

Collected Short Stories

Patrick Runyan

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2016

Committee:

David Bosworth

Maya Sonenberg

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

English

©Copyright 2016

Patrick Runyan

University of Washington

Abstract

Collected Short Stories

Patrick Wade Runyan

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Professor David Bosworth

English, Creative Writing

Selected short stories of fiction written by Patrick Runyan.

Contents

Burning Down the House 5

Perfect Stranger 24

Lost Pencil 48

One Size Fits All 51

A Foolish Old Woman Gets Her Revenge 53

Alien 66

Nursing 80

Fast and Fresh 94

The Dark Cafe 115

Burning Down the House

I came to the house party with a woman I both wanted to have sex with and never see again. I was ambivalent about the order, and yes, the two are mutually exclusive. You can't have sex with someone and never see them again. The world isn't perfect.

I'd told myself that I came to the party with the intent of securing a new apartment. I didn't know the real reason why I came. Regardless, I knew at least two of this woman's friends were vacating and I was hoping to piggy-back their lease. Whether I needed to come to this party to do that or not remains an unanswered and unanswerable question.

The party was being held in an old two-story Cape Cod style house. It had an elevated front porch covered by a sloped wooden awning. Dried out bushes ran along the sides, concealing the foundation and making the building look more comfortable with its obsolescence. The paint was grey and in need of a good scraping followed by a repainting.

"This is it," she said. She let go of my hand and climbed the concrete stairs. I felt like the rope tying my life preserver to the boat had been let go of. I paddled in her wake. I followed her into the storm.

The attendees were composed of an inappropriate age range. There were teenagers there. I'd have assumed they were undergraduates had this been an academic party, but it wasn't. I bet they're undergraduates somewhere, I thought. And then there were people older than me.

I suppose it should be said I hate parties. I hate people in general. So when people congregate you can imagine how the effect is compounded. I find intoxication helps. Any kind.

"I can't wait to introduce you to Jay," she said.

"Is he the one with the apartment?" I asked.

"No."

“What about the fiancé?”

“Jay doesn’t have a fiancé.” Her expression suggested she suspected me of stupidity.

“No, I mean the guy with the apartment.”

“Let’s get a beer.” She turned away and we went into the living room.

“Good idea,” I said. I struggled to remember who Jay was.

I moved to this city because I was depressed and angry. When I unpacked my things, I found that my ex had secreted her Santa’s wife lingerie costume into my luggage case. I’d broken up with her but she hadn’t accepted that yet. The day before I left I told her it was over at an Indian restaurant (elegant, yet un-romantic). She then hijacked what was supposed to be an amicable break-up and turned it into a two-and-a-half hour wine-laden filibuster. “Fine. We don’t have to break up,” I said at last. “But I’m going to have sex with other women.” She promised to come see me. I smirked. Not likely, I thought—not while her job consists of delivering pizzas. And then she pulled this on me. I was either going to have to call her in order to return her costume and thereby talk to her again—she knew well I wouldn’t feel free of her if I kept it. Or, I was going to get aroused and horny, want to see her, and then fly back to visit—again, she knew me well. Either way, the effect was the same. She delayed my arrival. What extreme would I have to go to in order to convince her that she didn’t love me? Did she enjoy being tortured? But then a third option presented itself. I would find a new woman as soon as possible and have sex with her while she wore my ex’s lingerie.

I was pleased and happy with myself. This is exactly why I moved. The old me would have been trapped by a false choice. The new me was already thinking outside the box.

The reason I had to find a new place to live so soon after moving here was that my current apartment was infested with bed bugs. The little blood-suckers were goddamn everywhere. The apartment owner wouldn't pay for extermination. "You signed a paper stating that there were no pests in the room when you moved in."

I was not getting enough sleep. I tried sleeping in the bathroom for a while. Even then they found me.

The name of the woman I went to the party with was Sheera. Like She-Ra: The Princess of Power, but spelled Sheera. I suppose her parents never saw the cartoon. I met her my first day here, when I went out to eat breakfast.

The restaurant was a block down from where I lived. It had glass windows and an open door. But inside there was a long wait. Something like twenty to sixty minutes, "depending," the greeter said.

Starving never hurt anyone. I decided I could stand starving a while longer. The problem was how long I could stand. All the waiting chairs were occupied. I leaned against the glass dessert display.

The waitress came back. I thought she was about to tell me to get off the display but instead she said, "Those people over there have offered to let you sit with them at their table."

"I'm sorry?"

"They have an extra seat and said you can sit at their table."

Sure, I thought, we're all strangers here. I'll just sit with these people I've never met. There were two of them: her and her friend. She had a vulpine face with dirty blond hair, dressed in forgettable gray clothing. He had a fat Asian face and wore a blue shirt with a necktie dialed

up to eleven. Another waitress had just finished taking their order and looked to me for instruction. But I hadn't seen a menu yet. "I'll be back with your water," she said. She forgot to leave me a menu, though.

"Thanks for letting me sit with you," I said.

Sheera introduced herself but it wasn't until the third time that I caught her name. "This is Kevin," she said. Kevin sat with his arms to his side, his hands under the table. I told them my name.

Sheera said, "We'd waited for an hour so we were like, why not let him sit with us? Have you eaten here before?"

"Yes." In moments of uncertainty I tend to lie. I looked across to Kevin.

Kevin stared across at Sheera. "I'm sorry Sheera, but I can't do this. I don't want to talk to this person. He can sit here but I'm not going to acknowledge his presence. I hope you understand."

"Oh my God," Sheera said. The waitress came and put my water on the table.

"Can I have a menu?" I asked.

"I'll be right back." Sheera got up and left.

"No offense, Phil," Kevin said—my name's not Phil. "But I have no interest in talking to you. You mean nothing to me."

I could have left, but I didn't. Among other things, I was starving. "You know," I said, "that's fine. I actually understand how you feel. But the thing is you *are* talking to me. Like what you just said to me, you didn't have to say that. But you did." I felt like he'd given me a gift. If he'd kept his contempt selfishly silent, I'd have understood, but I was grateful he was willing to share it with me, a complete stranger.

“Well, Phil, I guess it’s just that I really don’t give a shit. About you or what you say. Sorry Phil.” He mistook my name too many times not to know it. That meant a lot. At last, I thought, I’ve found someone who is disgusted by the same things I am. This promised to be edifying. I would enter Kevin through the things he said and explode him from within. I felt tears welling in my eyes at the thought. All I wanted then was to feel myself inside someone who truly understood me and to cover myself all over with their viscera. Because I couldn’t do it to myself.

I lived for these encounters. They weren’t the only thing I wanted in life. Just one of them.

But then Sheera came back with a menu. She stood at our table. “Hi, I will take your order for today. Come have a seat right this way.” She bounced her head side to side.

“It’s alright,” I said, “We had a little heart-to-heart just now and I think we get each other.”

“Well, it’s just I’ve already prepared another place for you to sit...”

I had no choice. I went and sat at an empty stool at the far counter. I reflected on my loss while I ate. Fifteen minutes later Sheera came up to me and gave me a note: *Call me*, it said. Her number was scratched under it. I decided to forget about Kevin and think about Sheera. I felt positively giddy at how quickly it seemed I would be able to resolve the problem of my ex’s lingerie.

I followed Sheera through the living room and toward the kitchen. Along the way there were hung charcoal pictures of Cthulhu porn: Nubile women with pneumatic-breasts in various states of abduction by unhuman monsters, or simply monsters with big breasts. Someone’s an artist, I thought. It’s amazing what people will tolerate in chiaroscuro. Sheera noticed me

noticing and said, "I've posed for some of Dan's renditions." I didn't sense any resemblance other than the feeling I got looking at those pictures was the same I got looking at her sometimes.

"Beer?" I asked.

We made it to the kitchen and pulled warm beers from the refrigerator. A couple of goth-punk kids were there. The girl watched me up-end my beer can into my mouth and I watched her out of the corner of my eye as I did so. Her clothes had a Goodwill donation vibe and she was probably one shower away from being mistaken for homeless. The boy she was with was bent over slightly and puffing marijuana from a glass pipe. I put the beer can on the counter. Sheera waited for me to start a conversation. Instead I pulled another beer.

Sheera put her arm through mine and tugged, "Come on. I'll introduce you to my best friend, Jay."

Punk-girl extended the pipe to me. "Hold on," I said. I took a big drag. I started coughing and had to talk in monosyllables. "Take a hit?" I offered Sheera the pipe.

"No, I don't smoke."

I gave the pipe to punk-boy.

The day after breakfast, I called Sheera and we went to the farmer's market. I had yet to discover the cause of my bug bites. I'd assumed a spider. At one of the booths a man sold homemade ravioli. Sheera said to him, "I like your pin, by the way. I'm also a member of the Communist party."

The man turned stony. "This is a Turkish pin."

"Oh," Sheera said. "It looks like the pin for the Communist party."

This wasn't the only instance of Sheera's bizarreness. On our second date we went to a

bar, got drunk, and started making out in the middle of a discussion about Dennis Kucinich, which started with the question, “What the hell ever happened to Dennis Kucinich?” We took an Uber back to her place and as soon as we got out of the car, Sheera said of the driver, “I feel so sorry for that man. We owe him for colonization.”

The inside of her house was a dump. Five people lived there including herself. No one cleaned. The carpet was stained with ash, the sink filled with dishes, the toilet bowl growing fuzz. Some dude slept on the couch outside her room, “That’s Jay. He’s been here for a year.” Jay slept with a blanket draped over him like one would drape a blanket over a dead body. In her room, clothing was strewn about the floor. A bra hung from the rack on her door and swayed back and forth after she closed it. But I couldn’t have cared less about any of this. I took off my shoes, climbed on her bed, and began the freefall into an alcoholic blackout. I woke up the next day not wanting to see her again, though later I changed my mind.

Sheera was still searching for this Jay person I’d yet to meet who I didn’t want to meet. I’d now recalled who he was. I wanted to meet whoever her friends were with the low-rent apartment connection. People crowded me and I pushed through them in slow motion like a sea-diver through a kelp forest. Then we were on the porch. Below us a pickup was backing into the driveway. The driver leaned out the window and people cheered him on, including Sheera. He looked up at them instead of where he was going. He had a plain doofus look, a high-functioning idiot. The pickup was a tight fit but someone said, “Kay’s a good driver.” Good for you, Kay. You need something.

I asked Sheera, “He’s not the one with the apartment is he?” I hoped not.

“No. Stop asking me.” She pretended to be intensely interested in Kay’s progress and

leaned over the porch railing, straining to watch the pickup even though it had passed out of sight. When she turned around she didn't address me but instead spoke to two friends of hers standing below us on the stairs. I followed her to them and we formed a huddle. They were smoking pot as well. Sheera introduced us but I forgot their names. I was handed the pipe and I inhaled eagerly. I passed it to Sheera. "I told you I don't smoke." I passed it to the guy. "I'm going to the bathroom. Do you want anything from inside?" She asked.

I told her no and resumed smoking with her two friends. I confessed I missed their names and they told me again: Mark and Mandy. How could I have forgotten that? "We're getting married," Mark told me.

"You aren't the ones moving out of your old apartment are you?"

Mark said that indeed they were. They'd bought a house. This was it, I realized. This was the conversation I wanted to have. "Sheera said you're looking for someone to take it over. She said you're renting it for six-hundred. I'd love to take that problem off your hands."

Mandy turned her head toward Mark. Mark grimaced. "Well, we own the apartment. So in the long term we're looking for someone to buy. And the six-hundred was just the rent we were going to ask from a friend of ours who needed a place to stay short term. But he found somewhere else..."

"I can do short term," I said. My voice sounded like it was coming from behind a closet door. "I just need to move... as soon as possible."

Mandy said, "It wasn't really Sheera's place to tell you this. I know you're friends with her, and we're friends with her..."

My ears were ringing loudly. I had trouble hearing the ends of their sentences. I had difficulty ending my own. It was definitely the pot. It had gone straight to my head. Everything

focused inward. I asked myself what the matter was. Sheera's face appeared in my conscious and I recoiled. I asked myself why I was afraid of Sheera. And to be honest, that's what it was. I wasn't afraid to have sex with her. I was afraid of *her*. It seemed irrational. I attempted to psychoanalyze myself through associative thought experiments. I identified memories connected to this fear, including but not limited to: The time we went for coffee and the Korean girl behind the counter gave us our drinks without even acknowledging us. "Thank you," I'd said. She didn't even look up. "I said, 'thank you'," I said. Then the girl acknowledged me. When we sat at the table, Sheera said, "That was embarrassing." Then there's the time we were at the crosswalk of a T-intersection. The through street was a one-way going left. A guy was waiting at the light of the perpendicular terminal street. His license plates were out of state. The SUV behind him started honking his horn to get him to make a left turn on red. I trotted over to the driver of the SUV and knocked on his window. "Stop honking," I said. I surprised him into compliance. "Thank you." I went back to the corner and waited for our crosswalk signal to change. "I can't believe you just did that," Sheera said. I expected congratulation, but no. "I'm so embarrassed." I demanded to know why. "I'm embarrassed for you," she said. Things Sheera's ashamed of: First, colonization. Second, me.

And now I was learning that Sheera was friends with idiots. This felt like an important clue to my puzzling fear. She'd associate herself with anyone, a doofus like Kay, a social retard like Kevin, a homeless like Jay, and some guy (or girl) who was into Cthulhu porn—that's right, his name was Dan. She had no discerning taste. She'd go to this kind of party. She'd take me to this kind of party. She'd blab things she wasn't supposed to.

I would not associate with just anyone. I wondered what her previous lovers were like. I was pretty sure this Jay person—the amorphous lump on the couch—was one of them. I felt

hesitant to have my face be adjacent to his and all the rest on Sheera's shelf of former lovers. Do I not have pride? Do I not have a sense of decency?

Sheera had reappeared. Even though my inner ear told me I was standing perfectly stable, I couldn't shake the conviction that I was dizzy. It sounded like the other three were talking but I had no idea what about. "I'm in trouble," I said. "I think I need to sit." My voice sounded quieter than ever, like from behind the door of a closet packed with snow. "I'm having trouble hearing."

"We better get you somewhere calm," Mark said. We walked down the steps. They were very careful about how I walked. I was walking fine. The front yard ended in a concrete ledge above the sidewalk. It was just right for sitting so I sat down on it. The three of them were talking about who the next person to move into their apartment should be. There was talk of continuing friendships post-relocation. They were talking to me, also.

"All I have to say is when you're married, don't cut off your single friends..." I said. I had a speech prepared. About how married people become boring and only become friends with other married people.

Mark interrupted me, or else he misunderstood that I was finished. "The thing about me," he said, "that you have to understand, is that I'm a very mercurial person." Mercurial. Just to make sure I heard him use the word, he used it again. "I have a mercurial personality. But I tend to select good people," he continued. "These are all good people. For example, you know you're with good people when they're with you now in your current state. They're there to take care of you. Life ebbs and flows in a mercurial fashion."

Sheera sat next to me now and talked about how she doesn't smoke pot or something and I tried to tell her about the last time I got this fucked up and how I find that people want to take care of you and they have to because when you say, "I'm ok," it's the exact same thing you say

whether you're actually ok or not. "So," I told her, "I have to give up and let people take care of me even when I'm fine because I understand they can't trust me. And fighting against it just makes it worse." I wasn't making sense even to myself.

To make me shut up, Sheera did the lunge and started to make out with me. When we came up for air, I thought it was finally time to leave this party. This had to be the most enjoyment either of us had had so far, right? This was probably my strategy all along, subconsciously. "What do you want to do later?" I asked.

She asked what I meant. She knew what I meant. "After the party?" She asked.

I shook my head. "After we leave right now."

"I'm uncomfortable," she said and stood up in front of me. She brushed cement chips off her ass.

I put my arm around her waist and pulled her toward me. Her boob was right at eye-level. Maybe she thought I was going to mush it into my face. I wouldn't deny there was a part of me all for it. That would've been nice. They were big fluffy pillows. I thought that if she were a little thinner she'd have awesome rockin' tits. I'm not actually that way, though. Really, I was in control of myself. I only pulled her closer. And any fascination I had with her breasts in that moment had only to do with wanting somewhere soft and quiet to lay my head. "I'm fine," I told her. "We don't have to stay out here. Let's go back to the party, then, if that's what you want."

I stood up and we walked back. "Yeah, we should go in and be social," she said. "It was awkward when you started kissing me in front of everyone. I think we drove them off. I wasn't sure how to tell you to stop."

Now wait just a goddamn minute, I thought. "I'm not taking full responsibility for that," I said. The lingering pot had reached cruising speed so I was winsome about it—one might say

“mercurial,” but what she said was fucked up. I hadn’t asked her to kiss me nor had I lunged on *her*. This wasn’t the first time we’d made out. She knew what she was doing. “Should we apologize to Mark and Mindy?”

“Mark and Mandy. They went home.”

If it weren’t for my high I’d have left then and there and never seen Sheera again. I was greatly vexed, but my vexation had sunk helplessly to the bottom of the ocean, miles below. My priorities were in an altered state.

“I know I saw Jay earlier. Let’s see if we can find him.” She said.

We were in the living room again. I’d found my comfort zone exactly as we were passing through its middle. “I’ll wait here. I’ll just slow you down. I’m fine, really.”

Sheera left me and I crossed my arms for comfort. Next to me punk-girl and some other young people were listening to punk-boy talk. “The thing you have to understand is that a person who enjoys doing wrong more than doing right will be happier than someone who doesn’t enjoy doing good to the same degree. That’s the lesson here. Literature itself is a collection of symbols and signs that do not exist in reality and therefore are beyond petty moral judgement.” I was fascinated by punk-boy’s face. His mouth masticated the air and made it scream bloody murder to the tempo of his tongue, teeth, and lips. He was much older than I’d thought. His face was smooth as if it were waxed clean of facial hair. But there were lines and pores that betrayed him. I guessed he must be over thirty. He continued. “The Marquis de Sade knew this and took it to the greatest extreme so that we here today would understand this. The fact that he is so disturbing is the very reason he is so important.”

Finally, I’d found an academic conversation I could take part in, and here in the most unlikely place: the middle of this room. “Yes! Yes!” I added to the excitement. “Sade! The crazy

man who continues to this day to inspire people to literally eat dick.”

Punk-boy squinted at me. “Have you *read* the Marquis?”

“I haven’t read him, but I’ve read about him.”

“Perhaps you should read him.”

I was elated. “I’ve read about him and that’s why I don’t need to read him.”

Punk-boy’s eyelids fluttered. “Do you take pride in being an ignoramus?”

I thought about it. “Your statement begs the question. I cannot say.”

Punk-girl said, “You two are hilarious. Want a beer?”

The mention of beer made me aware that I needed to pee and that it was becoming more urgent with the passage of time. I excused myself.

“I’ll hold on to one for you when you get back,” she called after me.

I went upstairs to the bathroom. Inside, the sink held a stagnant pool of water with a few hairs emerging like fine tentacles from the clogged drain. I stood above the porcelain toilet bowl, which was streaked with urine and hard water stains. I closed my eyes. The door opened and I quickly zipped up. It was punk-girl. “Sorry, I thought I locked it,” I said.

“You have to use the deadbolt.” She set the deadbolt. “What are you doing?”

“Peeing. I’ll only be a minute.”

“That’s not what it looks like you’re doing.” She came up to me. I thought what the fuck is going on. “I liked what you said earlier.”

“What did I say?”

“You destroyed my stupid boyfriend.” She bent close to me. “I want you,” she whispered—not to be quiet, but for effect. “Destruction is sexy.” Yeah, but whose destruction? She began to rub her leg against my inner thigh.

This was fight-or-flight. “What are you doing? Christ, how old are you? I’m at least old enough to be your uncle. You’re out of your mind.” I scooted to the other side of her.

“Ok, calm down. I won’t force myself on you. People do this at these parties all the time. There’s nothing weird about it.” She moved over to me.

I leaned backward against the counter and compressed my body to let her pass. She stopped in front of me again. “Look, I’d love to,” I said. I was uncertain. “But my girlfriend is here.” A small lie.

“So let’s not have sex.” She put her legs on either side of mine. Stunned compliance, that’s where I was. We started dry humping. “Is this sex?” She talked down to me like a grade school teacher would to a child. She obviously knew the answer and all I needed was to use my head and I’d see it, too. My hands were around her waist and her feet were locked behind me. “Our clothes are on. We’re not touching. I’d know if you were touching me.” I restrained my breath. She put her mouth closer to mine. She breathed herself into me. “Am I touching you? I can only feel your clothes.” Having sex is never as simple as people make it out to be.

I shook my head and pushed her off me. I was not going to dry hump this girl. Either have sex or don’t, I thought. Dry humping is goddamn stupid. “Look, some other time maybe. Right now I really have to empty my bladder.”

She thought the word “bladder” was funny. “Ok,” she said. “Don’t forget to lock the door behind me.” She closed her eyes so she couldn’t see me in order to hold back her laughter. It was the pot laughing.

The party continued without me while I recovered. Someone banged on the door and I got so keyed up I couldn’t finish. Then to my dismay the toilet didn’t flush but nearly overflowed. I looked for a plunger like a sailor does a bucket on a sinking ship. Fate was

merciful, though, and it stopped just in time. The door-banger's problem, now.

Outside the bathroom, from my vantage point on the stairwell, I saw the whole party as a transference of liquid. Beer from can to stomach. Spit from mouth to mouth. Sweat from body to air to lung. But the windows were closed, the drapes drawn, and now the toilet was clogged so the house would fill and fill without release. I barely set foot from the bottom stair when Sheera found me. Her expression demanded to know where I'd been. "I really had to pee," I said.

"I did not need to know that."

Punk-girl came up to us. "Here's your beer." I took it from her.

"Who's this?" Sheera asked me. Her tone was neutral.

I went slack jawed and then recovered by pretending to clean my teeth with my tongue.

"I'm Amy," Amy said.

"How do you know Peter?" Sheera said.

Amy looked at me like: Now I know your name. "We just met. He was talking to my friend. They were hilarious. Come on. I'll introduce you."

"Did you find Jay?" I asked. "I still haven't met Jay."

Sheera followed Amy. "I did," she said over her shoulder. "But then you weren't here and now I don't know where he's at."

Punk-boy, Sheera, and Amy, all participants congregated in common cause to undo me, veiling their machinations in the guise of conversation about Dr. Who. Punk-boy was clearly a sadistic pervert who salivated at the thought of cutting up softies like Sheera and he wanted me to see that. Sheera was trying to make me act out by flirting with him so she could shame me for it later. And Amy just wanted to keep the show going.

I was afraid again. I was afraid not of what I thought *might* happen but because I didn't

know what *would* happen. It wasn't that I'd now decided I definitely did or did not want to sleep with Sheera. I merely wanted to still have the choice.

The moment I'd been dreading came. Amy put her arm around the small of my back, needled her fingers under my shirt, and pincered my fatty waist with her fingernails. She knew exactly where and how to do it. It hurt like hell and I spurted out my beer. Most of it got up my nose and I contorted my face. A little bit of it got on punk-boy.

"What the hell," he said.

"Oh my God," Sheera said.

Amy stood with her hand over her mouth.

"What is your problem?" punk-boy said.

"I don't have a problem," I mumbled.

"Are you trying to piss me off?"

The thought hadn't occurred to me, but now that it had I said, "Are you trying to piss me off?"

I became acutely aware of a new sensation. It felt as though an angry wasp was trapped inside me and had stung the inside of my belly-button, and now I was imploding. Though I didn't recall it being there a moment before, I saw punk-boy's clenched fist recede from my navel. He'd punched me right in the bladder. In the time it takes to say 'bladder', he'd punched me again in the face. By comparison, it didn't hurt too much. And besides, he'd only hit my cheek. But now I really, *really* had to pee again. "Bathroom," I croaked. I had sunk to my knees. The room was silent except for the music. A couple of other men were holding punk-boy's arms. Another came and helped me up. He led me, to my chagrin, toward the upstairs toilet.

While I reacquainted myself with the facilities (this time I peed in the shower), punk-boy

had been expelled from the party. The violence had clearly been one-sided to all who witnessed. And violence was not tolerated here. I remained as victor without throwing a single punch. I won the battle by losing. Sheera awarded herself to me when I came back out. She asked if I wanted food. She took me outside to the porch again and left me standing by the grill. I assumed she went to look for Jay once more. I leaned against the wooden support. Kay was there cooking hamburgers. The meat sizzled. I stared at it unemotionally. "I'll be right back," Kay said. I guess he was talking to me. I was the closest person to him. It didn't feel like he was talking to me, though. "Watch this until I get back. I'll be quick." He said it loudly. I suppose anyone could have heard him. But again, who else could he have meant other than me? Was he one of those idiots who talks loud? A minute passed and a black woman came and added onions and a corn cob to the grill. More minutes passed and I watched as the onions shriveled. The corn cob burned to blackness on one side. The flames licked through the metal grill. Then the hamburgers were combusting. They united into one single flame. In the back of my mind I thought that someone should probably do something about this. Where had that idiot Kay gone off to? What sort of jackass leaves his grill unattended? No matter, the display was enchanting. A voice cried out and Kay, too late, ran to the grill shouting, "Shit! Shit! Shit!" He swat helplessly at the meat with his spatula. The flames rose higher. Someone smarter than him ran out carrying a blanket and threw it over the grill. The blanket caught fire. Then the roof awning caught fire. The house was catching fire. "Get the fire extinguisher!" people shouted. No one could produce it. I noted the fire extinguisher was underneath the grill. Someone had obviously thought of safety ahead of time.

The people on the porch retreated to the sidewalk. The people inside had not yet seen what was happening. But as the curious came out, the alarm increased. "Call 911," the people

outside said. A dozen cell phones called 911. The fire was getting hot so I, too, retreated to the sidewalk. From here one could see the whole front façade was in flames. The house was fucked. At this point, people were running diarrhetically from its orifices. A guy in a plaid shirt waved his arms in the front yard, “Someone help us get our stuff out!” No one moved. “Help me get my computer!” He turned and ran back inside alone. I guess he made it out.

There was nothing left for the party guests to do, so the crowd began to thin. People were going home, unable to endure the enormity of it all. Sheera came to my side. “Oh God, I can’t watch this. It’s so horrible. Poor Dan and Dave. It happened so fast. I can’t believe it.”

I turned to her. In the lurid light under the indigo evening sky it was impossible to think of her as real. Big, idolatrous tits surmounted by a hideous visage gilded in bronze makeup, a real primordial effigy, the incarnation of an ancient and forgotten Earth-goddess. How many men had been sacrificed to her? Burned at the alter? She was absolutely awful.

“Peter, I can tell you need someone. I don’t think you should be alone.”

How magnanimous of her. She was the only one of us now who couldn’t face the fire. She was the one who needed someone. People only need me when they need “someone.” I’m their rock bottom. How does that feel to know you’re someone else’s rock bottom? Does Sheera know? Maybe I want to feel that way about someone for a change. Where is my rock bottom? “No,” I said. “You still have work tomorrow. You better go home.” I returned my gaze to the burning house. The fire fed my desire for destruction and consumed it at once. It was self-correcting loathing.

The sound of sirens approached. Sheera squeezed my arm and then left me alone. As if on cue, Amy jogged up to me. “Wow,” she said. “I have never seen a burning building before. What the fuck happened?”

“I happened,” I said. It felt good to say so, to claim it, my greatest achievement, done by doing nothing.

Amy put her arm through mine. “This is so fucked up.” Now that her so-called boyfriend was gone, she no doubt needed a new place to stay. She’s a runaway just like me. I invite her over and she accepts. It’s an honest, equitable exchange, which is as close to a perfect world as I’ll get. She and I will fuck during the night and wake up the next morning with less blood than we had before. But for now we stand there watching the house burn down together, staring into the flames until the firemen and the police push us out of the way.

Perfect Stranger

That evening, Molly was going to a party she didn't feel like going to. She doubted the friends who'd invited her would be there. Why she thought they wouldn't be there she couldn't say because she had known and bought marijuana from them since high school. It was just a feeling. Why she was going anyway, though, had partly to do with the other day when her friend, Liz, had hurt her feelings. In order to motivate herself, Molly called Liz three times that afternoon and when Liz didn't pick up—as she rarely did—an incompetent sense of rivalry and a childish, fidgeting inability to sit still in her own body took over, and so she left her apartment because she had to.

She drove to the address in Palm Springs. The party was at an expensive ranch house. Cars occupied the driveway so she parked down the street. At the sidewalk she could hear the bass thump from inside. Signs with lights underneath said to go around back. By the side of the house were a couple of blue Porta Potties. At the back gate two young boys stood guard. The smaller wore a dapper purple shirt and the larger a muscle shirt. "Who are you?" the smaller asked.

"I'm friends with Dwayne and Roland. And Robert," she added.

"Cover's fifteen dollars."

Whatever, Molly thought and paid.

"Listen, this is my house and this is my club. You get to go to the club. You don't get to go to my house. You need a bathroom, look behind you. Patio is fine but pool is off limits. All the drinks, food, and the rest are compliments of me."

Molly went past him without a second glance. A floodlight illuminated the patio and the backdoor of the garage. Smokey, pungent, muggy air oozed out the entrance. The garage was a

place she'd never been before. Inside it was packed with bodies, too many for anyone to dance. Instead they were just pressed against each other, swaying. She didn't see anyone she knew and doubted her decision to come. Someone gave her a joint and a light, though, and she wormed away with it to smoke and stand against the wall. These kids were all underage. She was easily the oldest one here, twenty-five. *Never too young to feel old*, she thought, and then, *how lame my life is*. She had to stand up straight as someone pushed past her. She'd never done anything like this when she was eighteen. She decided now that she was lame then, too. When she started college, her first boyfriend had been twenty-three. A serious but boring graduate student. He talked too much and made it difficult to want to have sex with him. When he had confessed after their first time that he hadn't broken up with his girlfriend, she was relieved to let him go. It would have been better to have lost her virginity like this, she thought. Just be another stupid eighteen-year-old girl with a stupid eighteen-year-old boy, both virgins, music loud, no talking allowed. She'd missed her chance.

The two boys standing next to her started shouting a conversation. The newcomer looked at Molly and she recognized him. Robert, a skinny kid she used to babysit. He shouted something, smiled, and waved at her. She shouted back asking where Dwayne and Roland, her older friends, were, but Robert shrugged either not knowing or not hearing. Robert tried to tug the boy next to her into the center of the dance floor but he wouldn't go. Molly saw that the boy was getting angry and that Robert didn't notice. Robert left. The boy's anger made her feel awkward, like she might be seen as guilty by proximity. Getting high wasn't helping. She felt she had to acknowledge him so she passed what little was left of her joint over to him and he took a drag. It burned his fingers and he dropped it. He shouted, "Sorry." Molly looked at him dully. He shouted again something that sounded like, "Don't be mad," but his scowl made it more of a

warning, a warning that he'd be mad at her in return. An image of a cornered, wounded squirrel appeared in her mind and the absurd hilarity of it spilled out her gaze and disarmed him. He motioned her to follow him and he took her outside to the patio. Molly enjoyed the initial moment of comparative coolness. "Sorry," he said again. "Wait here and I'll get some more." He walked over to the kid in the purple shirt and they started arguing. The bouncer looked bored. Molly leaned against the garage wall and remotely took in their masculine energy. She liked it. It felt like the time she was walking someone's cat and she caught two people having shadowy sex through the thin drapes of their midnight window. It magnetized her, but unlike then, now she felt no barrier to joining in. She walked up to the two of them. The boy turned to her and said, "This place sucks."

"You're disinvited, asshole," the purple-shirt boy said.

"Don't worry about it. I have some weed in my car. Come on," Molly said. She walked past and knew the boy followed. Molly could smell his angry sweat and thought, *this is how boys become men*. What she said next could shape the course of this boy's whole evening. One comment about feeling hurt and he'd seize on it and take his own pain out physically on the other boy. Then the bouncer would probably step in. The thought that she *could* do that was enough, though. "I'd rather smoke outside anyway." It wasn't true; it didn't matter to her.

When they got to her car, though, Molly realized she'd left her pipe at home. "You don't have anything to roll with?" She asked.

He shook his head.

"I guess we can go back and see if someone has any."

"I don't want to go back there."

"Yeah." Molly leaned against the side of her car. "I guess I'll go home."

“Me too.” He walked away without saying anything more.

Molly sat in her car a moment playing with her keys. Then she started it and pulled away. She passed him walking down the street and stopped. She rolled down her window and asked, “Didn’t you drive?”

He shook his head.

“I’ll give you a ride.”

He got in her car.

“Where do you live?” she asked.

“Desert Hot Springs.”

“Are you crazy? You can’t walk that far. How’d you get here? Nevermind. I live there, too.” They drove in silence for twenty minutes. Out of the corner of her eye she caught him glancing at her curiously. She’d seen a movie once where a beautiful prince walked down a row of charming princesses in pastel dresses. Whomever the prince stood in front of as he paced down the line instantly stopped giggling and looked shamefully at her feet. Then she recalled that it had been a soft-porn film and that next the prince’s advisor lifted the front of the girl’s dress for the prince to judge the pattern of wetness on her panties. At that point, Molly had changed the channel. Now, whenever Molly turned her head to read a sign or check a stop, the boy looked out the window the same way the princesses had looked at their little feet. The comparison occupied so much of her mind as they drove that she thoughtlessly took the route for her apartment. When she pulled onto her street she said, “I forgot to ask where exactly you live.”

“It’s ok. Let me off here. I’ll walk.”

She pulled the car over. “We’re real close to my place. Why don’t we smoke and then you can walk home.”

“If that’s ok.” Then after a few seconds, once she was driving again, he said, “You’re not worried I might be a psycho?”

“You shouldn’t joke about that,” Molly said. “Don’t even remotely joke about hurting women.” But she felt it was really her friend Liz who said it.

Liz was Molly’s only friend from college whom she still saw semi-regularly and who, the other day, lectured Molly about relationships under the guise of complaining about a man whom she went on one date with but kept texting her. They sat outside a Starbucks.

“Maybe he just really likes you,” Molly said. “Is that so creepy?”

Liz put her hand to her mouth. “You don’t understand men. You’re so innocent.” Liz was a lawyer who volunteered for domestic violence services.

“Well, I wasn’t there...” Molly wanted to like Liz, which is why she kept meeting her when she could. She also wanted to think she was the kind of woman that Liz liked.

“I love that you can see things that way. I wish I could but I can’t because of what I’ve seen.”

“You’ve told me.”

“Yes, but you have to see it. Men are inherently violent. Sometimes I think the only way to stop it is to stop having children, have a moratorium on marriage until society changes. Men either want more sons, or want their daughters to marry so they can have grandsons. Just look at your dad. Isn’t that what he wants?”

“Don’t bring my dad into this.” Molly was annoyed and regretted ever sharing anything about her father with Liz.

Liz continued. “Boys are basically girls with penises. It’s too bad they have to become

men.”

Molly idly pressed her napkin into the table’s lattice.

Liz noticed and said, “So are you seeing anyone? Or still hanging with those burn-outs?”

Molly felt the criticism of Dwayne and Roland was secretly aimed at her. She feared that perhaps the only reason Liz spent time with her was so Liz could not only judge her for not being more like her but also so she could make Molly feel like she *couldn’t* be like her.

And so later that day when her friends invited her to the house party, she agreed to go.

Molly pulled up into the gravel yard of her apartment complex. The ground crunched under their feet as they walked around the side of the building. Molly’s keys jingled on her finger. One of the neighbors was shouting and could be heard through the bathroom window. Once inside her apartment, she pointed to the couch for him to sit down. She rummaged in the kitchenette and came back with her pipe and lighter.

He’d seen the litter box next to the fridge and asked, “Do you have a cat?”

“It’s not mine.” Molly plopped herself next to him. “I shelter cats for people who are out of town. Among other things. I think the cat’s probably hiding.” They smoked. “What’s your name, anyway?” she asked.

“My friends call me Bleed.”

“Really.” She exhaled.

“Not really. I don’t have any friends.”

“If you want to smoke my pot, you have to tell me your real name.”

“Stan. It’s short for Stanislaw.”

Molly laughed. She wouldn’t have normally, but she was already high again. “Now that’s

funny. You're funny when you don't try to be." She handed him the pipe and lighter.

"I wasn't ever trying to be funny."

"You were trying to be something when you made the rape joke. You're better when you're not."

He looked at her sidelong as he inhaled the smoke. He handed it back to her. "What's your name?"

She told him and asked, "So who invited you to the club?"

"Robert. I think you saw him."

Molly started laughing again. "That's who invited me, too."

"You laugh at everything."

"Because shit's funny. That club was hilarious. I was supposed to meet some friends there but I didn't see them."

"They disappeared."

"I didn't really want to go. I wanted to be here. Doing this."

"So why'd you go?"

"Because I didn't want to be doing this alone." And then Molly felt a surge of sobriety at what she said, like a cold gust of air had hit her in the face.

"You're weird."

"I am. Why'd you go to the party?" He didn't say anything but held onto the pipe.

Molly could see what he wanted written all over his body. She saw his mind didn't know how to say it, let alone recognize it. "Let me ask you something. Have you ever kissed a woman?"

He flinched. "Yes."

“When?” His answer had the tone of a technicality. She could imagine him as a six-year-old boy kissing a six-year-old girl. Molly giggled at the thought.

“I oughta go.” He got up and then turned away from her.

“No, no, seriously, I’m sorry. I’m not laughing at you. It’s the pot.”

“I’m going anyway.”

Molly got up. “Give me a hug before you go. I want to know you’re ok.”

He turned around but avoided her eyes.

“I thought you might punch that kid in the face. I was worried.”

When he hugged her she felt his erection through his pants. He let go of her but she didn’t quite let go of him. She waited for him to look her in the eyes and when he did she leaned in and kissed him. “Sit back on the couch with me. Unless you really have to go.” He didn’t know what to do and Molly was glad for it. No one had taught him to say or do things so he wasn’t capable of doing anything she wouldn’t like. His innocence was a blank sheet of paper on which she could draw or scribble whatever she liked. She could even tear it up into little pieces. And this made what she chose to write all the more meaningful and her care of the material all the more compassionate.

When Molly was younger her father told her she needed to know how to defend herself. He took her to the front yard and demonstrated. “If someone rushes you and you need to stop them, kick them above the kneecap here.” He kicked her carefully.

“That hurt.”

“See how it stops you? And the faster they come at you, the more it will stop them. Now you do it to me. I’m going to rush you.”

“Mom says only boys fight.”

“In the Israeli army both men and women fight. And this is what they teach you. I learned it from an Israeli.” He stepped back. “Now get ready to kick me.”

When she turned sixteen he sat her on the couch and told her she was old enough now that he knew she was thinking about boys. Her mother was out getting groceries. “Some day you will find yourself sitting like we are now, hopefully with someone you love and trust.” He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her towards him. Molly looked at the turned-off TV. “But the people you love and trust are also, statistically speaking, the most likely to hurt you.” He moved his hands around her neck. “If I squeeze my hands, Mol, you will not be able to breath.”

“This is stupid, Dad. Let go of me.”

“I will. But first I want you to take my hands and try to move them.”

She grabbed his hands by the wrists as he'd taught her but he tightened his grip. She gasped, “Daddy!”

He let go immediately. “I'm sorry. But you need to know what it feels like just in case so you can recognize it and not panic.” He put his hands back on her shoulders to keep her from getting up and storming out. “If a person has a grip around your neck, you're in a battle against time to break free before they strangle you. And if they're stronger than you, no amount of time will be enough. The best way to incapacitate an attacker is to hurt them back. Now I want you to reach up and grab my ear. Feel how it is. Just tug it a little.”

Molly got a firm grip and pulled hard on purpose. Her father cried out and she was surprised by how much his head jerked. “Well, that's the idea. If you put your strength into it, you can rip my ear off. No matter how strong a guy is, his ear's no tougher than yours or mine.”

“God, Dad.”

“It’s the most effective way to get someone off you. Better than going for the eyes. Having your ear ripped off hurts like hell. Furthermore, it’s a bleeding wound. Keep hitting it with your fist or anything else. Most attackers will give in to the pain. Make them want it to stop more than they want to hurt you.”

“I’m never going to use this.” And she never did. Looking back, she saw this, alongside the movies he picked to watch with her, as evidence that, before she was born, he’d really only thought of having a boy.

The next morning she didn’t feel anything like what she’d always felt in the past. In the past sex had always been uncomfortable. No matter how well she’d known a man before sleeping with him, afterwards his strangeness was revealed. He’d hide it until, through sex, it came out—sometimes it was a fetish, other times a personality quirk, but always something that ran against the grain of the exterior he’d presented to her. But with Stan she felt none of that. It felt like taking in a stray animal when she was a child.

He came out of her bedroom after she was already dressed and eating cereal. She asked him what he’d do today. He shrugged. “Don’t you need to study?” she asked.

“I guess.”

“What year are you?”

“Sophomore.”

“What classes are you taking?”

“Same as everyone else. English, math, biology, American government...”

Molly put her spoon down. “What school do you go to?” Then before he could answer she said, “How old are you?”

“How old did you think I am?”

She waited.

“Don’t be mad. You didn’t ask.”

“I just did.” But she could guess the answer now that it was no longer dark. “I’m not mad.”

“I’m sixteen this year.”

Molly looked back down at her bowl of flakes and started eating again.

“I wasn’t trying to trick you or anything. I didn’t know what to do. I was high. I would’ve told you.”

“It doesn’t matter.” As soon as she said it, she knew it was true. She didn’t care.

“Nothing’s changed.” In a way, it felt like an affirmation, like getting a hundred answers right in a row in *Trivial Pursuit*. She told him to come over again the next weekend and he did. And then the weekend after that.

Molly’s mother called. Her father’s doctor found an arrhythmia and sent him to the hospital. Molly felt numb all over. She drove there immediately. He looked weak and thin under the blanket. The good news, he told her, was they would only put in a stent. And then he demanded from her, “I haven’t seen you for so long. Tell me what you’re doing. Have you decided what you’re doing with your life yet?”

“I have a job, Dad.”

“Do you? Babysitting animals—cats—whatever it is? I still don’t understand. What about going to grad school?” Her father looked at her meaningfully.

Molly threw her hands up. “How am I going to pay for it?”

“I’ll help you.”

“I can’t believe this. You’re in the hospital and you’re doing this.”

“Molly, look at me. When we die, you’re going to be all alone in this world. How are you going to take care of yourself? We feel responsible for you.”

“Well, as a matter of fact, I’m seeing someone.”

Her father brightened. “We just want you to *be* someone,” he said.

I am someone, Molly thought. She made excuses and left. She passed her mother in the hall and made more excuses. Anything would do so long as she could leave.

A few days later Liz invited her to eat lunch at a nice little sushi restaurant with a stereotypical Japanese soundtrack. Liz told Molly about her last encounter. It was with an artist who took her to a gallery showing in Los Angeles. He knew some of the artists whose work was displayed and complained that art only lived in the instant it was made and that all this was dead shit. He was a performance artist.

“What did you say?” Molly asked.

“I agreed it was shit.” They laughed at this conceited man and his petty jealousies. Then Liz said, “We should be lesbians, Molly. That would make things so much simpler.”

Molly shook her head. “Why do you keep dating men?”

“Because I want to have sex.”

“You don’t need a man for that.”

“Like what? A dildo? Not for me. I can’t make a dildo feel ashamed of itself. It hasn’t done anything to feel ashamed of. I can’t make it feel what it’s like to be scared. I can’t make it feel what it’s like to be a woman sometimes.”

“And how is that?”

“You know in those war documentaries where they describe men dying in pain on the battlefield and they’re already half-gone and they call out for their mothers? That’s how I want to make men feel.”

They were silent for a minute until Molly said, “Well I’ve finally found the right person for me. He doesn’t know how to do anything wrong.”

“Who is he?”

“A boy I met a party.” Molly savored this chance to flaunt in front of Liz for once.

“What’s he do?”

“He’s in high school,” Molly said. It was nothing.

Liz raised an eyebrow and said slowly, “You’re dating an eighteen-year-old?”

“He’s almost sixteen.”

Liz frowned. “You’re being serious with me.”

“What’s the big deal?”

“Jesus Christ, Molly, you know what the big deal is. It’s illegal. You could get in trouble. Are you seriously not fucking with me?”

“Lots of things are illegal. Smoking pot’s illegal. I think you’re being kind of hypocritical...”

“That’s a bad analogy.”

“...And pot *is* legal in some states.”

Liz bent forward and lowered her voice. “And sex with a minor can get you registered as a sex offender in others. I’m talking about this state. Here. Now.” She tapped the last two words on the table.

“Well then it’s a stupid law. People break the speed limit all the time. I’ve slept with men ten years older than me. So have you.”

“You’re being facile. Molly, the world doesn’t work this way; the world isn’t fair.”

“Why are you suddenly turning on me?”

Liz sat back and was quiet. The waiter came and took their plates. Finally Liz asked, “What’s his name?”

Molly shook her head. “I’m not going to tell you.”

After her dinner with Liz, Molly just wanted to get high and cool off. Since she shared with Stan, though, she’d already run out of marijuana. She went to Dwayne and Roland’s house to get more. Roland opened the door and let her in. The carpet was dirty as usual and in the corner, tied to one of the kitchen chairs, sat Robert. He was wearing cheap panties and a bra like they sold at Walmart. He didn’t make eye contact with her but stared ahead blankly. “Is this a bad time?” Molly asked.

“Don’t worry about Robert.”

“Why’s he tied up?”

Roland looked at Robert. Without looking at Molly, Robert recited, “I know what I did and I graciously and willingly submit myself to this penance.”

“How long you going to keep him that way?” Molly asked.

“In time all things pass,” Robert said.

“*Time brings all things to pass,*” Roland corrected. He guided Molly into the back kitchen.

Behind them, Robert recited, “Time brings all things to pass.”

Dwayne sat at the table with his laptop and an empty pizza box. “You come to hang out?”

Molly shook her head. “Actually, I need to buy more.”

“Well, I guess we can do that.” He got up.

Roland leaned against the stove, which needed cleaning. “So Molly, what’s new?”

“I’m tired. That’s what’s new.”

“Robert tells us you’re fucking his little friend.”

“Geeze, I had no idea you liked them so young,” Dwayne said.

“What do you know.” Molly’s voice went flat.

“I just told you. Unless you got more to say.”

They were mocking her. She felt betrayed by it. “I didn’t come here to be interviewed. I don’t have to buy pot from you, you know.”

“And I don’t have to fucking sell it to you. That weed I sold you before I could have easily sold to that kid in Palm Springs. I did that for you. So show some fucking gratitude and respect.”

“Like you showed when you invited me to a party you didn’t go to?”

“Christ,” Roland said. “Don’t get uppity with us. We’re your friends.”

You’re burn-outs like Liz said, she thought. Not that Liz was much of a friend either.

“Actually, I’d like to go ahead and get an ounce.”

“Oh you’d like?” Dwayne said bobbing his head. “You got that kind of money on you?”

“You have PayPal. We can do it that way, right now.”

“You’re the boss, applesauce.”

That night Molly got so high she couldn’t get up from her couch. She thought her

neighbors were playing music until she realized it was the hum of the refrigerator mingling with a ringing in her ears that sounded like techno. She felt like the world was getting farther and farther away from her, receding on a cool tide of air. She picked up her phone and stared at it for several minutes. Then set it back down. She did it twice again not sure if she meant to call her father and see how he was feeling, to call Liz and explain, or to call Dwayne and Roland and reconcile. She decided it was to call Stan. His phone rang, the buzz from the speaker changed the repetitious melody in her head. When he answered she said, "I forgot what I was going to say. Come over."

"I can't," he said. "My parents."

"Sneak out. It's easy. Wait for them to fall asleep."

"Ok. Are you high?"

"I'll be up. Just come in the door." He was about to hang up and she said, "Wait. Tell them you're going to study with a friend and spend the night."

"Who do I tell them?"

"I don't know. Isn't Robert your friend? Make something up. Give them my number to call if you want."

"What if they say no?"

"Then sneak out."

She sat there and waited, listening to the song in her head. Finally she figured out the melody was from the intro to "Summer Breeze". And now the rest of the song started playing. When he got there she told him to undress her. "I don't think I can do it myself." Although not as clumsy as the first time, he still touched her in a straightforward way which, against her tingling body, tickled and made her laugh. After he came, he got high with her and they watched videos

of edited Hannah-Barbara cartoons set to old pop songs. The cast of He-Man sang “Bohemian Rhapsody”. GI Joe performed “In the Navy”.

“I didn’t know GI Joe was so old,” he said.

She drove him to school the next day. Since she had to go to work, they arrived before anyone else.

For convenience, Molly gave him a spare key and let him leave in the mornings after she left and come over before she got back from work. There was a long week in October when they didn’t see each other. He’d been suspended for smoking on school grounds and she thought it best he stay away until it blew over. Then she took a week off to go with her parents and visit relatives in Anaheim. But she arranged on her first day back to pick him up after school so they’d have time to drive somewhere.

She pulled into the school’s short-term parking and found him. She sent him a text message. He looked over at her car. He didn’t come immediately but waved at her—was he waving her over?—and stood with his friends. She delayed a moment. Pulling into the loading lane would be annoying, and she didn’t like the idea of mixing with these kids. In the daylight many of the younger ones looked like children. She decided he had waved her over, though, so she pulled up next to him and rolled down the passenger-side window. “Let’s go,” she said, not meaning to sound peevish but sounding so anyway. She felt embarrassed by this un-cool tone.

One of the boys asked, “Who’s that, Bleed?”

“My tutor,” he said.

Another boy looked at him meaningfully. “The *love* tutor?”

“Shut up,” he said. He hit the boy in the shoulder.

Geeks, Molly thought. *His friends are lame*. A car behind her honked. "I need to move this car," Molly said.

"Can I get a tutor?" one of the boys said to her. Molly didn't look at him. She kept her eyes on Stan.

"One sec," he said to her and waved that same wave again, the one from a moment before, only now Molly decided it was dismissive. He said something inaudible to them. The blood in her heart seemed to congeal at the bottom like lead. Then he said, "See you guys later." In the space of time before he turned to get in the car, she imagined him winking at them. She started to pull away before he'd closed the door.

"Hey," he said. He buckled his seatbelt.

Molly now wished she'd driven away and not let him in. She wanted to stop and tell him to get out, but the steady press of exiting traffic wouldn't allow. Then she tried to calm down. She told herself he wasn't even sixteen and so anger wasn't the right approach. She needed to reason with him. Teach him. "I don't want you talking about me that way ever again," she said.

"What way?"

"The way you did back there. That was not cool."

"But that's how we always talk. And they're my friends."

"They're not very good friends." But he was right. She said lots of stupid things during foreplay when she was high, like her other lovers had said to her. And what was their excuse? She had to forgive Stan. He didn't know better. "That's how we talk but it's just for us. If you tell other people, it ruins it."

"So what are you saying? That you're not my girlfriend?"

"Of course I'm your girlfriend. But there's a way to talk to people about your girlfriend

and there's a way not to. That was not the way."

"Teach me?" he said. He reached over and ran the back of his hand down her cheek. The upcoming crosswalk light started blinking its little red hand and she accelerated to enter the intersection before the light turned yellow.

Stan came over almost every day now. Molly began to think he wasn't going to school between when she left for work and when she came back. She wondered what his parents thought. One morning she insisted on taking him to school even though he said he could walk. Then, when she drove back that afternoon, she saw several boys fighting in an empty dirt lot. She caught a glimpse of a blue shirt and felt dread settle over her. She pulled over, turned on her blinkers, and stalked up to the crowd. There were four boys. One was on top of the other while the other two kicked occasionally and shouted, "Bleed the freak!" She started running. She pushed one boy from behind and then crouched down over Stan, putting her back between his head and the other boys' blows. They stopped.

"Fuck off," Molly shouted.

"This is none of your business, bitch," one said.

"I called the police," Molly lied.

"This isn't over. It'll never be over," another said. "Don't ever talk to my sister again."

They retreated.

Stan's lips were bleeding and his eye was swollen shut. He pushed Molly away. "Let me go. I don't want your fucking help," he said.

"Tell me who they are."

"No. Let me go home." He started walking towards Molly's apartment, it was only a few blocks away. She stood and watched him, but he never looked back at her. She returned to her

car, drove to the grocery store, and bought packs of ice.

Back at her apartment he smoked sullenly and refused to talk. She held the ice against his head while he ignored her. “You might need to see a doctor,” she said. He spent the next few days sleeping on the couch, getting blood on it, sometimes too stoned to get up. She cooked in the evenings for him and bought junk food for him to eat while she was out.

She took in another cat to take care of while the owners went to Los Angeles. It was an overweight Maine Coon whom she had been warned had frequent hairballs. She knew, however, that the cat just needed brushing. She did her regular rounds helping owners, both present and absent, administer medicine and anti-depressants to their animals. Molly was experienced and efficient and did what the owners couldn’t bring themselves to do. The third day after the Maine Coon arrived, she came home and couldn’t find it. “Where’s Munchy?” she asked Stan.

“I don’t know. Hiding?”

Molly called the cat, looked under the bed, behind the couch, in the closet. “Where’s the cat, Stan?” He sniffed and rubbed his nose. She began to panic. “Is the cat ok, Stan? This is important. Stan?”

Stan put his hands together in his lap. “He ran out on me before I could stop him. I chased him, but he went under a fence. He probably ran home.”

“Fuck!” Molly walked to the kitchen sink and put her hands on the counter. “Oh, fuck! Did you *look* for him? Where’s the fence? What fence? We have to find the cat right now.”

“Don’t you think it went home?”

Molly turned and glared at him. “It’s not a dog, Stan.”

“I’m sorry. It’s not my fault. He ran out when I came home.”

She was at the door but he hadn’t yet gotten up. “Help me,” she ordered.

He shuffled after her and they searched the neighborhood. With each hour she spent more energy making him help her than she spent searching.

“Maybe we should make signs,” he said.

Molly couldn't take it anymore. She rubbed her temples with her hand. “I can't believe you're so stupid.” When she took her hand away he was crying. She resisted the urge to take it back. “We'll start looking again tomorrow as soon as I get back. It would help if you looked in the meantime. I have to find that cat, Stan. This is my job. Do you understand?”

He nodded.

“I'm not mad.” Really, she'd never been angrier in her life. “But I don't want to find you high when I get back.”

When she came home the afternoon the next day, an envelope was taped to her door. She took it and went inside. Stan was gone. She opened the envelope and read the note inside. It said: *Stay away from our son or we will call the police.* Molly walked around her apartment. She picked up the empty bag of potato chips on the coffee table. She washed the dishes in the sink. Then she sat down on the couch and sniffed wetly. Scalding tears mingled with sweat and dropped onto her white blouse, a growing little shadow.

On Wednesday, she waited for Stan outside his school, down the road a ways. When he came out, she watched him get in a car. She waited until the car passed and then she followed it for a few miles down residential streets. It pulled into a one-car garage and Molly pulled up behind it. Stan's mother got out and Stan stood behind her, in the shade of the garage. “You get off my property right now,” the mother shrieked.

“Please,” Molly said, “I need to talk to you, to both of you.”

“I'm going to call the police.” She pulled out her phone.

“Mom,” Stan pleaded.

“You have to understand,” Molly said, “I love Stan. We’re in love. He’s an adult and you should treat him like one.”

“Shame on you,” his mother said. She rushed Molly. Molly tried to step away but the woman grabbed her hair. Molly kicked her in the knee cap and she went down on the pavement. Molly stepped back. Stan bent down to pick his mother up.

“Stan, I mean it,” she said. “We can fix this. We just have to talk.”

“Please go away,” he said. “You fucked up my life.”

Molly tried to give Stan time. In the meantime, Munchy’s owners came back. She drove to their house with the empty carrier and told them she’d lost the cat the way Stan had told her. They were furious and their anger only grew more intense at her dull, uncaring response. Molly gave them as much time to belittle her as she felt she owed them and then abruptly got in her car and went home.

She felt very tired. She called Stan multiple times each day but he’d blocked her number. Or his parents had disconnected his phone. She waited outside the school again a week later, wearing sunglasses, her car parked even farther away. She didn’t see him. Finally she saw Robert leave the school and followed him. He didn’t have a car so she followed on foot. When they were a safe distance away from other people she called to him. “Have you seen Stan?” she asked.

“Who?” he said.

“You know who.”

“I don’t know anyone named Stan.”

“Bleed. Have you seen Bleed? His real name’s Stanislaw.”

He paused.

“I’m not fucking around here, Robert.”

“I could get in trouble if I told you.”

“Then don’t tell me. I’ll give you fifty bucks if you let me use your phone right now.” He gave it to her and she called his number. It hadn’t been disconnected. When he answered she said simply, “It’s me. Something important has happened. I can feel it.”

There was a long silence and a man’s voice said, “I know who you are. We warned you.” And then he hung up.

Molly felt herself going limp. Her arms fell to her side. She started walking towards her car. “My phone,” Robert said. He ran up to her and she dropped it in his hand.

At her apartment she sat on the couch and smoked. She fell asleep sitting up. When she woke up her pipe was still in her hand and she relit it. Someone knocked on her door. She thought she heard it anyway. Her phone rang, making little hiccough sounds. Once she steadied it in her hand and looked at it she saw it was Liz. *Strange*, she thought and answered it. Liz invited her to have coffee at a gourmet coffee shop that had opened in San Bernardino. Molly demurred. “You ok?” Liz asked.

“I don’t think I want to be friends with you anymore.”

Liz said something but Molly put the phone down. She began to giggle uncontrollably and then had a coughing fit. Once her breathing was back under control she felt an honest sense of accomplishment. Minutes or hours later, the phone rang again and this time it was her father.

“Hi, Dad,” she said.

“Do you know why I’m calling?”

“Nope. Can I have a hint?”

“A man came by the house looking for you. It was a process server.”

“Yeah. I’ve made a mess.”

“I told him I didn’t know where you were. Where are you?”

“On my couch.”

“You sound sick. Are you ok? I don’t know what’s going on, but I don’t think you should be alone right now. I’m going to come pick you up. Will you answer the door?”

“Just come on in.”

“You’ll be ok, do you hear me? Whatever’s happened, it’s not your fault.”

“Yeah, I know Daddy.”

He repeated for her to wait for him several more times before hanging up. Molly leaned back into the couch. It felt like it didn’t truly catch her. She was falling backwards into it, ever slowly. Her body tingled. It was as though her skin was trying to crawl away, like she’d become a stranger and it was confused, looking for what had happened to her, where she went. She kept smoking. She lost track of the seconds between hits. She forgot whether she’d lit the lighter when she inhaled. Her heart beat to a dull doom. The room filled with smoke. She felt the blast of a shockwave and the world returning to her.

Lost Pencil

When I recall the things I've lost, I tend to think about objects from my childhood. Like the gold Krugerrand my grandpa gave me when I was seven and which I immediately lost—I knew just enough by then to know not to tell my parents. I found it again when I was ten while idly exploring the deepest crevices of the couch, beyond the normal cushions. What joy I felt. I vowed never to lose it a second time and put it in a special place, not with all the other hundreds of international coins in my coin collection box, but somewhere special, and now, totally forgotten. This is a lesson I still struggle with today. Don't put things in special places. Put them where they belong.

Instead of things I've lost, I'd rather remember something I'd lost that I reclaimed. The Kruggerand comes close, but I recovered it by mistake. I may yet recover it again by the same means. But this is different. I had this grey pencil with pink stegosaurus on it that my next-door neighbor gave me when I was twelve. I kept it on my desk at home even after he moved away. It was the sort of thing I was a little too old for—and he was a little too old for it, too, which is one reason he gave it to me. One morning my freshman year of high school, I needed another pencil since yet again my old one had been stolen from me on the bus. I shouldn't have accepted my friend's pencil, but what can I say? It's one of those poor decisions you make at 7:00 in the morning before you've had a chance to eat your blueberry muffin. I lost it. Then, a week later, I saw John Rider “boobifying” his French book in class (that is drawing little dots inside all the double-o's and make-shift torsos where space permitted).

I told him it was my pencil. He said how did I know. Why would *I* lie about a pencil?—(and yeah, I know *he* would). I told him it was my pencil and I told him to give it to me. He refused. I wasn't popular at school. I was ridiculed behind my back for wearing Hawaiian shirts.

I was still a kid. I liked Hawaii. Of course I wore Hawaiian shirts. I followed Rider out of the classroom to his locker. That's my pencil. Give it to me. I was not plaintive. But there was only one acceptable outcome for me. That pencil was nothing to him. It meant something to me. Every time he touched that pencil, it was like he was touching my friend, polluting our past. I wouldn't tolerate it. I would follow him to the ends of all the hallways in all the horrible high schools of Earth in as many Hawaiian shirts as necessary just to get his hands off of it. And as much as John Rider and people like him enjoyed humiliating me and stealing my pencils, they'd realize that even they sometimes wanted to be left alone and just go to school. But I would be there every day at his locker to say give me my pencil and nothing he or anyone else did to me would make me go away. I didn't say this. I felt it. And he felt it, too, so he said fine, it was just a pencil and gave it back to me. You know, he told me, the sound of your voice is the most annoying sound in the world. That's why no one likes you. But I had the pencil.

My freshman year I had no real friends. Actually, throughout high school my friendships would be perfunctory and cursory. But my next door neighbor, who had moved away the year before, was my friend. He was my best friend. He was a year younger than me, though two years behind me in school. My parents were the kind who enrolled their kid in school a year early. When I was ten, we stuck leafy branches in our butt cracks and ran around the back yard shouting I'm a peacock, I'm a peacock! He then upped the ante and ran naked through the front yard. I'm a peacock, I'm a peacock! I've never done that with anyone since. A few years later, we started to build a shared fort along our back fence. We fought sometimes. The day before he told me he was moving, we'd fought. His parents told him to make up with me. The news was too important. They called my parents and my parents didn't tell me anything but made me go outside. So I put a flashlight in a jack-o-lantern and laid it on the fence scaffold (finishing the fort

before he left would become our goal for the rest of the year). He came out to see me. That's when he gave me the pencil. He gave it to me on his own. It wasn't a birthday gift paid for by his parents. It was just one of those dumb objects that pass between people. I knew he picked it because stegosaurus had been his favorite. I still have that pencil somewhere, though I've forgotten where it is.

I imagine that pencil's probably at the bottom of a box in my parents' furnace room along with the rest of my childhood, its tip broken off. Cliché, yes. But no matter, I now have my own children in front of me doing what-I'll-never-know, passing bits of nothing that mean everything.

One Size Fits All

I went with my dad to buy a bookshelf at the local furniture outlet. I must've been thirteen. It was one of those chores my dad would justify dragging me along on as "building character"—but whatever, I loved my dad. At the checkout, the cashier asked if we'd also like to buy an Allen wrench. My dad made a queer look and said no.

When we got home, none of my dad's Allen wrenches worked. "That's funny. It's a European company but they're using American sizes." But then his set of American wrenches didn't fit either.

"Didn't you buy a wrench when you were there?" Mom asked. How did she know?

Anyway, you could hear the thoughts come together in my dad's head like two cymbals crashing. "Pack it up, son. We're going back."

At the store my dad demanded a refund. "Was there a problem?" the help desk asked.

"Yeah, your sockets don't fit any of my wrenches."

"You didn't purchase a wrench at the checkout?"

"No. I *have* wrenches. Why would I buy your goddamned wrench? If your furniture doesn't fit any of my wrenches, then I want my money back."

"I can offer you store credit on another item."

"I don't want your store credit and I don't want your wrench. I want my money back."

The manager arrived. "Sir, allow me to give you a complimentary wrench. I apologize for the miscommunication on our part when you purchased your item."

Yeah, I thought, free wrench. Take that you bastards. Dad took the wrench and I carried the bookshelf back to the pickup. It was late afternoon. We fastened our seatbelts and I said, "We won, Dad."

He didn't look at me and turned the key in the ignition. The air conditioner blasted on filling the cabin with the smell of Freon and dry sweat. "No we didn't," he said. "We never even stood a chance."

A Foolish Old Woman Gets Her Revenge

It was the start of the rainy season and Noriko was worried about the cats. She was a foolish, old woman who, although only just turned seventy, had nevertheless not aged well. She sat most days on the porch of her home, which had been like many others once on her block but was now the only one. Her yard was divided by a straight path, which had been five walking strides long, but now had become twice as many, bent prematurely as she was by osteoporosis and with knees that had frayed from years of proper sitting. The path led to the wooden gate. The gate formed the mouth of the cinder block wall enveloping her yard and home. To the left of her gate, an old, beetle-infested plum tree grew and stretched its branches over the wall giving shade to passerby—as Noriko saw it—and making a mess of the sidewalk. To her right, buried under weeds and dirt, somewhere remained the concrete basin of a Koi pond. In the corner, mossy rocks that had once overhung the basin now lay like odd, left-over rubble. Noriko was unfazed by these changes over time. She saw the plum tree as simply waiting for the day it would be pruned and restored and for the insects to move on. The pond only needed to be dug back out and filled with water and it would be as it had been. And the new apartment buildings that couched her property... since they had been built up so quickly it would take even less time to take them back down. Nothing changes that can't be changed back, she thought. This was the only wisdom she had.

Noriko had one son. Whenever the son thought of his mother now, he thought of her the same way as everyone else. He thought, what a foolish old woman; where did I ever come from? A troubling question for anyone, but he did not trouble with it often.

Her husband had died when the son was twenty-five. Her husband had retired from his busy job, received a retirement bonus, and then realized he would be spending the rest of his life

sharing a house with a complete stranger. And it was this—not the years of long hours, heavy drinking, and heavy smoking—it was all this time spent in a house with someone he didn't know anymore that led him to his rapid decline. He caught pneumonia and succumbed before he or Noriko knew he needed a doctor. That had been twenty years ago. At least he had the good sense to die when he had nothing left to live for, unlike Noriko.

This was the first year she'd become acquainted with a neighborhood cat. The mother cat had given birth under the foundation of the house to three kittens. Noriko had spent the spring months watching the kittens grow and play; and she'd named the tortoiseshell mother Peach, the yellow-white piebald Leo, the yellow tabby Spring, and the tuxedo Coco; but she could not yet coax even one of them into her house and that was why she worried about them now, at the start of the rainy season, on this first day of rain.

The rain wasn't heavy, but it would be eventually. Today it hardly made a sound, but she knew it was there because of the way the puddles rippled in her yard. When it stopped it was time to go shopping. Noriko couldn't carry much so she shopped often. She like to shop and did so completely unaware of the trouble it caused for everyone involved. She flattered herself thinking that she was independent. Really she just slowed down everyone else. She should have paid someone to do it for her.

The weather was hot despite the rain and the clouds covered the sky. It hadn't been this hot in the past summers, but over the decades high rises had risen in the south blocking the cool summer sea breeze, replacing it instead with the hot exhaust of air conditioners. So it was hot and she wore her yukata. Behind her house ran a canal. She preferred the path that followed it. Fewer people walked the path than the residential street in front of her house, so she didn't feel

obliged to move out of anyone's way. Her selfishness in this case was a convenience to all. The canal path ended in a torii gate and a Shinto shrine. The shrine's courtyard was never locked and there were no regularly attendant priests or clerics. It was just a typical local shrine, though it had an ablution pavilion which was unusual for a shrine of its modest size. Noriko walked through the courtyard and under a second, larger torii gate that faced a busy street. The canal ran under the street, emerged again, ran under the train tracks, emerged again, and then joined the Edo river. Another block up this busy street was the station and across from the station, on her side of the street, was the Itoyokado supermarket. This was where she now headed. She was going to buy tuna. The cats liked the tuna, even if they didn't like her. Of course, Noriko was oblivious to the latter.

In the market, it was not yet busy. The day was still early enough that people had not come home from work. Later the music would change to a marching band soundtrack and people would flock in to take advantage of the sale hour. But now there were few people present. An old man who'd come to buy nothing saw Noriko and followed her. Noriko didn't see the strange old man, but he knew her.

The old man followed Noriko out the store, down the busy street, through the shrine, along the canal, and when she turned inside her yard to close the gate she faced him finally for the first time. "Good day," she said.

"You have cats," he said.

"That's so." She smiled. "Aren't they cute?" At the moment, she could only see Spring but one of the other kittens was surely nearby.

"Cats are no good." He frowned openly and sucked through a gap where he was missing an upper canine tooth. "They have bugs. And they kill pigeons."

Noriko closed her eyes cheerfully. “They’re only kittens. Their mother cleans them every day. And I give them food so they’re not hunting pigeons.”

“I don’t like them. They’re no good.”

When she opened her eyes he was already leaving. “That’s not the case,” she called after him.

He waved his hand and continued. She could barely hear him say, “It would be good if they died.”

Noriko had never seen this man before. He entered the three-story apartment building next to hers. Then she could hear him stomping up the metal stairs on the far side. She looked up at the windows on the side of the building facing her property. She hoped his room did not belong to any of these windows, but indeed it did. What silly conflicts old people create for themselves.

No one Noriko saw now knew her when she was young. Those neighbors had all sold their property to apartment builders and moved away about the same time her husband passed. Most of her neighbors now were tired office ladies, exhausted salary men, beleaguered housewives, and the occasional uncrushed but sullen college student. “Good day,” she’d say as they passed her property.

“Good day,” they’d reply.

“Doing well?” she asked if they didn’t hurry away in time.

“I’m doing well. And you?” they’d have to reply.

“I’m doing bit by bit,” Noriko would say. And this was a foolish thing to say because that’s not what people say in Tokyo or Kanto, regardless of whether they’re from Tokyo or Kanto

originally. Noriko was born in Kyushu where they did occasionally say that, but she should have known how out of place “bit by bit” sounds. It would be better to say, “I’m also doing well.” There was no need to be provocative like the people on talk shows. This also her husband thought before he passed. But again, he was wiser than her.

She saw the strange old man again a few days later. She returned from shopping and saw him crouched in front of her gate with his back turned. She paused a moment. She could hear him coaxing one of the cats. She thought her memory of their previous conversation must be mistaken as he sounded so sincere in his appeals. But then he became aware of her and rushed off before she could say anything.

The rain picked up again. The second typhoon of the month was approaching. Though it wouldn’t hit the land, it still brought torrents of rain. When the torrents stopped, Leo was missing. Noriko sat on her porch again and asked passerby if they’d seen the kitten. It was a strange thing to ask strangers, especially when they already thought she was strange and foolish. But she had no sense. One young woman was slightly more patient and asked Noriko for more detail. Afterwards, she said, “Oh did you not hear about what happened at the shrine?”

Noriko said no.

“There was a dead cat in the purification font. They’ve covered it for now.”

“But the kittens never got that far,” Noriko said.

“Some people say someone did it deliberately. Cats hate water.” Then the young woman looked around for escape. She saw Noriko was upset. If Noriko possessed more wisdom and perception she would have known better than to press her problems on people who already had their own.

Later the same day the strange old man passed, his head at just the right height to seem to be bouncing along the top of the concrete wall. Noriko watched him intently. He stopped under the plum tree and pretended to admire it for a moment. Of course he wasn't actually. The tree was sickly. "Old lady, how many cats did you say you have?"

"Four," she replied. "One has gone off somewhere, though."

"Indeed," he said. He pulled a leaf from the plum tree and left.

Noriko felt afraid. She tried again to coax the cats into the house with the smell of fresh processed fish but they would not come. They waited knowingly until she relented and put the can of tuna in the yard.

The next morning the sun appeared intermittently beyond the gathering clouds. When Noriko went to her porch she found the body of Coco, hair matted and clumped, body stiff and covered in a film of dirt. Spring and Peach were next to the body and sniffing it but when Noriko stepped outside, they fled. Noriko choked back a sob. She was a thoughtless woman. She cried now more at this dead kitten than she had when her husband died or when, any given year, she'd called her son on his birthday and he didn't answer.

She knew it had to have been the old man. She wrapped the corpse in some paper towels, put it in her bag, and resolved to go to the police. She walked to the super market and then crossed the street. Under the station stairs in the taxi roundabout, stood the police box. She slid open the door and a young officer said, "Good day."

"I'd like you to arrest someone," she said.

"What's the matter?"

"He killed a kitten." She pulled out the wrapped remains and put them on the plastic

counter over the city map.

The young officer recoiled a moment from the putrid smell and an older officer came in from the back. He put his hand on the young man's shoulder and moved him aside. "Did you see it take place?" he asked.

"No. But he told me he would do it. And then he did."

"I see. Please, leave this here." He gently folded the paper wrapping back into place. "We'll take it as evidence. Tell me your contact information." He nodded to the younger man to take notes.

"Usual form?" the young man asked.

"Use your notepad."

"Of course," the young man said finally understanding.

When she returned home she took down the phone number of the management company for the old man's building and called them.

"One of your tenants killed a kitten," she said.

"I think you're mistaken. Pets aren't allowed."

"He lives in your building. He killed a kitten. It wasn't in the building. I thought you should know this."

"Do you know this person's name?"

"No, but he lives in your building. I think his room faces my property. I thought you should know what kind of person lives in your building. Maybe you will want to do something."

"I'm sorry. However, I'm not sure we can do anything."

"Maybe you should put up a sign saying this sort of behavior will not be tolerated."

"Yes, of course. We can do that."

Noriko did not wait for the company to put up a sign, though. If she had waited they might have. But the sign they would have put up would simply have reminded tenants that pets were not allowed. Instead of waiting, Noriko wrote on some stationary: *The person who kills cats, can it be said is human?* It was a preposterous thing to write. What makes humans different from animals is the capacity for language. Her sign answered the question by asking it. She found some old adhesive tape. The edge of the roll was covered in dust. She went to the building next door and taped her silly sign on the entrance.

Another day passed without incident and Noriko had begun to hope things had taken effect. She had not seen the strange old man. She indulged the thought that the building managers had discovered him, that he had violated one of the codes by killing a neighborhood animal, and so evicted him. She indulged the thought that the police had discovered him and after some pointed questions, he'd confessed to his wrongdoings and so been taken away. She indulged the thought that his family found out and so this had brought them shame. It was a windy day and then the wind calmed, and then it was the next day and it rained and rained.

Noriko watched the news. The well-dressed anchors talked calmly of subway flooding. Live images showed the subway cars slogging through the flood waters. Now the subways weren't running, the well-dressed people on television said. Then there were more pictures. The waters of the Edo were rising. Footage played showing a blue tarp of a homeless squatter floating down the river.

Noriko turned the television off and instead of silence there was the crackling static and the susurrus roar of the rain. She stepped into her slippers and opened the door to the porch. Her yard was muddy and the puddles were merging into deepening pools. She called the cats but

nothing came. She changed into her galoshes, took an umbrella, and braced herself to look for them. It didn't occur to her that she herself might catch pneumonia. No, she only stupidly thought of the cats. They had to come inside now. If the yard was flooding, it was flooding under the house as well. But nowhere she looked could she find them whether it was in the plum tree, under the porch, or in the small space between the wall and the side of her house. She opened her gate and stepped onto the sidewalk of the residential street. Water flowed down the gutter carrying the stench of the sewer.

Noriko could hardly see anything very far. The rain made a curtain. Water buffeted her umbrella, ran along its edges, and poured off it in places as from a garden hose. She walked behind her house. She had to walk through a puddle that was deeper than it looked and moisture seeped through the seams of her old boots. It felt clammy and cold. The canal behind her house was flush with water, so much so that it had risen to the banks. Beyond the small path, hunched down in the mud next to the canal lip, there stooped the strange old man. His hands were plunged into the water, in up to the wrists. Noriko shouted at him but he did not hear. The rain was too loud. He himself was drenched in rain and his hair clumped together like the hair on Coco when she'd found him. She came up behind him, saw that he held Peach beneath the vigorous water, and flew into a rage. She folded her umbrella and thrust it into his back. It was a thoughtless, careless thing to do. The old man lost his balance and fell head first into the canal waters, carrying the now drowned mother cat with him. He did not reemerge. Noriko froze in astonishment and disbelief. Stupid, foolish, murderous old woman, what did she think would happen? "Help," she cried. But there was no one anywhere. She hurried down the canal path, not wise enough to realize that she'd more likely meet a car or a person on the residential street. She went all the way to the shrine, unknowingly going toward the supermarket because that was the

only response she had. On the busy street the cars would not stop and neither would the pedestrians. They all wanted to escape the miserable rain and get home. "Help me." She tried to touch them. The passerby recoiled. There were simply too many people for anyone to stop. And what problem could she possibly have that they could possibly help her with? She reached the supermarket and the station and then finally recovered the presence of mind to go again to the police box. She entered and water fell from her waterlogged garments and dripped rudely on the floor. She had released her umbrella at some moment she couldn't remember. "A person has fallen into the canal," she croaked.

The young man was there. "What is it?" he said.

She pointed vigorously and came across impolitely. She was, in fact, being rather rude.

"A person has fallen into the canal," she said again.

"Really?" the young man asked.

The older officer came out of the back room.

"Yes. I pushed him. I'm very sorry."

"You pushed someone into the canal?"

"Yes. Please forgive me."

The older officer put his hand on the young man per their ritual. He shook his head. "And how did you push this person into the canal?" the older officer asked.

"I hit him with my umbrella."

"Where is your umbrella?"

"I don't know."

"Here, here, Yamada will take you home."

"But the man in the canal..."

“I’ll go look for him. I’m sure it will be fine.”

“But won’t you want to arrest me?”

“Let’s take you home first.”

Noriko waited dutifully for justice. There was no sign of Spring but she thought little of the cats now. The next day the strange old man’s corpse was found and recovered. A sign was erected near the spot where he was discovered that said: *Dangerous. Entry forbidden.* But it was not the place she’d pushed him. The body was not even found by Yamada or the older officer, neither of whom believed the story of this foolish old woman. Believable stories went like this. A lovelorn college student had set fire to his girlfriend’s apartment, killing her. A jealous patron had stabbed the matron of a snack bar, killing her. A deranged young man had buried his English teacher in a bathtub filled with sand, killing her. Never had anyone heard of an old woman pushing a man into a canal. However, desperate old men had drowned themselves before. And this is why the police had stopped talking to her when she called them. They were tired of listening to her nonsense. The simplest conclusion is always best, but Noriko didn’t understand any of this yet. To her, it just seemed she hadn’t made herself clear. Now that there was finally a day without rain, she determined to go to the train station, get in a taxi, and visit the police headquarters. She foolishly thought that must be the proper thing to do. The police at the police box were only meant to give directions and that was what she’d done wrong, she thought. After all, the police headquarters were where people went to confess their crimes in the television dramas she watched.

When she stepped out of her house and got to the gate, she heard a young woman talking to someone officious in front of the apartment building next door. There was a small moving van

filled with boxes out front. This must be the old man's daughter, Noriko thought. She asked, "Whose things are those?"

And the young woman and the middle-aged man she was talking to faced her. "They belonged to my father," she said. "He passed away."

Noriko could not contain herself. "I'm so glad I found you. Please forgive me. It's my fault he died. I pushed him."

The young woman's eyes widened. The middle-aged man said to her. "Don't be alarmed."

The young woman softened. "Please don't blame yourself, grandmother. My father was old and he didn't think well." She turned back to the middle-aged man. "Really, it's fortunate he died this way rather than passing away in the apartment. It will be easier for us to sell the room." This was a very sensible way to look at things.

"It's so sad when an old person loses their mind," the middle-aged man said. He wasn't specifically referring to Noriko but he might just as well have been. "At least he lived in a building with other people and not alone in an empty house."

They continued to talk as though Noriko were not there. Noriko turned around. Next to her was a clay flower pot holding some anemic hydrangea. She stiffly broke off a couple stems that held blossoms. She went inside her house, found an unused bottle she didn't feel particularly fond of, and put the blossoms in it along with some water. Then she took this and went to where she'd murdered the old man. She placed the flowers in memory of the tragic occurrence as was customary. Though of course actual accident sites had bouquets from the community, not this pathetic display.

"This is all you're going to get from anyone. Be satisfied with it. And don't come back."

It should be no surprise that Noriko was also superstitious.

Noriko went back to sitting on the porch. Spring appeared now and meowed accusations of hunger, loneliness, and the necrotic infection destroying its leg. The little kitten kept its customary distance from her. Noriko ignored it for once. The young daughter and the moving van had departed. Noriko saw her yard now as it was in the moment without the patina of memory and sentimentality. She saw it as the passerby did, only she was looking out whereas they were looking in. She saw vaguely how the next person to see her about the tree would come to tear it down. The next person to come and dig out the Koi pond would do so to remove it. She didn't let herself think about who the next person to come visit her after the strange old man would be, or this stranger's purpose.

Instead she thought that no one in her position would regret what they'd done. At last she accepted that she got away with murder and no one cared. How could things not have ended better for her? It's true. It's so true.

Alien

According to the square red digits of the alarm clock on the TV, it was 3:00 AM. I felt a familiar presence outside our motel room. Alex and I were in Sedona, lying on our bed with the girl. The two of them were sleeping. Only I was awake to see what was happening. The blinking colon between the “3” and the “00” slowed and became arrhythmic, as though time were alive but the seconds were coughing and sputtering out. I recognized the presence, of course, because it had come before, just never when there was actually someone else in the room. I call it Gary, but the name has no meaning.

Gary’s dark light seeped through the drawn curtains, squeezed between the door and the door frame, until it filled the room casting everything in a sort of anti-shadow where what was dark remained dark, and what was lighter became darker. Gary had come to take me and Alex again. More accurately, it came to take what it thought was Alex—what the outside world thinks is Alex—but is actually me. At the moment, Alex slept inside me.

I was lifted up gently from the bed. The girl didn’t wake. I felt like I was falling down down down, even as I saw myself fly upward in an instant through the stratosphere. I caught a brief glimpse of stars and then once again I found myself in Gary’s windowless spaceship.

Alex and Gary have never met. Alex and I are two people inside the same body who don’t get along. Time was, I used to be in charge. *I* was Alex. And Alex used to be the tiny voice in the back of *my* brain that *I* used to ignore instead of now, the other way around. Alex hates me but Alex needs me. I’m the one who can face Gary, who can keep it at bay. If Alex met Gary, that would be the end of Alex.

Inside Gary’s angular chamber, the black light is so intense, so dark, that my body is nearly transparent. Yes, it’s my body now. Alex is still asleep. I can only make out my body’s

contours by the refraction of the light passing through the water inside, like I'm a glass statue suspended on my back in mid-air. I can't describe Gary. Looking at Gary is like looking at one of those pictures that in one instant looks like a bowl of fruit and in another a stranger's face, but in three dimensions. Or maybe I've never truly seen Gary. Maybe what I thought was Gary was actually just its fingertip, metaphorically speaking. And now I feel the touch of that fingertip inside me, violating me, again metaphorically speaking, penetrating my anus, inching upwards through my intestines, my esophagus, to the stem of my brain. The finger threatens to burst my body from the inside. And just when it feels like there's nowhere left for it to go, Gary's touch enters my mind.

Gary traces the maze of synapses, comes into contact with me, and stops. In my brain I hold the sleeping essence of Alex to my breast (metaphorically) and away from Gary. I hide Alex. *Nothing to see here, Gary. Just me, same as always.* But Gary knows I'm hiding something. If only there were just me, if I didn't have Alex as a liability, maybe Gary would stop coming for us.

Gary wasn't the only problem. There was also Wonder Woman (not her real name)—*the girl*. She was the reason we came to Sedona in the first place. Alex became infatuated with her the first day she started work. How pathetic, a man our age following a twenty-five-year-old flake with his eyes like a lost puppy, eating lunch with her like a pimply teenager. And when she invited him to go with her to a UFO conference at the Sedona public library, naturally he said yes. He's too weak to say no.

On the drive over from California he listened to her prattle about seeing lights in Australia—as if she's ever seen a *real* UFO. She has no idea what I've seen. I resent her and I

resent the fool she has made of us.

After the UFO conference had finished. Alex took Wonder Woman to get something to eat at Denny's. How romantic.

"What did you think?" she asked.

"It was interesting," he said, looking in her eyes.

It was stupid, I said, looking at her chest. Definitely a Wonderbra—and that's how I came to know her, to distinguish her from any other random person: Wonderbra woman. Wonder Woman. Easy for me to remember.

"I don't believe everything people say," she said.

Alex nodded. We finished eating in silence. Alex wouldn't admit to himself how he really felt about her. He told himself they were just friends. He was afraid. Afraid because secretly the things he *wants* to do *with* her are the things he knows I *would* do *to* her. For him, I represent every human quality he rejects just as he represents the same to me. No one knows the true depth—the nadir—of his emotions, least of all her. But he can't keep them a secret from me.

Gary's fingertip presses against the net of my neurons, then oozes through it like a viscous slime, an amoeba's pseudopod. Alex squirms in his sleep as my conscious sensations bleed into his subconscious nightmare.

What does Gary want? A presumptuous question that Wonder Woman would ask. The question presumes that the alien wants anything. Why is this so hard to understand? Or should I say, why do people presume these things? Come on, do we really think that ants *want* things? They're ants. If *want* is above the ken of lower life-forms why do we assume that *want* reaches the ken of higher ones? Maybe *want* is limited to the narrow bandwidth of human feelings.

Maybe there are alien thoughts with wavelengths of emotion outside the sliver-like human experiential spectrum of *want* and *love* and shit. I don't know what Gary is *experiencing*, but I know what it's *doing*. And that's all that matters. It's scanning. Gary knows I'm protecting something, though it doesn't yet know what that is.

Inside our mind, Alex dreams he's sinking into the sea. He vaguely senses Gary's presence in the form of a shark swimming blindly toward him. The shark may be blind but it can trace the blood trail of Alex's fear. Despite my efforts, Gary's has found a way into our subconscious, where I've hidden Alex. As I run out of places to conceal him, in Alex's dream, the shark's mouth expands until that is all Alex can see beneath him. Once Gary infects our mind completely, the shark's maw will close upon Alex, he will wake up, and Gary will find him. I can't let that happen. Alex can't confront Gary's existence and what it means. It will destroy him, and, by extension, destroy me.

I have to get us out of here. But Gary won't stop until it finds something. It won't return us to Earth until it finds what—*who*—I'm keeping secret. So I decide to give Gary Alex's secret instead of mine. I speak to Alex in the dream. *What's her name? I don't know it. Tell me what's Wonder Woman's name?* I put her image, the image Alex has of her, in the dream with him. The shark pauses. Alex tries to warn her. He screams her name into the water. He's thinking about her instead of himself now. The shark *sees* her, veers off, and swallows her. Gary is satiated and its presence leaves my body. Again I feel the falling sensation and see the glimpse of stars.

Alex wakes up. We're back in the motel room. The little alarm clock on top of the television says 3:25. The digits change to 3:26 and our heart stops pounding. Alex closes our eyes. He assumes Wonder Woman has gone back to her bed or is in the bathroom. He's relieved she isn't next to him to witness his intense fear. I encourage this logic. Do I feel badly about

what I've done? Should a person feel sorry for the things they have to do?

It was dark when we left Denny's to go back to the motel room. She and Alex took turns showering and dressing. Right after the shower, while we were still in the bathroom, I tried to talk Alex into leaving his pants off and going to sleep, but he wouldn't. Not in front of her. He was afraid of her even seeing an outline of his—no, goddammit, *our*—genitals so he got back in his sweaty slacks and shirt. Alex came out and then all of us lay alone on our respective beds, fully clothed, with the television muted and the shared bed lamp on between us.

She started talking again. I'd never known anyone to talk as much as this girl did. "There's a lot of misinformation about UFO's and Gnosticism. Some people do more harm than good, like those militia guys who claim to have killed aliens with psychic weapons. That's what most people see when they look at me. They see someone living in a fantasy world. But it's no different than any other ideology. It's no different than a libertarian who thinks people who don't buy fire insurance deserve to have their house burn down. Or feminists who think you can end misogyny by banning free speech. But there's some truth to every belief. I believe that ignorance is evil. Don't you? Who wouldn't agree with that?"

I'd have answered if Alex would've let me.

"I believe ignorance is evil and ugly and that's how you can tell it from the truth. There is truth in beauty. So beautiful things must be true. The truth is beautiful. And it's intelligent. To me, that's what Epinoia is. Thought illuminates and the light of our universe is our universe thinking. You need light to see beauty, so light and truth aren't the same thing, but light *tells* us the truth. And we're like that, too. We give off light in the infrared. It's because we're flawed. When we overcome our problems, one day maybe we'll glow with light we can see. We'll light

our own way to beauty and not have to rely on the universe.” She turned her back to Alex. “You probably think that sounds stupid.”

Here’s what I think. The light of stars is nothing compared to the void. The darkness outstrips the light at an ever-expanding rate. The universe is getting darker each moment, not brighter. If existence were static, as everyone on Earth lives their lives believing, then the light from the stars would fill every point in the sky. But it is not; it’s *darkness, darkness, every where, and light that does not think.*

But Alex said, “I think it sounds beautiful.”

I thought if only I could grab the nearest blunt object and hit it against our head.

Wonder Woman turned back to face us. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, and it’s fine if you say no, but can I come lie next to you? I don’t know what it means. I just really want to be closer to you. I don’t want to do anything. I just want to be close. Would that be ok?”

Alex nodded and she got on the bed with us.

“I want to hold you,” she said and turned off the TV and the light.

Alex was stunned by this sudden contact and I managed to say out loud, “If light is such a good thing, why turn it off?”

She whispered, “I’m ashamed of myself sometimes. Like right now. I’m afraid of the truth.”

These two were like fucking peas in a pod. I couldn’t believe it. This was the closest Alex had ever gotten to a woman. I used to get us laid all the time when I was Wonder Woman’s age, seventeen-plus years ago. But then I had that nervous breakdown. I lost control, and in that interim Alex stepped in and took over. He quit our eighty-hour-a-week job, throwing away my career, my ambitions, everything that would have made me proud—not to mention the women

that would have come with all that—threw away all those sacrifices I'd made, threw them away for nothing. And now somehow he'd managed to get a woman in bed with us (sort of) and he lay there paralyzed. *Just do it*, I told him. He wouldn't. I told him to lie still then lest his boner jizz all over us. *But if she touches it, we're doing it*, I warned him. *You can't do it without me also there*. He snarled against the desires I put forward in our mind. He wasn't about to let me touch his little bright and shining angel. *We'll see if she's an angel*, I told him. *We'll see if you can stop her from touching you and then if you can stop me from touching her*. But she didn't. She fell asleep. We fell asleep. Then I woke up and there was Gary.

She was still missing in the morning. Her bags were there, her phone, her wallet, her car, her car keys, her mint throat lozenges. Alex talked to the motel staff and called the police. They took his information, filed the report and told him the car we'd taken was registered to what turned out to be her parents. Her parents told the officer over the phone they had no idea who Alex was but said something which, alongside Alex having told him they'd come to a UFO conference, cemented his face. He confirmed with Alex that she was dressed in a brown skirt, nylons, and a grey sweater-blouse (*and a Wonderbra*, I added, but Alex didn't). The officer asked Alex if he thought it possible she'd get up and simply walk away.

“But she left everything here,” Alex said.

“If you wanted to walk away from everything, what would you take with you?” the officer said. Then he asked Alex to return the car to her parents. He talked about paperwork for a few minutes and took a statement or something. Whatever the parents had told the officer, it must have cleared Alex of any suspicion. When the officer finished, he advised Alex to let her parents file the next missing person report in their own jurisdiction if somehow she didn't turn up.

Alex didn't notice—but I did—all the things molded onto the officer's face: This sort of thing happens all the time around here. A twenty-five-year-old girl doesn't take her parent's car and come to a UFO convention with a forty-two-year-old man if her life is going swimmingly. For that matter, what kind of forty-two-year-old man takes a twenty-five-year-old girl to a UFO convention? If anything, the officer pitied Alex. I didn't tell Alex this. He'd been through enough already. Besides, maybe now that Gary had a new experimental subject, it would leave us alone. Move on.

Alex drove back to Riverside feeling somehow responsible. He wondered if I'd done something lascivious, but no, I wouldn't hide *that*. He parked the car in front of her parent's house and found, taped on a yard sign reading *Private Property Absolutely No Solicitors*, a note instructing him to leave the car where it was and take a taxi home.

She didn't come to work on Monday. Alex began to crack up. He called in sick for two weeks straight. He read how-to's online for finding a missing person. He made flyers and posted them in her neighborhood with an image of her from the company directory. Someone took them down. He went back to Sedona and posted the same flyers there. He posted queries on the internet. He even hired a private detective. *You're going crazy*, I told Alex. *A normal person wouldn't do this*. As far as he should know, *she* went crazy. He didn't listen. His obsession was costing us sleep—he wouldn't rest and I was too nervous to go to sleep while he was still awake. If I did, there was no telling what he might do without me there to try and talk him down. It got worse. He ran a stop sign without noticing. He stopped answering his phone but started calling people on hers. No one had seen her, and so when he was too tired to think, he just drove and drove looking for her, visiting hospitals and asking about Jane Does. *We're going to lose our job*,

I told him. Again wouldn't listen. *This is how people end up homeless.* He didn't care. It was now I realized I was trapped on the top floor of a burning building. I could pray for a miracle or I could jump. I had to tell him what happened.

I showed him all the memories, the interior of the space ship, our encounters with Gary, and tried to make him understand: I had to protect him. Alex couldn't have handled Gary. If Gary had found him, there was no telling what would've happened. Maybe something even worse than this. *Do you believe me?* I asked. *It was you or her. She's gone now.*

Alex imploded. Not all at once. He went quietly. It's not what I expected. I expected to hit pavement.

I took over. I got us back to work and paying bills. I also shaved our ridiculous mustache and began jogging in the evening to get our weight back to where it should be. Alex stayed silent. "Are you still there?" I asked in the mirror. *Yes*, he said and that was it.

Wonder Woman never turned up. People gossiped. I didn't. The people at work didn't like me, not that I think they ever really did (when it was Alex they worked with) but now they disliked me because I didn't actually know their names and had to call them "Boss-man", "Scooter", "Winklevoss", etc. That's how I think of people, sorry. Alex was the one who learned everyone's stupid names. "You've changed", they said. Well yes, I have. "Your attitude is different." No it's not. They have some nerve. They treated Alex like he was nothing and now they complained when I treated them the same way? I didn't get it, honestly. Seemed very hypocritical. Because they knew his name they thought that makes a difference? It doesn't. Names mean nothing. Deep down, people mean nothing to each other beyond what they can get from each other. These people got to feel superior to Alex. And Alex let them, all in the guise of friendship.

A few weeks later I was called into Boss-man's office for an "early" quarterly evaluation. His name was on the door, but as soon as I closed it, I'd already forgotten. I looked for clues in the room. No desk plaque. A picture with more forgettable faces. A scraggly potted plant of some kind that looked like it'd been peed on by the cleaning staff.

"Alex," Boss-man started then looked at his lap.

I remained standing.

"I want to talk to you about your recent erratic behavior."

"Sure thing." I wasn't sure what to do so I kept staring at him.

He looked back up at me. "I'll just come out and say it. We're getting complaints from HR that you're... looking at the female employees a lot."

How else was I going to remember them?

"And the programmers are saying you're... overzealous with the bug reports."

I was not. I was just better at finding their faults than Alex was. "That's my job," I said.

"There's all this and add on top of that your... as yet unexplained and unprecedented... sabbatical?"

I couldn't tell if he was finished or this was another of his long pauses. I waited. "So why *did* you disappear for two weeks?" he said after arranging the picture, sharpening a pencil, and opening and closing his desk drawer.

"That wasn't me."

"Exactly my point. You haven't been yourself at all for over a month. I lost one employee already. Maybe because of you. I don't know. But I don't not know, either. And you know, I'm starting to think you hold me in contempt. And that hurts my feelings."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but if you think I hold anyone in contempt, that's only what you

think.”

“I don’t believe you *are* sorry,” he said.

He’s right. I’m not. I’ve never felt sorry. That’s all Alex ever did and what did he get us? A shitty life with a shitty job and a flabby stomach. He accomplished nothing. No one respected us. No one invited us to go out and do things, except Wonder Woman. No shiny awards, no sexy women, no fancy apartment or car, no thanks for anything. At this point in my life, I’m not sure I can even turn this boat around. Certainly not at this job with these people, though I don’t know what other job I could possibly get.

I’m afraid I said one or more of these things out loud because of what Boss-man said next. “I think, Alex, it might be a good idea for you to go on another break. I’ll have someone call you to hammer out the details. But for now take next week off.” He stood up and we shook hands. “Of course, if under the circumstances you should want to, feel free to seek employment elsewhere in meantime.”

That night I split my efforts between looking for a cheaper apartment and sending my resume to some recruiters. I also made appointments to meet temp agencies. Luckily I had some savings left. At ten someone walked up to my door and knocked. I heard a thump. I looked out the peep hole and saw a person’s head resting underneath, brown hair parted down the middle. When I opened the door she stood up straight. I didn’t know what to say to her except, “How’d you get in here?”

“I climbed the fence,” she said. “Then I looked for your mailbox.” She walked in and I let her.

I turned on the light. It had gotten dark outside and I hadn’t done it yet. She squinted and

asked me to turn it back off. I obliged. To be perfectly honest she looked terrible anyway and smelled like BO. She sat down on my bed. I turned my desk chair around and sat opposite. I told her I hadn't thought I'd see her again. She told me she thought the same. "Something terrible happened," she said. I told her I knew. "I can't talk about it." She sniffed. "I saw the flyers. I know you were looking for me." Technically, that was Alex, not me. I'd briefly forgotten that she still thought I was Alex. "Where did you go? I woke up and you were gone. I went looking for you." She bit her lip and shuddered at some unspoken memory. "Nevermind. It's not your fault what happened after that. Please don't ask. You'll think I'm crazy. *I think I'm crazy.*" She slumped off the bed and onto the floor, pulled her knees up, and covered her face. She started to shake her head, more and more violently and repeated, "No, no, no". She was in pain and she needed help. Back in the day, no one had ever come to *me* for help. They knew better. Alex tried to change all that, but then people came to Alex wanting things. They'd always come with some agenda, perfectly capable of handling their own problems but choosing to foist them on him. Alex was reasonless compassion; I was reason. Alex was a victim; I am not. I understand that in life one must sometimes make a sacrifice. Alex is the guy who would walk down the beach throwing every goddamn starfish back into the ocean, never once thinking maybe they were *meant* to die.

But she had come here not wanting anything from Alex. She'd come here wanting *Alex*. Was it possible she could ever want *me*? How could she? I don't even know her name. Besides, why would I ever even want that? I deal with the world by finding and utilizing its weaknesses while building and maintaining defenses around my own. This was how I survived Gary—and Gary knew that, which is why Gary continued to probe me. But she openly exposed her weakness. It must be a ruse. There was no possible explanation. I would not fall for it. It was a

trap. But already I felt as though I had been ensnared by...

Why did I all of a sudden feel sorry for her? What had she done? Pathetic! She was pathetic, like all the rest. But she especially was pathetic!

I could deal with any amount of horribleness and selfishness from other people, but I could not deal with this pathetic creature before me. I had this infuriating, alien emotion *to* help her, but I was just as helpless.

She had no one. I've never known anyone else who had no one except Alex, and he at least had me. And like me, she'd seen Gary and felt like she had no one to tell. But she did. She could tell me. How could I tell her that? All I knew was I needed Alex. I couldn't face this alone.

Alex, I said, come on. Forget about you and me for a moment. Talk to me. Forget that you hate me. I know you care about this woman. Do something. He gave me the silent treatment. But if I knew anything, I knew Alex; he would help her, he just didn't trust me. I said, *Alex we can't go on like this. We need to be of one mind.* I told him I was willing to admit that I'd made him miserable, if he was willing to admit that he'd disappointed me. I guess I was begging now. I was begging him not to let our conflict get in the way of helping her. Alex relented, because that's the way Alex is. There was never any question.

I asked him what he would do. He told me to tell her I'm sorry. I asked him how she'd know what it meant. *Doesn't matter,* he said. *We know what it means.* It meant I didn't have to bring her to this in the first place. When Gary probed me with its question, I could have just as easily thought of our landlord's Alsatian. Would it have worked? No. But I would have at least tried. *And furthermore,* Alex said, *call her by her name. Stop hiding from the part of our memory that knows her name the way I hid from the part that saw Gary. Next, stop calling it Gary like it's somehow human, like it's something other than what it really is: a monster. Finally, and this is*

between you and me, even when nothing else worked, you should have let Gary find me. That should have been the last resort. And really there is the difference between him and me: I wouldn't sacrifice us for her; he would.

I got on my knees and I reached out to her. I held her to me and she embraced me back and inside myself I felt the same embrace between me and Alex. Neither of us were the same as before but instead became the same.

We're gone and I am left. I've never felt this way. Yet it feels familiar. I feel more like myself than I ever have before. "It's ok," I tell her. Maybe it'll turn out to be a lie, but if it does then the truth is ugly and it doesn't matter. I tell her, "I'm going to turn on the light."

Nursing

Preston moved back in with his mom after Katie kicked him out of her house. They had broken up some time before that, she had boxed up his things in between, and then one night after band practice, he pulled up to the driveway in his hatchback and found the boxes stacked in a corrugated cardboard wall blocking the garage. His mom's house was the only place he had to go. Any other alternative would cost money he didn't have. His father wasn't an option.

The first thing he did when he got to his mom's house was call Katie from the kitchen cordless. She wasn't answering calls from his cell phone. "Why?" he asked.

"It was time," she said.

"I haven't found a job yet."

"Maybe now you will."

Preston had been thinking about this a lot lately. He'd been trying to make Katie understand and he knew this was his last chance. "Please, Katie, listen. It's hard. I can always get a job. That's plan B. But I don't have anything if I can't play music. Everyone lives their plan B. I'm trying to live my plan A."

"Listen to yourself. You're thirty-five. I think it's time for plan B."

"And us?"

"I guess this is also my plan B. It's got to end. I can't control what you do. Even if I could, I wouldn't want the responsibility. I'm blocking this number now. Don't call me back."

"I won't," he said. "You'll have to call me." And he hung up on her.

The next morning his mom made him scrambled eggs and ham. As they ate, her long-haired white calico hobbled in, sniffed its food, and then hobbled back out. Its long claws clicked on the linoleum.

“What’s wrong with the cat?”

His mom looked over and said, “Sally’s just getting old, I’m afraid. Her kidneys have failed.”

“Why don’t you put her to sleep?”

“I thought about it. I might. But the vet says she’s not in pain. And she still goes out for sun in the morning and sniffs around the garden.”

“You could still put her to sleep.” If it were him, he’d rather that than be held mercy to time.

She shook her head, “It’s just not that easy. You and your father gave her to me. She’s a very special kitty.”

It was the summer between high school and college when his dad decided they should get her a cat. “Give her a new kid to take care of.” He waited for Preston to get home that day and said, “Let’s go.”

“I need to put on shoes,” Preston said. “I lost my flip-flop.”

“Clean yourself up, too. You look dirty. Did you get my bike dirty?” Preston shook his head and his dad yelled outside to his mom, “We’re going to get lunch.”

Preston changed and they went to the pound. His dad picked the cat from among many because of the way it rubbed against the wire grating and because it was still less than a year old. “We’ll take Elpseth,” his dad said to the attendant.

“The cat’s name is Sally,” Preston said.

“You want to name it Sally?”

“No, the name is ‘Sally’. Here. ‘Elpseth’ is the name of the sponsor or whatever. Here.”

Preston pointed to the postings.

“That’s right,” the attendant said.

“We’ll take Sally,” his dad said. They took the cat home and his dad gave it to his mom. It was his penultimate gift to her before the divorce papers. When Preston came back from college the next summer, it was just his mom and the cat.

Earlier the same day they got the cat, on his way home to meet his dad, Preston saved a baby’s life. He had ridden his dad’s Raleigh downtown, dropped off his distortion pedal for repair, and was riding back past the Morrison cemetery. The street had only two lanes and was overshadowed at intervals by oak and maple trees. There was no sidewalk and Preston rode in the two foot margin. The cemetery’s low galvanized bar fence ran along the curb to his left. On the other side of the fence was an irrigation ditch.

Today there was a funeral. The family was gathered underneath a white-green striped pavilion with their backs turned to the road. A few small children, too young to comprehend, played in the arborvitae and the junipers subdividing the grounds. And, just as Preston was about to pass by, a toddler trundled up to the edge of the irrigation ditch and plunged in head first. Preston coasted ten feet wondering at what he’d seen before he dropped his dad’s bike against the fence, jumped over its railing, and groped in the murky water. He found the baby and pulled it out looking into a face as dazed as his own. The baby opened its mouth and rivulets of water poured down either side of its chubby chin. It coughed. In the next moment Preston and the baby were surrounded by adults. In the ensuing commotion, blame was given to the other children, the faulty stroller, the poor wisdom of the city waterworks, and the cemetery grounds, but no one knew what to say to Preston and so said nothing but only took the baby from him. Whatever happened afterwards, Preston never knew. He’d lost a flip-flop in the water. This annoyance,

combined with his need to go home anyway and his unease about leaving the expensive mountain bike next to the street prompted him to go before anyone could tell him what he'd done. For sixteen years, Preston wouldn't reflect upon his actions this day.

Now, Preston was fully settled back into the basement room of his mom's house. He slept on the old futon, some nights just as a couch. His dad's TV was down there, too, a hulking Sony thirty-six inch cathode ray tube he'd brought from work. It had once been state of the art. Now, weighed down on a make-shift stand of cinder blocks and rejected pine boards, it was just too big and bulky to throw away. The burgundy shag carpet had been part of the living room once but when his mom wanted it replaced with a hard-wood floor, his dad moved it here to make a den. In a corner, a dried-out terrarium also rested on cinder blocks. Preston had made it the summer after his freshman year, but it still smelled of its former life as his dad's aquarium. The forest themed wallpaper was discolored in places where book shelves, computer desk, and posters of Lance Armstrong had once been. Now Preston's tube amp, pedal case, and guitar tried inadequately to fill those spaces. The ceiling was bare rafters with years of cobwebs spun between fluorescent light fixtures, measuring the time.

A week after Preston's last interview, his mom said, "Preston, dear, there's something I need to talk to you about."

"I'm still looking for a job, Mom, then I will move out. Or when I get into grad school. One of the two." Grad school was an idle fantasy of his. The only thing he felt motivated to study anymore was music.

"Well, I wanted to ask when you thought that might be."

"Fuck, Mom, I don't know. Fall? If you need me gone, I'll figure something out. Just say

so.”

“No, dear, it’s not that. It’s my fault I’m not making myself clear. I know you’ll get a job when you’re ready. I like having you here. I just wanted to ask because if you think it will be soon, then I will have to change my plans. But if you’ll be here for a while longer, then I don’t have to.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I thought I told you I plan to visit your aunt next week.”

Preston remembered. He nodded his head. That was right. He would get to have the house to himself.

“I had made these plans and everything last year, but that was before Sally got sick.”

Preston frowned.

“I need to tell you what to do if she passes away while I’m gone.”

“You think that will happen?”

“I have to help her get into bed at night. And she hasn’t really eaten for almost a week. Of course I pray nothing happens. But while I’m gone, I want you to have the vet information just in case.”

“What should I do if she dies?” Preston hoped the cat wouldn’t die before he left. If it did his mom would want to bury it in the garden. And he’d have to help. It felt morbid and he didn’t like it.

“Take her down to be cremated.”

“Ok.” He was relieved except for the discomfoting image of carrying a corpse to and from his car. He’d use the cat carrier.

“I hope she doesn’t leave us before I get back, but I don’t know. And I would just dread

taking her to a kennel. Here at least she won't be lonesome. I know she loves you."

His mom was no doubt remembering the summer before Preston and his dad moved out. He had played games in the basement on his dad's computer while his dad worked late with the new woman. The cat would come and jump in his lap. It annoyed him and he put her on the floor, but she jumped back up. He crossed his legs and she stood up against the chair looking anyway and then jumped up. He didn't make a place so she turned about and blocked his eyes with her tail. She rubbed her head against his mouse hand and put her paw on the space bar. He learned to put up with her in his lap and play computer games anyway. "She's just a cat, Mom. I'll take care of her."

Preston went about thinking of all the things he could do this weekend with the house to himself. He could play guitar. He could jerk-off wherever he wanted. He could have friends over. He could have a girl over.

His mom left Friday morning and gave him some money. After waving her car goodbye, Preston got on the phone. To his disappointment all his band-mates, except Jason, the bassist, were too busy to go out. The drummer had other bands. The other singer/guitarist wasn't actually busy. "Too busy" for him just meant he didn't want to do something.

Preston liked to masturbate before going out. He believed it kept his head cool and insured that he wouldn't hook up with a girl who was too ugly. He'd done that before, just because he was drunk and horny. He'd masturbated preemptively the night he met Katie, though. That was different. She'd found him on stage, not at the bar. Tonight was all bars.

He wondered where to do it. He could do it anywhere. The backyard if he liked, alfresco. But ultimately, he went to the downstairs futon. The place he felt most comfortable. The place where he dreamt. Katie hadn't called. Maybe he should try to call her? Of course not. And then

he closed his eyes and started. In his imagination he made her beg for it. He made her offer him money and he took it. Just as he came, he pictured wiping his cock with the money. She wanted to stay but he kicked her out. He had no intention of seeing Katie again. He opened his eyes and instead reached for a tissue.

He showered, changed into black Levis and a red long-sleeved shirt, and went downtown to meet Jason. He was early and sat at an empty bar. A faint vegetable reek wafted from the kitchen. A girl came in, tattoos all over her arms, and sat one chair down from him. She was obviously bored, but Preston felt good ignoring her. Out of the corner of his eye he could tell she was occasionally looking over at him. So Preston inspected the rows of snifters and wine glasses hanging over the bar. He traced lines in the condensation of his glass with his fingernail. Finally, Jason arrived and sat between them. All three started talking then. “My boyfriend’s the cook here,” she said.

She may have a boyfriend, but she was still looking at me, Preston thought. Girls can have boyfriends and still want other boys. Katie was proof of that—she’d ditched the loser cashier she’d been dating to start seeing him. Jason drank faster than Preston. When the girl left with her boyfriend, Jason and Preston followed shortly after. As they travelled the downtown sidewalks, they met other passerby whose voices and faces ran the full gamut of boredom to enjoyment. They passed one bar with reggae blaring on cheap speakers and Jason said, “Let’s do a walk-through.” They passed another with a wrought-iron stairwell leading up to the entrance from the side-alley and Jason said, “We gotta come back here later when we’re more drunk. I’m not drunk enough yet.” They passed a third place with a neon Pabst Blue Ribbon sign in the shape of a guitar. Two young women stood looking doubtfully at the door. Jason said, “This place sucks. Never let us go here.”

“What’s wrong with it?” one of the women asked.

“None of the pretty girls go there,” he said to her. “So you shouldn’t go there, either.”

“Where should we go?” she asked. Her friend moved up beside her.

“I know the place,” Jason said. “Come with us. This is Preston. I’m Jason.”

“Trisha,” she said. “And Colleen.”

Preston noticed Colleen’s necklace pendant when it glistened in the light of a street lamp.

“That’s an interesting necklace. I like it.”

Colleen pinched the gold crescent between two fingers. “I appreciate that,” Colleen said.

“My brother made it for me.”

“Very crafty.” Preston nodded. Colleen smiled. Such a great response already and Preston hadn’t even been thinking about what to say. *I’m good at this*, he thought. He smiled back.

“Colleen, remember what we agreed,” Trisha said over her shoulder. Something indecipherable passed between the two girls like a wave under the deck of a ship.

Preston sought to regain balance. “Think he can make me one?” he asked.

“I don’t want to talk about my brother,” Colleen said.

“Sure!” Preston forced his uncertainty into the width of his smile.

Jason took them back to the lounge where they had started the night. No one was there now. They got a booth by the window looking out on the sidewalk, far away from the kitchen smell.

“What do you guys do?” Trisha asked.

“We’re in a band,” Preston said.

“But don’t worry. I have a real job, too,” Jason said.

“What’s your real job?” Colleen asked.

“Bike courier. Pays better than you might think.”

Colleen grunted, but Jason either didn't notice or didn't care.

“What do you do?” Preston said.

“We're nurses,” Trisha said.

“That's funny. I'm nursing my mom's cat.”

“Is that your job?” Colleen said.

“You could say that.” He felt piqued but hoped his voice hadn't betrayed him.

“What's wrong with it?” Trisha said.

“It's old.”

“Who's nursing it right now?” Colleen said.

Preston sipped his drink.

“We all eventually grow old,” Jason said.

“I don't want to grow old,” Trisha said.

“I think there's some good things about growing old,” Jason said.

“Like what?” Colleen said. “Dying?”

“Well, like, when I go to the gym, all the old guys are the ones who walk around naked and don't care.”

Preston looked at Jason sidelong.

“Wait,” he said. “I'm going somewhere with this. Bear with me! So, at the gym, it's all the young guys who have towels wrapped around them. The old guys they just don't give a shit. They know we're all going to be old one day so why not just let it hang out? It's all the young guys that are so vain that they have to have a towel around them. They haven't figured out that they're going to be old and seventy and look like shit no matter how they look now. We should

all live like that. Live like we're seventy. Like nothing matters. Because if something doesn't matter in the future, how can it matter now?"

"Is that why you're a bicycle courier?" Colleen said.

"I hadn't thought about that specifically, but yes," Jason said.

"I think the moral of the story is we should loosen up," Preston said. He admired Jason's aplomb, but Colleen was starting to piss him off.

They drank more, except for Colleen. It became clear she meant to drive Trisha home.

The bar was closing. Jason proposed Denny's but the girls weren't in to it. Preston hadn't finished his drink. He couldn't remember what it was. They were standing at the table.

"You could just leave it," Colleen said.

"I paid for it. I have to finish it," he said. It was unpleasant, but he did. Outside the lounge, Jason asked Trisha for her phone number. She gave it to him. Preston asked Colleen for hers.

"You're drunk," she said.

"That's not what I asked," he said giving his best imitation of Jason.

"How are you getting home?" she asked.

"Why do you ask?"

"You shouldn't be driving."

"Colleen," Trisha said.

"You offering to give me a ride?" Preston said.

"Sleep it off," Colleen said.

"I think I will not be doing that."

"Only reckless assholes drive drunk."

“You calling me an asshole?”

Jason had his arm around Trisha and was carefully steering her away. The two of them started walking slowly down the sidewalk, trying to set an example.

“What if I told you my brother got hit by a drunk driver?” Colleen said.

“You know, I’ve been trying to be nice,” Preston said, “but now I think I’ll try being honest. I’d say first: I don’t believe you. And two: boo-hoo, I don’t care about your brother. My mom’s cat is dying. I’m not too drunk to drive and I have responsibilities. Do you get that? So *I* am going home.”

“I should call the cops.” Colleen brandished her phone. “Let them decide.”

“I think you should die in a fire,” Preston said. He knocked the phone out of her hand. It clattered on the cement.

“Colleen,” Trisha shouted. “Grab your phone and let’s go.”

She did. Preston resisted the urge to bend over himself and grab it for her. When she stood up her mascara was smudged, her face contorted. *Go ahead and cry*, Preston thought. *Go ahead and cry about your shitty life*. “See you at next practice, Jason,” Preston shouted after them. Let Colleen know that he was absolutely fine. They were crossing the street, Colleen running slightly faster to catch up.

Preston found his car, put the keys in the ignition, and sat. *I don’t regret what I did*, he thought. *I didn’t do anything to her*. Yet he couldn’t stop imagining himself going back in time and picking up the phone after he’d knocked it to the ground. Then he imagined never knocking it out of her hand in the first place. He thought like this, further and further until he saw himself back at the beginning, talking to Katie on his mom’s phone. He knew what he should have said then, what could have prevented everything since from happening. He rolled awkwardly on one

hip, pulled out his cell phone, and called her. He knew she probably wouldn't answer but it didn't matter; he'd leave a message. *I only called to say I'm sorry*, he thought, *that's all*. Then hang up before he made excuses. The phone rang twice and then sounded the subtle click of a person answering. Preston startled. Before he could say anything, a voice that was not Katie's said: "We're sorry. The party you're calling is not accepting calls at this time. Goodbye." And he was disconnected. He saw his life as someone who stands between two mirrors, an image of himself reflected infinitely in either direction until darkness. No past, no future, just now, as far as the eye can see.

Preston's brain reacted atavistically, deep down at the cellular level, and the necessary impulse fired. The memory of the day he saved the baby came back to him for the first time in sixteen years. His life wasn't trapped in this moment. He wasn't merely the person Colleen, or more importantly Katie, thought he was. But as soon as this memory reconnected him with the world, he reverted. He asked himself who wouldn't have stopped? It would have been criminal not to stop. He did what anyone would have done. It wasn't exceptional. It wasn't brave. It was self-preservation. No grace on his part. *I've done nothing good to feel good about*, he thought. *Who really has?* He started the car and drove home.

Preston woke up the next day on his futon. He was still wearing his clothes. He was utterly un-hungry, though his stomach growled. He showered and put on clean underwear. Then he made a cup of coffee. His mom had replaced the ceramic cups he remembered in the kitchen with the ones his grandmother had owned. Probably ones his mom had drunk from when she was growing up. He sipped his coffee on the couch in the living room. It occurred to him now how much the house looked like the house of an old person. The faded Bidjar rugs, the cups in the

kitchen, the porcelain lamps that flickered because of bad wiring, all things from his grandmother's house, from his mom's younger days, that only made Preston think uncomfortably how old she was.

He finished the coffee and went back downstairs to the basement, still in his underwear. He picked up his guitar and tried playing. He had no enthusiasm. He just crunched away between an E-minor and an F-minor chord. It was dull and going nowhere so he put the guitar back down and listened to the shrill whine of the strings and the amplifier resonating louder and louder. He flicked it off and it sounded like a giant's ear popping. He turned on the TV. The morning children's shows gave way to daytime programming. He couldn't say in one hour what he'd watched in the previous. It was the time in the broadcast schedule when the commercials, with their animated suds, talking babies, and battles against kitchen grease fought to the 1812 Overture, were more interesting than the shows. He heard a thump on the ceiling and thought nothing of it. He knew he'd heard it before. It must be the cat. He heard it again. *What the fuck is it doing?* he wondered. The commercial break ended so he got up to see.

He walked up the stairs, through the kitchen, through the hall, and to the doorway of his mom's bedroom. The cat was hanging onto the side of the bed. Its hind legs were extended touching the floor. It was stuck, helpless. Preston walked into the room. The cat looked at him and meowed hoarsely. It was scared and in pain. Preston bent down quickly to lift it up. It was bony and fragile, lighter than he ever remembered. Its claws were caught in the white chanille. He had to tear them out. The cat cried again. The thought occurred to him that he might have snapped a bone. He lifted her back onto the bed. She sprawled out unnaturally. Her limbs were still locked into the position they had been in as she clung to the side of the bed. Preston watched her chest heave rapidly. He petted her on the head. Nothing but bone, skin, and fur. "I'm so sorry,

Sally,” he said. He thought about the time that had passed. This morning, and the night before. He imagined the cat stuck on the side of the bed straining to breathe, too weak to let go, its own weight slowly suffocating it. He felt pressure building in his own chest and had to get out of the room.

He went back to the hallway and put his hand on the wall. Across from him hung old, faded pictures, pictures of his mother and father when they were younger than he was now. And there were pictures of him. One taken that very summer he and his father had first brought the cat home. In the picture Preston was standing, smiling in the backyard with gladiolas and trumpet vine out of focus in the garden behind him. It was a picture of a day Preston couldn't remember.

Preston checked on Sally again later. Her breathing had recovered and she went back to being curled on the bed. He moved a footstool to the edge of the bed. Unsatisfied, he took a chair from the kitchen and put it next to the footstool adding another step. Next he took a small, shallow cottage cheese container out of the trash and washed it. He filled it with water and took it to her. She didn't sip as he held it for her. He put food on a saucer from the kitchen and brought it to her. She still wouldn't eat so he petted her. She did not purr. At night, when he woke up for whatever reason, he went to check on her. She lived a while longer.

Fast and Fresh

It's just a dream. He's riding on a train, alone, toward Canada. It's nighttime when the train comes to a gentle, silent stop at a bridge spanning a wooded ravine with a river below. There's a hole in the track and the train cannot pass. The hole moves down the track toward the train and comes into the cabin. The hole has shrunk now to the size of a briefcase, and it passes through the chest of a man in a suit and dissolves him from the inside out. He knows the hole is passing by other people because they're ok. The hole is only looking for bad people. The next bad person it finds, the hole enters through his mouth and peels him into thin air from the head down. The hole moves down the aisle of the train toward where he's sitting by himself and then he wakes up.

He jerks up in bed, sweating profusely. His heart is pounding. But the fan next to his bed is cold. It's early summer so the nights are still cool, and the breeze is cold. He gets out of bed, walks upstairs, and gets into the shower. Inside he scrubs furiously trying to get the sweat off. He sobs because each night he wakes up in a sweat. The dreams don't bother him. He hates his body because he cannot control its sweat.

When he leaves the bathroom, he can't see in the dark and he fumbles for the stairs. His parents' bedroom door is open and his mom calls, "Nat, are you ok?" He nods in the darkness and goes back to bed. The side of the bed he slept on is soaked and disgusting so he has to move to the other side and sleep there, on a new pillow.

Three months until he goes to college and he wants one summer without chores or work but the next morning his dad comes downstairs, finds him playing JRPG's in his room (his dad doesn't knock; he just comes in), and tells him, "You need to get a job." So he drives his car out to the Flying J truck stop at the edge of town in response to a help wanted ad and takes their drug

test. He's wearing a suit like his dad told him to and the kid at the counter looks at him like: do you know what job you're applying for? The middle-aged woman who takes his urine laughs about it and by all but saying so, indicates he'll get the job.

The next day (it's Saturday no less), his dad comes downstairs, finds him playing JRPG's in his room, and tells him, "I told you to get a job."

"I applied for one," Nate says, but his dad has already left to read the newspaper in the kitchen. Nate has no choice. His father has spoken. He applies for a job at the Skipper's Fast and Fresh Seafood Restaurant and gets hired on the spot. When the Flying J calls Monday morning he tells them he already took another job. The woman on the other end calls him a flake and hangs up. Nate hates his father for making him be "responsible" and thereby making him be a "flake."

But Nate doesn't feel too bad for very long after the phone call because the day he went in to be interviewed at Skipper's there was a girl, Patricia, whom he instantly became infatuated with. He couldn't put his finger on it nor did he try. Maybe it was the smell of her.

The woman who hired him, April, was just twenty-one and, though shorter than Nate, he immediately looked up to her. "Ok," she said rummaging in the back, "We had a Nathan before, so you're going to be Nathan." She handed him the used name tag. "The only shirt I have that will fit you is a woman's size. I hope you're man enough to wear a *girl's* shirt. This is a *girl's* shirt. It belonged to a girl." Nate blushed and took the shirt. "She was a cunt, though. So long as you're not a cunt then no one else will have to know." She smiled at Nate. He smiled back. She cocked her head expectantly. He continued to smile stupidly. She put her hands on his shoulders, turned him around, and marched him out of the back room. "If you're waiting for me to kiss you, handsome, that's not going to happen. Let's go." After the tour of the restaurant, April took him

out in front of the cash register. “Patty, this is Nathan. He’s your new Thompson Twin. Gaze into each other’s eyes now. You’re working Monday afternoon’s shift.”

The next week, desperate for better workers, April increases the wage offer above minimum. She looks at Nate guiltily and he knows why but doesn’t care. He took the job to get his dad off his back and now he does the job because he likes April and he wants Patricia. The job also accomplishes even better what his video games would have. He forgets his future. He forgets that once he leaves, he never wants to come back. He will be free from his father. But he will also never be a kid again. For better or for worse he will have to become a man, perhaps a man like his father. He doesn’t want to be like his father, though, and he doesn’t know if that means being good or bad. It gives him nightmares.

Of course, Nate and Patricia aren’t the only ones who work for April at Skipper’s. But the personal bond between him, April, and Patricia is the most pronounced. This job has a high turnover rate. People come, work for a few weeks, and then disappear. One girl April hired, Melissa was working the evening shift with Nate. It was 10:00 PM and they were closing. He emptied the grease from the fryers up front while she was supposedly cleaning the back. Nate heard a loud clang followed by an “Oh... Oh... Ow.” He went to the back room. Some empty metal trays were strewn on the orange tile floor. Melissa leaned against the metal sink and said, “I’ve hurt my back. I think I’ve slipped a disk and bruised a rib.” She squinted her eyes and put her free hand at the small of her back.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

She glared at him, “I’m in serious pain here.”

“Like 911?”

“I need to sit down. I think I need to go home.”

Nate called April. “I honestly don’t believe her. But can I send her home anyways? I don’t want to deal with this shit.”

“Yes or no question: Are you the closing shift leader?”

“I am...”

“Yes or no.”

“Yes...”

“There’s your answer.” She hung up. He went out front. “Ok, I believe you. This sounds serious. If you don’t need me to call an ambulance, then please check out and go home. And see a doctor tomorrow. If you’re working, someone will cover your shift.”

Melissa stood up. “If I get terminated for this, you’ll hear from my lawyer.” She left, Nate turned up the Metallica, and by the next week she’d stopped showing up for work entirely.

On Friday, April came in at noon while Nate worked the fryers and Patricia worked the register. April weaved her way through the customers to the back. “Trish, you have less thoughts in your brain than syllables in your name, but at least you show up for work.”

Patricia finished with the customer. While the next one gazed with open mouth at the overhead menu Patricia turned to April and handed her some papers. “Two people filled out applications.”

April snatched them from her. She threw open the backroom door and howled, “Send in the clowns!”

Nate caught Patricia’s attention. “You know she’s only joking, right?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, you’re not dumb.”

Patricia stared down at her fingers on the cash register. “You don’t know that.”

Later when they had finished closing, Patricia asked April for a ride home. “Where’s starch-boy? Didn’t he give you a ride here?” Nate could hear April’s reluctance and inside his mind begged her to say no so he could give her a ride instead.

“I walked,” Patricia said.

“No wonder your make-up looks terrible.” Then April’s voice softened. “Sure, I’ll give you a ride. We can talk.”

The other people April hired were like ghosts to Nate. Some of them he never even saw because they worked the morning shift. He knew of their passing by the change of clothes on the clothes rack and the names on the time sheet. Nate and Patricia worked the most frequently with each other on the evening shift. April never talked about the new hires with them except for mandatory introductions on days they shared shifts. But there was one person she was enthusiastic about. She came out of the backroom to share her enthusiasm with Nate. “Finally, we’re getting some real help. My friend Chris is transferring here from Broadway.” Nate didn’t know who that was. “I worked with him over there before I became manager here.” Chris was a six-foot-tall Native American with lush, long black hair who April said was the only man who could have long hair and still be gorgeous. Later, when the two of them ate their employee-discount desserts standing in the back room, she told Nate, “Chris, me, and my boyfriend all drove down to Burning Man last year. But the car broke down so by the time we got it running again we were pulling in at midnight. It was so hot and we were so tired, Chris had put on Megadeth the whole way at top volume with the windows down. Anyway, we pulled into where we were going to sleep for the night just as this one song finished a really long instrumental

intro, and right as we pull in Dave Mustaine sings ‘Hey, I don’t feel so good. What the fuck is this?!’ and we laugh our heads off. Everyone around us is awake at that point. Not that there’s not someone awake all the time down there, but now I mean like everyone is awake. It was hilarious. There’s like Phish and the Grateful Dead and then we pull in with ‘What the fuck is this?!’” April took a bite of her cake and then continued. “The next day no one really cared even though everyone around us knew it was us. But there were these two guys who came up to us and were trying to do the welcoming thing and then they asked where’s our gift. So my boyfriend says, ‘We brought death and destruction,’ and because he’s black they can’t say anything and they leave us alone for the rest of the time. I think they may have even left early because of us. And so then Chris starts pulling this shit too and goes up to people saying, ‘I have brought the spirits of my ancestors to share with you,’ and all these white people are trying to act cool—except the old burners who you could tell were pissed. Like one kid was like, ‘Oh man, those are my spirits, too!’” April laughed and choked on her cake.

“I didn’t know your boyfriend was black.”

“That’s a weird thing to say, Nathan.”

That Friday the phone in the office rang. Nate was sitting there taking his break, eating the same chocolate cake he always did from the dessert case, and contemplating a map of a foreign coastline as it appeared in the relief of flaking and cracked paint on the water softener. It was evening rush and when no one answered after the fifth ring he picked it up. “Thank you for calling Skipper’s. How may I help you?”

“Yes, I’m a concerned customer. I came in earlier and had your daily fresh cod. However, while I was eating it I found this strange black strand.” The other end paused.

Nate said, "Ok."

"Yes, well, I'm concerned what it might be and wanted to know if you know?"

"A black strand?"

"Yes. It tasted a bit like chocolate."

"Huh."

"Listen, maybe is your manager there? Could I talk to them, please?"

"Yeah, let me just put you on hold." Nate looked at the variety of buttons on the phone but could not decipher which one was the button to hold. So he set the receiver down as gently as he could on some inventory reports and hoped the other side couldn't hear.

April followed Nate back to the office. He tried to finish eating while she stood holding the receiver. The phone cord flopped against his knee and in front of his face. April listened to the other end and then said, "Oh my God. I think you better go to a doctor right away. That thing could grow inside your stomach and burst out of it." Nate looked up at her from the corners of his eyes. "Haha, I know it's you, Floyd. There are no parasites in the fish. I cut them myself every morning. And I've been working all day so I know you haven't been in. If you're going to punk my staff would you please do it when we're not in the middle of evening rush?" She didn't wait for an answer. "Ok-see-you-Monday-bye."

"Who was that?" Nate asked.

"Floyd. My boss. You haven't met him. Is your break done yet?"

At the end of that day April asks Nate what he's doing and he says nothing. "Let's go to Shari's then," she says.

"Ok, let me call my parents," he says.

“Why? I thought you drove here.” When Nate tells her he did she says, “I was living on my own when I was your age. Don’t be a pussy. What are your parents going to do? Ground you? You said they’re the ones that wanted you to get a job. Consider this ‘other duties as assigned.’”

“Can Patricia come?”

“I don’t know. *Can she?*” April turns around and shouts. “Trish. Shari’s.”

A few hours later, they sit in a booth by the window, the two girls side-by-side. It’s dark out. April orders them each a chocolate milk shake. She wastes no time getting to what’s on her mind. “Floyd is coming Monday. He’s the regional manager,” she says to Nate. “Just so you two know. Can one of you score some cocaine?”

“I can maybe get some pot,” Nate says.

“I’m sure you could. But I was only kidding. I think you guys are smoking pot half the time already. Seriously, I need to get one of those posters but have it say: ‘Can’t tell if high or just stupid.’ You know I love you guys. Anyway, I don’t need cocaine or pot. I need to get laid. Fortunately I totally am on Sunday. I got a new boyfriend.”

“I thought you said you had a boyfriend.”

“No. We’d broken up a long time ago. He left me for a stripper.”

“Was she pretty?”

“Yeah, in a way.”

Nate lowers his voice. “Did she have big breasts?”

April doesn’t lower hers. “Yeah, but they were fake. Besides, she was *old*.”

“How old?”

“Like in her thirties.”

Nate processes for a moment and then asks, "How did you meet this guy?"

April tells him she met him at the bank where he worked. They exchanged phone numbers and texted back and forth a bit and then she says, "He asked me if they were real." She smiles widely.

Nate blushes. Even though April is short and plump, he's never thought about her breasts before. He doesn't want to. He's frustrated now that he is thinking about April this way. He's doing everything he can to stop. He looks to Patricia, but she is staring off somewhere else and has finished half her milkshake. "Is he black?" Nate asks.

"Why are you so fascinated by the fact I date black men?"

"I don't know."

April bumps Patricia in the shoulder. "Your parents picked out a new starched Mormon boy for you yet, Trish?"

"No," she says.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" Nate asks.

"I don't know," Patricia says. "Maybe?"

"You're not still seeing Carlos are you? I told you to dump him."

"I know."

"Well you haven't slept together have you?" April asks. "I mean literally. Not like just slept in the same bed. Have you had sex?"

"Does oral sex count?"

"That depends."

Patricia's voice falls farther down inside her, coming as though from a room behind the clanking kitchen. "He wanted to but I said no. So last Saturday I went to his house. I mean, he

lives in a trailer. And when I got there, he said ‘Get on your knees.’”

“Did you?” April’s tone darkens.

“Well, what would you have done?”

April puts her arm on the table and sits sideways to look Patricia squarely in the profile.

“If a guy told me to get on my knees, I’d bite his dick off.”

“But I like Carlos. And he says he loves me.”

“Let him get on his fucking knees then.”

Nate says, “I’d never ask a girl to suck my dick.”

April glances back at him. “Wow Nathan, your medal is in the mail.”

The waitress moves from the booth next to theirs and says quietly, “Can you guys keep it down? You’re bothering the other customers.”

Nathan looks around. The restaurant is nearly empty.

April sits up and shouts to the next booth, “If you guys want to study, go to the library.”

Behind Nate a young man gets on the seat and faces them. “The library’s closed. Why don’t you talk like a regular person? Your friends are sitting right there. We have a test tomorrow.”

“Well studying at the last minute’s sure to help.”

He sits back down. They are all quiet for a while. The entire restaurant is quiet. “You guys ready to go yet?” April asks.

“I haven’t finished my milkshake,” Nate says.

“Get it in a cup and take it with you. Or stay here and finish it.” They leave and in the parking lot April says, “Way to stand up for us back there, Nathan.”

Nate is caught off guard by this. “I didn’t know you wanted me to say anything. I thought

you handled it.”

“Just some advice if you want to get laid: Women like to have a man stand up for them.”

That night Nate dreams about being on the train again. But this time April is sitting in the aisle seat next to him. But she’s much, much bigger, and cartoonishly round, obese. When the hole slides down the aisle and the passengers recoil from it, April does, too, and Nate feels smothered between her and the side of the train. He feels himself smothering. He wakes up and throws off the covers. He catches his breath. Again he is covered in sweat and the bed is wet with perspiration. But he is so tired—his muscles are sore and his feet still hurt from the busy day—he doesn’t shower. Besides, he doesn’t want his parents to know. He wipes himself off with the linen and then rolls to the dry side of the bed to sleep.

Nate’s shift on Monday starts at 3:00 and he wakes up at 1:00. The first thing he does is take a shower. Then he changes directly into his work clothes. When he goes to the kitchen he says good morning to his dad who is sipping coffee at the kitchen table. His dad looks up over his bifocals.

“Afternoon, son. Late night?”

“We went to Shari’s after work.”

“We?”

“Some of the girls from work.”

“You working today?”

Nate nods.

“You’re working a lot.”

Note opens the refrigerator and takes out the milk. “Yeah.”

“These girls. They’re your friends?”

“Yeah, I like them.” Nate pours himself a bowl of Cheerios.

His dad resumes reading the newspaper. After Nate finishes and is putting the dishes in the dish washer, his dad says, “Do you have condoms?”

Nate doesn’t know exactly why, but he feels angry. “Dad,” he says before he gets his voice under control. Then, quietly, “It’s not like that. They’re my *friends*.”

“Alright, sorry.” His dad stands up from the table. For a moment Nate is afraid he’s angry about him being angry. “You’re a good kid, son. But that’s not always a good thing. I hope your friends are good people is all. But...” His dad says in a practiced, stiff tone, “Good people are destined to be hurt. I just want you to be careful.”

When Nate leaves, though, and he thinks of Patricia, he feels as though he’s lied to his father.

As soon as Nate gets to work, it is immediately apparent something is wrong. The regional manager, Floyd stands by the door to the back room, hands crossed behind his back. April is barking orders to Chris as the two of them work the fryers. She has none of her typical aplomb. Patricia has a look on her face as though she’s been cross-examined. The line of customers extends to the bathroom hallway. The restaurant is so packed that even the smoking section has people in it.

“Nathan, I need you in back pronto to help whats-his-face with the dishes and then when he’s caught up get out here and start serving.” If she hadn’t said his name, she could have been talking to anyone.

Nate says nothing but runs into the back and does as he’s asked. The kid in back is

clearly overwhelmed so Nate asks him to just empty the baskets and leave the dishes to him. In fifteen minutes he's able to restock the front. He realizes he's forgotten to punch in, but knows to ask April to correct it later. "I'm here to serve," he says to April, trying to cheer her.

Floyd says, "Now that you have an extra staff, why don't we get one of them out front to help advertise the sale."

April looks at Floyd with an expression of disbelief. Before seeing it now, Nate would not have imagined her capable of such an expression. "I think the sale's doing just fine, Floyd."

"Yes, but we want the larger public to be aware. What about the people who can't come in today? We want them to come in tomorrow, don't we?"

"Floyd, I don't have a person to spare."

"April, we both know the numbers. If we're to afford more help, we first need to meet our normals. Select someone."

"Trish..."

Patricia turns from the register. She looks ready to cry. And says, "Please, April. I'm wearing make-up."

"Chris—"

"No way," Chris says. "I'm not wearing that fucking thing. You're the manager."

"Wear what?" Nate asks.

"Floyd wants someone to dress as Skippy the Parrot and wave the sale sign at traffic," Chris says.

"I can do it." But April has already gone to the backroom. Nate hears some shouting and then April storms back to the front.

"Great, so I guess I'll fucking do it," April says. "It's not like I'm manager or anything."

“I said I’ll do it, April,” Nate says.

“Oh well thanks for volunteering *now*. Come on, then.” April takes him in the back. She dusts off a large cardboard box and pulls out the costume. The interior is stained with grease and sweat, the exterior is a moldy green. The head of the costume is an over-sized parrot’s head with a sailor’s cap. The enlarged posterior lowers Nate’s center of gravity and causes him to shuffle. “There you go, Skippy. Here’s the sign. Go wave it around like an idiot.” She sends him out the backroom door and he waddles around the sidewalk to the front lawn. The black screen in the open-mouthed beak allows him to see the ground and passerby from the waist up. It’s at least 90 degrees outside the suit and Nate is sweating off the tip of his nose. He waves the sign around. Occasionally a car honks at him.

Nate is starting to feel bleary and has a headache. He’s not sure how long it’s been but he hopes all the sweating he’s doing now means he won’t sweat again tonight. April comes out and yells, “Hey, Skippee! Stop trying to impress me and get back in here.” He follows her around the building again to the back door. “John just walked so I need you in the kitchen again.” John was the former what’s-his-face.

“How long was I out there?”

“Like thirty minutes. Did it seem like forever?”

“Nah, it was ok. It was different.”

By 7:00 Floyd has left and by 10:00 they lock the doors. But there are customers until 10:30. It’s calmed enough that Nate can both clean in the back and serve food. He comes to one table and recognizes the blond college student from Shari’s. The blond does not recognize him. “Hey man, could you score us some more fries?”

Nate speaks in a sing-song tone, “If you’d like more fries we’d be happy to ring you up a side-order at the counter.”

“Come on, man, you know this isn’t a proper serving.”

Nate relishes the moment. “As I said, we’d be happy to ring you up a side-order if you’d like more.”

The blonde kid glares back at him and Nate moves on. Even though it’s after hours, April tells Nate to take a fifteen minute break while she, Patricia, and Chris continue closing the fryers. In a minute Patricia comes into the cramped office. “Stand up, Nathan, I have a surprise,” she says. Nathan stands up. She bends in very close to him. He bumps against the desk. She presses against him, he feels her breasts against him and leans backward trying to feel them as little as he can. He stares at her lips. He wants to bend forward the few inches necessary to put his mouth against hers, but he’s not prepared for the sudden affection. Patricia holds up a five-dollar bill. “This is your share of the tips tonight.” And as quickly as the heady feeling came, it leaves him and he is deflated. He can’t believe what just happened was only about a tip. “By the way,” she says, “that was really nice what you did.”

“What did I do?”

“You made April cry. She started crying after you went out in the parrot suit. No one has ever volunteered to wear the parrot suit.” Patricia acts like she’s shared something she shouldn’t have and escapes the office.

By eleven, there’s honking in the parking lot. “I have to go,” Patricia says. “Carlos is here.”

April is too tired to argue over the remaining ten minutes of work left. She waves her off and Patricia rushes out the door. “You guys want to come over after this? I’m making my mom

dinner.”

“Can’t,” Chris says. “I’m fucking this crazy bitch later.”

“Nathan?”

“Ok.”

Nate follows April to her apartment complex. When they get there, April’s mom is on the couch watching TV. Unlike April, whose hair is black, her mom’s is a dirty blonde. “Mom,” April says, “this is Nathan from work. I told him he could eat with us.”

The furniture in the room is all a matching eggshell white leather. “It looks nice,” Nate says.

“It’s pre-furnished,” April’s mom says. “These were supposed to be time-shares but there was a big development scandal so all these rich apartments got reduced in rent. When we found out we decided to take one.”

They start to watch a Richard Gere movie while they eat. April’s mom sits in the recliner while April and Nate share the couch. When they finish, April’s mom says, “I’ll clean up. I’m going to bed. You two watch the movie.”

When the movie finishes, April says, “That was dumb.”

“I thought it was ok,” Nate says. He reaches over and pulls a loose hair from her shirt without thinking.

“For a minute there I thought you were going to touch my boob,” she says.

“No! I wouldn’t do that. Jesus, I’m sorry. That’s not what I meant at all.”

“Don’t be embarrassed. It would’ve been fine. They are big after all.”

“I would not ever do that.”

“It’s fine, Nate. I know you wouldn’t. You can hold them, though, if you want. But I’m

not taking off my clothes and you can only do it now because I say so. And that's all you get to do."

"No, it's ok."

"What's the matter? Haven't you ever touched a woman's breasts before?"

"Not on purpose. I mean, thanks, but I think I only want to touch the breasts of the girl I love."

"Oh, that's sweet. A little nauseating, but also sweet. Do you have some special lady in mind?"

"Patricia did something really weird in the office today."

"Did she give you a blow job?"

"No." Nate's face flushes. He's angry.

April stretches her back and runs her hands through her hair. "Jesus Christ, sometimes I think you're as dumb as she is. Well, I'm sure if you want Trish you can have Trish. I mean, that's like setting your goal to win the Special Olympics. Compared to her current trailer-trash, I'm sure she'll give it up for anyone. Get in there, tiger. Go boldly where any man may have gone before."

Nate glares back at her. "I thought you were her friend."

"I *am* her friend. But here's the deal. I'm also *your* friend. I can't help Trish. But I'm trying to help you. Trish has problems. Problems only she can fix but she won't."

"Ok," Nate says. That night he lays in bed fantasizing about Trish's problems and ways to rescue her from them.

It's nearing the end of July and little changes at Skipper's Fast and Fresh Seafood Restaurant. Nate watches as April grows increasingly frustrated and talks more and more about

Floyd and “normals.” She stops inviting him to go to Shari’s or to watch movies with her. He also works less with Patricia now. April schedules her in the morning to help with prep and he has to close with whatever the help-of-the-week may be. But finally he gets one day after several weeks that both he and Patricia work the closing shift. While the grease drains, they sit in the dining room and sip cokes from the red plastic cups of the soda fountain. Nate struggles to find something to talk about. He asks about music and TV, tries to talk about April, but Patricia again seems somewhere else. Nate wants so much to break into her. He sees himself pulling her along and running up a hill. When they get to the top there’s a big green valley below with its own little sun at the bottom shining up at them. He wants to see the look on her face when he shows this place to her. He has no idea where it is or how to get there, but first he has to find a way to get her out of the gray tower of her body.

He’s lost in this fantasy when she says, “Do you have any little brothers?”

Nate shakes his head.

“Have you ever killed an animal? Do boys do that?”

“We killed grasshoppers in the first grade.”

“Have you ever put firecrackers in frogs?”

“I haven’t.”

Patricia nods to herself. She contemplates. “You’ve never killed a cat or a squirrel?”

“No.”

“Is that normal?”

“That’s horrible. I hate people who kill animals.”

“My little brother kills animals all the time. My parents take him to the church but then he killed a cat and now they’re thinking about taking him to a psychiatrist also. They want to

move to Salt Lake. I haven't told April. I don't want to go to Salt Lake. I hate my brother. He's crazy and fucked up. I think he's going to turn into a murderer. I think my parents think so, too. I wish they'd just take him away and lock him up." Her mouth is stuck open before she finally asks, "You hate my brother, too?"

"I don't know." Nate feels the gray tower suddenly much larger than he ever imagined. It's not a human-sized tower. It is the tower of a giant, populated with trivialities that dwarf him by comparison.

"I don't know what's wrong with me. No one likes me."

"That's not true, Patricia." Nate fidgets with his hands on the side of the table. Patricia holds her hands in her lap. "I know lots of people who like you, Patricia. *I* like you."

She looks back at him with a perfectly blank face. It's not as though she looks at him with disbelief. It's more like she can neither hear him nor see him. It is like he is a speck far beneath her. That's what he sees in her face, behind her eyes. And Nate feels ashamed. He doesn't know her. He just wants to know her. But he doesn't know her.

This is the last time he sees her. She doesn't come to work again. April fumes. He knows she's moved with her family. But he doesn't tell April this. "Oh God," April says. "I can't do both this job *and* not get laid."

"I thought you had that taken care of? What about your boyfriend?"

"I had to dump him."

"Why?"

"He started following me around. Like that night you came over. I found him outside when I took out the trash afterwards. It was the fucking middle of the night. I tried to work through that shit, but I don't need a fucking stalker. So—" she made a *thwak* sound and chopped

her hand “—off with his head!” Another week passes and April tells Nathan, “I know you put in your notice but you said school doesn’t start for you until September, right? Well I really need you to stay on. I can’t let you quit in two weeks.”

Nate agrees not to quit. He wanted at least two weeks of vacation to play video games before he went to college but there’s no arguing with April. Every time he tries, she acts flustered and he feels guilty. And yet, another week later April is gone, too. Floyd comes in with a new manager. “Nick?” he asks. “Nate,” he corrects himself. “This is Frank. He’s going to be manager now that April’s quit.” Nate and Frank work their first shift together quietly and when they finish, once again Nate puts in his two weeks’ notice. The following weeks Nate feels like he’s in another store.

One afternoon a lanky black man in a suit comes in and asks, “Is April here?”

And instantly Nate knows who he is. “She does not work here any-more.” Nate says evenly.

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Nope-*puh*.” Nate hates this man. He blames this man for April leaving him behind. If either Patricia or April had stayed, he could have stayed connected to the other. He couldn’t help Patricia, but this man could’ve helped April. He wants something bad to happen to him. But all Nate can do is be rude. He knows he’ll never see either of his friends, such as they were, again.

On Nate’s last day Frank says to him sheepishly, “Well, because we’ve only worked together for two weeks, I can’t write you a letter of recommendation.”

Nate laughs inside himself. As though he needs a letter of recommendation from this stranger. He’s going to college. He’s done with this life forever. But for what he will later look back on as a stupid, meaningless, service job, right now he feels incredibly hollow. Once he

leaves this place, any vestige of April and Patricia will leave with him. Their name tags will become plastic. He feels a hole inside himself. It's late afternoon and the sun is setting. "I've got the back room caught up," Nate says. "You want me to go wave the sign outside?"

"Sure," Frank says. "That'd be great."

Nate puts on the parrot suit by himself. Putting it on is the hardest part. But once inside everything else is easy. No matter how cold outside, inside the suit he instantly starts sweating. But it feels ok. It's just what happens. He goes out on the front lawn. He's learned how to walk in the suit so he can see where he's going. Soon the temperature makes him feel like he's in a fever dream. Somewhere in the world a volcano has erupted and the volcanic gasses have spread far enough to reach around the world and turn the sunset into a beautiful, alien purple and orange. Traffic has backed up from the light at the intersection. Nate walks between the cars waving the sign. Some honk. He walks out to the turning lane. Then he crosses to the other side. The cars from the opposite direction haven't got the signal yet. He stands in the middle of the left lane and waits for them to start. He knows the good people will swerve to miss. And it turns out every one of them do.

The Dark Cafe

Geoff's biggest problem in life was that the Korean barista at the café he went to hated his guts. He didn't know this yet because the problem was still one in the making. She, on the other hand, thought he was her biggest problem. What she didn't know was that her hatred for him came from her undiagnosed obsessive compulsive mood disorder that he inadvertently provoked. Like the way he, in her eyes, deliberately strode over the floor haphazardly, ignoring the pattern in the concrete floor tile and randomly stepping inside one square and then stepping on the cracks between two others. He assumed she just hated everyone and tried not to take it personally. He considered going elsewhere, but damn, the coffee was good. So he told himself. What he really wanted was to be outside his house.

In her mind she thought of him as "professor monkey" because he wore a suit and had hairy knuckles. She liked bare-skinned men, like James the cashier, whom she'd personally hired. Unlike most white men she knew, James was clean-shaven and hairless. Whenever she served the professor and saw one of his chest hairs poking through the fabric of his white shirt (how did that happen?) it reminded her of how much she loved James. James, six-feet tall, sharp chin, always smiling and nice and doing exactly what she said. For example, he called her "Eun-hee" instead of "Miss Kim" like the rest of the staff because she told him to. But more importantly, the day he came in with his application, he'd seen her struggling to up-end the giant kitchen trash can into the back alley dumpster. The kitchen staff had refused to do it but it was attracting flies and they were starting to buzz about the front. And Eun-hee hated flies. Something soggy and heavy stuck to the bottom of the barrel. A disgusting brown liquid flowed out the lip and down her arm but the horrid mass refused to be dislodged. She couldn't tip it at a high enough angle. And then James was there and he did it for her. He didn't even work for her.

He was just a kind man who'd seen a woman in an alleyway struggling. When ten minutes later he handed her his completed application, for once she didn't go by the book but hired him on the spot.

The "professor", who wasn't a professor at all, whose name was Geoff, tried to be kind as well. He made a point of saying, "Thank you," when she gave him his drink. She pretended not to speak English and turned her back on him curtly. What right did he have to presume to talk to her? What entitlement to think she owed him her friendship. She saved all of that for James.

Nothing was going wrong for Geoff, except his contract had expired a month ago and he had to find a new one. He took his coffee and sat at one of the wobbly wood tables in the corner. He opened his tablet and scanned his job search website for results. There was little demand for architecture and so he'd been reduced to AutoCAD work mostly. He hated sitting in front of the computer.

It was 7:30 this particularly day. He was the only one in the café (along with Eun-hee who took her free time doing the books at the counter). A young college girl came in. She towed a homeless man in off the street to buy him food. Her friend followed. They sat down and Geoff saw the second girl was uncomfortable and annoyed. She hadn't agreed to eat breakfast with her friend in order to hang out now with a homeless man. But the first girl continued nodding without a thought for her friend. Geoff felt sorry for her. He couldn't have cared less about the homeless man.

Geoff finished his coffee (delicious!) and left. Today he only had one interview, downtown, and he needed a walk beforehand to calm his nerves.

Eun-hee Kim worked for her uncle, who owned the café. He rarely came to work but was

there that day. The two girls and the homeless man had left by now and the café was empty. Mr. Kim had brought a replacement water cooler for the café. The old one's nozzle had cracked. No doubt from brutish oafs like professor monkey, Eun-hee thought. James came in at ten and helped Mr. Kim set the heavy glass container onto the counter. The two men stepped back to examine their handiwork.

“Mr. Kim,” James said. “You misspelled ‘water.’”

Mr. Kim had written “watter” on the jug.

James laughed good-naturedly. He liked Mr. Kim, what little he knew of the man.

Eun-hee was there in an instant. She cackled loudly and said to her uncle in Korean, “Are you stupid?”

Mr. Kim didn't feel bad. Why should he? He'd learned to double consonants in words with short vowel sounds. It was spelled “ladder”, “batter”, “fatter” and “redder”, “better”, letter,” wasn't it? His logic was sound. It was the logic of English that was not. Despite his niece's seemingly constant derision of him, he laughed with James at the mistake. As far as Eun-hee went, she was family. Her prospects for a man were dim and Mr. Kim felt sorry for her. He had given her this job as a favor to his brother who'd refused to let his daughter live at home anymore once she turned thirty.

Geoff got on the bus at 50th and sat down alone in the second front-facing seat on the left. His interview was downtown in a high-rise. With each block more passengers got on. Geoff was lost in thought, thinking about money and television. The bus stopped. A woman with a cane passed his seat to go to the back. The bus started up.

A voice said, “Let me ask you something. Do you think you're special?”

Geoff looked up and around, and saw a man standing forward in the walkway. Pale, stocky, in his mid-thirties, glaring at someone sitting in the inside-facing row seats.

“Did you not see that handicapped person pass you?” the man continued. Geoff became uncomfortable.

“Do you think you’re so special you can just ignore people worse off than you? Can you not read the signs? These seats are for the elderly.”

The hairs on the back of Geoff’s neck stood up as they did whenever he heard a shovel scraping the sidewalk. At this point the recipient of the man’s anger, a young Chinese boy, probably eighteen, stood up from the seat and held onto the handrail. He hadn’t meant to be rude to anyone and he didn’t know what to do but give up this seat he’d had no right to.

“You know my mom is handicapped,” the man continued. “I really resent people like you. You don’t give a shit about anyone but yourself. Always looking out for number one.”

Geoff looked to the back of the bus. No one was moving to take the seat. Of course they wouldn’t. Who would? Geoff hoped someone handicapped would.

The boy didn’t make eye contact but mumbled, “Sorry.”

“Are you apologizing to me? I’m not the one you should apologize to. It’s too late for apology. You should’ve thought of that sooner.”

“Hey man,” Geoff blurted, “you made your point.”

The man turned his gaze on Geoff. “What?”

“The kid’s sorry. Leave off already.”

“I wasn’t talking to you.”

Geoff looked out the window to hide his fear. He regretted this already.

“You’re a trouble-maker,” an elderly Chinese man sitting across the aisle joined in to

support Geoff. Thank you thank you, Geoff thought. Oh God, get mad at that old guy.

But the man ignored the new critic. “What stop are you getting off at?”

Geoff looked back at him nervously. He couldn’t not say anything. “City hall.”

“Ok.” The man was silent. Geoff went back to looking out the window.

The bus arrived at the city hall. Surely the man had calmed down. Surely he had somewhere else to be, Geoff thought. He exited the rear bus door and the stocky man followed him.

“Hey,” he said.

Oh shit, Geoff thought. Was this going to turn into a fight? He couldn’t afford to get into a fight right before an interview. Hell, he couldn’t afford to replace his suit either.

“I’m not wrong,” the man said. “It just really pisses me off how selfish people are in this city.”

“Yeah.”

The man continued staring at Geoff. Waiting for something more.

“I understand. But, the kid did all he could.” Geoff took a step back. “Well, I gotta get to an interview.”

“I’m not racist,” the man said. “You know that.”

This statement blind-sided Geoff. He no longer had any idea what this fight was really about. And that’s true, he didn’t. But in that moment, Geoff finally noticed that the man was shorter than him. “Yeah,” he said. “I know.” But he wasn’t sure. Had someone called this man a racist before? Would someone who wasn’t racist get off the bus just to him he wasn’t? And Geoff wondered if he were racist for not being able to tell.

The stocky man seemed satisfied, though, and walked away down the sidewalk in the

same direction as the bus.

Geoff went to his interview shaken and feeling guilty and he didn't get the job.

Eun-hee continued shouting out the orders for drinks all day at the café. She'd just hired a new girl to help. The girl was late. When she did arrive, she ran behind the counter, into the kitchen, and came back out wearing a green apron. Her name was Emily, she was technically Korean, as Eun-hee saw it, but she'd been born in America and her Korean was abysmal. She was young, like James, probably in her early twenties, and perpetually cowering under Eun-hee's gaze. And they'd only known each other a few days. Eun-hee felt it her duty to shame Emily about this by scolding her in Korean, "Why're you so late? You have a clock. Use it. Now work the cash-register. James deserves a break." She told James to take an hour break and order anything he wanted from the menu. Then she told the cooks to make him bi bim bap. He sat at the same corner table professor monkey sat at earlier. But James sat the chair so that all four legs were positioned symmetrically in the concrete squares. Not haphazard. Why couldn't so many others understand order the way he did? Eun-hee thought. From behind the bar, she watched James eat heartily. She decided to cut him a piece of chocolate cake also and brought that out to him. "I'm sorry for Emily," she said. "So please have this piece of cake."

James blushed. He accepted reluctantly. Eun-hee made him uncomfortable. He had no idea that this came across in a way that made her think he was infatuated with her. He didn't want the cake. He didn't want free meals. Not when the other staff didn't get them. He worried if Mr. Kim found out because Mr. Kim was his boss, and Eun-hee was his niece. James rightly judged that if there were a problem, he'd come out the loser. "Thanks," he said. What could he do? He decided to pay Mr. Kim later. But the cake was expensive. Eun-hee stood there waiting

for him to start eating it. In the weeks since James had first helped her, she'd decided he wasn't nice but instead he'd helped her because he'd fallen in love with her there in the alley and her brain had altered the memory accordingly.

The door opened and the doorbell chimed. James leaned around, "Oh, Geoff's back." Indeed. Geoff had come back. He wasn't ready to go home today. He still felt shook up by the bizarre combination of bad luck.

James liked Geoff, but that was because James liked everyone. James was likable that way. But it also made him hard for most people to understand.

Eun-hee frowned and returned to the bar. Emily rung Geoff up. He stood at the end of the counter and waited for Eun-hee to make him a mocha. She finished and slid it to him. A slight amount spilled over the lip of the cup. "Oh," Geoff said, "can I get whip cream?"

"You didn't ask for whip cream," Eun-hee said. She didn't bother looking at the receipt. She'd already looked at it once.

"Well, I did. Anyway can I have whip cream?"

"Fifty-cent," Eun-hee thickened her accent.

"Fifteen cents?"

"Fifty-cent."

"Fifty?"

"Fifty-cent."

"Ok," Geoff opened his wallet and pulled out a dollar. "Can I get change from here?" he pointed to the tip jar.

"Pay up there." Eun-hee jerked her head toward the cash register without making eye-contact.

“Can I get the whip-cream first?”

“Pay first.”

Geoff bit his tongue, but he was angry. He walked carefully to the register holding his drink. He then set it down gently. Eun-hee rapped her fingers in quick succession. Geoff paused with his wallet in one hand. A wave of aggression flowed over him and everything but the sound of fingernails on wood dimmed. How dare she feign impatience when she was the one who purposefully created this hassle? The nerve, he thought. It was the shovel on concrete sensation all over again. And just as on the bus, his impulse to put a stop to it got the better of him. He reached out with his free hand and touched her fingers. Eun-hee jumped. All the banal dislike Eun-hee had heaped on him over the past months came back out of him in that instant. “Would you please stop that,” he hissed.

Eun-hee jerked her hand back. Geoff’s anger insulted her. “Don’t you touch me!” Her voice carried. Mr. Kim came out of the back and looked around quizzically. Eun-hee turned to her uncle and said in Korean, “Uncle, this man put his hand on me.” Eun-hee told herself it was technically true.

Mr. Kim strode out to confront Geoff. He spoke in the best English he knew. “What do you do? You leave my people alone!” Mr. Kim didn’t know Geoff, but he could see clearly the anger and hatred on Geoff’s face. He understandably assumed the worst.

Emily, whom everyone had forgotten except James, because James was smitten with her, came forward and said, “She started it.”

Now James left his seat and joined them. Geoff looked to him for help. They’d known each other casually since the day James started working there. “I just want to get this in a to-go cup and leave.”

“No,” Eun-hee said. “The cup isn’t free. You can’t have things you don’t pay for.”

“I can pay for his cup,” James said.

Geoff only got angrier. “How long have you been charging me for this stuff without telling me?”

“I give you cup and then you leave,” Mr. Kim said. “You never come back.”

“You got it,” Geoff said. But now just looking at the cup of cooling mocha was too much. He felt even drinking it would be one more indignity. “No forget it. You keep your drink. You keep my money. I don’t want anything from you.” Geoff turned and stormed off. Just as he got to the door two young college girls came in. “I wouldn’t recommend you eat here,” he said. His anger garbled his words and made his speech stiff. Then moved between them. He made sure when he left that the door was propped open.

That night he’d lie in bed and think how much he hated people. He’d think that hatred was why he never made anything of himself as an architect and why he was still doing grunt-work design. He thought bitterly that maybe that was actually best for him. In the end, he felt he lived better alone with a machine than anything else. He rebuked himself for wasting so much money at the café when he could have saved so much more by making coffee at home. And in the back of his mind, he blamed Eun-hee for all of this.

In the café, Emily cried. She didn’t know why. It was because she hated conflict. Really, it was because she wasn’t used to such needless destruction. “Why are you crying?” Eun-hee demanded. “He didn’t attack you.” This made Emily cry more.

James took Emily’s hands and peeled them away from her face. “Hey,” he said. He bent toward her and pushed the locks of hair over her eyes back behind her ears.

Eun-hee’s eyes widened and she shuddered. How dare James touch Emily that way?

Where was his compassion for *her*? She needed more than she could ever know for someone to touch *her* face. She blamed Emily. That stupid girl. Crying to get the attention of a man. But she also hated James now. A stupid man to be so easily manipulated. A stupid man who couldn't appreciate a woman who cared about him. Stupid, stupid man.

“It's ok,” James told Emily, oblivious to everyone but her. “Don't cry. It was just a bad day.” Theirs wasn't a love to last the ages, but it would do until tomorrow.