millionaire’s assets. The former child star never had a will, and the paper says he never had a childhood either, that his estate was filled with toys.

“You look like a student,” says a man sitting beside me.

“No,” I say. “An artist, I suppose.”

“So you’re a waitress?” he asks.

“Practically. I mean, I spend a lot of time waiting.”

“Love, fortune, or transportation?”

“Doesn’t one imply the others?”

“He’s lucky, whoever he is,” the drunk says. “Oh to be lucky in love and death and taxes and getaways.”

I consider telling the man everything, that Ollie is getting married, that I’m meeting his fiancée, that I am wrong and that I don’t know how to make it right. He wants the unadorned truth, but instead, I tell him about conceptual art and the readymade. I tell him about choice elevating the everyday to art, about form and logic and beauty, and how maybe the bastard truth is they can’t coexist. I tell him that maybe I’m just the sickly aesthetic offspring of Duchamp, and he says that someday he’d like to see my work in a museum, where no one can buy it and where it is for the public eye only. When we reach my train stop, I give my newspaper to him. He holds it up to make a joke. He calls it art.

In the parking lot I see Ollie in his car with a woman. Suddenly, the friction of hair and skin prickles my armpits, and this bra is running over with me. There is heft to my hips, stretching my dress into an hourglass. I watch them sing along with the radio until I want to collapse my body smaller, but he can see me. It's too late.

"Hello," I say and tap on the windshield. The beautiful woman smiles next to him. She seems nice, pretty and nice. She is a tidy thing in a suit. Of course you can never tell. There are sexual diseases they call silent, and he too looks good. He slivers down the driver's side window, as though I'm dangerous. Probably he is right.

"I didn't think you would make it," Ollie says to me. "I didn't think you could make it."

"I wouldn't have," I say. "But that's because you didn't invite me." The woman looks at him. She smiles beside him stiffly and knits her fingers in her lap. For a moment I can't removed my eyes from the civility of her tiny jeweled fist.

"I sent an invitation out," he says.

"Just an?"

"More," he admits.

"So my father tells me," I say. I take the invitation from my pocket.

“He popped the question. She said yes. Now please come join us, and be our guest!”

“That’s what they said, yes.”

“That’s what she said: yes.”

“Honey, aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend?” the woman says. She smiles again, and she is thin enough that I can see the powerful muscle of her jaw.

“I didn’t know you and your father were speaking these days,” he says.

“Just because you don’t speak to me doesn’t mean no one does.” He cradles his forehead in his hand. “Friends and family, Come unite, For dinner, drinks, and Love’s Delight.”

“Honey,” she says again, touching him in the rib. Then she gets out of the car and closes the door. Towards me, she walks. Slowly.

“So mark the date. No don’t be late. With joy come celebrate, two lovers’ fate.”

“Are you done?” Ollie asks.

“Are you?” I ask, but he doesn’t answer.

“Pansy, Elena,” he says finally. “Elena, this is my little cousin Pansy.” Her face blossoms and she takes my hand. I never thought he’d tell the truth. It is the monstrosity we never spoke, and I see what I was too young to see as a

child, that it is silence that isn't word or music.

"Finally," she says.

"The caper's up," I say, and she laughs.

"I have heard so much about you from Ollie's mother," she says. "I just love your work. To think that you've created such amazing work so young!"

"To think."

"I mean at your age, I wasn't even in law school yet."

"Few are."

"And you haven't even graduated college yet?"

"There's time still."

"You're practically a baby!"

"Baby, oh, baby," I say.

"Should we get a drink before everyone arrives?" Ollie asks. He is rolling and unrolling a newspaper in his big hands, still buckled in his car seat. He is rolling and unrolling, and he doesn't even know what he's doing.

"I would love that," she says. She turns to me, eyes like small soft-boiled eggs. "But can you can drink yet? I'm not a cop. I don't care of course. But can you drink yet?" I can but I'm not allowed, I could tell her. I could tell her the times I've done what I'm not allowed. But we're looking at her, Ollie and I, and she is so firm and gentle. I can see the mother she could become.

“No,” I tell her, but I hate the sound. “No,” I tell her. “I’m *barely legal.*”

For the first time in my life, Ollie looks afraid, afraid I'll take it all away, his life with his gray suit and catered reception and lawyer fiancée. I could ruin it all right now, at any second: Ollie Ollie Ollie all over. I want to scream *Pedophile! Pedophile! You sick, perverted fuck*, but now I'm crying. My feet weigh against the gray gravel.

"Jesus, are you okay?" Elena asks, and I know she's the one he always should have chosen; she is not me. He's working for a health insurance company and I can barely look at my boyfriend when he fucks me, but she is right. She could be a mother, and I know I've got to stop this. They could be happy without me. I want it for him. *This is the first world. You can work hard for a good life and you're free.*

I hold my breath for a moment, as I did that afternoon so long ago, when we dove for sinking plastic rings in the pool. He is holding his breath too, and I remember how he opened his eyes bravely against the harsh water to see the colors warp beneath the water's surface, pink and blue and green. *I would cut off my feet so you could run away.*

I am drowning. I am heavy with womanhood. I am hearing the present garbled, as if through water. But I reach for the brightness, open-eyed, and see before me those two as they could be: readymade, gorgeous, everyday art. So I

lie.

“I’m sorry. I just have my period,” I say. “And it’s just,” I choke. “It’s just you are so beautiful together.”

“It’s okay, honey,” Elena says. “Let’s just get you some chocolate. Chocolate fixes everything.”

And for him, to her, I give my life away.

LOCKS FOR LOVE

It's been growing longer than I've known her, and it would be easier if I didn't want it; then I could just do it myself, clip clip. But you can't argue with philanthropy. I'm up against victims. Suddenly I'm the bad guy even though I've never been a man mothers warn daughters about. I was born and raised in the Midwest by a married Methodist couple. I have no touring band. I've never backed out on a pregnant girl. Last week I went to church and put a five in the basket when they passed it around, even though that's twenty minutes on my pay scale. But then there are times like this morning, and it's like I've got to fix my reputation with my own wife or else she'll get rid of it.

So this morning, this night— you tell me what's more important the dark or the letter before the M when there are green numbers flashing two one one—I heard her come in. I was lying on our couch with the television on, which had had a movie running and gone into late night bogus gadget advertisement stuff. I could've surfed around, but really, I just wanted the sound of someone's voice in the room, even if the someone wasn't really there in the room or even speaking at the time but the record of someone saying something somewhere else at some time before on low volume. It makes me feel like a kid again, like

falling asleep to overhearing muffled adult conversations coming from the kitchen.

Anyway, I hear Margarita lock the door behind her, then the jangle of putting her purse down, and when she comes into the living room, I grab her by the belt loop to get her onboard the H.M.S. Couch— that’s a little joke I had to clarify to her the first time— and picture this: I am all kinds of excited because there is a rock exhibition opening at the museum in two days and I am planning to take her. Rocks are not just big dirt, as I’ve explained to Margarita. Rocks are the superheroes of the natural world: strong, silent, immortal. This is maybe the best date I’ll ever come up with besides our first date, where she ate three slices of pepperoni and I started singing this song I made up on the spot about how she made my heart feel like dough getting thrown in the air to make a perfect pizza pie. But she said she’d made the appointment and when I protested, loosened herself of me.

“I suppose you think everyone doesn’t need hair,” she said.

She has changed, won’t take flowers. She says it makes her sad to see them so pretty, petals opened to the brink, when she knows they’ll be nothing but dead by Thursday. She thinks about cholesterol. She wants to cut her hair off and give it to bald people with cancer. I loved her the first second I saw her. I spread that hair over my chest like a blanket the first time we made love. That

night, when everything that has happened was still to come, I swam in that hair of hers straight to the horizon and touched the rising sun of us. She was a stripper then.

“How many hairs are there in the world?” I asked. “And it has to be yours?”

“Mine. Exactly,” she said. “Or I suppose you think yours?” I don’t know when this mine and hers thing started, but it’s definitely after we were married. It’s like she’s been writing up a postnuptial prenuptial the last year. “Did you hear me?” she said. “It’s my hair and I can give it away if I want. I’m the one who has to look at herself in the mirror.”

“You don’t see you, though. *I* see you,” I said, “outside of the mirror.” She has been losing her big butt with grass juice she juices herself. I don’t mind so long as the hair stays. See, it was this hair that first caught my attention when I saw her in the subway station and when she thought I was a creeper who followed her from the club and when I said what club and when she said never mind. I said to her that her hair was like this rock I’d heard about, obsidian, and she asked if I was a geologist. A geologist! Well that just bowled me. I am in love with that girl who thought I was a rock doctor.

“You don’t see me at all. But what is it you think you see?” She zings real well like that, and all the while I’ve got a head full of marshmallow fluff, thinking

things about how when she crosses her arms it's an issue of perspective, so that it's like either she's holding a baby in the pretty slope of her elbows or mad as hell.

"I see a girl healthy as a horse. Black Beauty. Legs longer than the grocery store line on a Sunday. My girl."

"A horse," she said. "Now I'm being compared to a horse." Maybe the Black Beauty was a mistake. I was still a little dopey from getting stoned with Carm and Fat Ted while she was at work. And why was I getting stoned? Because the truth is, lately it's like I'm watching her through a hole in the fence, but we're in the same room. It's not just the hair or the flowers; she has been making my ears spill over with health nut stuff and she wants me to get a better job. She asks me how we're ever going to have a future as if it's not passing through us and disappearing, turning into afterthoughts every minute. But now of course I couldn't explain the Black Beauty without explaining the pot and I couldn't explain the pot without her going on again about do I want to be like the next door failures or grow up. So I shut it.

"Look, I'm sorry for yelling at you. Let's forget this horse stuff. I have a lot on my mind."

"Like broken arms and infected cuts and ailments?"

"Well, I'd rather not think of it as an ailment—"

“But they *are*! Come on now, you’re a nurse! You knew you were getting in the business of sick when you started. Still, I can see how you’d want to take the scabs out on me.”

“I’m not taking the scabs out on you.”

“So don’t! I haven’t seen you all day. I’m tired. I just woke up from a nap.”

“Tired? Have you done anything at all today? Have you left the apartment? I’m trying to have a serious conversation and you’re tired from *napping*?”

Whenever we fight, the dog, Skipper, he throws a tantrum like a little kid. He bares his teeth and runs around the room, over the furniture, climbing up the walls practically, circling, this circling merry-go-round hound. Margarita hates this, gets angry to the point she regresses into Spanish. The meanest thing she ever said to me in a fight was that she wished she’d never married me for a green card. “Why don’t you go drink some arugula juice,” I said. That was the best thing I could come up with. She apologized later, but she didn’t take it back.

So when I didn’t answer about what it is I’d been doing, it’s that whole ordeal again. Skipper was giving us the three-sixty, Margarita started yelling words I didn’t understand, and I wanted to lie down and close my eyes again, but I had the feeling this might be another Black Beauty. Once she told me that what

she liked about me was that I was so next door, she couldn't picture my face with a secret on it, just me standing next to a lawn mower with a lemonade. That wasn't when all I wanted to do was anything except keep fighting, though, so I thought I'd better arrange a secret on my face now.

"Did you even walk him at all today?" she asked. "Stop it Skip! Stop it!"

"Don't yell at poor Skippity-Do-Da," I said. "He's just demonstrating for world peace." Then I started singing that song, the old hippie one about all we are asking is to give peace a chance, and made bunny fingers and started swaying side to side.

"You're high," she said. "I'm going to my sister's for the night."

"But you don't eat the cuchifritos anymore," I said. Because that's the kind of good food her sister cooks when we go over for supper and because frankly, I blame her sister quite a bit for this hair cutting business since it's her sister who is the bald person with cancer that Margarita wants to hack it for. I try to keep it light and amicable. "Keep your hair on your head. Stay here. Level with me. Think about it from my perspective: you're not facing the facts. The facts are that not only is your sister sick; now you're going to make her feel like a transvestite with a wig." I thought it was a good one.

“You’re an ass,” she said. Then she put the parka back on and went around plucking things up and putting them in her purse, enunciating her breathing like maybe she needed an asthma inhaler or something.

“Laugh,” I said. “That was a joke.”

“You’re a fucking joke,” she said. “I need you to be a man, not a joke. I’ll be home after work tomorrow. Have done something by then.” And then she walked out the door.

I try to make it up to Skipper with a kibble feast drenched in melted peanut butter to let him know that even if he misses a meal, it will all work out in the end. Then I lay him on his back and sing to him— “This land is your land, this land is my land”— until his tongue relaxes out the side of his mouth and he falls asleep. I look at his fat little belly, and I know that loving is the easiest thing I’ll ever do. The confusing thing is, I always thought Margarita hated manly stuff, but I guess it’s kind of a sliding scale thing, like those medical clinics for poor people. In her country guys are all about machismo, as they call it, so I guess her

man sensory system is skewed a little on the high end. Then again, she does have it out for The Man as pertains to my job.

My boss, Fat Ted, claims that he can eat even more pussy than half-pound double bacon cheeseburgers, which is quite the feat for a consumption champion such as himself. For weeks before the last competition we kept Ted on a regimen of six daily meat workouts, which he referred to as Eat Outs. "My mouth hasn't been so full since the University of Texas cheerleaders' bus broke down on the way to University of Georgia," he said, rolling up his sleeves. Then a couple weeks back, he ate nine cheeseburgers over a course of five minutes. That was the fifteenth time that Fat Ted won the Big Belly Burger Contest and the second time I saw Margarita cry. See, after the competition, we went home to smoke a joint after an afternoon of victory drinking, and when we got through the door, Fat Ted goes, "A pleasure to see you Senorita Stripperita!"

"She doesn't do that anymore," I said.

"Aunt Flo is coming to town!" Ted roared. "Someone, quick, call the bellhop! The PMS Express is rolling into the station!"

"Choo-choo!" Carm cried, pumping his elbow. I laughed a little, couldn't help it, chugged down another sip.

"These are your friends?" Margarita said.

“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” I said. Ted had been calling me a pretty boy, an anal bead, and a hairy nipple for as long as I’d known him.

“Simpatico!” Carm and Ted said then, crabbing their fingers with mini imaginary castanets. Margarita had this face on her like a murderer.

“Can’t you have fun? We’re celebrating,” I said because why go *there*? Looking on the bright side never hurt anybody.

Except maybe I was wrong, because this was when she turned into a big puddle, covering her swampy eyes, whispering, “I love you and I wish I’d never met you, you son of a bitch.” I had to go German Shepherd on Carm and Ted, ranging them out the door. Then I got into the bed with Margarita and started touching her hair, braiding it, telling her, “This is 1980, Sweet Valley High, and we’re having a sleepover. I’m your next door neighbor, and when I was little I begged my mom for a doll so we could play together. I come over for slumber parties even though our parents think we’re too old and too young both for boy-girl sleepovers. I climb up the fire escape with a Barbie in my teeth and a brush in my pants pocket, and I’m going to braid you to sleep every night until we’re grown up enough to run away together and get married.”

“We already are married, idiot,” she said. But it got her to stop crying. We took out the chess set, and she beat me, like she always does, probably without even trying. When she first came to the country as a kid she didn’t know English,

but she knew chess, so she mostly just played chess with her dad. Then he died. Her mother didn't have papers, so they just stayed illegal until a while after she met me.

"I hate knights," I told her. "They're the only bastards on the whole board that move in two directions."

"You've just got to think steps ahead. Don't worry. You'll get better. Just look for all the possibilities."

"Ah, the tarot will tell! Only the tarot shall tell!" I moved my hands in the fashion of shuffling cards and pretended to go woozy with the future. "Ah yes, the Two of Swords! Do you see this good fortune?"

"Check mate," she said.

But this was not skin off my nose. I just like doing something with her, even if the premise is we're enemies. When she concentrates, she gets a uni-brow, and her hair hangs over the chessboard like theater curtains. I imagine her face as this stage for drama, lights and props and lines you can't take your eyes off, a world of pretend where ghosts puff out of graves to right the wrongs of their lives and warring houses learn their lessons from dead kids. I would have liked to have told her as much, but she thinks metaphors are for assholes not romance.

I knew because of a few months before when me and Carm and Ted got together our old band, the one we'd moved to New York to make famous then broke up once it didn't, and at the show I got so drunk I didn't wake up for two days. I missed Margarita's nursing school graduation and didn't feed Skipper, of course, and when she got home from the ceremony Skipper was so excited to eat, he bit the food right off her hand. By the time she returned from the emergency room, I was getting ready to go to work at the guitar store and she launches into this whole thing about how she's been waiting years to stop jiggling her ta-tas, which she was only even doing to pay for nursing school because *she* is responsible, and now she has to delay getting a job because her hand is wrecked. My head felt like a marching band timpani, and even though there was no need to worry about getting fired, Ted being my longtime buddy and whatnot, I didn't want to disappoint my friend. Besides, I was paid hourly. I couldn't find my keys. I remembered about brushing my vomit-breath teeth.

"If we discuss this now, I'll be late, and two wrongs don't make a right," I told her. I cracked a beer for the sake of my head.

"And now you're drinking before work? If you can quite call it that." She hadn't even woke me up to alert me there was an emergency. "You're a child, a bearded child."

“You told me before that that’s why you like me,” I said. “And as a medical professional, I’d think you’d have heard of this centuries-old holistic practice. Hair of the dog?”

“I hope that’s not your idea of an excuse.”

“It’s a metaphor,” I said.

“The closest you’ve ever come to apologizing is saying ‘excuse me’ when you sneezed,” she said. “And metaphors are for assholes.” She was crying then too.

So as anyone can see, we’ve been through the thick of it and come out on the thin side many times before, and I plan to do it again. But when your woman leaves you, even if it’s for her sister, it winds a guy up, and a deer in the headlights never figured out a good solution. That means the first step is create the proper mental space. That means I go next door to Fat Ted’s to see if he’s got anything to smoke.

Before we moved to the city, if there was nothing to do, Ted liked drunk driving in his old yellow truck fast through the back roads. He loved that truck and he loved to be above the law. He drank beer like he ate burgers, and he

always wanted more. “Come on, you pussies!” he called out, jangling his keys by our faces like catnip. “We’re not getting any younger!” If we didn’t want to go he’d come back, place his hands on his hips, and wiggle them as he crowed, “You girls have a good manicure?” Now he doesn’t have a car, so usually he’ll just get loud and drunk and fall asleep on the couch and that’s what he’s been doing when I ring the doorbell. Ted, being the old pal that he is, happily obliges.

“I was sleeping, you menstrual napkin,” he says. “So we’d better be getting high.” That’s what we do, sitting on his couch, and Ted offers the best advice he can give. “You’ve got a hot tamale on your hands, and she’s worth every hassle. Write Margarita a valentine, something real nice.”

“A valentine is just a card that happens in February,” I tell him.

“Flowers?”

“She doesn’t like flowers anymore.”

“Doesn’t like *flowers*?”

“Not a bit.”

“You really don’t meet a Margarita every day,” he says, shaking his head in admiration. “Unless you’re in Mexico.”

“She’s not Mexican,” I say.

“Whatever.”

We sit for a while brainstorming quietly, and this commercial of black couples in candlelit rooms comes on the television. There are white curtains blowing in the background and song titles falling down the screen: "I Will Always Love You," "Try a Little Tenderness," "Can't Get Next to You." And that's when I know what it is I have to do.

See, I have a friend whose mixtapes could win him political offices if he wanted, not Podunk titles either. True, the only people still on cassettes are senior citizens now. People don't value touching music a bit these days, downloading or uploading, or whatever it is they do. But Margarita needs to forget being an adult, remember being a kid, shake her shrinking butt, look at me and see the guy she wanted to be with, her rock. Take her mind off, and she won't think I'm such a bad guy. Take her mind off, I figure, with music. I guess I've got eighty minutes to do that. One hundred sixty if you consider sides A and B.

"I've got it," I say.

"Of course you do," Ted says. "Now go get that sweet piece of booty back in bed."

Side A I decide to start just like this fight, with misunderstanding, and I mean that literally, as in the song “Misunderstanding” by Genesis. It’s hard to love a band with so much musical chairs happening, first Anthony Phillips leaving, then Phil Collins replacing Peter Gabriel on vocals, then Steve Hackett quitting, then Phil Collins taking off to be Phil Collins, then Ray Wilson being added. You think you know a band, get the T-shirt and everything, then bang! So and so decides to call it a night forever. But “Misunderstanding” is pop canon 101, classic, time-tested. Besides, the song is a musical generosity; Phil Collins wrote it while he was making his first solo album but gave it to the guys anyway. That’s what I call loyalty. That’s a way to begin.

Next I want to show her what should happen after a fight, so I go with “Cherry Pie,” the Warrant song that goes, “Swingin’ so hard we forgot to lock the door.” Maybe that’s a little unorthodox since it’s about sex getting walked in on, but I figure the main point is monkey business. Jani Lane said he regretted writing the song because it got so popular and it wasn’t even Warrant’s best, but that’s the reality of success: it doesn’t always have to do with quality, same as the art of the mixtapes. Like “I Fall to Pieces” is a beautiful song that will break a stony heart into a handful of sand, but if you’re trying to win over your wife again, maybe that’s not exactly the sentiment you want to express. There are a lot of things to avoid: breakup songs, songs about affairs, songs like “I Will

Survive,” which is all about Gloria Gaynor being better off independent and not being afraid to die alone a crazy cat lady. Also, I try to avoid the songs with the word “baby” because of earlier this year when old Skipper jumped up on Margarita’s sister Aureliana and she dropped the baby and the little baldy’s forehead needed stitches. Aureliana said she’d never come back to visit again unless I got rid of the loco fur-face.

“Between my sister and the dog, I choose my sister,” Margarita said when she got back from the hospital.

“I’ve had Skipper longer than Aureliana’s been a mother,” I said. I counted months in my head. “By six years!” I added, because Margarita was looking at me like I’d done my math wrong.

Now Margarita and I have to go all the way to Washington Heights for Easter and such, but I don’t complain. I love her like crazy, even if she does insist on a haircut that may leave her looking like Dorothy Hamill. I’d probably even find a way to love her more if she didn’t. But still, I think I should avoid the songs with “baby” in them.

It’s exhausting to realize that so many songs you love are ruined by one little word wrong with them. Sometimes you don’t even realize until you’re halfway through or more. There are decades of ruined love ballads on the floor. I tell myself I’ll just lie down a minute.

When Margarita gets home, I'm surprised, and not just because the way I wake up is her slamming the door. She has come back a different woman.

"What did I say before I left?" she screams. There are records all over the floor, half of them out of the cases. Skipper has chewed up my sweater, and there's dog doo by the door. "What did I say?" As she says it again, Skipper gets zipping around the room and knocks over a cola can. The brown fizz bubbles up white over the carpet. Margarita goes for a towel, and I knock the sleep out of my eye even though I know it's real; it's done.

"You said two days. It's only been one." I don't need to count this time. I can't believe it. Here she is, hair up to her ears, yelling at me, like I'm the one breaking promises. "One! You said one!" I make scissors fingers across my neck where there might have been hair.

"We are not talking about my hair right now," she says. "We're talking about the fact that I gave you all last night, all today, and I come home to this again. Sit, Skip. I said, 'Sit.'"

"Slow your roll, Skippy peanut butter boy," I say.

“Effective,” she says. “Skipper, I swear to God, if you don’t sit.” She doesn’t finish but Skipper sits.

“You cut your hair. You cut your hair to give it to a bald person with cancer.”

“That person is my sister.”

“You didn’t even speak for three years while you were stripping. She judged you. *I* was the one who loved you when you were a stripper.”

“We’re past that now. She was worried about my safety.”

“And to add insult to injury, I made you a mixtape today.”

“A *mixtape*? Is that what you’ve been doing the whole time I’ve been at work?”

“Yes, a mixtape. And it’s a damn fine musical curatorial job, if I do say so.” I go to the stereo. I’ve had it since 1992. I respect tradition. The tape needs to be rewound. “Give me a minute while I get it to the beginning.”

“Don’t bother. I’m not interested.”

“I’ve worked on this all day.”

“Well I’m sorry if you’ve wasted your time.”

“We’re listening. There! I’ve got it. Play.” I press the button.

“Stop it, Rob. I told you to do something, *anything* as long as it was something, and I come home to a house full of dog shit.”

“And a mixtape!”

“Shut up about the mixtape.”

“It’s not full of dog shit,” I say. “And why is it always about all the things I’m supposedly not doing?”

“I’m pregnant, dumbfuck. That’s why I give a shit about all the things you aren’t doing.”

“I’m the one who got you pregnant,” I say. “So you can’t hold that against me.”

“That’s exactly why I can hold it against you.” Genesis is singing it.

“We’re going to have a baby?” I had been so deep in the struggle, I didn’t see it. It’s hitting me suddenly, the excitement, and I want to hug her even though she still looks like she’d punch my eyeballs out onto the dirty dog shit floor if I try. We’re having a baby. “We’re having a baby!” I say. Immediately, my mind is all tricycles and T-ball. I start thinking about those little baby socks, little baby sacks with the poop emergency exits in the butt, little hats with the tassles on them. I’m going to be the kind of dad that teaches his kid how to play the harmonica. We’re going to ride bikes. He’s going to be my best little bud. I’ll stop smoking.

“We’re not having a baby,” she says. “I kept hoping you’d change, but I’ve known for a long time that you wouldn’t. I’ve known for a long time that if I ever

found out I was pregnant, I would have to have an abortion.” I can tell that I’m staring, but I can’t stop. It’s like I’ve got rocks hanging from my lower lip. There’s drool dripping from the corner of my mouth. I can’t even wipe it. “You’re not ready.”

“Ready.”

“Do you understand?” I don’t. I’m seeing her, but I think I can’t possibly be hearing her. My ears are thumping. There’s something wrong. I’m going deaf. I’m dying. There is a parched log in my mouth masquerading as a tongue. “Hey? Are you listening? I’m asking if you understand. I love you, but I can’t do it alone. I want to have a child, but I don’t think you’ll ever be ready. I want to love taking care of you as much as I love you. I want you thinking the stupidest things are important to be a phase. I want you to want to change without me nagging you, and I want to believe that if you ever do that I will believe you won’t just go back to being like this. I don’t know if we’re going to make it.”

“Baby, please,” I say. Begging is the only way I can say now. “Baby, baby, please. We’re going to have a baby. Say it baby, please. We’re going to have a baby. Baby, be my baby.”

She pulls me down onto the couch, into her lap, and I reach up to touch the shortened obsidian strands of her hair. We’re crying together. I bite down on her belt loop to keep myself from screaming. Her arms are crossed underneath

my head, and it's not because she's mad as hell. I should have gotten a better job. I should have brought her to see the rocks at the museum sooner. This is going to be the last time.

The mixtape keeps playing, but instead of hearing the songs I chose, I think of all the words I avoided, believing I'd save us. "Baby," I say. "Please, please, baby."

DINNER AT THE OKAY CORRAL

It had been agreed upon so easily—the winter wedding, the small reception—but now she had nearly conceded her food. When she was a waitress and he was a painter, they would eat meals of snacks: cheese melted onto bread so that the holes filled in, deli meat coiled around carrots, grapes halved to remove seeds. They ate on a blanketed floor like confused picnickers, and he went to his easel when she went to her books. Actually he'd never been a painter at all but had been studying for a role. The one before he had had to cough up blood and die sputtering. It was life or death. A Hollywood big gun was producing the thing, and for weeks he practiced to be Victim #2, bulging his eyes beyond their sockets, flexing neck muscles, convulsing to the floor knees first, which was the safer way to fall. That role was how they had afforded for a time to live in a New York neighborhood of people with resumes while she commuted the wrong way to Connecticut. But then she'd finished the degree and he'd taken a job selling benefits. They returned from a month in Hawaii to dinners in the dark of the New England winter. Now it was her night, and the woman looked at a takeout menu with items named after dead presidents.

"I wanted the fingers," she told the hostess. "Just the fingers."

"The John Adams has fingers," the girl said.

"But I don't want sauce on the fingers."

"Then you should have just ordered the other Adams, Sam," the girl said. "Now you're going to have to wait. Once the sauce is on, you can't just take it off," she said.

The woman went outside and in a rear view mirror caught herself intent and furrowed. Hers was a face that didn't reflect nature. It didn't dwindle or show years. Sometimes she was still carded for liquor. My wife the minor, her husband laughed at restaurants when they bought a carafe of wine. My husband the pedophile, she said if she was tired. She *was* tired but took the scraper to the windshield. The dealer had said that a heated shield would save her this labor, but the truth was that the snow melted and then froze harder, and there she was in metronomic labor through the cold every day starting in October.

"Grassy ass, lady," the hostess said. She'd come so quick, but she looked bored, as though she'd always been there waiting. The woman felt inside her parka for bills while the girl sighed white clouds. She wondered when pragmatism had become so impracticable. When she had been a waitress, she called customers honey, called them baby, called them darling clementines. She called them sweetie, pumpkin, sugar-frosted angel heart of mine. Anything—sweet cheeks little hot stuff— she'd call them. Anything except what they were.

At first when she had left her job at the Connecticut restaurant for the New York club, she'd been afraid that the gentlemen, as they were called, would be unbearably handsy and rude. Once she had been there a few weeks, however, she was pleased to find them no handsier or ruder than previous patrons, and she didn't need to remember what was always changing, best translated in French to *dujour*. Two nights in, she tried to change her name. The manager said there was no need since she never took her top

off, but she began telling customers her name was Casablanca anyway. If they weren't obviously obnoxious, she let them call her Blanca for short. She began making more money once she understood it was easier to lie. She could teach this girl something.

"Thanks for braving the cold," she said now.

"A dollar?" the girl said.

"Some of us get ours in the end," she said and got into the car.

One night, she remembered, a man waited for her in the deli next door to the club. When he grabbed her, she stabbed him in the eye with a key and ran away, leaving him writhing and holding the arms of her pea coat. The next night she wore a big men's jacket from the Salvation Army into the club, and when a young drunk chef told her he wanted to marry her and bring her to diners Sunday mornings for the rest of their lives, she knew he meant he wanted to save her. And look at her now: a lawyer with no one trying to be her hero at all.

They were afraid of her, plaintiffs and other lawyers both, but she could say with certainty that she wouldn't be afraid of herself if she weren't. She didn't accept the nonproductive, even if they were emotions. She believed in exacting revenge on the justice system for its own loopholes. She wished she could vote for Bill Clinton again. She was a person only her mother thought would make a wonderful mother.

When she came to their driveway, the woman observed evidence of her husband's homecoming in the trampled snow. Often, she arrived home around nine or ten from the office, while his workday ended at five. It would be a logical error to assume he spent this four to five hour window at home, so she didn't anymore. The frightening reality was that there were two nights a week he taught catholic education.

But God was her fault, she knew; she wasn't one for pop psychology. Back when the trend was letting your parents take the fall for your failures, she was running marathons. How, friends asked, did she? It was about staying in the room, she said a famous writer had said. Now, she told herself this was what marriage was: staying in the room. Besides, it had been her own decision, the glowing stained glass scenes of the long walk to sacrifice coloring the faces of the Czarinskys on her father's side and the Sheas on her mother's side as she walked down the aisle. No, she had done things she knew better than, but marriage hadn't been one of them. Wanting tradition, she had earned it— he had become a believer.

"Chicken fingers again?" he asked when she'd gotten inside the house. "I said it once, and I'll say it again: they's ain't no vitamins in that there grub," he drawled. Sometimes still he played at being an actor by making a caricature of himself. At first when he began doing this, the woman had thought he wanted her to join in— hell's bells, landsakes lordy me—but now, years and miles later, she knew better. He wanted her to be deceived.

She hung a withered lettuce garnish into her mouth. "Look! Salad!"

"If you know what's good for you," he said, cornering her and directing a kiss on his open mouth. "You'll surrender. And cut to Scene Two, the Second Snake Saloon."

She passed him an aluminum container creased with weight through a sagging center and he opened a beer. The breadcrumbs on her chicken had sogged over the ride home. She opened a greasy little container frilled at the lid with crusted mayonnaise. It would be easier living with a failed mime than a failed actor. "When you gonna grow up and eat real food, little lady?" he said. "This stuff will kill you."

"But I'll enjoy it first," she said. "I guess I'll be like the second nun in that joke, you know? Two nuns get jumped in an alley. When the men start raping them, the first one looks to the sky and says, 'Forgive them Father for they know not what they do.' The second nun says, 'This one does.'"

"Not tonight, okay? Please."

"You realize you're an atheist in every religion except your own."

"You know you protect criminals, right?" He took the mayonnaise knife from her.

"They're not criminals," she said. "Beyond a reasonable doubt, at least. This is why I can't discuss my work with you."

"I thought you said you couldn't discuss your work with me because of client confidentiality laws."

"Well yes, there's that too."

He grabbed her by the shoulders. "Ain't no way the law ever gone to catch ahold of me, little lady," he said. "Don't got me no one to tell." She felt some chicken rise up in her throat and pulled away, gagging.

"I am a child of the Enlightenment," she told her husband. "Scientific experiments are not made to prove what is. They are made to prove what is not. I don't prove innocence. I prove that there is reasonable doubt. If there is."

"But you can't prove that God *doesn't* exist any more than you can prove God does," he said. "So why don't you believe?"

"You," she said.

When she'd met him, he had been studying for the part of a depressed divorcee gone on a stripper-killing spree. His chin had grown sharp with stubble, and he moved his eyeballs wildly side to side. She bent over him to lay a cocktail napkin on the table before him.

"I want to smell your scalp outside of here," he'd said.

"Better keep it inside, clementine."

He grabbed the ends of her hair in his palm, pulled them to his nose. "Smells like," he huffed, shuddering. "Smells like woman," he hissed, and she took her hair back— Easy there, tiger, or something to the effect— and when he let go, she could see the silhouette of her body reflected in the sheen of his eyes.

“In real life, I’m an actor,” he said. “I’m just studying.” He left his number on a napkin. He wanted to know everything about the secret part of her life. They met at a diner two days later.

“Don’t you want to take care of me?” she said. “That’s what we’re supposed to say when a man doesn’t tip.”

“What do you say if it’s not enough?”

“Don’t make me punish you, bad boy.” He wrote this down in a small notepad alongside notes on divorcees. After the check came, she kissed him, and she interpreted the surprised herky jerky mechanisms of his mouth as innocence.

He told her his uncle paid for Brown. She told him, her customers paid for Yale. They met in Connecticut during her vacations, and he whispered to her in bed, “My little girl, my sweet girl.” She moved into his apartment, and they were happy when he was memorizing lines and she was memorizing wits. His failure in the theater only made her love him more; that he couldn’t convince anyone that he was a leading man suggested his honesty. When he’d finally gone corporate, he asked her to marry him. She told him the contingency was baptism. She’d known not what she was doing.

“I think I’d better look over some files in the office,” she said now. “You don’t mind if I eat in there?” Her mother would have thought it a disgrace, not eating together, especially when it was bad enough they didn’t even have a baby yet. But she didn’t want to see her husband hold a baby, let alone her own. It wasn’t fear, what she felt. It was civic duty.

"I didn't done and got married to eat dinner alone, but what can you expect when you marry a Yankee bitch," he said, smashing peas into his potatoes until they turned green.

"I stayed, didn't I?" she said. "Don't you recognize that I stayed?"

"It's just a character." He brushed past her to look for Tabasco sauce. "Aren't no darned tootin' reason to a-worry your little heart out. Take a joke, why don't you." He had no character, of course. He hadn't taken a role in years. The only community theater around there was the St. Elizabeth nativity play, and he still hadn't gotten over losing out on Joseph to Francis the town mechanic. He threw his voice into octaves and dialects that weren't his own at home, and that was the extent of it. Sometimes, she convinced herself that this acting in roles for which he'd never been cast was proof of his insanity, and this helped her sleep easier.

After dinner, she crushed the food containers into a trash barrel. He touched buttons on the remote, and sound fragments made their way into the kitchen. Pull the trigger. I'm sorry there's nothing we can do, Ma'am. Live with her, live without her. Chop, dice, and slice in your very own home.

The trash barrel was still half empty but she bundled and carried it outside anyway. From the curb, she saw no signs of human life. This was a place where trees trundled over houses, big and old and amoral, blacker at night than the sky. You looked and saw dark in one direction and the next and the next. Lately, there were times she couldn't figure out how to get home. She found herself telephoning her husband to find

her and him not knowing where she was, her not wanting to go where he was, driving in ellipses until somehow the cycle broke and she was in their driveway, weeping. She had planned and planned and somehow hadn't seen this life coming.

"You were a bland, wonderful lie, but not a white one," she said when she returned to the living room. "Give up church." He had settled on a show about forensics, one where the crimes could be read through the temperature of a cooling corpse or the blood covering a lattice fence. Killers were caught by the facts of their violence. Science prevailed. Loved ones were restored to their faith in order. They cried for the closure. "Give up church or I'll kill you."

Only a few months before, she'd been defending a millionaire accused of defrauding investors. According to the press, it was a scandal. This made it better to her, although the defendant himself smelled like vinegar when he overheated, which was not infrequent. One afternoon, sweatily, the millionaire Jackson Anderson began crying as he described withholding information about mortgage-backed securities.

"What am I going to do? We have children," he hiccupped miserably. "And twelve horses."

"Now, now," she said. "We're going to save Black Beauty, Mr. Anderson. No one is going to have to go to public school. Now calm down and eat a chocolate. Chocolate

fixes everything.” Then she unwrapped a chocolate from a wrinkly tin foil and pressed the brown dollop into his fat, pink hand. He squeezed her hand back desperately until she cleared her throat and excused herself to the bathroom to wash the melted chocolate off her hands. “The law protects those it can’t catch,” she told Anderson before he left.

Later she and the two other partners working on the case, Lamont and Grubler, volleyed strategy. She was at her best staying late at the office, tapping her foot wildly and nibbling chocolate as the yellow notepads filled. Lamont, however, was pulling his hair out and reciting definitions.

“But what is a ‘material fact?’” she said. “To defraud is to make a misrepresentation of an existing material fact, knowing it to be false or making it recklessly without regard to whether it is true or false, intending for someone to rely on the misrepresentation and under circumstances in which such person does rely on it to his or her damage. Yes, Anderson *misrepresented*, but did he misrepresent a *material fact*?”

“We never should have taken this case,” Lamont said. They broke early, and she drove back to Connecticut considering the kindest way to drive Lamont quietly hysterical until he resigned from the defense team.

When she arrived outside the house, her husband wasn't home yet. She crept around the house with the odd sense that she was somewhere she shouldn't be; she'd never come home before work earlier than he. This was fun, intruding on your own life; she moved between their rooms, pretending to be a thief. She considered the question of the material fact. Something material was unforgivable. Something immaterial was not. And within the justice system, forgiveness meant freedom. And wasn't this, stalking through her home like a criminal but not, immaterial guilt? Wasn't this freedom? She placed two of her husband's cufflinks in her pants pocket, his class ring in her shoe. From the closet shelf, she took a letter she'd once written him: "I love you even when you aren't yourself. Congratulations on the performance tonight." She stopped in the sock drawer. Photographs.

From her hands, they fell onto the bundles of white cotton socks, and her fists bunched up around her husband's cufflinks as a cold swell gathered space in her chest. She took her hands from her pockets and placed them back in the drawer. Her fingers felt the worn edges, the right angles. The softness of the photograph corners implied habitual use.

For a moment, she found herself doing her job: she was sure he hadn't taken them, only *had* them. Them: the photographs, a packet of twenty-three. Somebody had made them, the materials facts; her husband had only seen. A witness! Yes, an innocent bystander! But then she lost herself to the memory of Bill Clinton defending his presidency: "I did not have sexual relations with that woman." They were only little girls.

"Ollie," she said. "Did you hear me? I said, 'Give it up.'"

"I can't," he said. A news story about wild mustangs herded by helicopters sent a glow of gray grass and yellow dirt kicked up by frantic hooves onto her husband's face. Even so she could see some grease clinging to his upper lip, and for a moment, she thought to kiss it. It was one of the things she'd first loved, the way he made a mess of himself and didn't even know it. He was so big and boyish at once, a man trying to play pretend professionally who'd needed her to tell him about the perverted corners of the world. This image of him still welled up in her sometimes, but always they were quickly supplanted with the others. "We've been through this before," he said. He turned the television off. "The only thing left to do is for me to wait to see if you to forgive me. It's too late for perfection. Everything is done."

“Then what are we doing if it’s done?”

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.’ Hebrews 11:1.”

“Look, you’re doing it again. Talking in poetry— like a crazy person. That’s what crazy people do: talk in poetry. You’re sick, Ollie. Please. You need help.”

“That’s why I’m going to church. Because it helps.”

“And spending time with children? In a basement?”

He wiped his hands down his face, as though there was something sticky on it.

“Can’t you believe that some people can be saved?”

“You can’t.” It was the only way she could forgive herself, believing that he wouldn’t get better. He was insane, defensible. He didn’t know what he was doing. The girls in the photographs looked like they were choking on the men. From the corners of their stuffed mouths, drool dribbled. They were drooling and crying like children. They were children.

“Do you know what Jesus said? He said, ‘If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.’ And I have to believe being someone else isn’t impossible. I’ve been afraid of myself my entire life.”

“You should be. You’re sick. Permanently, irrevocably sick. You’re not going to get better. Why won’t you defend yourself? Just admit you’re insane. There are places, hospitals, where people like you can go to rest.”

“I don’t need to rest.”

“You need psychiatric care.”

“I just want to be forgiven.”

“Then stay the fuck away from children.”

“I’m not there for them.”

“You’re a psychopath.”

“If God—“

She grabbed at the coffee table and threw it upside down. A candy dish cracked on the floor as it fell, brightly colored wrapped candies spraying clownishly over the carpet, pink and blue and green. The table legs ended in gargoyle claws, and she broke one off and splintered it over the door frame. “God is dead! God is dead! God is dead!” She rushed to the floor and snatched the pretty little candies, pelted them at her husband, watched them ping off his face like cartoon explosions. “God is dead, you pervert! God is dead.” He was covering his face with his hands, and for a moment, she kept it up, throwing and laughing, the suffocating laughter drowning her. And somehow she had her hands on his tie, pulling it tight around his neck, and she was spitting in his face, growling, “Kiss me, cowboy. Or am I too old for you?” His eyes were closed, and beneath her wet lips, she felt his lips trembling: “Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Then she tore her nails across his eyelids, and even when the world had flipped dark, when she felt the

weight of his big, boyish man's body pressing a pillow into her face until the air was scarce and dangerous neon lights accumulated beneath her eyelids, he was begging her.

"Don't make me do this," he whispered. "Just say you forgive me. Stop screaming, and tell me you forgive me."

"I did," she gasped. "I forgave you. I told you, it's not your fault, you sick, perverted fuck. God is dead."

WHO CAN SHAVE THIRTEEN TIMES A DAY

There's this woman I see, usually once a week but sometimes more, who is lately always telling me about her husband. He was a negative force in your life, I tell her. But he did it so positively! she says. I'm not easy on her. I've been seeing her for years. So far as she says, the guy was a lazy lump with a guitar and a part-time job where he had to wear a nametag, so I tell her that some men are like hair; they need to be cut off to grow back stronger. And I tell her that these are her best years, and there's only so much makeup can do. She should sign the papers and go back to going by Miss. I think Margarita appreciates the honesty, or else we've had a relationship too long for her to find someone who knows her like I do, the texture and cowlicks, the inky kinks, the volume where it gets to be too honky tonk for her, though I'd call it Bridget Bardot.

"Anyone you want," I tell my girls. "Just tell me who, and I'll make you anyone you want." And these days, generally, she is not aiming Bridget.

Most of my girls come from Next Door, Next Door being the topless spot. They want me to blow them out or sew the hair extensions in extra tight, so they don't lose them whipping around the pole. They want highlights and dye jobs and to look good enough that the creeps are worth it. Margarita used to be one of them, but now, bless her, is a nurse. I lose most of them when they stop

dancing, but there are some who still come around, new nurses and lawyers and homeowners. “Jolene, you’re a catch,” the loyal ones explain, but I know that blandishments are in a stripper’s nature. What they mean is, I’m cheap.

I’ve been flown, so you’d think I’d have arrived by now. A few years back, a production company bought me a plane ticket out to Hollywood so I could make the star’s faces. I let my sleeping dog boyfriend lie in the bed he made for himself and packed my gamut of skin tones in powder, cream, and sheer formula form. I touched famous faces by day and looked at their pictures in magazines at night. It was like being in a movie but tactile. Then pink eye took a week out of filming, and I was the one carrying the infection in my compacts, they said. I bought a ticket to New York City and the salon took me when even soap operas wouldn’t. I didn’t tell the girls a new look would change their lives. I told them, If it looks like a duck, it must be a duck, and left the walking and talking up to them. That’s why some still come back.

But it’s true. For example, when you have a gap between your two-fronts, people will assume you’re dumb or trailer. This was one problem I had until recently. So I saved up several years and bought myself a mouth full of metal. I say you don’t have to put up with anything you don’t want to, even if it’s part of yourself. I’ve dropped girls who made appointments and didn’t show. You see, it’s not really what they’re doing; it’s what I’m *not* doing. When they don’t

come, I'm not cutting, and when I'm not cutting, I'm not being a woman who pays her own bills.

A few weeks ago, though, I didn't even get a cancellation from one of the former next door girls. I had a name penciled for the Saturday last cut, and she never showed. I'd come into the salon sore with improvement. Earlier that morning, I'd gotten my braces tightened. It was the first time, and I hadn't counted on my mouth getting so cut up and stringy like crab meat. I'd go in the bathroom to spit blood-pinked saliva. Not a bite did I eat and still I was tasting myself.

"There's blood in my mouth," I complained to Celeste, the receptionist. Everyone else had their hands in people's hair. She ducked her head and looked side to side as though she was about to cross the street.

"Like, murder?" she whispered. "What have you done, Joley? Why?"

"Just tell me if anyone comes in." That girl is some kind of savant.

Normally, I would have scuffled my tail home, but the no-show had had three hours, cut, color and style, that she didn't end up using. I watched the clock and touched my braces with my tongue, hoping someone who hadn't prepared to get beautiful would stop in. That happened, I knew. People would decide they weren't a woman who let a man put his hands on her and go out to

get themselves some pink hair. The bells hanging on the door shook as it opened.

The ones I took were a new pair, snotty girly homos whose hook at the club was that they were sisters. They wore matching dresses sized like scarves that let their holes hang out. Mickey and Minnie they called themselves. I think of them as The Rats. I don't care what the hell gets anyone's bread risen. I just didn't like how they acted like they'd tricked the system.

So The Rats sat there talking about the little black baby they were going to adopt and how it was only going to eat vegetables from the Hudson Valley and no bread at all. He'd be given dolls and trucks and soymilk. When he was three, they'd explain to him that he peed out of his urethra just like girls did so he didn't develop a patriarchal superiority complex. I combed Minnie's hair while her fake sister sat flipping through the dye swatch book.

"Do you know that once at the grocery I saw a woman spank her little boy right in the middle of the produce section?" Mickey said. "It's like, what do you think your child is going to learn from that?"

I'd personally learned a lot of things that way, such as don't talk to strange men and don't accept anything from them either, don't steal candy from the store, and do your part instead of letting your mother and sister do all the work. "My daddy striped me up with a belt, and look how I turned out," I said.

“A hairdresser,” said Minnie. She stared right at me through the mirror, and Mickey choked on her to-go latte laughing. The two of them slapped their knees, and some of the foil from Minnie’s head fell to the floor.

“I brushed Michael Bolton’s hair once,” I said, “and moisturized George Clooney too.”

“Congratulations,” they said, laughing and calling jinx and clapping their hands together.

For a moment I thought I’d like to leave their hair half done and let them walk ten blocks in public to the next salon. They’d look as twisted up as they were. But there’s an expression my pops told me when I was a kid that won’t let me forget it: “Don’t be too poor to paint and too proud to whitewash.” I stuck it to them the only way I could, charging them authentic prices for polyester hair. It was never about money.

So when they’d left and the hair was swept, I decided to call the cancellation. It wasn’t exactly her fault, the afternoon, but it wasn’t quite not her fault either. I’d tell her that whatever the excuse it was meager enough that her dog better be shitting homework. No one picked up the phone. I called again. Then once more. A hairdresser!

That night, when I’d returned home and let the television smooth me down some, I thought it was better the call never went through though. There

was this article I'd read once in a magazine called "How to Be Angry the Right Way." The author, a Dr. B.D. Gillman, had been inspired by the Greek words "Anyone can be angry— that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way— this is not easy." His point was that you had to be careful not to starve your kid because your husband ate the last cookie. You were supposed to ask yourself if one anger was just an easier way to be angry than the way you were angriest. Once I pondered it, the answer was clear as cake: I wasn't angry about the cancellation. I was angry with my lousy ex-boyfriend who didn't know much about anything except venereal diseases. He was the one who was always late or not showing up or living with his mother. He was the one who deserved a furious phone call, not her. In fact, the next time I saw the cancellation, I'd congratulate her on being a strong, ambitious woman with a 401K and retirement plan. She, at least, thought about the future.

When I went to bed, the world was a perfect sphere again. Two days later, the detectives came to the salon. They wanted to know when was the last time I'd spoken to Elena Czarinsky. She was missing.

The one with the saggy cheeks sat down in one of the salon chairs, but the young one who looked so proud of his badge stood with his hands holding his belt. I got the feeling he was trying to seem amused but also like he had enough of these cases under that holster of his that this was like slicing butter. "Her appointment book said she was supposed to see you for an appointment on Saturday at 4 p.m.," he said.

"Well she didn't, and you can ask those lesbian strippers if you need verification," I said. "What's this about? Can't you see I'm busy?" I pointed to the Color Sophisticate product line on the shelf. "Those colors don't mix themselves."

Saggy cleared his throat. "What this is about is that Elena Czarinsky can't be accounted for since six on Friday."

"She's a free woman," I said. My eleven o'clock was pretending to read an upside magazine in the waiting area, and though I was trying to orate along the lines of Bill Clinton, the only democrat my pop ever voted for, inside I was frail as his loopholes: "I did not have sexual *relations* with that woman."

"She's the prime suspect in the homicide of her husband, Oliver 'Ollie' Malone," said the young one.

“Homicide?” I said. “How do you know it wasn’t him who did it?” In my experience, it has usually been men overlooking the crimes of men that makes unsolved mysteries. Put a woman cop in there who has the hell-topping fury that’s deserved when she’s scorned, and you can bet someone would pay.

“Read the papers, ma’am. That’s the official word.” Now my eleven o’clock wasn’t even pretending anymore.

“Well I don’t know where she is,” I said.

“Give us a call if anything changes,” the young detective said, as though change was some sort of rarity. He handed me a card and the brass chiming bells smacked the glass door behind them.

The rest of the day I made a lot of mistakes and probably screwed up a bunch of girls’ social lives for the next six to eight weeks, at which point, they wouldn’t come back for a trim. Slick salon chairs, adhesive mousses, noisy air: this was all it was. “My wedding is tomorrow!” one woman complained. “And now I’m bald in the front! I’m going to be bald in my wedding photographs!”

“True love is unconditional,” I said and pushed her out the door.

She began banging the glass. “This is supposed to be the biggest day of my life!”

“Then you’re lucky!” I said.

And I would've felt bad if she didn't come back fifteen minutes later, scream "Nice braces!" then dump a bottle shampoo on the floor. Celeste had to wipe it up and we were slipping around, falling on our knees and bruising our bottoms, all afternoon.

At the end of the day, I got Margarita's number from Celeste. She and Elena had been best girls since their days at Next Door. They knew all the gossip from each other's lives and always thought the other deserved better. I didn't know what to say, but I wanted to talk. The first call there was no answer. The second call she picked up.

"Hello?"

"It's Jolene, sugar."

"Gracias a dios," she said.

I'd never been to Margarita's apartment before, though I did make her up for her wedding. It was a real nice updo, teased in the front with a neat French twist in the back that blossomed at the crown of her head in curls I'd sewn with tiny pearls. A picture of this and her old good-for-nothing sat on a table by the entrance to her apartment. When she opened the door, her eyes

looked like beestings from all the crying. She'd lost weight over the last year, and on her, her sweatpants looked like they were still on the hanger.

"Oh Joley, thank you for coming. I've been next to myself." Margarita sometimes made these sayings mistakes when she was upset. It was one of her better qualities. Right after she separated from her husband, I was only understanding halfway for weeks.

"Where do you keep the hemorrhoid cream around here?" I said. "A touch of that and some cucumbers will take the puff right out of your eyelids." I'd learned this trick in Hollywood. Margarita stared. I looked right back. Her eyeballs trembled liquidly.

"Let me look the way I feel, Joley. I don't care about my *face* right now." Actually I didn't either. I just wanted to be fixing something, even if it was only unsightliness.

"It smells nice in here. Soapy or something." I looked at my feet. "Cilantro?" The building foyer had smelled like stinky dog spit, but inside her place my nose met something sharp and green and clean.

"I'm sorry," she said. But I couldn't be angry with her.

"No apologies. A lot of people don't like the idea of rubbing anus ointment on their eyes."

“Oh Joley,” Margarita said. “Thank God you’re always yourself!” Then she hugged me, and it was almost like having a sister again. I missed Val so much when something wonderful or terrible was happening or when someone made a joke that wasn’t funny. This always made Val laugh her most dangerous laugh, the one where she lost the rhythm of breathing at a certain point and got hyperventilating, especially if I said the word “Lamaze” and exaggerated the minimal requirement of living. “Are you ready to see her?”

“Giddyup,” I said.

“And you promise no cops, Joley?”

“My heart’s crossed as a crucifix,” I said, because I had my own opinions about the law. Let’s just say I have less respect for the police than the real animal they’re often called. Pigs, it’s known, are intelligent animals.

When Val went missing, the cops said there was no evidence that it was her boss at the diner who took her, though he’d put in his two weeks two weeks before and hadn’t been seen since the last night Val was. I’d sat in my car right across the street from his driveway for a week, looking all the time I wasn’t sleeping, which wasn’t much, and not once did he show up.

“‘I want to be you.’ That’s what he said to her last month,” I told the officers.

“Well if she was so afraid of him, why didn’t *she* quit?”

“Is your brain receding with you hairline?” I said. They never found her.
It’s been ten years.

I didn’t feel like I needed to hear the story to know Elena was right, but there are times the mouth must air out of the mind, so I listened. Apparently this husband of hers was one of those guys mothers tell children not to take candy from. I’d met the guy once before. I guess he was one of those handsome perverts. “I killed a mentally ill person, and he was my husband,” Elena said. Maybe it made it easier to think she had a victim on her hands. “I killed a mentally ill person,” she said again.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Margarita said. “We spoke. You said you were having problems. Not disasters! I would have done something.”

“And what would you have done?” Elena said. It was a good question, and it shut us all up for a few minutes. “I’m a killer,” she said finally with genuine discovery in her voice.

“A killer *kills*. Just because you’ve killed doesn’t make you a killer!” I said.

“I’m a killer, Joley. Empirically, this is proven. I’m turning myself in.”

There was a chess board on the table and Elena spun a black queen between her fingers.

“It was a crime of passion,” Margarita said. “The court will have to understand this.”

“There were weeks in between when I found out and when I did it. I just didn’t, I don’t know, I thought he could be reformed. Like maybe this was a characteristic, but not a characterizing characteristic. He did too, I think. You know, he kept telling me he could be saved, and I was telling him he couldn’t be, at least not by God. I said maybe by disease. It must have been difficult for him to hear. I thought he would submit himself to hospitalization.”

“He should have! He was a dangerous sex friend!”

“Fiend,” I corrected.

“And he was suffocating you! What about self defense?”

“With a pillow,” Elena said. “There’s no physical evidence. Look at me. Do I look like I was going to die?” I looked at her. She was small but strong, athletic in hair and body. Unbruised except for a very small one by her jawbone. “I don’t know how it got so far. I thought I could do it myself.” She laughed. “I guess I did do it myself.”

“But it *was* self defense!” Margarita cried. “He suffocated you, you hit him with the lamp. A lamp isn’t even a weapon!”

“Anything can be a weapon the person holding it wants it to be.”

“What about the photos?” Margarita said. “You can kill your husband if he has those photos.”

“I made him throw them away.”

“Why did you do that?”

“Because they were child pornography!” I’d never seen Elena yell before.

“Look, it’s over, Margarita. I just wanted to see you before I wasn’t free anymore. I’m turning myself in tomorrow. I’m not even myself anymore. I used to keep people out of jail. I got off criminals who deserved to go down just to show I knew the law better than the other guy.” She stood up and then sat right back down. I could tell Margarita was trying not to cry. She was a giver. She’d give someone the hair off her head and had. Last year we made of a wig of probably five years worth of her hair for her sick sister. She wanted to give Elena her innocence, and she couldn’t. She moved a chess horse in a forward L and then angled backward.

“What if you were me?” I said. Margarita and Elena turned in my direction. “What if you left the country, went to somewhere where the law

wouldn't apply anymore, and were me? You could get on a plane. I'd give you my passport."

"You're a redhead."

"Don't tell me you haven't seen the commercials now, El. *Naturally yours: Colour Sophisticates!*"

"You're naturally blonde?"

"I'm a professional," I said.

"That could work," Margarita said. "You could go, stay with my family. They'll take you in. You could be Jolene." Elena put the queen down and looked at her hands.

"But we're not exactly. Well I'm," she said.

"A diet," I said so she didn't have to feel any meaner. "If anyone asks, you went on a diet. A little gold highlighting cream on the apples of the cheeks will make your face look fuller anyway. We'll do a smoky violet eye to bring the green out in your eyes and make them appear smaller. A rosy nude lip liner on the outer rim of the lips and a metallic gloss in the center of the lip will make your lips look as big as mine. It can make you me. I can make you me."

"But what will you do? Don't you need to exist? On paper?"

"I'm a cash worker. Always have been, always will. I'm just a hairdresser."

“You’re much more than that!” Margarita said, but she didn’t elaborate. I wasn’t offended. I liked what I did, and pretending I was more than that wasn’t worth anyone going to jail for.

“What about your family?” Elena said. “You’d not be able buy tickets. You’d be in South America as far as the authorities were concerned. What about when you wanted to see your family?”

But the truth was, I couldn’t see my family, the whole of it, even when I did want to. My dad was babbling the ear off some nursing home attendant down south. My mom was in the ground. And Val? I hoped she was out there somewhere being so free she didn’t even feel like writing. I hoped she cut that man up something mean and ran away.

“Are you going to be me or not?” It was all so simple, I was sure. I could already see it now. If I became no one, I could be everyone, and I’d change my look a lot. There’d be a perm that wasn’t permanent like the name suggests, a brunette phase, a smart little pixie cut. Sometimes a man might ask me out on Monday and two days later ask me out again. He wouldn’t even know why he got left sitting alone in a restaurant on a Friday night, but I’d save myself a lot of heartache and moping to country songs.

Margarita would come to get blowouts and talk about her husband. She and the loyal Next Door girls would know where to find me, at a new apartment,

and I wouldn't miss the salon much. Jolene, as she'd be called, would be safe below the equator. Everyone except Margarita would be a different person, but I'd still tell her that her husband was a sonofabitch.

Sometimes I'd imagine Val and Jolene meeting somewhere hot on a beach. It'd be a place that doesn't have seasons, and they'd run through the water collecting shells, wearing matching pink bikinis like they had since they were kids.

"You must be sisters," men would say.

And at night there will be dancing and tequila, fresh fish and cilantro. They'll hold glasses glittering with salt and act like they're teenagers getting away with something. "Remember when you used to want to be the hair stylist of the stars?" Val will say.

"I don't," Jolene will say. Her teeth are finally perfect. "But do you remember who can shave thirteen times a day and still have a beard?" A pause for effect. "A barber." And Val will laugh in a way that dares death to finish off what the bad joke started.

And sometimes they'll walk by a phone booth, almost stop to make a long distance call. In shops they'll buy postcards: a palm tree, a couple watching a sunset— "Wish you were here!" —then sometimes get pens and stamps out, really think to send them somewhere to someone. But then, they'll realize they

don't know who that person is anyway. They just know she'd never fault them for missing no one.

“I couldn't do that to you. You'd never be able to even get a credit card,” Elena said. “And anyway, no one would ever believe we could be the same person.”

“But we could be,” I said. “I could run away.”

FIRST DATE

The bartender would have been pretty if it weren't for her face. This was the sort of thing he always found himself thinking the last couple of years. She would be fun if she wasn't so sad. She would be smart if she had any common sense. She would be— no she wouldn't. He sipped his beer. Beer was his automatic beverage selection since he'd decided not to drink— it wasn't drinking if it wasn't hard stuff— but it wasn't nearly as satisfying. He liked to blackout and reconstruct the past the next day. It gave him a sense of accomplishment.

A cold wall hit his back as someone opened the door behind him. He shouldn't have chosen that seat. Then again, this person, whoever it was, shouldn't keep the door open so long. It was irresponsible. It wasted something that was precious and nearly extinct to the environment, or maybe "extinct" could only be used to qualify animals that were no more. The words weren't coming properly; he was all shot vocabulary and taut muscles. This was always how he felt after seeing his father. That had been even more of a mistake today than choosing this seat. He turned around to look at this person who was letting the weather in.

The first thing he noticed about her was her record. Its corner was a little crumpled and stuck only slightly out of a shopping bag that she lay on the bar,

but he'd recognize it anywhere. "Evergreen Blues" was the name, and all his life he'd played the exuberant thrash of notes to hear where the spray of tree needles would happen. He had to be told later that it wasn't a song inspired by plants but pain.

The girl with the record, he noticed, was not stirring her drink circularly but in ellipses, figure eights swiveling voluptuously through a rocks glass. Her pigtails shot out of her head like pine bunches and that hair glowed red around the edges from the hanging Christmas lights. She had sat right next to him. If he spoke to her, he'd be the creep who spoke to her. If he didn't, he'd be the creep who stared at her. He already was. It was too late.

"That's my mother's," he said. The girl turned her head with aggressive deliberation to look at him.

"Would you like to see the receipt?" she said.

"I mean she composed it."

"Your mother is *Adrienne Hache*?"

"Luke Hache," he said, so he could touch her. She accepted his hand with her fingertips. "I changed my name recently to reflect my loyalties."

"Your mother is a genius," she said. "Are we on a date?" His face pinkened. He looked at her hands, the long fingers that had folded a cocktail napkin into a small fan.

"I don't even know your name."

"Pansy," she said. "Do you want to play a game?"

"I don't know," he said. "I just met you."

"How else could we play this game?" she said. It wasn't coy exactly.

Already she was exasperated. Quickly, not long enough for her to notice, he closed his eyes to see if he had memorized her. Pink wisps of lips, callous-knuckled fingers, shoulders that curved forward as though to shield her breasts. In the overheated bar, he could smell her, the slate gray dust of freshly sharpened pencils curlicued to a gleaming point rising off her neck.

"I guess that's the point," he said when he opened his eyes. "So I guess you don't want to hear about where I went to school or my hometown or anything like that." He took a sip from his beer.

"You're a quick study," she said.

"An understudy?" The possibility was exactly *not* one. He was not, after all, his father.

"No, just a quick study." She advanced her empty glass forward and smiled.

"You guys okay?" asked the bartender.

“Yes,” Pansy said. “I need another thanks.”

“And I wouldn’t say no to another,” he said.

“Wait, so does that mean you want another?” the bartender asked.

Pansy nodded her head slowly.

“She would be easy to talk to if she knew what we meant,” Luke said.

“Like that,” Pansy said. “That would be appropriate to say.” Already he’d forgotten about the game. He thought he heard a man towards the back of the bar screaming something about how he could eat more burgers than pudding. Luke was always mishearing, and it wasn’t that he didn’t listen. “It’s simple,” she explained. “I haven’t been on a first date in two years, and now that I am, I’ve realized that it’s like quitting cigarettes once you already have cancer.”

“I think that does actually improve your chances.”

“For some people,” she said. “But I’m only one person. Which is why the rules for this first date are this: we’ve already been together for years.”

“That sounds a lot like Halloween. Last year I didn’t even buy a costume.”

“You know what Wittgenstein wrote? ‘If, from one day to the next, someone promises: ‘Tomorrow I’ll come to see you’ — is he saying the same thing every day, or every day something different?’”

“Wittgenstein?”

“Before I decided to be an artist, I thought I wanted to be a philosopher,” she said. “That was my first year of college. I was only seventeen.”

“You’re breaking your own rules already.”

“Like I’ve always said,” she said. “You’re a quick study.” Then she kissed his nose.

In the cab, she held his hand and looked out the window and didn’t speak. This, she said, was what couples did, didn’t talk. It made him almost ticklishly happy. This was, indeed, better than Halloween. Two years ago, after dropping out of grad school, he had been between a snowplow, a piñata, and Jesus Christ. His best friend Claude, advised against the piñata if he wanted to escape the holiday without bodily injury, and the snowplow proved too difficult to make, so he succumbed to God.

“Aren’t you going to be anything?” he asked Claude, who’d just arrived from Boston for the holiday. He was wearing jeans and a sweater. He looked like the physical therapist he had become.

“I am.”

“What are you?”

“A prophylactic,” he said. “I’m going to go around cock-blocking all night.”

“Lucky me,” Luke said, adjusting my crown of thorns.

Claude drove to the center of town, where there was a bonfire, and they sipped bourbon in the parking lot by the green. Coming was an act of charity on his part, Luke knew.

“You can’t possibly like this sorbet place where you work?” Claude asked, wincing through a whiskey-drawn face.

“Ice cream. This is Maine, Doc.”

“Mais oui, c’est vrai!” Claude said, and Luke asked him how to say “prophylactic” in French. “La catholicisme!” They were able to laugh together for a moment. “But really, what are you doing with yourself?” Luke looked at him. This guy was simpler than a success story; he was the best friend. He was the one who hadn’t understood when told to sleep loose but not with loose women his first night in the dorms from Versailles. He was the one Luke told where Swiss cheese has holes, American cheese has stars and stripes.

“I’m a late bloomer,” Luke said.

“You’re wasting your time, forget-me-not.”

“This is what you on the continent would call a ‘holiday.’” And Claude told him that you cannot be on holiday without being on holiday *from*

something. Luke had no answer and really it hadn't been a question, so they sipped quietly as the human peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, crossdressers, and adult babies paraded past the car window. This silence, with Pansy, involved less shame because she didn't know him yet. She didn't even know the reason he was in New York, that he hadn't wanted to leave his mother at that place. "We're going to take *very* good care of her," Annie, one of the attendants, told him. It was as though she was rubbing it in his face: he wasn't capable anymore.

"What's the matter, honey?" Pansy said.

"How did you know?" It had been less than an hour.

"Because you're my *honey*, honey," she said. "Of course I know when there's something the matter with you. I know *everything* that's the matter with you." The way she said it made it seem like quite a lot.

"Like what?"

"Don't get me started, dear," she said quietly. "We were having such a good night." They still could! He squeezed her large hand. A shrieking from the cab tires as they took a sharp turn. He felt the beer splashing in his stomach.

He'd never seen such a gray apartment before. From the curtains, the soft calf's leather couch, and even the marble kitchen counters, a silvery gleam cast

gentle light as she switched on a lamp. She'd said she was an artist, but there was no artwork on the wall. It wasn't a criticism, and not only because he wasn't thinking aloud.

He needed to use the bathroom, but he was afraid to ask. If they had really been a couple, he wouldn't need to ask. He also wouldn't go into the wrong room. A long hallway led out of one end of the living room. Another hallway led out of the other side of the living room. He didn't even know down which hallway to try. This had been his problem professionally. He wished he'd gotten good at something early enough for his mother to realize it. Really, the relief was necessary.

"Have you seen my razor around?" he asked.

"No." She switched on the television and sat on the couch. A black and white movie was playing, and an actor and actress were parting, their gray mouths articulating words in a manner impossible with how much Pansy and Luke had drank.

"How about my toothbrush?"

"No."

"Did you remember to buy shampoo?"

"We have *plenty* of shampoo, Luke." She twisted her neck to throw a knowing, irritable look his way. She tilted her head to the right. "Oh God! You

want me to place it in your very hands? Why is it so hard to find things?" Her voice was brittle, but she'd understood. They walked down the hallway and veered left into the bathroom. She slapped a pink shampoo bottle in his hand. "Happy now?"

"Yes." A glimmer of smile wrinkled by her eyes, he thought, as she slammed the door. It was something he was used to looking for, those blips of comprehension. "Ray Charles!" his mother might say when he put on sunglasses, and he'd known she remembered something.

From the bathroom, he heard the voice of a man probably dead already: *Make no mistake, I shall regret the absence of your keen mind; unfortunately, it is inseparable from an extremely disturbing body.*

There was a horrible muffled wailing sound when he returned to the living room, and a torso careened between vertical and horizontal. Dry, scratchy noise, and a pile of paper ribbons tumbling to the floor. It was tearing, Pansy tearing newspaper. When his vision collected around her, he could see small bubbles blossom and pop as they burst from her nose. She was crying. She was someone who cried out of every orifice. These were the tears of children and old people.

“What’s going on?” he said.

“It’s too late,” she said. “You wouldn’t understand. It’s too late. It’s too late. It’s too late!” The screams were slurred, but her words were perfectly clear to him.

“Pansy,” he said.

“Go, just go. It’s too late. It’s too late.” But it couldn’t be. It was only the beginning. He’d done his best. That’s what the doctor said. He’d done his best. It wasn’t his fault he wasn’t a medical expert. His limitations would amount to neglect if he didn’t place her somewhere that specialized in the period between life and death. Which wouldn’t be long. And suddenly something terrible: what happened tomorrow? And the next day and the next? “It’s too late,” she wailed. “It’s too goddamn late.”

He moved toward her. So soon the hope couldn’t be over, when almost no tries had been exhausted yet. “I admit it!” he screamed. “I did it, and I’m sorry, but I admit it.” There was no noise at all and no movement for a minute. She was staring at him. Then she blinked.

“For what?” she said. He reached toward her face and wiped her nose.

“I drank too much. I made you worry.” Gently, he took her hand.

“I couldn’t trust you. I knew from the beginning, I couldn’t trust you,” she said. “What else?”

“And I was with someone else.”

“But it’s over now? She’s gone?” Was it recognizing where and when you were that made a life? Was it remembering that time was passing? He’d tried to make her remember things, Italian, for example. *Perdono*, he’d said and held up an index card, and when his mother didn’t answer: *forgiveness*.

“It didn’t mean anything in the end. We were always just getting to the end.”

“Nothing, Luke? All of it? It was nothing?” Her eyes were almost leaving the sockets, she’d opened them so wide, and she swept at her face, using her shirtsleeves. He felt like was going to cry.

“It meant nothing. Can we just keep being?”

“We’ll have to change the channel. I refuse to watch that movie. I’m serious, Luke. I refuse.”

“That’s fine,” he said. “Forgive me?”

“Baby, don’t you know?” she said. “I love you’ means you’re already forgiven.”

“You love me?”

“How could you ask?”

“I just can’t believe it.” But he did too.

She yanked one of her pigtails in both directions to tighten it. "You never believe me." Then she walked out of the room.

He sat on the couch and squeezed a throw pillow in his hands. They could do so much together, if this wasn't the end. It was night already, and even in the city, so much had already closed. They wouldn't be able to eat an ice cream sundae together. They wouldn't buy a puppy and walk it in the park. He slid his mother's record from the sleeve and let the turntable needle follow the cracked circles to make sound.

"You don't need to be perfect," his mother had told him when he asked how she could ever have been with his father. "You need to multiply like negative numbers." She was a sad, hopeful woman. Long ago, when he was a child acing fractions, she told him math was music, and when he was failing miserably through college, she spoke the Fourier Transform: "A function decomposed may be inversely rebuilt in synthesis."

"I'm just a fuckup," he said.

"That's my son you're talking about," she said. "And I don't care whether you're him. No one talks about my son that way." She didn't speak to him for two days.

Jazz pedants raved that “Evergreen Blues” was a visionary composition. His mother said being an atonal theory visionary was a lot like being the best Ethiopian restaurant in Maine. Being his mother: that was singular. He missed her, and she was still essentially alive.

“I’m sorry,” Pansy said. She’d come up behind him and was holding his waist with her arms.

“You are?” He’d forgotten what she’d done.

“I’m sorry because I don’t want you to feel alone. You are sorry, aren’t you?”

“I am if you are,” he said.

“I’m not alone,” she said, “when I’m with you.”

It was the part of “Evergreen Blues” where the bright brass and deep shudder of timpani began to rove toward a crescendo. Pansy began tapping the beat against his back with her hands. “You know what I’m going to do? I’m going to feed you a candlelit peanut butter cracker dinner.”

“Really?”

“It *is* our anniversary,” she said. She went to the kitchen to look for a butter knife.

The numbers didn't go to the same places here as they did in Maine. He pressed them in the remote, and the wrong channel appeared. Luke looked around the living room for a TV Guide while Pansy showered. When he didn't find one quickly, he depressed through the channels until he found a movie about a drug dealer in the Bronx. *Hurt me once, shame on me*, said a man holding a gun. *Hurt me twice? Please. Your ass already be dead the first time.*

"Round two." He turned away from the thugs. Pansy had dropped her towel on the floor. As she moved toward him, she tripped on nothing. She was still drunk. "Don't you want to know what happens in round two?"

"Yes."

"Then it'll be yes-or-no questions only, sir."

"Like is it bigger than a breadbox?"

"I hope it's not bigger than a breadbox." In this, at least, she could be satisfied. "Well?"

"Is it going to be fun?"

"That depends on you."

"Oh excellent, no pressure."

"Come on, next question." He looked around the room and caught sight of a pile of pink, blue, and green pool toys arranged to hang from wires. A bikini bottom was pierced through one.

“I don’t know. I can’t think of anything.”

“Oh, I see. A still tongue keeps a wise head? Is that the deal? Well I can tell you, that kind of strategy will not work in this game, Luke.”

“Didn’t you want to watch a movie?” On the screen, a man pushed powder into a little cellophane bag with a credit card so painstakingly it made Luke nervous.

“That was before. Think of something.”

“Alright, okay. How about this. What are the rules now?”

“I already explained them! Oh fuck it, you’re no good at this.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Be naked.” She crossed her arms. She really was so lovely with her roundnesses, the smart curves of mood, the mercurial dedication to whimsy. It was their anniversary! He began taking his pants off. “I wrote you a poem in the shower, you know.”

“On what?” Luke realized this was a dumb question. He hopped on one foot to loosen his left leg from his pants.

“That’s a dumb question.”

“Stupid is as cupid does. I know.” He was standing in the middle of the living room with crisp tangles of pubic hair exposed.

“Well do you want to hear it?”

“Please.” Onto the coffee table she climbed, wobbling.

“If you hadn’t

I still might

not stay, but moot

points make for poor conjecture:

you did, and I?

Still might I

stay

if you block the door.”

“That’s wonderful,” Luke said. He wasn’t lying. He simply hadn’t specified. *It* was wonderful. It was wonderful that she wrote him a poem.

“Not for you,” Pansy said. She sat on the couch stiffly.

“I don’t know what you want me to do.” Luke crouched in front of her, balanced on his toes. Bullet shots issued. A woman’s scream. Then the rubber screech of a getaway. “What can I do?”

“You *never* know what I want you to do.”

“Never say never,” he smiled. “Except in aphorisms.” This was something his mother used to say.

Pansy batted art books off the coffee table with her foot, and one splayed open to Duchamp’s parody of the Mona Lisa. The defaced woman smiled

up at them from beneath the mustache the man had added. "I love Duchamp," Luke said. He sounded desperate, even to himself.

"I always knew you were a homosexual. Is that the problem? Are my titties too big for you?" She bent to kiss his cheek.

"You don't know," he said. "And your body is perfect. You're perfect."

"L.H.O.O.Q.: *Elle a chaud au cul.*" She was smiling with her teeth.

"I don't know what you're saying."

The book flew from the floor to the wall with the force of her hand. "Why can't you even speak French?"

He knew one thing. "*Laissez-faire*, Pansy."

"Or what? Daddy Capitalist will shut me up?"

"I would never hurt you."

"And you always make empty promises."

"Maybe they're half full." Wasn't that all a promise could ever be?

"And you won't stop making terrible jokes." She was spitting now.

"Stop. It's not fun anymore for either of us."

"And you always tell me what to do." That with a little shove.

"I don't."

"And you deny everything you do wrong, Peter Peter Peter Eater."

"You're drunk. Let's go to sleep."

“And you *turn* everything on me. Like *I’m* the pervert.”

“Not me.”

“And you don’t follow the rules. You think you can do whatever you want. Yes-or-no questions! What is so hard about yes-or-no questions?” She was crying again. He could be terrified and was. What was it she had said? “If, from one day to the next, someone promises: ‘Tomorrow I’ll come to see you’— is he saying the same thing every day, or every day something different?”

“Will you be happy with me for the rest of our lives?” he said.

They could be happy if she’d just stop being so miserably for a minute. They could be happy if she’d just stop crying long enough to say yes.

“Will you be happy with me?” he said again.