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THE SECRET LIVES OF ADULTS: STORIES

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These stories are dedicated to my parents. Mom and Dad, though you have never read them, you know these stories by heart; the act of creation was as much yours as mine.

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ABSTRACT

There is a famous Chekhov quote that goes, “There ought to be a man with a hammer behind the door of every happy man, to remind him by his constant knocks that there are unhappy people, and that happy as he himself may be, life will sooner or later show him its claws.” Passive protagonists having good days are hardly, if ever, the components of lasting, memorable fiction.

The protagonists of these stories confront life’s claws. Developing these stories, I was particularly concerned with knowing the protagonist’s voice and using it to guide my writing. The stories are all either first-person or third-person-limited. Sometimes I knew where the story was going from the outset; other times the path of the story unfurled as it was written. The crux in writing these stories was to stay consistent with the narrative voice, through every impulsive maneuver.

Humor is an important component of these stories. I admire characters that find solace in humor, and I find humor is an effective device to subtly punctuate the deftness of many risky narrative situations. Every story contained within is a footnote to other stories; they are the stories of an apprentice given go at the forge.

CURRENTS

This morning, the first Saturday of the month, I find a new department assignment waiting in my locker. "You are now: *AN ELECTRICIAN*." Employees of the Home Improvisation workforce, we are community cast members, our roles rotated monthly. I've gone home with sawdust-packed sinuses as a carpenter; as a plumber, I honestly pitched differences between brands of plunger; was approached to join a sinister ring-wearing union as a mason; worried about sterility, cancer, and unexplainable mood swings while handling pesticides. The list goes on. When I started here, I played an electrician. This is my first repeater role.

I don and tie the signal-orange apron, strap on the special electrician's utility belt—fully loaded with droplight, multimeter, and a continuity tester—and pin my name card under my lapel. *My Name Is: Leo*, it reads, *How Can I Help YOU?*

Next to me, Hank Riordan, one of our semi-retired cast members, makes sounds like a goat and head-butts his locker. On the bench behind him is his assignment: cart rustler—the bottom of the barrel. Hank and I rent houses on the same street. I am given a cut in rent for performing handyman duties in the sixty-year-old homes—a position previously held by Hank. Our rented homes, laden with leaky roofs, hair-lined plumbing, and lead paint like dead skin; to the contemporary fixer-upper homebody, the crappy old things probably seem charming.

Hank and I haven't loved each other in the neighborly sense, though, since our landlord gave me his position—not that we were all sunshine-up-the-ass before, but lately he's had an air about him. Word around Home Improvisation is he was once a great electrician, but he started flubbing jobs and riding the dim currents of senility. Although his face has always appeared sort of wet, these days it looks like soggy paste. His arms hang on their hinges, his joints rusty and leaden with Bayer.

I put my hand on Hank's shoulder, surprised that it feels rigid and sturdy as a newel post, mutter something commiserative regarding cart rustling, and offer him my Velcro back brace. He stops hitting his head, spits into the little cup he always carries, and empties the cup on my steel-toed boots. Everything quiets for a second. Hank's spit settles darkly into the leather; my hand remains on his shoulder. He looks awful, full of worms, and if we came to blows, his chest

would cave like drywall. I let saliva-spilling go as the sort of thing an old person can get away with, like farting in the supermarket. Hank slips from under my hand and wanders out of the locker room.

How long does someone have to work in the same place before it's considered a career? Two years ago I found a job at Home Improvisation to bridge the chasm between the end of college and life's work. Lately, I've started feeling the time I've spent here. I've hit this point where life seems a series of forces for which I am unaccountable. Thoughts containing phrases like *the Fates* and *God's guiding hand* have broken from whatever cage once held them and now swim casually with other neurotransmitters. I am wary of the stimulant-like gratification I get from telling customers about the security benefits of windowless steel-reinforced doors, and the sedating comfort I feel every day but Sunday returning to a locker the combination to which only my fingers remember. I vaguely recall when I wanted more than this.

Why aren't I at an electronics firm or a patent office, or even in my garage, soldering wires and plugging chips, drafting the new tech-toy sensation? These questions didn't even occur to me until last month when I was a cart rustler. Day after day I pushed a line of orange carts from the parking lot to the store. One night after closing, while corralling a truly awesome number of carts, my palms turning on the greasy handle, I glimpsed the stasis my life had achieved. There I suddenly was, looking down from a great height at a man in an orange apron straining against the weight of a ridiculous quantity of carts in an otherwise empty parking lot. The last moments of twilight focused its stern attention on a patch of skin where his brown hair was thin and worn. This poor man, I thought. This ignorant slave to time, numbly gathering the husks of other people's commerce—he should set himself on fire and get it over with. There was no sensation of falling, but I felt an impact on return to my body. I stopped pushing, and doubt and discontentment sprang forth as though I'd been turning a dial through static and found a clear station.

Did I immediately announce my resignation at Home Improvisation? Don't be rash, I told myself. This morning, with an Electrician assignment in my hands and the cast assembling in the locker room, I feel the static returning, the clarity of my discontentment driven out-of-range into the prairie lands of new responsibilities and a more respectable role.

I close my locker. With the back of my hand I wipe the wet smear where Hank banged his forehead. Then for some reason I punch Hank's locker. It shudders under my knuckles until I'm somewhere else, until the new key-cutting woman taps me on the shoulder.

The weekend morning shoppers convert the store to a playground. Moms and dads search the aisles for seasonal, oversized jack-o-lantern lawn bags to decorate their yards. The screams of playing children punctuate the rattle of carts over concrete floors. I don't get it: blind games of freeze tag in an aisle of saw blades, climbing on delicate pyramids of PVC—where are the parents? While boys play soldier and let their wounded bodies flop onto bags of concrete mix, girls dance in provocative circles under prism lamps and ceiling fans, and oblivious parents navigate their home improvement dreams. A child toting a caulk gun chases another and is nearly gored by a forklift. Kids keep away from my department—switch plates, outlets, and plug fuses are too familiar-from-home to be interesting—but the rest of the store is their sandbox.

I recognize my first customers immediately: the Johnsons, my lawn gnome collecting, birdseed spreading, down-the-street neighbors. They come in squinting like cavemen at the skyward orange *ELECTRICITY* banner.

"Leon?" Mr. Johnson says, misreading my nametag. "I know you from somewhere?" He wears a blond, combed-looking mustache and jeans two sizes too small with a cell phone and knife pouch clipped to his belt. He is descendant from the same stock that once upon a time pureed my lip over lunch money.

"We're neighbors," I say.

"Hoo-wee! I knew it!" His laughter is like a shattering jar of pennies. "You got renter's insurance in your place, boss?"

"Yes."

"Me and the wife, too." He puts his arm around his wife who looks a decade younger, embarrassed, and corn-fed. Midwestern, mail-order American. "Can't be too careful with these kids," Johnson says. For a moment I think he is referring to his wife.

"I'm going to find our son," she says, and she ducks from under Johnson's arm.

"Yes sir," he says. "Insurance makes you bulletproof." A livid crater, where some projectile had obviously found purchase, pocks his neck. I wonder if he has a bomb shelter in his backyard. He tells me he is an insurance salesman. "Nope," he says, "just like with kids, never can be too careful with these shit rental properties."

I ask him how electricity can be of service today.

Johnson launches a rambling monologue that begins with him scouring his basement for a tackle box and ends with the discovery of exposed frayed wires in a coverless electrical box. He shows me his raw palms. "The damn thing was hot to touch," he says.

I imagine insulation and kraft paper crumbling from the exposed wires.

"I'm no electrician like you are," Johnson says, "but it looked dangerous." He raises his lip and smells his mustache. "You got any tools and cable to replace the old system?" he asks.

It is misleading that we sell all this equipment, everything you need to rewire your house. At this point in our interaction, it is my place to inform Johnson that wire replacement should only be done by a professional. To warn him of direct exposure to electric arcs that could splash molten copper or steel at his face, or, worse, blow his lifeless body across the room. Remember the opening scene of *Back to the Future* when Michael J. Fox overloads his guitar amp? Right, only Johnson, insured or not, wouldn't get up afterwards and muse, "Rock and roll."

I am about to tell him, I think I am, when his wife returns with a towheaded junior sobbing in one arm and a yellow toy truck in the other. "He was spraying lawn chemicals at cinder blocks," she says, looking at me expectantly. She has a really neat way of making her hip into a seat to carry the boy. She sets him down, gives him the yellow truck, and he toddles over to a bin of cable rippers.

"Unh-*unh*," I say.

He throws the truck at my shin. Even so, I am a paragon of patience.

"Enrique!" Johnson says. "I'm sorry—"

"How can I be angry when they're so cute?" I say.

"Baby," Johnson says, taking his wife's hand, "with all these plugs and wires, I'm not sure I can do this myself."

"Good, then let's go," she says. She picks up Enrique and seats him on her hip. I hand him his truck. "Let's just call the landlord," the wife says. Enrique drops the truck, but she catches it with a deft swoop.

Later in the afternoon, I am mounting a $300 stained-glass bathroom light fixture for display when my friend's girlfriend, Samantha, sneaks up and taps me on the shoulder. She wears a party shirt that would be too small on Enrique.

"Hammer and I broke up," she pouts. Then, sobbing, she throws her arms around my neck. The feeling of the light fixture in my right hand fades, and memories of Hammer's brags about Samantha's perfect yah-yahs bloom as she squeezes harder.

"That asshole," I say.

"Hang out with me tonight," she says.

How can I say no?

I've recently been hooking up with old friends who, like me, didn't move away after college. What happens when friends sleep together? The roles you are used to inhabiting suddenly take on the tender responsibilities of nudity and body smells and extended close-ups of a face you're used to seeing from a distance. You get close enough to her body that you realize how odd it is that you're used to viewing large sections of her at a time. Her navel seems like a great place to put your mouth. She looks devastating—you hate that word, devastating, but you think it—when lying on her side, her hair a mess over your pillow. In bed you are equally tall. You're shocked by the skin tone of her breasts, and the pink lobes of her nipples, again, seem like an excellent place for your mouth. Your life with her before, within the comfortable shells that separated you, becomes a fuzzy yesterdayness, and you wonder whether that life wasn't a prelude to this, a new life in a delicate shell you both share, or if this isn't just a mistake. In the morning, when you wake up and are struck by how bizarre it is to find her next to you, you feel matted, wet, out-of-the-shell, and born.

At five, when I return my gear to my locker and hit the parking lot, I find my car surrounded by shopping carts. With my heel, I rub the spit stain on my boot. That old man, I think. I should rig an electrical current to his locker. So before I leave I do. Zapping your enemies is easy; just find a one-hundred-volt source, the frayed cord on a plugged-in electric pencil sharpener will do, and solder or tape the live wires to a semiconductor your enemy will touch.

Later Samantha and I meet for consolatory drinks at the southwestern restaurant where seven months ago Hammer introduced her to me. Hammer and I aren't good friends; he's a Roofie-slipper and was serving probation last time we spoke for trying to E-Bay auctioneer copies of a homegrown porno called *Ball-Penis Hammer*.

Every entrée at the restaurant somehow incorporates corn, so we don't eat. Instead I buy pitchers of imported draft, glorified malt liquor that loosens our speech before the first pitcher

runs dry. We sit in a small booth and, under the narrow plank of a table, our knees touch, the bumpy parts fitting like grooves cut into a key.

"So," she says, "I had an interesting conversation with a certain someone." She smiles, melodramatically conspiratorial. One of the awkward things about dating friends, even acquaintances like Samantha, is they tend to know each other. When you stay in any place too long it will shrink to the proportions of a bar; trusty degrees of separation fail.

"Who?" I ask.

"Guess."

I make that mistake. "Chloe?"

"No," she says, disappointed. "Brie."

Brie Adams. I am not sure when I started thinking sex-with-friends was a good idea, but Brie was my introduction. She had tried to explain things in terms I would understand: we only needed to rewire the hardware that debunks viewing friends as sexual beings. Harder than it sounds; I am not some David Lee Roth gigolo—it's not like I own white Lycra pants. Brie Adams, however, did own such pants. Before she moved to Colorado, I was helping her pack by co-imbibing the remnants of a liquor collection she didn't want to move, when the pants were discovered in a box with dusty workout equipment and encrusted mix-tapes. Brie insisted I put them on, which, as I brought the pants into the bathroom and finished my glass of iced crème de menthe, seemed like a great idea. They hugged my legs and crotch like a warm sock. When I emerged, she grabbed my hand, stifling laughter, and we tangoed a la the "California Girls" video before crumpling to the floor in a fit of laughs. Laughter morphed into an embrace, which was held inordinately long, which led to a thank-you peck, which encouraged a long consideration of her eyes: a detonation of blue, which necessitated a light I'll-miss-you kiss that lapsed into several, which did not lead me to consider whether we were destroying a healthy friendship, but, as she undressed among the half-filled boxes and the Lycra came down to my ankles, this instead: Why the hell does this happen only when she's about to move away? Since Brie, my wiring has been frayed.

"Wow," I say. "Brie. How's she doing?"

"You know her," Samantha says. "Rock-star lifestyle, even in Colorado, getting seventy-five bucks an hour to massage rich guys and lifeguard hot tubs."

This is another pattern: my friends, the ones that end up as more I mean, all seem to be making, or on the verge of making, fantastic money. “What are you doing, these days?” I ask.

“Funny you ask,” she says, finishing her beer. “Up until yesterday, I spent most the day answering phones in a doctor’s office, flipping through the *PDR*, considering writing my own prescriptions, but yesterday I found out the office will pay for me to go to night school to become a nurse – they’re that hard up for nurses.”

It’s like opportunity knocks on their doors and puts in a good word for me, opportunity’s ugly, unsuccessful friend. Under the table, I put my hand on her knee. It isn’t comfortable, and I have to lean forward to reach but do it anyway.

“What about you, Leo,” she says. “You’re pretty settled here, right?” She slides down in her seat, moves closer.

“I feel kind of caught,” I tell her. “We switch roles every month, so whenever I get tired of doing one thing they move me on to something else—it’s like being in a circular traffic pattern.”

“You’re afraid of merging into different lanes,” she says. She slides down a little more and the frayed cuff of her shorts meets my fingers.

“There’s this old guy,” I say, “who’s giving me a hard time.” I run my fingers under her shorts, over the smooth top of her thigh, down the middle, over stubble.

Then she tenses. “Your friend Hammer is such a prick,” she says.

The barroom conversation ebbs into a collective, self-consciousness lull, and the Stones’ imperative *hoo-hooing* takes the foreground. I pull my hand to myself and sit up straight. Her eyes blink out frustrated tears. “Shit,” she says. Our legs disentangle.

“He’s not a good friend,” I say. It isn’t weakness or vulnerability, but something in the way her brown hair hovers statically just above her shoulders that makes her suddenly appear very haloed, almost fluorescent. Whether it’s sexual or the dry air in the bar, she wears a charge. “I don’t want to be alone tonight,” I say. My voice says her words, and the reversal disarms her. Broken circuits switch on, and a current is shared.

“Then you’ll just have to take me home with you,” she says, our charge ready to start a fire.

* * *

Your domicile, you may know, has built into it everything needed to self-destruct. The easiest way to think about electricity, for me, has been to think of it as a force, like life—as long as it's in motion it's happy, and it will do everything in its power to keep from stopping. Electricity's path is always circular, the way some believe life is. Current is a rabid squirrel, bounding in and out of trees, seeking a place to pounce. With the help of a circuit breaker, electricity in your home is slightly more domesticated—a tethered mutt. When a circuit is broken, electricity just goes into the box, and the mutt lies down. However, like I said, electricity will do everything it can to keep moving. If current that's beyond what a sixty-year-old breaker can handle is suddenly told to stop, things really heat up.

This metaphor, like most metaphors I've found, seems accurate until I try to lay it over hard reality; until I see the Johnsons' house breaking, lighted, searing and smoking in electrical fire—at least, given my conversation with Mr. Johnson earlier that day, I think it must be an electrical fire, as Samantha and I pull onto my street and witness the inferno at the end of the cul-de-sac.

I gun the car for my driveway, and Samantha and I join those neighbors already gathered at the fire to toast the Johnsons as their house burns to the ground. Everyone, or more accurately the ones who aren't dashing, as though on a dare, into the smoke that billows from the front door, seems to have a drink in hand. At the center of the crowd is Mr. Johnson; shirtless, with a tallboy, he barks coach-like at several men in singed robes and oven mitts on their hands, damp towels swathed around their hair—one appears to have slathered his bald scalp with Vaseline. At Johnson's feet is a pile of salvaged tokens, and every few seconds a yell can be heard that starts soft and gets louder until a swathed man breaks from the smoky front door with another item held aloft—toaster, remote control, cutlery—as though signaling an interception from the engulfed home. Some people applaud, and their exposed skin glows almost romantically in the firelight. I put my arm around Samantha's waist, mimicking the other couples gathered, as we are, on the outskirts.

"The poor people," Samantha says, leaning into me. A siren, then another, distantly bleats.

I scan the crowd for the mother and Enrique. "There are two more," I say.

"More what?" she asks. The sirens are closing, but at a rate that seems closer to amble than speed. "I'm going to your place to get us drinks," she says, which seems ridiculous but somehow appropriate, so I hand her my keys.

Enormous with malt liquor, I make through the crowd toward Johnson. "Fuck you, rental suburbia!" he yells, and he chucks his beer can at a window. At this range the fire feels sincere—the hibachi's cover thrown away, stoked coals surge.

"Leon!" Johnson's brow and mustache glisten. He throws an arm over my shoulder, staggers, and knocks over a lawn gnome.

"Where's your family, Johnson?"

He jerks a thumb behind him. "Tucked away at a neighbor's house, hoss. Everyone's copasetic."

The crowd erupts as the Vaseline-scalp man breaks out of the smoke and holds up a dog collar. Johnson elbows my ribs. "Don't worry—ain't no dog goes with it." Another man, towel wrapped around his head, disappears into the smoke. Three other men sit, shirtless and drinking, in front of the salvage pile. "You wanna give it a go, Leon?" Johnson asks. His brow lowers, and I swear his bony frame straightens, his pectorals flex, and the scar on his neck seems to flutter.

"What happened to renter's insurance?" I ask.

"This is hillbilly sport," Johnson says, grabbing a towel from a seated drinker and putting it on my head. I find myself wrapping it tightly, tucking in the corners, and pushing the hair around my ears beneath it. "Besides," Johnson says, "think I wanna actually replace all the shit I'm gonna claim?" The man who had just run in suddenly hurdles out of the smoke, flames reaching out from behind; he hits the grass and rolls back and forth, clothes smoking. "We take turns going," Johnson says, "until we get tagged." He gestures at a charred shirt at his feet. "Try and get Enrique's baby photo book in the front closet—insurance don't cover stuff like that." The sirens sound close now, maybe a few blocks away. "Better hurry if you want a chance at it, hoss."

He pats my back and I'm moving past the guy on the grass who's tearing off his smoldering shirt. I cut into the smoke with a karate chop, close my eyes, hold my breath, and—when it feels like my face is about to cook—futilely raise my hand to block the heat. The cheering crowd pushes me on in my blindness, becomes the surface I fathom deeper and deeper

away from until it's lost. My arms swim—my body: a suit too big—until I touch an intense heat, an openness from which my hands instinctively pull away. When I open my eyes the smoke isn't as thick. I try breathing—like sucking air out of a glass. I am in a living room, its shape, size, and arrangement not unlike my own. The heat is, at the moment, not horrible—my body is inured to its intensity—but sweat rolls steadily from my brow and armpits. This is not what I'd expected; no electricity unbound, wild, un-harnessed, or ricocheting. There is no hint of electricity at all, except maybe its aftermath: a wall socket charred around the edges, an inept electrical smoke detector. No sound, save a serpentine hiss. I have no idea what I was thinking dashing into a burning house, except there are times when trivial things become inexplicably important. Perhaps that's just opportunity knocking; I have to answer. I have to save Enrique's baby pictures. What might be the photo book closet is to my right. I make for the door, but then it starts: a sound—not the crowd that floats, silently, somewhere behind me, but a roar from above that's suddenly on me, barreling over my head, knocking me on my ass. I am on fire. I twist around, my feet frenzy until the legs propel me through the smoke, and my lungs sound like an upturned vacuum, until I trundle into something soft that wraps around me and throws me to the ground.

My cheek is pressed to the wet grass of Johnson's front yard. The fire trucks' lights flash and slow the rubber boots tromping around me. A cumbersome blanket holds me immobile with something jabbing my ribs. My face feels sunburned.

"He's drunk," someone says. "They all are."

As Johnson lifts me up, I think I see Hank Riordan through the smoke, shaking his head at me. Then I start choking and a half-melted yellow toy truck falls from my blanket.

"I must have grabbed it," I say.

Johnson kicks the toy toward the pile of rescued junk. Up the street, the surrounding houses and my front door are a feast for the firelight, vaguely satanic and appropriately Halloween. Johnson has his arm across my shoulder, and we watch the crowd disperse through the mist of the firemen's hose. There is no sign of Hank Riordan.

"Don't worry," Johnson says. "I don't blame you." He tries to crush a beer can on his forehead.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Don't feel bad for not selling me those replacement wires, hoss."

I put some space between us. "You would have killed yourself, you asshole."

"Oh, I see, by not preventing this"—he wildly gestures at the fire—"you saved my life. Won't my little boy think you're a hero?" He makes to leave, then turns back and throws a ropey punch so slow and sidelong that I'd have to step in for it to connect. A fireman grabs Johnson from behind.

"Sir, is this your house?" he asks.

"Yes, I am the renter of this shit property," Johnson says. I leave him to explain. Blame me: your handyman, your rental community's patsy. In my spit-on shoes, I climb the slight incline to my house where electricity runs with a lolling tongue around the maypole, under control, and existing in that moment only to bathe Samantha in dim light.

I find her in my kitchen, drinking a beer and playing with the Arm. Woozy with smoke inhalation and a clogged nose, I watch her perform its basic functions with the radio control, certain she knows I'm in the room—I must reek—though she doesn't acknowledge me. The Arm is my senior thesis project, designed with five axes to predicate the operator's control over the robot's strength. *The Delicate Power of Physics*, I'd called it. It was supposed to be destructive enough to crush a tin box, yet able to feather-grip a warm egg. No matter what I adjusted, though, I kept cracking eggs. The torque and pressure were perfectly calibrated, but every egg broke. I remember my committee members stroking their beards, as they checked my work and said, "Most distressing." Now I use the Arm to open bottles and jars.

"Is everything okay?" Samantha asks.

"Yeah, the fire department is there," I say, but of course she probably heard the trucks.

"Where did you get this?" Samantha asks, making the wrist jerk-off.

"I built it," I say.

She hands me the remote. "What's it for?"

"The inflatable woman was too gentle," I say, which makes her laugh.

"You can build this," she says. "Why do you work at Home Improvisation?"

Here I could tell her a story. Any story. Maybe the truth. I could try to describe how it feels to enter the store, to breathe the carpentry and plastics I take home on my clothes, or maybe I could give words to the feeling I get when I put on my uniform every day. But all I can muster is, "I'm waiting for something," which seems to satisfy her.

"Your face is all red."

"Happens when I drink." I step in to kiss her, too fast, and she stumbles back against the Arm. I turn the dial on the remote until the hand is open, level with Samantha's neck, and gently pull the toggle until the hydraulic holds her. She doesn't struggle. I lean in again, my face stinging fire.

"Leo, you smell awful," she says. "What happened at that house?" I release the toggle. "Take a shower," she says. "I'll wait for you."

Curious, I direct the Arm at her beer bottle and try to pick it up. With a sickening pop, it explodes under the pressure and foamy shards hit the linoleum.

When I get out of the shower Samantha is curled on my bed in drunken hibernation. I lie next to her with an ice pack on my face; sleep is a construction project nights behind schedule. A familiar woman in my bed with a layer of hops on her breath and a campfire scent in her hair—it's comforting to imagine this as customary.

* * *

I open my door the next morning to my landlord with the homeless Johnsons standing soberly behind him, shuffling their feet like refugees. Nine-thirty, and the neighborhood smells, appropriately, like someone has doused a pile of coals with water. Beyond my visitors, at the cul-de-sac's end, men in suits kick around loose wood and knock on what is left of the Johnsons' shingling, looking for the secret passage that will lead to the fire's source. Actually, my landlord explains, they know the fire's cause. Earlier, the Fire Marshall had scraped a bit of charcoal from the home's structural studs, put the residue on his tongue, looked thoughtful while tasting it, and deemed electricity the culprit.

"Big surprise," I say. Johnson pulls his wife close and Enrique squirms on her hip.

"What the hell happened to your face?" my landlord asks.

I look like I pulled a Rip Van Winkle on the beach. "Electricity," I tell him.

Overfusing in the house had been heating the studs that framed the electrical boxes, slow-roasting the framing until it essentially became super-inflammable charcoal. Pyrolization, he called it—digestion by heat. The Fire Marshall had ordered the city's Electrical Inspector to do a walk-through of every house on the street—houses unable to earn even a gentleman's C under the National Electrical Code. My obligation as handyman, my landlord reports, is to gut the eight houses' substandard wiring so as to deter impending lawsuits and fines. The walk-throughs will commence next week.

I tell him I don't have that kind of equipment.

"I've taken the liberty of recruiting the services of Mr. Johnson and Mr. Riordan to help you," he says.

"A real Tom Sawyer project," I say.

My landlord looks at me like I've thrown a firework at a caged monkey. "Hank will be over soon," he says. "Start with your place, in case you screw up."

It takes less than fifteen minutes for the Johnsons to make themselves at home with the mismatched fixtures I've installed in my house. Mrs. Johnson, whose name turns out to be Jan, settles Enrique down to watch a Japanese video about mechanized moths at war with blue grasshoppers that she assures me will keep him catatonic and out of my stuff all day. Then she joins a puffy-eyed Samantha in the kitchen to make pancakes. Samantha goes about setting up the griddle, as though we'd penciled this intrusion into our planners months ago; it's hard to read her. Johnson gives me a pumpkin with a jack-o-lantern carving kit, as what I guess is an apology for trying to clock me last night after I almost died in his house. "We were going to carve it ourselves," he explains, "but we're just not feeling festive anymore."

"Understandable," I say.

"Well," he slaps me on the shoulder, "I guess we should get started on your electricals."

I tell him I need to see about having the power shut off before we do anything, but if he wants to he can go down to the basement and prod around—the screwdrivers are in the red toolbox. He actually goes. On Enrique's video, grasshoppers use a light bulb to distract a mechanized moth long enough to rip its wings off.

Jan comes out to check on her son. "He can be a little brash," she says. "My husband."

"I'm sure he means well," I say. I can tell she doesn't trust me. I am childless and intolerant, probably hide razors in apples and bide my time until costumed children knock-knock-knock on my eager door.

She nods at her son. "You think it's weird, don't you—his name?" she says.

"Enrique," I say, "on a pale blond kid? I hadn't thought about it."

"Jim's a quarter Mexican," she says. "Enrique is named after his great grandfather."

There's an aggressive knock at the door.

How can I describe how Hank Riordan looks on my doorstep? Authentic? In his element? A small, round Band-Aid partially obscures a purple lump just beneath his white

hairline—if I hadn't seen his Bruce Willis move on the locker yesterday, I might think it's a battle wound, maybe the aftermath of Herculean wrestling with some sharp number six wire. Something about him—his leather belt, blackened and creased with use; the dented toolbox he hefts, hilted with coiled number fourteen copper, pliers with crimping die, a keyhole saw, receptacle analyzers, high-voltage testers, and even a conduit bender—makes me realize that our task, rewiring eight houses, is the real deal, and it scares me shitless.

"You need to shut this off," he says to Samantha at the stove. No room in his hands for a cup, he spits in my sink. "You're going to have to shut this all off," he says, gesturing at the TV. "Have you already called the power company?" he asks me.

"I was about to—"

He says, "Do it now," and goes down the basement stairs.

When I call, of course, I get a recording—it's Sunday.

When I go downstairs to tell them, Hank is explaining to Johnson that an electrician must always negotiate carpenters' eccentricities.

Johnson's arms are crossed, and he blinks at me. "Hank here says you should have referred me to an electrician before my house burned down." He tromps upstairs.

I call up after Johnson: "I might have had time to do it myself, if my car hadn't been boxed in by shopping carts."

"These old arms aren't what they used to be," Hanks says, holding a toolbox that has to be fifty pounds.

"You know," I say, "we don't need your help."

He laughs. "You and the retarded yokel? Well, okay—if you know how to install supplementary GFCI protection, I'm sure he can rig a new grounded and insulated busbar in the old panel board."

I follow not an inkling.

"Kids like you," he says. He puts the toolbox on the floor but holds the conduit bender like a lead pipe. "You go to school, get your degree, come out stupid with books—probably have a metaphor ready to describe how everything works, and you think you understand a creature that's existed before humankind was an amoeba. This is a job where someone with half a brain would beg for experienced help before he gets fried, and you tell me to get lost."

"I didn't ask for your job," I say. "It was given to me."

"Bullshit," he says.

I don't know whether he's arguing about the Home Improvisation Electrician gig or the neighborhood handyman duties. Part of me wants to let Hank know on how many levels his bitter-apprenticeless-old-guy sermon is wrong; common sense, however, something I've been lacking lately, wins.

"Working with electricity is an art," Hank continues. "You have to think in amperes, newtons, and joules." He reaches up to the basement window, pivots it open, and spits through it.

"I called the city," I say. "It's Sunday."

"Damn it," he says. He sits on a drop cloth and runs his fingers through his hair. "Reach up and feel that box over your head."

"It's warm," I say.

"They all are," he says. "Every house on this street is overfused, and that eventually leads to pyrolization."

"Digestion by heat," I say, but he's unimpressed.

"This is the old Cold-War conundrum," he says. "Do we stir up panic by warning the other seven residences that their houses are cooking from the inside out, or do we wait until we can do something about it?"

"Can't we do anything without the city cutting the power?"

Hank almost smiles. "Of course, there's secondary work that we can do with just the main breaker switched off." He stands. "Go get that hillbilly, and I'll walk you guys through."

I start up the stairs.

"Hey kid," he calls, "how'd you get the sunburn?"

When I get upstairs, Samantha and Jan are in the kitchen watching Johnson direct the Arm toward Enrique.

"Johnson," I say. He stops, mid-toggle, and for a moment the Arm's massive fingers hover around Enrique, ready to batten into a bone-crushing fist.

"Huh?" he says. Then the Arm droops, the lights flicker, and we all look at the ceiling. There is a soft snap like bacon grease and the power goes out. My eyes dart to Samantha, then the basement stairs.

"Hank?" I call. We race down the stairs and find him lying horribly prone on top of his drop cloth and equipment, and I'm aware of Samantha volunteering to call 911 and my instructions to everyone, the safest thing I know at the moment: "Don't touch anything in this basement."

The EMT's stabilize Hank just before the ambulance reaches the ER, and, since he has no family, we—the Johnsons, Samantha, and I—stay with Hank until the doctor reports he will be A-okay. Later, we interrupt Sunday dinners at my seven neighbors' homes to tell them they're living in firetraps, the Johnsons take their three-ring circus to a HoJo, and Samantha and I go to her place and listen to a message from Hammer that threatens wicked karmic consequences if his copies of The Smiths and *Siddhartha* aren't returned. I tell Samantha she's my bodhi tree, and she says she thinks she could fall in love.

Back at Home Improvisation, I cover Hank's cart rustling duties and disengage the current I'd rigged to his locker. My awareness of my stupid mistakes might suggest one positive: I am finally getting past a very awkward stage of life; common sense is winning more often. I am at a point where I have stopped waiting for knocks at my door, and I've discovered just how long someone has to work in the same place before a job becomes a career: two years, according to the doctor she works for, and Samantha will be a registered nurse.

Once he has recovered, I take off Saturdays to help Hank rewire the homes on our street. I think in amperes and joules; time is measured in watt-hours. When we finish for the evening, I go back to my place and work with the Arm. Although it still obliterates eggs, I have it lifting glasses with a mother's care, and I am starting to find that the big secret to making it work is simply believing it will, being comfortable enough to trust in it.

I have been thinking about electrical engineering a lot, lately. Samantha made me promise to go back to school once nursing gets going, but I know that's a long way off. Still, I find myself thinking of the Arm and school all the time, even while I'm at Home Improvisation. I see myself walking toward a dog, a mutt, that's tethered to a maypole and running in quick circles anticipating my approach. *Look at me*, it barks. *Here I am!* I reach out, palms up, like I know I'm supposed to, and there's a terrifying moment when I'm not sure whether my hand will be kissed or bitten off. Then I open my eyes and I am rustling a line of carts through an empty parking lot, adjusting every few steps when the last cart, yards ahead, strays to the left or right.

Minutes away from leaving to meet Samantha, a current inside me doesn’t move until we’re together.

COMFORT IN NUMBERS

The pregnancy must have happened the night my headhunter lost her auspicious *I'll-help-you-realize-the-American-Dream* tone. If my number was once in her Palm Pilot, I knew it was no longer there; a full year unemployee, I wasn't a fool. Really, how bleak do things look after a year of unemployment and no interviews?

"Then let's get out of here, Harris," Jeanne said after I told her. "We could move back up to New Hampshire, be close to my parents. They could put us up for awhile if we needed it." We were in bed; pillow talk about parents still made me uncomfortable. "Think of it," she said. "Snow at Christmas, a house that doesn't look like everyone else's—we could try to have children again."

And then I had to be very careful. This was the first time she'd brought up children since we'd seen the doctor.

I can hardly say what infertility did. It had me devising analogies: Sex is to us as an insolvable problem is to a mathematician. We had played around with the problem, trying this way and that, aroused by the possibility of finding a solution, as if we could be the first people on Earth to make one plus one equal three. Our friends, perhaps sensing some dissonance, stopped bragging about their own kids while we were present. When we entered a busy room, conversations would make clackity track changes to sports or politics, and Jeanne's hand would go limp in mine. Sex became something miscalculated, exposed, an anomaly, and something to be avoided.

We were lying in bed on our respective sides, the year of unemployment between us. I was thinking about the conversation with my headhunter. Nothing in sight, she'd said.

"Children," Jeanne said again. She moved to kneel over me. My wife's hair was a wellspring of youthful amber. Her belly ran long, straight into her navel, and deep with pockets of warmth and softness. Her legs were maybe too long.

I was careful and said, "I love you." She pressed her body into mine, and I fell further and further from thoughts of numbers. For a moment I forgot about calculations, and I felt

spontaneity; it sounded like breathing. I heard the moments between breaths when everything is at pause. Then I was aware of my fingers on her hips; my legs between hers; and my toes, stretched and curled. Jeanne amazed me. She held my arms and the wall behind my head, and I felt the year rub out of me and rise from our bed, taken up by the ceiling fan that thumped and knocked as it churned.

Afterwards she said, “I can feel it, Harris, I think we’ve made a baby.” She started crying and I got nervous. I hadn’t been careful.

“Don’t be silly,” I said. “We can’t afford a baby.” And I kissed her stomach to show that I wasn’t being confrontational. “Besides, you can’t *feel it*.”

She held my ears and kissed me long, drawing my breath from me.

“I can will it,” she said. My wife amazed me because somehow I believed her. Which was stranger, one plus one equaling three, or my wife believing that it could?

When the test showed positive, I was awed. I thought about the way its eyes would look, small and incapable; the way it would scream and scream, unable to find an echo.

Jeanne pinched my neck and said, “Now that I’ve taken care of this, you can take care of your job,” before she kissed me.

Right: the little unemployment issue. I called my headhunter in the morning, and she put me on hold, no doubt to find the file that told her who I was. “Ah yes, Mr. *Miller*,” she returned to the line wearing her composure, wielding her folder. “What can I do for you this morning, sir?”

Hand over your fucking job to somebody who has a clue.

“I was talking it over with my wife and I think we’d like to look up in New Hampshire.”

“Ah yes, New Hampshire is beautiful countryside. Live free or die, ha-ha.”

“I know. I lived there for twenty-four years.” Was even employed there.

“Perfect then, I can have several *accounting*”—she was actually verifying—“position interviews set up by next week, the first one for the week after that. How does that sound?”

“Super-terrific.”

“Great. Just let me get the number where you’ll be staying so I can call and confirm next week.”

I gave her my in-laws' address and number. Our plan was that I'd stay with them during interviews, while Jeanne stayed behind to sell our house. We hadn't told her parents about the pregnancy. I didn't need that hanging over me, while interviewing.

"The market is great up there, Mr. Miller. Things certainly seem to be adding up for you."

"I guess they do, don't they."

The cell phone Jeanne and I purchased before I left started vibrating, just as I was pulling into her parents' subdivision, Riverbrook Run. Our home number read across the display, all fives and zeros. I let the call go. The sign for Riverbrook Run designated it *an adult mobile home community*. I suppose it was to suggest that age doesn't limit the mobility of older couples, since the houses may have had aluminum siding, but no one in the neighborhood fell under the mobile home tax bracket. There were in-ground pools, and cars, Cadillacs mostly, unless they were being washed, were tucked away in garages. Eldridge and Eleanor's home had an upstairs—something like five bedrooms.

Eleanor and Eldridge were outside pulling dead leaves from an enormous vegetable garden, probably preparing for the coming chill. I put our car in park, and they looked at each other before rising to greet me. Our car felt small enough to have grown from a crack in their driveway.

"Harris, it's good to have you." Eldridge put his hand on my arm. His skin was smooth, almost flawless. Fifty-four years of working as a dentist had chamoised the gruffness from his face. I always attributed it to enamel dust from tooth drilling, or after-hours nitrous parties with the hygienists. He smiled big and kind whenever he could, showing off what he called his "business cards."

"Dad, Mom, thanks so much for helping us out," I said. I extended my arm for a shake, thought twice, and decided to embrace them.

"Harry, come on inside. We have supper all set." Eleanor was an extraordinarily tall woman, and through the years she seemed to pick up every inch Eldridge dropped. She had the straight posture and round, frosted hair of the senior bourgeoisie. "You'll have to tell us all about it," she said.

The cell phone went off again. I'd almost forgotten. "I have to take this phone call."

I brought the phone into the bathroom and shut the door. Jeanne had some bad news.

"I just talked to your headhunter, Harris. Harris, she says there's only one interview she can get for now. It's in Boston, but it wouldn't be a bad commute."

I put the end of the phone in my mouth and bit hard. I had given her my number here for a reason. Why did she call Jeanne? Now Jeanne was worried; I wasn't being careful.

"Honey, are you okay?" she asked.

I told her that everything was going to be fine, and that I'd make it the best damn interview ever.

"It's with a consulting firm called Marcum, Slate and d'Acconia. Honey, the interview is in three days. She says they're looking for someone to immediately fill a controller position."

I asked her for the address and number, and how were she and the rice doing. After seeing the first speck of life on the ultrasound, she'd taken to calling it her "rice baby," and made half-jokes about it having to wear a burlap bag, if our situation didn't change.

"We're fine. I just saw Dr. Baucum yesterday, and I'm supposed to be going back in a few days—just routine, but he wants to keep an eye on things given our history. I'll call you after I see him or if I need anything."

I told her to remember her sister Susan, who lived by us, and call her if she needed immediate help.

"I will. Harris, I love you. Don't think about this interview too much, others will come."

I said I knew and that I loved her, and we hung up without mentioning her parents. I looked at myself in the mirror and decided that I was not going to submit to tears or frustration. I put my fingers on my reflection and ran them down, leaving tracks like claws. One interview to make my mark. I wanted to leave it right then and there; here's my fist knuckle-deep in mirror for an impression. Like broken lines of communication or talking to a wall.

Jeanne was the youngest of Eldridge and Eleanor's flock of four girls. Of course the other three, well maybe not Susan, had married aspiring physicians and other –ians or –ists, and they over-achieved in their respective practices, produced grandchildren, and were thereby entitled to the dowry of warmth and compassion and whatever pocket change Eleanor and Eldridge would muster. Jeanne was a mid-achiever in nursing school, but that didn't excuse her husband from his stroke of bad circumstance. Eleanor and Eldridge were sticklers for husbandly

provision and tradition. They prided themselves on not drinking and the suburban picket-fence empire that their clan would someday upgrade to seaside real estate.

At dinner, Eldridge kept filling my glass with the guest scotch and talking about his dental practice. He said he'd taken on one of the other sons-in-law as an apprentice to whom he'd eventually hand everything over. I kept looking at his hands. They were spotted and wan, but they moved with surgical precision. He told me how many years he'd been in practice and put his fork out in front of him, ready to stab into another year and devour it. "*Fifty-one years*," he said. The fork moved up and down.

"How's the gardening doing?" I proffered.

Eleanor stopped chewing and considered. "We have worms. I was telling Eldridge this morning that we have worms. The vegetables just aren't doing well, and I really think it's the worms."

"Earthworms?" I asked. Eldridge, as if to commiserate, again filled my glass.

"Yes, the flesh-colored ones that burrow. They're all over the place. I see the birds going after them all the time."

"I thought those were good for the soil." I knew they were.

"Well, I never noticed them before, and suddenly all these birds are there tearing them out of the ground." She put her fork down ready for debate.

"You know you can cut them in half and they'll live," I said. "They have two hearts or something."

"Yes, I'm sure. It's funny how things manage to survive," she said.

I wanted to say, your daughter Susan came out of the closet and left her husband months ago. "Sometimes I just need to run," I said. I saw where the conversation was leading. "I'm going running."

"It's a wicked cold out, Hare, might even snow tonight," Eldridge said.

"I'll be careful—breathe through your nose, no lung freezage—I know all those things."

I stepped outside and it did feel like it might snow. My head was a little heavy from drink, and I checked to make sure that my phone was turned on.

I started, and right off I could tell that it was going to be a hard run. My shins felt like there were spoons prying the muscles from the bone. My breath spilled out of my mouth and hung in the air as I passed it. One foot in front of the other—1,2—I snapped my fingers to catch

a pace. I picked a direction that seemed like it might loop and followed it. PAIN was the sound of my feet hitting the pavement.

My arms chugged as though I was pulling on a rope and climbing into the thin-aired stratosphere. My sweat smelled like scotch. With each step and pull I rose further into the lightheadedness that would fill the room when Jeanne and I entered a party. I could feel her hand collapse under the pressure of mine. I saw her slump and turn gray when I fumbled the answer to "So what do you do?" I couldn't skirt the issue. Simple. Work. It was my right to work. It was my necessity to work. But accounting had a vitality of its own. Numbers moved, got cut, grew again, and I ran just ahead of them, digging tunnels and breaking to the surface only to be scorched by the sun. If you tore me in half I would just keep writhing. That was life's other trick: one equaled two.

Neighbors had their Christmas lights up already. I'd forgotten that Christmas decorations seemed to make more sense when the weather was cold. They gave warmth that I associated with nights of rubbing argyle-stocking feet on the hearth of a tremendous fire. A particular neighbor was arranging a lighted Nativity that made me stop.

As freshmen at Salem State, Jeanne and I stopped at just such a Nativity on one of our first dates. It was late, and we lay down in the hay that had been arranged around the figures. The cold made her pale cheeks ruddy and invigorated, and the hay stuck in her tousled hair. We took souvenirs with us that night: the baby Jesus and the head of a Wise Man, whose face was painted cross-eyed. On the way home we tossed the strabismal Wise Man into a ravine. But we took the swaddled plastic child to Jeanne's apartment off-campus, dressed him up with fir boughs and pinecones, and pretended he was ours. We made love that night on the hearth of her apartment's gas fireplace, our stocking feet entwined and warm. Later, we found out that we had started a tradition—a sort of lover's lane involving Nativity vandalism; every time the small college replaced the missing head and Jesus, a new couple would proclaim their love by tossing the Wise Man's head into the ravine and taking home the child.

The Wise Man in my in-law's neighbor's Nativity was headless. To think that the tradition had spread from a small college in Massachusetts up to New Hampshire was ridiculous, but I had to stop to make sure it wasn't a trick of the dim light.

The neighbor wore a red stocking hat that made him look like a young boy suddenly corrupted by age.

"Good evening," he said. "Out for a jog?"

I told him I was.

"It's a wicked cold for running, tonight. Be careful to breathe through your nose, buddy."

"I was just admiring your decorations."

"When my wife and I were in college, we bought them for her place. But Jesus doesn't light up anymore and some kids stole a Wise Man's head last year. His face was painted cross-eyed, anyway."

I kind of laughed and told him that even though they were chipped they were still beautiful.

"Thank you much, nice to hear it. I guess that's why I keep putting them up."

I was embarrassed by how much easier the run was to finish. I cruised.

It snowed for the next two days then stopped. The interview was at one in the afternoon, and I hadn't gotten much sleep the night before. I gave myself three hours for the trip into Boston. Of course my car didn't start. I hadn't moved it since the day I arrived.

"You just don't have any antifreeze in there," Eldridge said. "You'll have to take the Caddy."

Eldridge and Eleanor's Cadillac handled like a gentle tugboat and had a horn to match. Navigating Boston's rotaries was no fun at all, and I found myself taking up two lanes, or maybe not—it was hard to tell; there were three painted lanes but five lanes of cars. It had been years since I'd driven in a city the scope of Boston. I collapsed in the heaviness of its grip and the flow of its multi-layered traffic, round and always around. Lanes would appear and end mysteriously, bottlenecking the persistent motion that threatened to squeeze me past my turn. The buildings, the city's many fingers, blocked most of the daylight and lay a shade of gray over all. The city ran over me like a gear, and I followed. I could only honk the horn.

I estimated that I was about five minutes from Marcum, Slate and d'Acconia, inching through light traffic with twenty minutes to spare when my phone went off. I didn't recognize the number, but it had *Hospital* attached.

"Jeanne?" I said.

"Honey, I'm so sorry to bother you, I know you're on your way to the interview. I just didn't want you to hear it from Mom and Dad first."

"Where are you?"

"I'm fine."

My breath was short.

"I got into an accident on my way to Dr. Baucum's this morning. I'm in the hospital. Some kids were joyriding, Harris."

Kids? What about the rice?

"The doctor says the baby will be fine—95 percent chance things will be fine, he says. We're doing an ultrasound very soon, just to be sure."

And she was okay?

"Yes, Harris. I wasn't going to say until after the interview, but Susan called my parents looking for you. The car is wrecked."

She wasn't going to call until afterwards? Like I needed to hear this from *Susan*.

"Look, Harris, I just don't want you to worry. It's 95 percent that everything will be all right, but I know you. Please don't worry."

I told her to call *the minute* she found out anything, and that I was coming home that night.

Sometimes I think that people should have gauges on them, little wheels that they can adjust when the pressure gets too high. Think of it: hundreds of dials and switches that I could tweak to make my mind and body completely of my control.

The fluorescent lights and mirror walls gave the elevator the hue of steel. I straightened my tie five times, riding up forty-two floors. A strand of hair dropped out of place, and I matted it back into the slick, avoiding my own eyes in the mirror. I wiped my hand on my slacks, worried about the residual gel stickying my handshake. I wondered whether my headhunter forwarded my résumé ahead of me. I made sure my phone was on *vibrate*, and checked it twice. Everyone on-board listened to the bell-tone floor reports and admired themselves on the walls. The elevator's velocity called to mind a cartoon, stretching and compacting.

The main employment waiting room of Marcum, Slate and d'Acconia was beyond the familiarity of *déjà vu*. The way the vague smell of inky copy paper comforted me was frightening.

The receptionist knew my name and said, “Please have a seat, Mr. Miller, here’s some coffee,” before I could breathe a word.

I sat on a leather chair that groaned pleasantly, and sipped my coffee amidst a veritable jungle of potted office plants. An angelic choir hallelujahed softly from speakers overhead, and I remembered something I’d heard about plants’ growth response to soothing music. A coat of arms with *MSDA* scripted over a lion blazoned most everything from chair to desk to wall.

The phone at the receptionist’s desk rang; she lifted the receiver and placed it on the desk. She did not intend, I supposed, to answer it. She looked at me through the overgrowth of plants, as though waiting for my advice.

“Nice design,” I said referring to the coat of arms. “Impressive lion.”

“It’s a *gryphon*, Mr. Miller.” She wasn’t condescending, just correct. “The trustees feel it’s an appropriate symbol for mergers—something we’re quite fond of here,” she said.

“*Symbol*,” I replied. The coffee was dark and gourmet with an odor that opened eyes but didn’t permeate to ruin the room’s inky musk—a commercial had told me as much. The receptionist was smiling, the angels were singing, and in that moment I thought of optimism. Maybe this was all destiny. When she said, “They’ll see you now, Mr. Miller,” I smiled sincerely for the second time that week.

The first thing that I noticed, aside from the silence, was the row of windows displaying the view of the city. At about eight feet, they gave the room the vulnerability of space and the exposition of height. The room was all natural light; it eased through the windows, ran over the black granite floor, and filled the substantial gold *MSDA* crest on the door, which closed behind me. The city looked small from here, and I saw that that the building in which I stood towered over the rest like a middle finger. This building was the powerful gear that made everything else turn. These were the windows by which executives contemplated death. Jump, jump, jump.

A woman and a man sat on one side of a large ebony table that reflected their upper bodies like royal playing cards. They were in front of the window with an empty chair between them. They stood and offered their hands. A large TV glowed blue, in the corner behind them.

“Mr. Miller, we’re the interviewers; we’re pleased to meet you.” Her lips were mostly painted-on. He immediately called to mind the ‘80’s, Wall Street, and cocaine. Something

subtle was missing from their faces; it wasn't expression so much as feature. Everything was too symmetrical.

"Pleasure to meet you." I thought about taking off my jacket, then reconsidered. I wondered if they were two of Marcum, Slate and d'Acconia; did the empty seat between them belong to the third? As though by answer, a third party strolled in behind me, shook my hand, and took the middle seat. He was a tanned, middle-aged man in blue jeans and motorcycle boots. The completeness of his features, with robust fills and dark lines, made the others' faces all the more bizarre. He sat and folded his hands on the table.

The woman sat as well. "Please have a seat, Mr. Miller," she offered. The man followed.

"Mr. Miller, we were wondering if you'd mind having this interview videotaped," the man said. The one in jeans, in the middle, raised his eyebrows, and the woman looked at a stack of notes.

"Why no, of course not," I said, but I was startled. The man in jeans brought a video camera out from under the table and set it on top. Its red light blinked. The other man stood, wheeled the TV out from the corner, and set it behind them. He switched it on, and thirty-two gloriously diagonal inches of my head materialized, looking up. I looked at the camera; the red light pulsed. I cleared my throat. I was slouching, so I straightened my back, and my head disappeared from the monitor. The man in jeans looked back at the screen, exhaled noisily, and adjusted the camera so that it once again captured my head.

"Shall we get down to business then, Mr. Miller?" asked the woman. The microsecond delay of sound from her actual voice to the TV's low-volume report made my shoulders hunch forward.

"Yes, please." I crossed my legs. Seeing it on the TV, I decided I looked better before and readjusted.

"Tell us about yourself, Mr. Miller."

I started with my work experience, then moved into an anecdote about a summertime cookout, having to man the grill, and how a relative (an uncle) had choked on a shrimp tail. Forgetting any first-aid maneuvers, I'd punched him in the stomach repeatedly, until he coughed-up the offending tail. It wasn't a true story, but I came up with it with Jeanne's help. The hope was that it would get a hearty laugh, or, if I was lucky, a sentimental exchange of summertime

cookout horror stories. Instead, the woman began looking through her stack of notes again, underlining or crossing items with violent pencil strikes. The TV man was looking at something up high behind me, drumming his fingers on his pant leg. I wanted to turn around and look. The man in jeans leaned over and adjusted the camera. My head became enormous on the TV screen.

"Mr. Miller, would you consider yourself a violent man?"

"No, not at all."

"After reading the literature that we forwarded to your headhunter, why would you consider working at Marcum, Slate and d'Acconia?"

Literature? On the TV my lips formed the word. I improvised something about the appeal of climbing the rungs in a large firm, and said how I'd enjoy friendly competition amongst colleagues. Meanwhile, my interviewers resumed their distracting gestures. Only the man in jeans remained still, his hands folded on the table. He wore a gold ring of the *MSDA* gryphon.

"It says here," the woman said examining some documents, "that you were let go by your former employer because of a particular incident. Would you feel uncomfortable explaining to us exactly what happened."

The red light blinked steady.

I began, "I was at a Christmas party at Menger's—my former employer's—home. There was a scuffle, and I ended up putting my fist into his mirror over the mantle," I said. "My wife, you see, we'd been having trouble with pregnancy. I'd had a lot of scotch that night."

My phone began to vibrate in my pocket and startled me so that the top of my head momentarily left the monitor. It would be Jeanne with the ultrasound results. I reached in my jacket to turn it off. My interviewers were unfazed.

"Mr. Miller, what do you think of the windows behind us?" the man asked. I could see what it was that his and the woman's faces lacked: definitive lines. Dimples, crows' feet, evidence of beard-growth—it was all missing, yet they had to have been in their fifties.

"I think they make the city look beautiful," I said looking to the horizon, avoiding those faces.

"Do they make you think of jumping?" the woman asked, still making notes.

"No, were they installed for that?" I said, surprising myself. "I maintain that things were designed for a purpose and should be used accordingly."

“What would you bring to the *controller position* at Marcum, Slate and d’Acconia, Mr. Miller?”

After he asked the question I tried addressing him directly, but he was staring off into space, drumming his fingers. When I finished he looked at me again.

“One more question, please: If you feared that a plane might drop out of the sky, land on your home, and kill your family, would you move or seek psychiatric help?” The woman made a sound effect like a plane in distress.

I didn’t hesitate and told them that I’d try to quell the fear by learning as much about aircraft as possible. My head was large and frightening on the screen. It was odd to look at it and see my eyes looking up instead of at me. Balls of sweat were rolling from my armpits, and I was glad to have kept my jacket on. *This is exactly what unemployment feels like*, I thought.

The man in jeans spoke: “Thank you, Mr. Miller, you should be expecting a call in the next three days. I have a feeling you may be exactly the type we’re looking for. We’re sorry to cut this short, but we have another interview forthwith.” He stood and offered his hand. Seeing it on three occasions on the TV, I decided that I hated my handshake. I nodded instead of saying goodbye so I wouldn’t have to hear it twice.

I pushed through the heavy double doors and slid back into the cool waiting room. I checked my phone: it had been Jeanne all right. That five-percent chance had had its day in court, and soon I’d have the verdict.

The waiting room was so dark compared to the interview room. The receptionist must have turned up the music, which was now an opera, rising soprano to stalactite alto.

The next interviewee was sitting where I had, with a cup of coffee and a stupid grin on his face. The plants rustled in the drafty air conditioning. A few wisps of hair had fallen from the interviewee’s carefully combed coiffure and swayed over his brow. The receptionist was explaining mergers and the coat of arms to him.

What would I tell Jeanne? *Gee honey, I knew it was going well when they asked me what I would do if someone dropped a plane on you, and I told them that I’d try to forget about it, and then they said they thought I was just what they’re looking for*.

Think of it, though: if I could just turn a wheel, and the gasket would blow somewhere from my ears or fingertips. I’d deflate, sinking down on one knee, then the other, lay down on my back as all the pressure was released. The receptionist would rush around the desk and say,

“Oh God Jesus!” “It’s okay,” I’d say. “It’s okay,” as my head began to collapse. “It’s just like being cut in half,” if I could manage before my mouth caved-in. “The rice can wear burlap if it has to, nature will mend itself.” There were plenty of others in our situation; we could take comfort in that.

SCARS

Stewart Nichols would find worse things to loathe, but for now nothing miffed him more than twenty-something models strutting into his cattle call only to slouch before him like limp genitals.

"Get that out of my face!" he shouted.

"Do I get a callback?" the girl asked. Even her speech was flaccid.

"Out!" he almost screamed.

"But Elan said—"

"I cannot work with someone who uses Thorazine suppositories!" And that did it. She shuffled out, mindful of her carriage, all damaged. "Haven't these people ever heard of attitude?" Stewart wondered aloud.

Next to him, Matilda cracked open a Crush. "A shame," she said. "Her tearsheets were stunning." Stewart and Matilda were married a year yesterday.

"I won't take nonchalance," Stewart said.

"I think she was going for effortless, Stew."

"That was apathy, Matty—she would have been like photographing anesthesia."

"You're being over-passionate."

"That's exactly my point," he said. "You're so used to blasé that anything else comes across as melodramatic."

She gulped her Crush. "I just think you're too riled up over nothing."

"Are you paying any attention to what you're saying?" he asked. Of his friends who had years ago chased their ambitions to the big city, Stewart was one of only two photographers who had yet to achieve widespread and agreed-upon recognition. If such rumors were to be believed, Alain—his comrade in relative obscurity—had recently booked the shoot that would have his work on coffee tables: a commercial shoot for Revlon, spotlighting its new line of men's toners and concealers. Not only that, but the model was rumored to be none other than Eugene, the ex-construction worker who had split his face lengthwise down the center while cutting a slab of

concrete with a chop saw—basically, a lawnmower engine with a circular blade. After the staples came out, Connie Cabellero, who had read about the construction worker's plight, debuted Eugene in her Urbane-Urban show. Soon after, twins from a diminutive Baltic village, with mirroring pock scars under their eyes, turned up at the Fall Trade Show. Ever since, the facially scarred had been the industry's hottest cult of worship.

Although he would admit he yearned for success, Stewart would have settled for respect. He had done some parts shoots with Seiko and even had a flash of commercial work with Neutrogena, but it was this, his current project, that could upgrade his status in the talent pool from lamprey to shark. No tepid, frumpish prima donna was going to ruin that.

"I won't stand for anything less than passion, Matty," Stewart said. "Consider it my devoir." The current project was a talent search for Maybelline, for which his wife was a casting director. Matilda had secured for her husband the shoot with a new talent. It was a surprise she had sprung on him during their anniversary dinner the night before. "Who's next?" Stewart asked.

"Number thirty-two," Matilda said. "A new addition to Elan Gotleb's stable of beauties." Elan was a mid-tier agent, a dumpy ex-mannequin as well-known for his casting couch as he was for his talent stable. Before calling the girl in, Stewart and Matilda thumbed through her composite and portfolio.

"Five-ten, 34-24-36, facial structure like a Greek algorithm," Stewart said. "Yawn."

"What's this?" Matilda asked. Over the girl's head shot was a yellow sticky with *recent work done* handwritten.

Stewart had been in the pool long enough to know that having work done in high-profile modeling—let alone calling attention to it—was a career ender. If work needed to be done, you were past your prime; alterations of skin, eyes, nose, and cheeks were to be made only by the photographer's use of light and shadow. That Elan would even consider sending this girl over—it was the fashion industry's equivalent to recycling an undesired wedding gift. "This ought to be rich," Stewart said. He pressed the intercom. "Send in thirty-two."

In she traipsed, and Stewart immediately spotted the work she had had: a livid scar ran parallel to her left eyebrow. It was glossy—the tone of her lips—and the deftness with which it contradicted her demure expression gave Stewart chills. He felt Matilda dig her claws into his

arm, trying to contain her rapture. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" she whispered, her breath hot in his ear.

"I'm not sure," he answered, "but I could die for her." Already that morning they had been subjected to gaggles of slashed young faces—poseurs with rush-job mutilations, still gleaming with Neosporin and pasty sutures. While accidental scars were like a tragic lash from a wrathful god, intentional scars, with their calculated cleanliness, screamed trash.

Golden light poured through the window behind Stewart and Matilda and cast the posing girl in statuesque bronze. Dust moving around her gave the illusion of heat and smoke. "Like Barbarella with scar tissue," Stewart murmured. He was professionally gawking. In his mind's eye, the photo session unfolded. Macro lenses for close ups of her face, under high-contrast lighting to absorb wavelengths of light and seemingly raise the subtle bumps of her skin; the tinges of eczema she tried to cover, fluffy with Maybelline products. The scar itself would be a ravine, a channel, where rivulets of shadow would stream into the dark recess of her lower brow, exposing a passion that photography had seldom, if ever, captured. There wouldn't be a waiting-room-caliber magazine that could resist such a testament to the human form and its beauty products. He could feel the weight of the Clio Award in his hands.

While Stewart was lost in thought, Matilda, as she was lately want to do, openly compared her elation to a fringe-cult experience. "Stew," she said, her nails twisting raw curlicues in his arm, "I'm having a Branch-Davidian moment." Her legs rubbed against each other like warm sticks under the table.

Stewart didn't know what to make of the references—Heaven's-Gate ecstasy, Shepherd's-Flock tingle—and found them more distracting than clever, if that's what they were intended to be. Regardless, he was shaken from his stupor. Again, there was the scarred, young model standing golden before him. "Your work," he said—when he did, her hand tentatively moved toward the scar—"it was done surgically?" It was tantalizing, the way she wouldn't completely touch it.

"Under general anesthesia," she said. Then, with a heavy tone of confidence, "With a soldering iron."

Jesus, Stewart thought. A deep burn—that was the secret to good-looking intentional scars. "How did it feel?" he asked.

The model looked confused.

"I mean, afterward," Stewart said. "Did it hurt?"

"Uh, *yeah*," she said.

"Who did it?" Matilda asked. "Where did you go?"

"A surgical esthetician," she said.

"Which one?" Matilda asked.

"Look," said the model, "I thought this was a makeup shoot."

"You're absolutely right," Stewart said. "We just need you to strip to your underwear."

The model untied her shirt, pulled it off, and stepped out of her skirt. Body checks, while completely necessary, especially when someone came in with scars, always made Stewart feel sleazy. Some photographers couldn't tolerate professional nudity the way some doctors couldn't tolerate surgery—Stewart was one of these types. Even after all the life drawing courses, the Calvin Klein internship, an anachronistic wave of Puritanical unease would wash over him. He looked at his new model only long enough to discern she wasn't perverted, no cigarette burns or random slashes.

Stewart cleared his throat. "Thanks," he said. He backed up his chair, stood, and extended his hand. "I'm photographer Stewart Nichols, and this is my wife Matilda."

"Adriana Maxine," she said.

"You're going to be famous," Matilda said, shaking her hand.

They all laughed for a moment, and then everything grew quiet.

"You can put your clothes back on," Stewart said. Then added, "We'll be in touch."

* * *

As far as Stewart was concerned, the argument that he and his wife had had the night before, during their anniversary dinner, would forever affect their marriage. They didn't have many friends, and the time they spent alone in their togetherness sometimes felt stuffy as a dressing room, but they never brought that up. When they were in public, though, Stewart felt their conjoined proximity, and it nearly became oppressive. He and his wife would gossip about those around them, picking at lacks of poise and grace—the dull and untalented, the unsightly and imperfect— fortifying their stuffy little bubble.

Such was the ambiance at the small table in the extravagant restaurant where Stewart and Matilda had acknowledged their first year of marriage. Stewart had chosen the restaurant by recommendation from one of his more successful photographer friends. The dinner was his

anniversary gift to her, but he didn't feel it was his to give. Stewart hadn't seen lucrative work in months, and the joint account he was dipping into for the dinner splurge had recently only been bolstered by his wife. Though she didn't say a word, Stewart knew what Matilda thought as she perused the drink menu; at the bottom it cordially reminded patrons of the eighty-dollar seating fee. If they had any gumption between them, Stewart thought, they might gossip about *his* apparent imperfections.

After he chose a bottle of Chardonnay—modestly priced, but still enough to finance a small home theater—his wife finally said, "The food here must be really good."

"It's too much, isn't it," he said.

"No, I'm sure it'll be fabulous," she said, without looking up. "I was just expecting something more like the Outback."

"They have steak here, Matty."

"I'm sure."

Stewart had begun to suspect that his wife was actually considering him—weighing him—as she would a potential Maybelline client. And she was so glib about it! She would arrive at home and immediately ask what he had done that day. If he had a shoot—recently, Stewart had sunk to high school senior portraits and proms—she would ask for the contact sheets and contemplate them so intently that Stewart felt sure she must be looking for an apparition in the images, perhaps the ghost of his talent. "These are really good, Stewy," was all she would say. "Keep at it, hon." Like a scout at a tee-ball game. More than once, in their bathroom, Stewart had come upon copies of old magazines opened to a page that featured his work, the page wrinkled under dampness and scrutiny. While he squatted, Stewart looked at the magazines, as she must have. He searched for errors—framing, cropping, lighting, layout, product placement—that would betray the amateur he had buried under years of school and internships, but he found none. His work was perfect. The problem, he had decided, had to be his subjects.

The waiter returned with the wine just as a man in coattails and a top hat—a top hat!—led an entourage of similarly dressed men and women, flappers with bobbed hair, into the restaurant. "Christ," Stewart said. "Gatsby party—unbelievably tacky." Gastby parties, or West Egg Affairs, had once again gone *en mode*. He waited for his wife to chime in, but she did not.

"I don't know, Stewart," she said, "I think they're kind of fun."

"Why can't people have elegance for its own sake?" he said. "They have to add this layer of irony."

"Because it's fun, Stewy."

"And it doesn't make sense! The point of that book, if memory serves me, is not that we should do what Gatsby did."

"I think I know one of those people," his wife said. He looked at her then, her candlelit face turned away, distracted, and he allowed a long-caged thought to pass: her ingenuous manner, the optimism she maintained, the good she sought—the virtues he had once found most endearing in her—now appalled him. She came across as unforgivably dishonest. He thought, "Isn't that all optimism is?"

One of the flappers capered over to their table. She and Matilda planted familiar kisses, and the woman remarked that Matilda looked stunning this evening. Stewart decided she was right, and the pessimistic cloud that had been building over his head dissipated. "Linda, this is my husband," his wife said.

"Charmed, old sport," Linda said.

"Did everyone switch cars before driving here?" Stewart asked.

The woman assumed a smile but looked distracted. "Well, Matilda, it was lovely to see you," she said, and scuttled back to her table.

"What was that all about?" Matilda asked.

"I know," Stewart said. He examined the sample of wine the waiter had just poured.

"No, I'm talking about you," she said.

"What are you talking about?" He sniffed the wine.

" 'Did you switch cars'—what the hell was that?"

"Are you being serious?" He nodded at the waiter, who then poured the wine into glasses.

"That was Linda Shulman—the photography editor at *Rolling Stone*."

"Oh, give me a break," Stewart said. "It was a joke. Besides, I knew who she was."

"It was cryptic and embarrassing, Stewart."

"Embarrassing? Matty, hon, look at them!"

"Okay," Matilda said, taking her wineglass. "Look, I don't mean to argue tonight."

“I’m sorry,” Stewart said. “I’ll make up for it on the way out.” They sat that way for a while, gulping wine and reading their menus, not saying a word. Where was their routine? Stewart thought. He had chosen the posh restaurant because he thought it would be a candy store to their saccharine banter, their self-consciously petty judgements. Something was making Matilda nervous and peevish.

“Is the place too much, Matty?” he asked.

“No, it’s fun, Stew,” she said. The waiter arrived and stood expectantly. They both ordered the seared tuna with walnut dressing—the only item not labeled with an exorbitant price, but *Market Price* carefully scripted instead.

“What is it then?” Stewart asked.

“I’m afraid you won’t like your gift,” she admitted.

“Well, I’m afraid you don’t like yours,” he said.

“No, it’s really great, Stew,” she said. She lifted her wineglass and held it. “It’s a lot of fun.”

“I’m sure I’ll like whatever you give me,” he said. He suddenly wasn’t too sure.

“Actually, I have two gifts,” she said.

“You’re killing me, Matty.”

“I’m just afraid I’ve overstepped some sort of boundary—I don’t want you to be mad.”

“What is it?”

“Maybelline is doing a new ad campaign and they needed a photographer so I got you the job.”

“Wow,” he said. He understood her trepidation—how bad a blow would it be to his ego? But he was gratified, not embarrassed. “That’s fantastic. Matty, I can’t believe it. Thanks.”

“Sure?”

“We’ll be working together?”

“Starting tomorrow.”

“Honey, it’s perfect,” he said. “What’s the other one?”

“I can’t really give it to you right now, so it’s kind of an IOU,” she said. Under the table she ran her stockinged foot up the inside of his leg. “I want to bring another woman home with us—not tonight, but sometime.” The words left her with a coy smile.

It took Stewart a moment to assimilate what she had said. "Do you mean what I think you mean?" he asked. She pounced on her utterance, trying to take it back, reloading it with qualifiers—only if you want to, it's probably a bad idea. Stewart hardly heard, though. He found himself trying to place the last time they had made love. A few days ago? Maybe the week before? They had been so busy. Every day, sunrise to sunset, the hours moved with more stamina than he could muster. He would stumble into bed, exhausted from hours of posing teens in formalwear, satisfied by the intimacy of spooning with his wife. Was it not enough? "Is there something wrong with us?" he asked.

"Not really," she said. Across the restaurant, one of the Gatsby flappers laughed obnoxiously. "I just think it would spice things up—bring a real Gatekeepers kind of pizzazz to our bedroom."

"That's what's missing?"

"Something is."

"You're comparing our sex lives to people who kill themselves with poisoned Kool-Aid."

"I'm just talking about passion," she said. "Stewart, honey, we don't have enough of it. I didn't think this would be a problem—most men would be glad to."

"Most men?"

* * *

Stewart and Matilda saw a dozen potential talents after Adriana Maxine, some with scars of their own, but none compared. In their car, as she drove, Matilda's free hand lay on Stewart's leg, rubbery and palm up. The gesture didn't feel like a token of amorous comfort; no, to Stewart it felt like a gag, a prosthetic hand that, when touched, would fall away and be done with. He thumbed through Adriana's composite, revisiting her marred beauty, trying to pinpoint the source of his fixation. "Tell me something," he said, "is Adriana Maxine the kind of woman you'd want to bring home?"

"Let's not," she said.

"No, really."

"She was stunning, wasn't she?" Matilda said, looking at herself in the rearview mirror. "That scar—it added such flair, such pinache."

"Was it just the scar?" he asked.

"It certainly helped, don't you agree?"

"It was something."

"We could call her," she said. The limp hand on his knee suddenly came to life and gave him a playful squeeze.

"How's that?" he said.

"I got her number."

"When?"

"There's a cell number in her composite," she said. Stewart could see it happening, lurid images on a contact sheet. He saw her arrive at their apartment in a hat pulled low to protect the coveted, obscene prize she wore. He saw his wife take the woman's coat and toss it carelessly on the sofa. Sensing a need to alleviate some tension, the woman would ask to use the bathroom. Would they drink first? Maybe. Or, better, Adriana would return from the bathroom with the hat still covering the scar. "Show me the bedroom," she would say, and Stewart's wife would take her hand and they'd dash off together, Stewart following like a kite tail. In the bedroom they'd lie, husband and wife, on their respective sides of the bed, and Adriana would kneel at their feet, doffing layers of clothes, Salomé dropping her veils. At the hat she'd stop. From his vantage, Stewart would be able to gaze under the hat's brim and discern a hint of the scar—a shadow, the blackest space in the room. Her hand would linger there, over the final veil. "What will you do for me?" she'd ask. "Anything," Stewart's wife would answer. "Anything?" the woman would ponder. Then, as though having settled on what she desired, the woman would smile darkly at Stewart and show them everything they wanted to see.

The composite lay open on Stewart's lap. A card was stapled on the bottom of the page: Spruce Patel, M.D., Surgical Estheticians' Group. There was an address and phone number. "I have a better idea," Stewart said. "Let me see your phone."

With Adriana Maxine's referral, Stewart and Matilda were able to squeeze a consultation out of Dr. Patel before he left for the day. When they arrived, they were shown to his office. Dr. Patel was a short man with black hair, and he wore a stark lab coat over his dark suit. A red tie stuck out like a lewd tongue. His office appeared to double as a consultation room—there were computer screens, a lab sink, and, Stewart noticed, even an examination chair. Tabloidish, oversized photos of famous people with scars—Harrison Ford, Seal, Humphrey Bogart, Robert Davi, and Diane Lane—served as the office's only windows.

Stewart had never felt his wife squeeze his hand so hard. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“Fine,” she said.

“Pleased to meet you both,” Dr. Patel said. He considered them carefully, tracing their outlines with his hands, as though he intended to cut them from the air. “You are both flawless,” he said. “Of course, if that made us happy, you wouldn’t be here. First thing, we must scan you for the computer simulation.” He instructed Stewart and Matilda to stand with their arms at their sides, while he ran what looked like a price scanner over their bodies. Stewart watched the thin laser record his wife’s dimensions. “Perfect,” the doctor said. Then, as though he could not resist, he added, “But not for long.”

He inserted a CD in one of the computers, made a few keystrokes, and flesh-colored simulations of Stewart and Matilda appeared onscreen. “I feel your uncertainty,” Dr. Patel said to them. “What we do here is not awful. Many couples, man and wife, become patients here—people always seem comforted by the fact that others have done it, too.” He waited for a response, and when none came he continued. “The results of the procedure can be as visible or inconspicuous as you wish—a flamboyant half-moon on your chin, or a pocket that only your lover will know. It will look as intentional or accidental as you specify. You can have bullet wounds,” he said, clicking a button. Small, rose-colored dents suddenly bloomed on the simulated-couple’s respective torsos. “Branding, cigarette burns, failed suicides, whip or chain lashings—think of the stories these telltale visuals will inspire at dinner parties. Your friends will worship you.” He sounded as though he were dictating a brochure.

Now he clicked a few keys, and the simulation program zoomed in on their expressionless heads. “Perhaps a near-strangulation is more your pleasure?” Violent streaks of purple rippled over simulated-Matida’s neck. “Maybe a prophetic scar in the shape of The Virgin?” From Stewart’s cheek grew a vaguely feminine profile. “You see, we can create anything,” Dr. Patel said. “However, do not ask me to inscribe someone’s name on you—that’s just trashy.”

Stewart couldn’t gauge how this augured for his wife. Her hand was tense and damp, but she laughed whenever new scars appeared on her simulation. “If you can make your work look accidental, does that mean that there are some people out there with famously accidental scars that are actually deliberate?” Stewart said.

“I will not disclose any of my patients, sir,” Dr. Patel said. “But know this: the story behind the work is yours to orchestrate.”

“Eugene the ex-construction worker,” Matilda said.

“If emulation is what you desire,” the doctor said, “we have a chop saw.” Dr. Patel sighed impatiently and stood. “Why don’t I leave you alone for a little bit?” he said. “You can play with the simulation yourself—just click the type of scar you want and drag it over your body.” With that, he left the room.

“Isn’t this bizarre?” Matilda said. “Who knew?”

Stewart clicked on the simulation, and a purple canal appeared parallel to his brow. “What do you think of this?” he asked.

“Like Adriana Maxine?” she said. Stewart nodded. His wife took his face in her hands and made him look at her. Her eyes searched; Stewart felt them looking for someone else. “Stew, I don’t want Adriana,” she said. “Is that what this is all about?” She tilted his head, as though trying to direct a marble.

There was a quick rap on the door, and Dr. Patel slid inside. “How are we doing, folks? Come up with any questions you want to ask?” he said.

“We’re still deciding,” Stewart said.

“Okay, I will let you decide longer,” Dr. Patel said. “But first, consider this.” He pulled a small vanity mirror from a drawer and held it so Stewart could look at himself. His head had always been a little round, his eyes a bit too far apart. Instead of noticing these things, Stewart only saw his own flawlessness—the soft, clean lines of his brow, the natural glow of his fair skin. He found perfection in his face, and he felt swollen with it.

“Tell me,” Dr. Patel said, “are you really pleased with what you see?”

The words wouldn’t come. Yes and no. Kind of maybe not. He abhorred his indecisiveness, the passive couch he safely resided on. He remembered his ads in the wrinkled magazines on his bathroom floor—perfect, save his subjects. So perfect, they floated on their mediocrity.

“Stew, honey, say something,” his wife urged.

“I’m not sure,” he said. He found himself looking past the mirror at Matilda, trying to open the floodgates, seeking leverage in her expression. Maybe scarring would deliver them to happiness, and maybe Stewart would find a niche in his profession to compliment the one cut

into his body. To whatever would grant him those achievements, he was willing to submit. And whether he would sink or swim, who could say? But Stewart knew he could cling to the driftwood of the virtues he'd once found so endearing in his wife, her optimism and honesty, no matter how much they appalled him.

OPEN WINDOWS

It was early August, in Florida, and for the past two days my father and I had been visiting the state university I would attend in the fall—an orientation to campus life, dorms, schedules, new faces, and, quite unexpectedly, my father. He only mentioned Harvard—the name itself triggered a spasm on my brow—to say Harvard's commons weren't as common as the one at my school. I told him he could be a real dick sometimes, and we couldn't all be like my brother Steve and get into an ivy-league school. "I meant it as a compliment," he said, noting that he'd never seen bare-chested guys hurling footballs and commingling with bikini-clad girls on a Thursday on Steve's campus. Whatever he meant, walking with my father was like being trailed by a bleeding conscience, and I wondered if the feeling would stay with me even after he was gone.

We were looking for the fine arts building. I turned to say something but found his attention focused on a building's Latin-inscribed cornice, his lips tentatively forming words he'd once known from his own studies. To our right a guy and semi-nude girl sucked face on a blanket. Their dark bodies were sculpted muscle-magazine style; weathered textbooks were propped to block the sun. I turned and my father was staring at me, waiting for me to move on.

On the last night of orientation, we went out for steaks that could choke a lion, and my father ordered beers to propose a toast to my success. Perhaps, he said, he'd been too hard on me, and perhaps I was better suited to a career in graphic arts than law. The corners of his eyes tightened, and he smiled at me the way I'd seen him smile when Steve received his letter of acceptance. I felt my posture in the chair slacken, and I realized that this was a moment my father had been hoping for—arguments aside, conscience clotted. In my wallet I kept my father's business card, which held his various phone numbers. Sometimes during the past summer, while I was interning at the TV station, I would take out the card and fixate on his firm's logo, Richard Feldman, P.A., rubbing the embossed letters under my thumb, feeling his name come alive. Sitting with him, I had an urge to touch the card again, to anchor the moment when I knew he was proud of me.

I wanted to share with him what my summer at the TV station had taught me. I showed him how the steak restaurant's menu, through meticulous center-placement and bold typeface, was designed to subconsciously urge patrons to order the sixteen-ounce sirloin.

"Whatever the hell, I'm ordering the goddamned fillet," he said, and we laughed. As his son, I discovered new avenues only to later realize the detour.

During the drive home we said nothing. Cars streamed by on our left, and insects—dragonflies or hornets, too blurred to discern—darted toward us then changed course a moment before impact. We remained silent, as we approached downtown Orlando. The largest buildings, each advertising the name of a bank, reached up like spoiled children toward some tacit remuneration; lightning rods dotted their roofs.

As of next week, TV-38, the station where I interned, would be no more than a fiber of Opti-Com, central Florida's largest telecommunications operator. Today, Mr. Guerrero was throwing a send-off party.

"Could you just drop me off at the station?" I asked.

"You don't want to go home first?" he said.

"No," I said.

He took the next exit and pulled into the station building's parking lot. "Call me when you need a ride home," he said.

"I'll probably ride home with Sylvia or Carl," I told him.

For the past two months Carl and I had interned in TV-38's production room. I specialized in graphics. You've seen it before: when a newscaster reports a story, a graphic appears to go along with the newsbyte. The graphic is usually ubiquitous and generic, a montage of signs that read "Stop!" if there's a protest story, a star-spangled mule and elephant butting heads, if there's an election story. The trick, though, was to create a scene-stealing graphic—something so ostentatious and flashy that it drew attention from the smug newscasters—and place it in the upper corner, to create a blocking effect that framed the image on the viewer's screen. TV-38's news broadcast graphics were works of technical art. At least that's what one of the midday call-in secretaries told me during my first week.

"Jonathan, your ass is a work of technical art," Constantine, another secretary, said. Although I was a sucker for compliments, ones like that made me seize up, mostly because I knew she was being insincere. I wore slacks three-sizes too big that made that area of my body

look more like a wrinkled curtain than anything else. Nonetheless, whenever I passed Constantine's cubicle, she seemed to be either rubbing the ball on the underside of her computer's mouse or clicking her tongue while watching my crotch. She wasn't accustomed to having someone under twenty around the office. She and the other cube tarts—Carl's coinage—were always trying to coerce Carl and me into joining them at Rio Bravo for margaritas and under-the-bar groping.

Carl sang and played rhythm guitar in our band Wake Front; I was on lead. Carl had his nipples pierced, and at our little shows he would drive the few girls who came crazy by rubbing his guitar's pickups over his piercings and the microphone, creating feedback while I cranked out three-chord riffs. Carl being my friend was the reason women pretended to sweat me—he had the look. One night Carl took Constantine up on her after-hours invite, and he told me he ended up going home with her. Even if I believed him, I had to question his judgement on that one. I mean, Constantine wasn't ugly, and she was only a little older, like twenty-nine, but she had this Chiquita-mamacita thing about her that made it seem like if it weren't for the dress code she'd wear a fruit hat and huge earrings every day.

The elevator let me out on the sixth floor, TV-38's empty lobby. Squalls of laughter and faint, rhythm-heavy music carried down the hall, and I was reminded that I didn't know what to expect from the office party. I had only vague notions of sitting on photocopiers and intercourse in offices—cliché movie stuff. The station had, however, proven to be a veritable wax museum of office clichés: languid, oversexed assistants; sexual harassment in the break room; vapid newscasters who believed themselves to be the elite cadre of the office staff, mediums to the muse of reportage; bathrooms that required a key, copiers that required a code, and coffee that required a cup from home—evidence of some earlier drama. After our first week, Carl and I agreed that our internships—the very institution of internships at offices—didn't serve as bottom-rung indoctrination so much as fresh blood to grease the cogs ever-stiffening with routine. We weren't getting college credit to learn a trade; we were brought in to heat and bother secretaries and invigorate glum employees with our spry, youthful lunch-runs to Subway.

From our first day, Carl and I had heard Constantine and some of the other women whispering the name *Sylvia Guerrero* between appellations of royalty, like *princess*, and lower-class things, like *bitch*. Sylvia was the boss's daughter, a paragon of nepotism who roamed from office to office under the auspices of quality control. In the exhausting monotony of our chores,

Sylvia's name became the mantra Carl and I used to jolt our atrophying brain cells. Hunched over a paper shredder, we would use what little we knew of her biography—a year ahead of us at the community college, the station manager's daughter, Latin beauty, in charge of quality control, mistress-like disciplinarian—to create scenarios that alleviated our ailing spines. We were slaves on her river barge, each willing to throw his body before the trajectory of an assassin's spear. In my version, poor Carl would meet his end, and I would be granted servitude placing grapes between Sylvia's perfect teeth, feeling the devastating touch of her wet lips as they closed around my fingers, and anticipating the wrathful licks of her whip for my insolence.

Then one day, while Carl was filling a lunch order at Subway, I was left sorting the to-be-shredded pile. Instead of shredding, I was shooting crumpled documents at a wastebasket across the room. I adjusted my arc each time, adding English, pointing my fingers. I missed every shot. After my fifth attempt, her voice came from behind me: "Do you think your mother is going to pick that up?" I swiveled my chair and I saw her: really severe eye makeup.

"That's not funny," I said. "My mother died." I hadn't said that aloud since middle school, and it felt inappropriate, but who the hell was she to mention her anyway? She wore dark lipstick, a black suit coat, a modest skirt that flared to betray her figure, and black socks pulled up to just below her knees. I realized my jaw was slack. To my surprise, her shoulders fell forward.

"Are you serious?" she asked.

"Of course," I said.

"I'm sorry." She leaned against my cubicle partition. "My mother's gone, too." And that was my initial connection with Sylvia Guerrero—loss. In that moment I thought of Eden: Adam and Eve lost in a maze of cubicles, crumpling the enticing documents we were told to shred, finding in each other's company a solace that had so long eluded us. Hadn't men and women been drawn to one another by loss from the outset, each seeking the missing element that made them whole?

We went out to lunch that day and she told me about her mother and how she died while Sylvia was still a toddler in Guatemala. She looked at me over the rim of her coffee mug, as though the aroma jogged her memory, and said since she'd been old enough to understand what had happened it had seemed like a ridiculous twist in an action movie. Kathleen Turner and Michael Douglas had become the onscreen stand-ins for her parents, and it was hard to

differentiate the sense of her mother—her kiss on the cheek, the feeling of her embrace, the smell of her perfume—from details she'd thought up. Was it even possible that she remembered anything from that age? That, she said, was what made her saddest.

My mother passed when I was eight. Lung cancer. There had been a housecleaning; my father seemed determined to scour any tangible memory of her. We moved into a house across town, furnished anew. Members of my mother's side of the family, like birds returning to find their nests corrupted, stopped visiting. I remember entering that new house for the first time, suitcases in tow, and feeling it was like a deranged vacation. Hooray!—a vacation away from mom. Everything—the smell of new carpet and furniture to the spotless white of the walls—held the unlived-in, hotelish feeling of temporariness. While a part of me understood this was how my father dealt with grief, another more insistent part of me couldn't escape the reckless feeling that nothing that happened in that new house mattered. The house was a monument to my father's grief, which became tangible on dry winter days when I'd scuffle across the carpet in bare feet and get shocked by the first object I touched. Dinners, it was as though my father, Steve, and I were wrapped in cellophane as we poked at our food. My mother's presence filled the spaces she no longer inhabited: the emptier the room, the more filled with her it was; a quiet room reminded me of how she spoke. Her fingers and her hair had had the sharp scent of the cigarettes that left a familiar layer of soot around the air ducts in our old home. After the move, the smell of cigarettes became repugnant. I, like Sylvia, longed for the sense of my mother that was lost.

Sylvia and I traded these stories during that first lunch together, and with each one I found that I could hold her stare a little longer. Her eyes seemed quick and sharp, ready to cut along the edge of my words, as if she pocketed our conversation for later scrutiny.

We arrived back at the station, and before we parted she gave my hand a fleeting squeeze and a tentative smile passed. "I'm glad we talked," she said. I went about the rest of the day uncertain of what exactly had transpired between us.

"Dude," Carl said. "What was she like?"

"Okay," I said. "You'd think she's boring."

"What does that mean?"

"She's just not like everyone says."

At lunchtime the next day she appeared again. This time we went to her house. She led me upstairs to her bedroom, which had glass doors that opened to a balcony overlooking a lake. She closed the door behind us. I sat on the floor while she fidgeted with something in a dresser drawer. Articles of clothing were strewn along the baseboards, along with a couple of swollen notebooks and a Princeton Review of colleges. I leaned back on my hands, my sweaty palms sliding on the wood floor. The ceiling was spotted with dust bunnies. I pulled back my hands and they were layered with dust; slick handprints marked the floor like tracks in sand.

She looked down at me. "You can sit on the bed." I did and it sagged alarmingly. Out the glass doors, the lake was crowded with summertime boaters—kids our age, out of school and out of work, oblivious to the time constraints of a lunch hour. Sunglasses, oil, midday drinking, browning, and watercraft narrowly avoiding collisions. I felt the AC kick on. Cool air rushed down over my body. I heard the snip of a lighter, and Sylvia held a flame to a stick of incense. From another drawer she removed a small pipe and offered it to me. "You first," she said, sitting next to me on the bed. The smallest space kept our shoulders from touching.

I gestured no thanks.

She laughed. "Aren't you in a band?" she said. There were scabs on the tops of her knees, just below her skirt. "I'm not doing this by myself," she said.

"Where's your father?" I asked.

"At the station," she said. She took my hand. I flinched, not wanting her to feel how wet my palms were, but she held my wrist firmly and handed me the pipe. Pot always made me preternaturally visceral—my orientation with the here and now would breathe in and out like an accordion. Everything I said would come out off-key. So I inhaled a shallow little gulp and passed it back to her. She drew long and exhaled a white plume that hung before us like a screen. As the smoke dissipated, she looked out the glass doors, at what I don't know, but part of me wondered if she was weighing our options, hers and mine. Or perhaps it was my move, the pot her opening gambit—check, back to me. It seemed at the same time absurd and entirely possible that she might want to mess around. Maybe just kiss. How long did I think we had for a lunch hour, anyway? I watched her draw on the pipe again; she still faced the doors, her dark hair tossed over one shoulder. I felt like I had an audience, a studio full of people just about to fall from their seats, anticipating what I would do or say. Hey, Jonathan, we're on your side—go get 'er. The boaters outside knew what hung on the line. The swimmers and skiers—hell, the

dust bunnies and the scabs on top of her knee were hardly suppressing a scream. I had the insane urge to put my hand on her thigh and kiss her knee. Then I had my move: I would put my hand on her thigh. I would touch her thigh just above the two cuts, just below the hem of her skirt—a gesture that could be safely played off as friendly. Weren't Latin Americans extraordinarily affectionate? I wiped my palm on my slacks and nonchalantly placed it on her thigh. I had just enough time to get a sense of it relaxed—thick, soft like worn denim, cool—before her muscles cinched and she said, "What the hell, Jonathan?"

My hands were under my arms before my bumbling sentence even began. "I'm sorry, I thought"—and I let that word hang because I didn't know what I thought anymore, but I hoped she would catch my words before they fell.

She stood up. "Do you want to go swimming?" she asked, looking outside again.

"What time is it?" I said.

She looked at her watch. "We should get back."

"Want to?" I couldn't move without her instruction.

"I've got a better idea," she said. "I'll be right back." She slipped into her closet and shut the door, leaving me room to realize that I'd been taking shallow breaths ever since I hit the pipe. How could I have been so sure? I focused on breathing rhythmically. I lay back on the bed, my feet dangling off the side. My hand still buzzing and awkwardly seeking cover, I reached under some pillows. On one of the pillows, I could make out the soft curve that cradled her head. Strands of black hair lay around the impression. My fingers met a small object. I removed a ceramic figurine of what appeared to be an orange sun with round, cartoonish eyes. The closet door clicked and I sat up fast, shoving the figurine into my pocket. She emerged from the closet, wearing a large t-shirt and otherwise only what appeared to be panties. Tanned legs and the rest of her thighs—they still lingered on my palm. Ignoring the probability that I'd be gored, I pleaded with her eyes for a hint or instruction. This was hardly office attire, even by Constantine's standards.

"We have a steam room," she explained, and I had a good view of her dark green bathing suit bottom. "Want to go?"

"In this house?" I asked stupidly.

"Are you wearing boxers?"

“Um”—I had to think back to how I’d dressed that morning, but she had already left the bedroom. I stayed put.

She appeared again with two towels, one of which she threw at me. “Let’s go.”

Outside the steam room she turned a few dials. “We can either wait out here until it fills, or we can wait inside,” she said.

Let’s go inside,” I said, not wanting to conjure small talk while waiting.

“You’re still in your clothes,” she said.

“Right.” I pulled my tie and shirt open, fumbled with my belt, then stood in my boxers. The hallway tile was very cold. My pecs sagged like empty wineskins, so I crossed my arms.

She doffed her shirt and revealed the rest of her Speedo-style suit—the sheen and contours of her body made me think of a seal. The suit seemed intent on squeezing her body into a straight line, and her breasts were pushed into persistent mounds. She noticed me looking and said, “I used to swim—the suit’s left over.” The steam room door shuddered when she pulled it open. I followed her inside. At times in Florida, especially in the summer, the air could be so humid it became a force like gravity; movements through it required aquatic treading. I had never been inside a steam room before, but my first impression was that the air inside was a concentrated dose of those humid summer days, as though this was the pit from which such air rose. The steam had hardly begun to form, but already it felt like too much. The room was only slightly bigger than my cubicle, but it was filling, still filling. “Some people get claustrophobic,” I heard Sylvia say from an impossible distance. “You should breathe through your nose—it’ll clear your sinuses,” she said. On a bench the length of her body, she sat with her knees drawn to her chest. I sat on the other end and let my back slump against the cold tiles. I tilted my head up, unable to discern the ceiling, and closed my eyes. “If it gets too intense, use the shower,” came Sylvia’s voice again. She kicked my thigh when I didn’t answer.

“Where?” I said. When I opened my eyes, a stream of cold water was dispersing the steam. Otherwise, the visibility in the room was gone. A slick layer of sweat that wouldn’t bead and roll covered my skin. The steam appeared textural, like cotton my hand could disappear into, disconnected and apparitional. It was trance inducing, nullifying, and without my sight I was left with thoughts. I ran through the news graphics I’d sorted earlier: airplanes, silhouettes of firemen, hands holding cell bars, long outdated color combinations of dirt, carrot, and lime. I saw Carl morosely chewing his lunch sub, while Constantine clicked away with her mouse.

Sylvia's bedroom returned to me. The spice of incense and the haze of pot. The glass, sun, lake, boats, tanned skin—the print of my presumptive hand on her floor, then her thigh. Her stabbing eyes.

"Jonathan?"

"Yes."

"What will you do after this summer?"

"I'm going to UNF."

"Why there?"

"I don't know. Orientation is in a few weeks. My father wants me to eventually go to law school." I saw my father in his office pulling books from a shelf, leafing through frantically and tossing them into a waist-high pile. Steve was at his side, doing the same. Another book was thrown into the pile and I saw myself buried under the tomes—

I stood fast and stumbled into the cold shower, my hand catching Sylvia's arm. She didn't move away. With the cold, clarity washed over my scalp and shoulders, and the present snapped back into place.

"Are you okay?" Sylvia asked. I held her arm like a banister.

"Yeah," I said, finding the bench and sitting near her feet. "Look, can we go back? I'm sorry I made it awkward earlier, really."

"Me too," she said, her voice suddenly very near. Then her nose brushed mine, her lips spoke softly against my lips, "Don't be sorry," and her body pressed against my shoulder; when I shifted my weight she fell fully against me. I returned her kisses, tasted her salty lips. I tried to touch her, but I almost fell backwards without the support of both arms. So I slowly lay back on the bench and led her with me, interrupting our kissing as I klutzily drew my legs up and slid them under hers. The effects of the cold water left and the steam again found its humid purchase on our skin. I tried to ignore the bench planks digging into my back as she knelt, pressed against me, and I felt a heat apart from the steam where our bodies met. Her eyes materialized from the steam, softened and half-closed like retracted claws.

We stumbled out of the room into the refrigerated hallway, dizzy and stupid with dehydration. We toweled off silently, and I looked down to see my clothes abandoned on the tile like the person wearing them had suddenly disappeared.

Sylvia and I began taking what we called "swimming lunches" almost every day. In her room we would hardly talk. Sylvia would smoke, sometimes so would I, and as a formality we would change into our swimsuits before going downstairs. There would be a moment of awkwardness until the room filled, and then the vapor would come alive with our touching and her sigh—a sound like the rush of a falling tree. I would put my lips over Sylvia's ear, wondering if she heard it too. After every time, I returned to the station flushed, and the last three hours of the workday would conduct a happy torture on my lunchless stomach.

"I thought she was not big deal," Carl said once. He prodded me for secrets I wouldn't reveal, juked right only to find me stalwart. Weeks passed during which I saw Carl only in passing through the halls. Our band practices fizzled when our drummer and bass player went on summer vacation with their families.

"How come I've never seen her around?" Carl asked.

"She must be avoiding you," I said.

"She'd better—if she got a load of me," he replied, "she'd put Carl in the driver's seat, baby." In the driver's seat, Carl was like a fifteen-year-old driving with a permit after dark.

Summertime sped up. The time when I'd go off to school and Carl would start at the community college in town drew ever closer, but I was oblivious. My memories of that time are a montage of swimming lunch sighs, news graphics, and nights I'd spend in my room with the windows open—I'd developed a penchant for humidity. I asked my father for books about commercial art and they appeared outside my bedroom door, without a knock or note, wrapped in a bag as though they were pornography. Sylvia and I would talk on the phone until early in the morning. It hardly seems to matter what we said. Sometimes no words would pass at all, but the silence was filled with her steady breathing and quick yawns that swallowed me into a sleep from which I'd emerge to the phone receiver's urgent pulse. I was left squinting at the clock, wondering how long it had been, my ear hot and raw where the earpiece lay.

Then one morning I received a memo that instructed me to report to Sylvia's father's office. I had harbored latent fears that Mr. Guerrero would surprise me in the graphics closet some afternoon after a swimming lunch and I'd smack of something pungent that would pretty much set things off on the wrong foot.

I knocked on his door. On its frosted window, his name was stenciled in letters that appeared somehow handwritten. I breathed out when he said, "Come in."

The room stank of cigars. Sunlight with glitters of static dust cut in from the window behind his buffalo-like head and lay like a sliver over the desk at which he sat. "Jonathan Feldman," he said. Although tempered, his Spanish accent leant geometry to my name. "Please sit." He pointed—his hand massive and imposing—to the interview chair before his desk. His hair was a shock of black, noticeably dyed—a full mustache and beard betrayed laces of white. He smiled. "Now I remember you," he said. He crossed his thick arms, and I noticed he was wearing the same shirt he'd been wearing each of the few times I'd caught glimpses of him: a pale yellow button-down—chest hair stuffed down the open neck—with *Nice*, the French province I supposed, embroidered above the right breast. The walls were postered with black and white prints—FDR speaking into a radio microphone, Marilyn Monroe barely decent over subway grates, and a picture of three flying saucers over a cracked desert. A door near the UFO picture opened and Sylvia stepped out with the sound of a toilet running. I caught a glimpse of a showerhead before she closed the door. She waved shortly. Loose talons from her pinned-up hair brushed her slender throat. "You've met my daughter Sylvia," Mr. Guerrero said. I'd never considered the dimensions given to her name by his voice.

"Yes," I said.

"Hello, Jonathan," she said. She wore a silken purple dress.

"Honey," he said, "could you leave us, please?" She looked at him quickly, bit her lip, and scuffled through the door I'd entered, closing it behind her. Mr. Guerrero lifted his feet and let them fall on his desk. Flinty specs of dust rose into the blade of sunlight. His boots were made of some cream-colored reptilian skin. "Your father is Richard Feldman, yes?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," I said.

He folded his hands behind his mass of hair and leaned back. "Sylvia tells me you have been doing well in the graphics department," he said.

"I've been trying."

"I assume you will attend college in the fall?"

"Yes, I'm going to UNF."

"A state university," he said. "Hmmm." He exhaled loudly through his nose and the mustache flared. "You will study law like your father?"

"Actually," I said, "I'm interested in graphic design or commercial art."

"Ah, we have made an impression on you," he said, and I think he smiled.

"I don't feel drawn to law," I said.

"It is too bad this station has been sold," he said. "Sometimes an internship such as yours can turn into a paid position." He tilted his head and expectantly cocked an eyebrow. "But I do not think you would stay here anyway." His head straightened with decision. "There is too much of the world for you to see." His eyes wandered to a picture frame on the desk.

Here was the first time someone considered my future as though it were entirely mine—unbridled and infinite. I was speaking to an adult without feeling like a child, and it was like being shaken from a stupor. I would be moving away soon. Sylvia would stay behind. Everything I knew was going to start again. The transience of it all became significant. I looked for a clock in the room—it was already after ten. The sun had moved past the window, and the office was dim save the faint buzz of greenish fluorescent light.

"I wonder, however," he took his boots off the desk and leaned toward me, "if you would do the station a service?" His breath was stale tobacco.

"Yes?"

"I want to throw a party—a big sendoff. My employees are hard workers and I want to thank them."

Something occurred to me then: "Are they all going to lose their jobs?"

"No, thank god. The station format will change—a Faith station—but the new management wants to keep my employees. Only the news anchors are leaving."

"What about Sylvia?"

His brow raised and I think he grimaced. "She will finish at the community college, then who knows?" I wondered what he meant. "But I wonder if you will do me a favor for the party," he said. "I want a big banner—two or three banners. Something appropriate—final but festive. I will pay you."

"No problem," I said.

"The party will be in two weeks. I do not mind if you work on the design while you are here—I'll leave it up to you," he said.

I looked at the shirt with *Nice* embroidered on the pocket and something about it put me at ease. "Nice shirt," I said.

The mustache lifted into a smile. "Exactly," he said.

I waited in my cube that afternoon among the piles of boxes I would never finish sorting, biding my time until Sylvia appeared, but she did not. I called her that evening and she said that something had come up—the sort of office drama that elicits codes on copiers. What with the impending last day, things were getting pretty busy, she said. She had to go. I said maybe I'd see her tomorrow, but she'd already hung up. I looked at the graphic arts text on my lap. Humid air coughed through my open bedroom window. I stood and shut it—I need to get to work.

I tried to think of an appropriate design. I perused the textbook, looking for models, ideas I might steal, aware that this was my opportunity to make my mark. The book had examples of designs that had failed, like the hyperactive tortoise for Everlive Batteries. Some, like Mickey Mouse, had been so successful that they were now iconic, transcending design. What did I think of when I saw these images? Well, batteries and Disney, respectively. When people remembered their last hurrah at TV-38, their minds would return to whatever image and message I chose. What should that image represent? What was I working with? A 3' x 6' banner—such a small space to create an impression.

I lay back on my bedroom floor, stretched my arms above my head, and yawned, longing for some distraction. Sylvia had made it pretty clear that she couldn't talk tonight. I hadn't spoken to Carl in weeks. I considered pacing, sitting in a thinker's position, fasting—things people did when trying to channel inspiration. Instead, I opened my window again. The scent of burning leaves carried a hint of cool air that promised fall was forthcoming. It was the same scent I remembered from the trips we used to take north, at the end of every October, every year before my mother—

She would try to make the trip a surprise, waking us up early one Friday. "No school today," she'd say. "We're driving to North Carolina to see the leaves change color." In the car, I had the seat behind her; Steve sat behind dad. We drove up the Blue Ridge Parkway, and when we passed a certain brown sign on the highway, just before the view opened and colors exploded, she would light a cigarette and tell us to open our windows. A roar of cool air would rush through the car and the sharp scent of burning leaves—more taste than smell—devoured the smoke from the miniature fire my mother held between her fingers. The forest on either side of us thinned, as though we were speeding toward the edge of a waterfall, and then suddenly there would just be the spectacular view. Colors—red, orange, yellow—sang, the mountains ablaze. Then my mother would stub her cigarette and extend her arm out the window, testing the air,

leaning out until her face met the wind. Her long brown hair streamed behind her, soundlessly tapping through my open window.

I went to my dresser and picked up the orange sun figurine I'd pocketed at Sylvia's. I ran my fingers over the smooth waving horns that were supposed to represent radiance or beams of light. I met the rough white surface on the underside, where the orange glaze ended, and found a small sticker: *Made in Guatemala*. I wondered: had this figurine belonged to Sylvia's mother? It felt obvious that it must have. Why would a girl of almost twenty sleep with a cutesy souvenir under her pillow, unless it was connected to a memory or significant nostalgia? I thought of the scent of burning leaves and wondered if the figurine had the same effect on Sylvia. It seemed it could. The day I'd taken the figurine, when I returned home and found it in my pocket, I decided to keep it hidden from Sylvia. I thought that maybe I'd return it at some appropriate time, perhaps just before I left, and we'd share a moment remembering the awkwardness of that first lunch hour, and that memory would somehow bring us closer to . . . I didn't know what. I hadn't really thought it out. But if I could somehow incorporate the figurine's image in the banner, maybe I could make that kind of lasting impression on Sylvia. She would see that I knew, and I empathized, and that these understandings brought us together and connected us still. I would create an image that drew an unconscious response from her; I would conjure the scent of burning leaves.

* * *

And there it was, right in front of me, over the reception desk in TV-38's lobby. It hadn't been printed before I left for orientation with my father; this was the first I'd seen of the finished product. It was about 4' x 8' of a deep lavender color that reminded me of the dress Sylvia wore when I'd last seen her in Mr. Guerrero's office. We hadn't gone to lunch since, and our nightly phone calls had been echoes of the brief exchange we'd had the night I came up with the banner idea. *There's work I have to do for my father*, she'd said. *Look, we'll talk at the party—we need to talk*. The lavender also worked out well because it came close to matching the purple used in TV-38's station logo. The sun was faintly traced in the palest of blues, the station logo's other color. In the upper right corner sat the TV-38 logo in white—an entirely better and subtler color, I'd say. Covering the bottom, in the same pale blue, overlapping the sun image in an effective and tasteful way, was the message I'd chosen: *Always Remember This Time*.

Another fit of laughter carried down the hall, and I proceeded to the main office. I wondered where the other two banners had been hung and where I could find Sylvia.

TV-38's main office was full of people. Salsa music banged through the overhead intercoms—every strike of the cowbell was a tinny pang. People restrainedly danced over a maze of knocked-over cubicle partitions, trying not to spill their drinks. Smoke hung under the lights, casting a pallid glow over the partygoers.

Constantine was to my left, sitting on the photocopier. She was rubbing noses with the bald guy who kept the copier code. A mouse cord was around the back of his neck like a scarf, which she used to pull him close. The bald man, the copier cop, puckered and leaned forward. Constantine turned her cheek to his simpering lips and saw me. "Jonathan!" she called. She released the mouse cord and raised a knee between herself and the copier cop. "Come over here!" From where I stood I could tell her eyes were half-crossed with cocktails. The bald guy gave me a look, put his hands on her thighs, and tried to whisper something in her ear. "Ow!" She pushed him away. "Fuck off, Herbie!" She was wearing a headband with plush reindeer antler, a green dress, and pointed green elf shoes. I went over anyway.

Herbie smacked my shoulder. "Nice job with the banners, Johnny-boy," he said. He looked at Constantine, who sat on the glass of the open copier, the green dress hiked over her thighs. "Forget it," he slurred. He punched me in the arm before walking away.

"What a putz," Constantine said. "But hey—check this out." She leaned forward, the top of her dress dropping everything into plain sight, breath like a shot of tequila, and punched a code into the copier's control panel. She pressed the copy button and a beam swept under her, throwing a bolt of white light through her underside. "It's hot!" she screamed. I stepped back, but she grabbed my arm and placed the photocopy—a dark smear between two grainy moons—in my hand. "Merry Christmas," she said. "Everyone's getting pussy tonight."

"You've got to be kidding," I said, twisting out of her wet grasp.

"There'll be a gift exchange later in the break room," she called.

I negotiated the dancers and fallen partitions and made my way back to Mr. Guerrero's office. The door was shut, but voices emitted from inside. The ghostly outline of his name lingered where it had been scratched from the frosted glass. I knocked, and the voices died. I opened the door.

Mr. Guerrero smiled at me from across the room, as though my entrance was the punch line to a shared private joke. He was wearing the *Nice* shirt. News anchors and technicians dotting the office resumed their conversations. My banner was hung next to the bathroom door, one side of it untacked and languid. There was no sign of Sylvia. Mr. Guerrero extended his hand. "Jonathan." I crossed the room and he clasped my shoulder. "Wonderful work with the banner," he said. Some of the technicians looked over at me.

"Thanks," I said.

"Something to drink?" He kicked open a mini-fridge stocked with imported beer. "Wait," he said. He slid a drawer in his desk open and removed a bottle wrapped in tan leather. "*Copas de aguardiente*," he said, and filled two shot glasses with the burgundy liquor. "Is that paper for me?" he asked.

I was still holding Constantine's ass. "It's nothing," I said.

He gave me a glass and held his aloft. "A toast," he said, "to a job well done." He gestured at the banner. It hung flaccidly. "A toast to your future." We touched glasses and threw back the hot black licorice. It was all I could do to keep from coughing. "Another?" he asked. He was already pouring. "To the station," he proffered. In that moment I admired him more than ever—this man who built a miniature empire on one floor of a building overrun by banks and attorneys. Although I was hardly a part of it, although my time there had been fleeting, I was sorry to see it go.

"*Salud*," I said. This time the shot fell smoothly.

A rattling crash sounded and everyone looked outside. In the partitioned area, another cubicle had been sacked. Some of the cube tarts lay prone on it, holding their drinks safely aloft. Beyond them, the unmistakable bluish flick of Sylvia's hair rounded a corner and was gone.

"Is Sylvia around?" I asked.

"Yes," Mr. Guerrero said. "She inquired earlier about when you would arrive." His accentuated words were almost palpable.

I high-stepped through the salsa dancers' battlefield and rounded the corner where I'd last seen her go, down the hall that led to the newsroom. Avoiding the party, I thought. It figured. She was probably waiting for me. It was dim in the hall—only the emergency lights shone. I slowed down to quiet my steps. I would surprise her. I would find where she hid, whisper her name, and she would come to me. I would touch her face, look into her eyes, and kiss her before

she could say a word. She wouldn't be able to name or describe what she'd been feeling since she saw the banner tonight; my kiss would guide her expression. And to hell with steam rooms and stoned passes—our eyes would be open.

But the strong odor of pot made me pause. And then a whisper—not hers—and a strange laugh. A waft of smoke crept from under the doorway directly ahead on my right. A shirt, inexplicably familiar, lay on the linoleum in front of the door. Drawing closer, I saw the patch on the front of it: Wake Front, Carl's band shirt, discarded, like the person inside had been sucked out. I heard Carl's voice, unintelligible, but Sylvia's moans ran over me like cold water. I tried not to think of anything, and I didn't want to listen. I leaned against the wall, my heart racing, and I could not pull myself away.

I remained unannounced in the dim hall. The plume of smoke thinned and dissipated completely, adding to the cloud obscuring the lights. Part of me tried to concentrate on the muffled din of salsa music in the background, but a more insistent side noted the pitch and timbre of their voices behind the door. Every breath drawn in that room registered. I didn't confront either of them. Why would I? I was leaving in a week. I would move to a new city, meet new people, and be someone else. They would stay here, where they'd spent most their lives, attend the community college, and never change.

I didn't go back to Mr. Guerrero's office. Instead, I returned to the lobby, found my father's business card, and called his cell phone. I asked if he wouldn't mind turning around and coming back to get me. "Sure," he said. No questions. I hung up the phone and looked at the banner behind me. The outline of the sun looked vague, as though it had been scraped away. The smell of burning leaves alone wasn't the memory. There was the drive, the cold air, colors, and the mountains. My mother's hair streaming through my window as if to touch me.

Between my fingers was my father's business card. I was about to return it to my wallet when something stopped me. I looked hard at the finger-worn card: the ugly red and black embossed letters, the messy placement of contact numbers, the lack of any memorable symbol. I wondered what I could change.

RADIO SILENCE

Our demise came one year after we left the comfortable suburbs of Nighttime Deejay to set up residence on the avenue of Shock Radio—a street crowded with lesser-knowns and would-bes; a cutthroat Project with infinite space and tenants always ready to buy. We picked through trash and put it on the airwaves. My brother and I never had the kind of radio show you would eat off of. It was insensitive, misogynistic, B-grade erotic, trite filth—this was Claudia's assessment before she kicked me out. How did we get the penthouse suite? If other shows find their juice sifting through the garbage of Boston Market, looking for a nut among the bones and gristle, we siphoned the golden swill by exploiting my disease: I have epilepsy. How's that for gifted? My disease is not debilitating or embarrassing; I don't need a seizure dog or a special award or applause for my struggle—that's not why I bring it up. You won't find me twitching and writhing in the middle of the street; my eyes won't plead for you to jam a biteplate into my foaming mouth. Don't worry that I might seize while driving and careen towards your vehicle. I don't drive. But sometimes I rode with you, while you were behind the wheel. You patiently sat through the garble and gab, on your way to work, play, or unemployment, waiting to hear dead air. Here I am, the deadest air in town. Ground control to Major Tom. Tune in Tokyo. Turn me up.

Here's how our last morning started.

"What's up, New England," Carbunacle said into the mike. "It's eight in the morning and you're listening to the sweet sounds of Mormon Carbunacle and Silence: the alleged force behind the December pileup on route 101A. Two Volvos, three SUV's, one minivan, and a partridge knocked out of its GD pear tree. No injuries—and let's try to keep it that way, you guys. Buckle your seatbelts, keep your eyes on the road, take the coffee mug from between your legs and put it in the cup holder. Pump up the volume—it's time for Radio Silence."

My brother, Carbunacle, nodded at Yolinda in the control room, but she'd already cued the "Pump Up the Volume" segue. I hated every thumping note and I couldn't believe we were paying for the rights to such a blowhard song. Next came two minutes of ads from our three biggest sponsors: Kitty All, Zoot Allure fragrance, and Pump-Action Twelve Gauge Condoms.

Enforcement Bullhorns yanked last week, after we distributed their promotionals to homeless guys. The homeless were reluctant to take the bullhorns until we promised to shower them with hamburgers and booze when we spotted them using the prizes. Panhandling with small, misspelled placards became obsolete.

Carbunacle pulled his headphones to his neck, leaned way over the turret, and handed me one hundred milligrams of seizure-muffling Depakene. "Yolinda, that song is dope," he said. He lifted his trademark novelty x-ray glasses. "I want to talk with you at the newsbreak, darling." In the control room window she gave him thumbs up and winked at me. The headphones went back over Carbunacle's ears, the x-ray glasses over his eyes. I dry-swallowed the pill.

We acquired Yolinda two months after the show got too big for us to do alone. Her credentials included launching WTGR's "Moxie in the Morning." She will tell you she's from somewhere in the Netherlands, but her accent is dime-store ghetto and she's olive-complexioned. I conducted Yolinda's interview over lunch at a D'Angelo sub shop. "You're the brains behind the show?" she asked. Her lips pouted like wilted petals. Most of the material, I told her, is based on my experiences with epilepsy. "I could chew on a brain like that," she said. "Put it all in my mouth." I told her my brain is riddled with sour lesions that cause seizures. "Banana peppers, salt, oil and vinegar—all the sprinkles," she said through a mouthful of sandwich. "You want to go back to my crib and get a taste of me, boss?" Which I did. She was a triple-double making rebound, just what I needed after Claudia. If she ever gave up radio, I thought, she'd make a rock star of a ball handler. Which is why she got the job.

Yolinda was the big push behind "Pump Up the Volume." She thought it smacked of revolutionary radio. The movie and song made her want to become a soundboard operator, she said. While our remaining sponsors' ads played, she went about her morning wake-up routine: she stood in the control room, made a V with her fingers, and waggled her tongue between it at Carbunacle, which I went along with, flirty as she was. She approached the window, lifted her top and flattened her breasts against it. Her areolas, I remember so well from her interview and subsequent lunch retreats to her apartment: soft purple sand dollars. Does this image stay with me? You betcha. Then she was back at the audio console, top in place, the paradigm of professionalism, before ad number three ended. In my headphones she cackled, "Damn, baby, yeah, I'm gonna buy you some D'Angelo!"

Then we were back.

Even though our ultra-high-profile attorney had advised us not to speak of it, Carbunacle began the show by hyping our legal debacle.

"You heard me right, skippy: these insurance companies—these simians—are suing us for the damages in the December 101A pileup. They think that our little show, our little Radio Silence morning program, is causing seizures in motorists. They want to slap a cease and desist order on your favorite show. Folks, let me tell you: these are the same assholes who think rock and roll causes school shootings. What do you think about that? Does Marilyn Manson subliminally command a kid to raid his father's arsenal? Can a radio show really make a listener seize? I'm not sure about the legalities behind taking a poll on this—it can't be good for our case—but I'd like to hear what you have to say, New England. All you out there on 101A, piss off the guy behind you—get on your cell phone and call me, if you don't seize first. We'll be back after this."

Our show was nearly sixty-percent commercials—I know; I could almost hear your complaints. Yolinda screened the calls for someone interesting, at least an element of lunacy. I knew the protocol well; before she came on I covered the phones. That's right: even though I never uttered guff on the air, save once, if you called you probably heard my voice. The first twenty interesting callers were instructed to turn off their radios and hold the line where they remained for up to ninety minutes, listening for their cue to jump in. Half our calls were lost to hang ups or arrival at workplaces. Sometimes, I would listen unbeknownst as you held. You would be surprised how much you talked, even when you thought no one was listening. You hummed a tune, affirmed yourself—betrayed deep obsessions and regrets. I wondered: Is there a purpose to this unconscious babble? Are we speaking the language of a state of mind that otherwise has no voice?

That's what the show was all about: silence. Not the puerile T&A, not championing the homeless—that stuff was just for ratings. We gave you silence, a toy in your Happy Meal, to mitigate the ulcer of noise that gnawed at the stomach lining of your life.

I want to set some things straight. First of all, no matter what you heard, never did we have strippers or whores in the studio. Leave that to the shows with money to throw around and less imagination. The moaning, the quick breaths, compliant gasps, and simpering giggles—all impersonations done by Yolinda. Her mouth has serious talent. It was a kickback to classic

radio where one guy in the studio, with a sheet of metal for thunder and some gravel for footsteps, would perform an entire show alone. Before Yolinda, I did all the voices. Can I imitate a woman in the throes of ecstasy? Absolutely. Is my impersonation of a stripper being interviewed dead-on? Try me.

But the show was not about that—it was about what we don't say. For instance: I have epilepsy. There, I said it again, for those of you just tuning in. After we put the calls on the air, after the newsbreak, the part of our show that set us apart—our opposable thumb, the reason you listened—went down. Carbunacle gave the cue, Yolinda initiated the drum-roll, and I handed my brother a slip of paper. On it was a phrase I'd written, vaguely suggestive, mildly avant-garde. My brother held the paper between his fingers and whispered the phrase into the mike. Greatest-hit phrases you may have missed: "Subdued Testicular Pendulum," "Bikini-Removing Tidal Forces," "Synchronized Sine Waves of Breast Undulation." And then his voice fell away, leaving you in silence. Two minutes of supercharged dead air that was supposed to simulate the state of absence I enter when I seize.

During this part of the program, three months before the show's cancellation, six motorists lost control of their vehicles, and a minivan launched over the curb into a pet store's window, crushing the last squawk from a $1500 South African Grey Congo parrot. The dirt behind why this accident happened is still waiting to be tilled into a crop of career-making dissertations, but I can give you the answer in plain terms: those motorists' innermost desires and regrets—the dreams revisited nightly but never spoken—suddenly became very clear to them, on that three-lane roadway. Everyone who reads the papers knows this much: three of the six drivers had their radios tuned to our show. Not everyone knows that I was dating one of the non-listeners involved. Claudia's silver Volvo iceberged a titanic SUV. She walked away with only a scratch, uncertain of what had happened to the drivers around her.

I am getting to the moment she called our studio. The last day. The first few calls were more of the same.

"Caller, you're on the air."

"I want to speak to Silence." We got a slew of these calls every week—they passed by Yolinda with a Trojan horse topic, curious of whether I was actually in the studio. My brother handled them with a pithy rip from Simon and Garfunkel.

"He's right here, talking without speaking," he said. "Echoing in the wells of silence." To which Yolinda spliced a booming fart byte before she cut the caller off.

"Guys, let's cut the B.S.," my brother said. "We're being sued for causing seizures, and it looks like this line of argument is actually going to fly in front of a judge." He lifted the x-ray glasses and rubbed his eyes with his thumbs. I handed him a mug of coffee, and he graciously nodded. "If you try to sue Anheiser-Busch because your dumb ass gets in a drunk-driving accident, what do you think will happen? Tobacco companies are paying out to a bunch of Muppets who can't admit they're to blame for their smoking habits, but do I sound like Big Tobacco to you? Talk to me!" Yolinda punctuated his last word with a sexy moan.

"Mormon Carbunacle?"

"Ah, someone who's paying attention. Tell it to me, brother."

"You're so stupid, man, I mean give me a break."

"Tell me what you really think, caller."

"Dumbass!"

"I'm going to fire Silence and hire you to write insults for the show—you obviously excel at it."

"My cousin was shot on Revere Beach by a twelve-year-old in an Ozzy shirt, you bastard. If music has nothing to do with violent behavior, why is it that all these kids who freak out listen to the same wicked stupid crap?"

"Caller, you are absolutely right. I am a stupid man with no college diploma. Only a barbarian would disagree, Socrates." Carbunacle signaled Yolinda to cut him off. "People like that are why we're going to lose this lawsuit, folks.

"Next caller, you're on the air."

"Hello?" It was a woman—not exactly the strongest showing in our demographic.

"Yes, honey, go."

"I don't think the charges are at all distended." Although every woman's breathy voice had become Claudia's, I was certain this was hers. The base of my skull swelled, and my scalp issued spikes.

"Let me guess," Carbunacle said, "your grandmother died of lung cancer?"

"I was in one of the cars that crashed," she said, "because of your trite program."

"Trite, eh? You naughty hand must have a mind of its own, tuning to our show."

I couldn't tell if my brother knew it was her.

"I listen for Silence," she said. "He's the best part of your low-brow program."

It was Claudia—the intonation of her voice, its fluttering Doppler effect, her luscious cadences. An epileptic seizure will focus on sound. In my case, certain sounds trigger seizures, which trigger dreams. Some things I hear and I can't let go of them. An overdose of Depakene can't stop it. I felt the seizure coming. I heard her voice, and I clipped and sampled the words: *I listen for Silence*—the very words she would say after one of our arguments, when make up was imminent. As she said these words, the soft part of her throat lifted, and there was her chin, then her mouth—she tasted lightly bitter, vinegary from the wine we finished to forget why we fought. I tried to hold the taste, but in seconds it was lost in the deluge of sound.

I stood and clutched my headphones tight against my ears. "Claudia?" I said.

Carbunacle's hand shot up to cover the microphone. He looked at me and mouthed, "What the hell?"

"I'm here," I shouted at my brother's covered mike. "Here I am." He put his hand over my mouth and pushed me onto the floor.

Yolinda said, "Boss—what the fuck, yo?" and I knew she had disconnected my headphones from the call and cut to commercial.

But I heard Claudia's voice again: *I listen for Silence*. The sound rotated and my condition dug into it like a needle on a scratched LP—the words skipped and repeated, again and again. Carbunacle was spouting into the mike, but all I heard was Claudia. Then her voice faded and everything went white and blinding. The only sounds during my seizures are animalistic grunts, moans and breathing. A scene appeared, as always. There I was with Claudia, spooning in our darkened bedroom—the same scene I had visited over and over. Third person to my senses, I saw myself run my hand over Claudia's arm, down her thigh, then reach around to cup her breast—there was no sensation. There never is. No friction, no warmth, no softness. There's not even a memory of feeling, only absence. I nod my nose to her hair but smell nothing. Never say you have "a clear sense" of something—you don't know the half of it. She moans, and I try to speak but only a grunt escapes. Better to keep quiet. This is what I see and hear. This is the experience our show tried to trap and tame into words. When it ended, my senses returned, but there was no gratifying touch or smell, only the sensation of falling away,

and my struggle to hold on to Claudia shook me awake. If I had been driving a car, I might have found myself stopped, engine running, in the middle of a pet store.

I was on the studio floor, my jacket as a makeshift pillow under my head. I sat up and rubbed my face. My jaw ached where my brother had shoved me. Carbunacle's seat was empty. Behind the control room glass, the old woman who reported during newsbreak was reading into the microphone; I had to have been out for ten minutes. I stood, grabbed the jacket, and went down the hall to the lounge to look for Yolinda and Carbunacle. The passage of time always screwed with me, and it felt like I'd just woken up.

Colors are muted during my seizures. Pale skin is white, blonde hair is a middle gray. When I come out of a seizure, I am always struck by how vivid the world is, how intensely brown stained oak can be. I am beholden to my feet touching the ground and the light brush of air against my forehead.

I know it seems strange that they left me in the studio. People think epilepsy and they imagine tongue-swallowing, spine-snapping, bowel-releasing seizures. That's only one kind. Mine is a condition that often goes untreated called absence. When I seize—when my neurons find a sound so delicious they all have to fire at once to see what it's about—I blank. To the outside world I'm a space cadet, one hundred thousand miles from Earth. If I'm standing, I simply fall. If I'm sitting and it lasts long enough, I might slide from my chair, but I feel nothing. I do not know why it happens, I only know when. Absence is what the 101A motorists experienced. The basis of our show was this: If I heard nothing, would I still have seizures? Strangely, the silence seemed to have triggered seizures in non-epileptics.

No one was in the lounge, but my brother's coffee cup was on the table and the utility closet door was open a crack. I looked inside. My brother was on the floor—head thrown back over the cartons of Kitty All and Pump-Action Condoms we give away as promos—with Yolinda prone, her blonde hair covering his thighs, performing an act we're not allowed to call a blowjob on the air. Yolinda turned over and looked at me.

"Oh you didn't!" she said. "This ain't what it looks like, honey." She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

Carbunacle sat up, and I tried not to look at his glistening thing, but there it was: wet, raw and aborted-looking. I looked at his black glasses instead. "I'm going out," I said. "I need some air."

His glasses sent waves of radiation at me. "We haven't done the Radio Silence yet, Jack-o-lobotomy," he said. "You can't leave."

Yolinda slumped back against some boxes of Zoot Allure. "Honey, don't get mad," she said. "The three of us can practice bigotry like real Mormons. After the show we go to D'Angelo and conversate about it."

Next to the door was a fire extinguisher. I took it from the wall, pulled the pin, and sprayed them with the white fog until they choked.

I used to hate my brother—all his inflated confidence and shtick. The radio personality never went back in the drawer. For us to work together every weekday, share a turret and a microphone and creative input and limelight, to live in the same apartment while I was between residences—for me to sit in silence while the he provided the voice—required trust. We were governed by a set of fraternal checks and balances. I break protocol by speaking on the air; he gets fellatio from my would-be rebound sex. I need someone to make sure I don't seize and fall down a flight of stairs, someone to occasionally take me to the grocery store; he looks at me with his x-ray glasses and tells me my skull looks like a rotting jack-o-lantern, or asks if I've considered lobotomy. Don't think I don't understand his reproach at the compromises I asked him to make.

In the studio, I grabbed a pen to leave a Radio Silence phrase for Carbunacle. "Performing Oral on a Sub, Stroking Sand Dollars," I wrote. Let him say it, I thought. Subtlety doesn't become him. And I walked.

* * *

The T redline into Cambridge is a weird crapshoot of uplift, heartbreak, and loathing, depending on your mood. I was rolling with all three, as I stepped into the stuffy car. I squirmed into a space between posh kids in black leather, other kids trying not to appear posh, and the occasional young professional deferring to poshness and the like. Next to me, a guy and girl held hands. They were the only ones speaking, their voices amplified several decibels too loud—the volume used when you want people to notice how interesting your conversation is. They talked about the medical system, wondered why they would want to practice in such a lousily equipped country, why they were getting their med degrees in the U.S. Maybe, just maybe, the girl offered, things would change. Some days this might have revivified my mood,

these students who would give away condoms to promote safe sexual practice—not to promote a radio show. But today I wished they would cram it like everyone else.

"Why don't you kids lower it," a man called from somewhere. Jackets swished as everyone in the car looked towards the chider. He was a tall man—even sitting—wearing a black overcoat and a blue ball cap pulled low to his brow. He nodded to his audience, and the woman next to me had the kind of coughing attack capable of snapping everyone from an awkward situation. The tall man looked at me, his deep-set eyes like a stone wall, and he tipped his cap and winked.

Mindful of other passengers' arms and shoulders, I took my Walkman out of my jacket and tuned it to Radio Silence. Commercials were playing, of course, enthusiastically delegating our station as "the only place you will hear today's freshest hits—never yesterday's leftover fish." I watched the quiet underground slip past the train's windows. The news must have just ended, which meant the Radio Silence phrase was coming up soon, as was the stop at Harvard Square.

Though it was almost nine, the crowded square was dim under cloud-covered skies when I emerged on the street. Wicked little gusts of wind hit my face and stung my ears where the headphones didn't cover. I walked through the less-crowded avenues of Radcliff, towards Harvard, unconscious of where I was going until I saw the green bench where Claudia and I shared our last afternoon. I find it hard to say just what we had together, or why we had been together at all. She was strange, an aloof woman, and though she talked about her friends—the funny snob, the one who gave her advice, the one who mainlined boyfriends—never once in our on-again-off-again two years did I meet anyone. She had studied tax law at New England School of Law, but she never finished her degree and settled for a penny-ante accounting gig at Fleet. She would jab that I used epilepsy as a crutch, then uppercut my gumption, saying I couldn't cut the tether that held me to my brother. I would counter with the obvious why-didn't-you-finish-school low blow. We shared a room in a go-nowhere hospice and comforted each other, which can be enough. Sometimes you connect with someone because you have everything in common, but they turn out to be the wrong things.

I sat on the bench and the planks of cold green wood sagged under my weight. There was a headstone-shaped monument there, next to the bench, commemorating Washington's first command of the American army in 1775. On the fridge, Claudia kept a handwritten list of

famous people with epilepsy. Dickens, Van Gogh, Michelangelo, Socrates, Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, Napoleon—I still have it memorized. The list always seemed arbitrary and condescending, like she was telling me anyone could be president. But I knew she wasn't happy with Radio Silence. Things changed when my brother and I stopped spinning "Benny and the Jets," "Man-eater," etc. from seven till midnight. I see my brother's transformation like the fade shots in Lon Chaney *Wolfman* movies: the loopy look in his eye when he proposed we "push the envelope of radio"; his bulging teeth when he held me by the shoulders and suggested using dead air to let listeners visualize images too sexually provocative to describe on the air; finally, the sudden appearance of x-ray glasses and tufted sideburns, and the metamorphosis was complete. Radio Silence was something different for him. My disease was his full moon; the silence was shtick. Growing up, he was the kind of brother who would call out of the yonder blue to go play air hockey; he became a guy who finagled head from girls I date. Had he managed something similar with Claudia? She claimed the breaking point was when those five cars around her leapt lanes, and I believed her. She could hardly put up with the show's misogyny—the patriarchy and objectification—and she couldn't bear to know we were endangering lives.

My thoughts lingered there until a man sat down next to me.

"How are you doing, friend?" he asked. Immediately I recognized him as the tall man from the train, although his voice was quieter, almost contained.

"No offense, man," I said, pointing to my headphones, "but I'm trying to listen."

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said. He put his gloved hands on his knees like he was about to get up. "Look," he said, "I saw you on the T, and I was wondering, are you one of the guys from that Radio Silence show?" A series of holes marked the shoulders of his overcoat. His eyes were shadowed beneath the cap, but I remembered his wink.

"No," I said. "I'm not—I get that sometimes, though." I looked at the Washington headstone monument and hoped he would lose interest.

"I'll bet you do," he said. "God, you know I saw those guys in the paper the other day, and, Christ, you look just like him."

"Sorry," I said.

"John Rowland," he said, and I felt his hand poke my arm. I looked at him, and he wanted to shake.

"Nice to meet you," I said, and took his limp hand. Suddenly the hand came alive and I couldn't pull away.

"Hey buddy," he said, "you like homeless guys? Bums?" I looked for help, but he pulled my hand closer. "I'm a bum with a pistol," he said. His left hand was buried in the coat pocket. "If you run," he said, "I will shoot you in the balls." His grip loosened then released, and I recoiled slightly but he moved his left arm and aimed the coat pocket at my crotch. "You like giving guys prizes?" he asked through his teeth. "Well I want to give you something. I want you to put this in your mouth," he said. I realized he was holding a pigeon in his right hand. "I want you to put it in your mouth, and I want you to think about how funny it is," he said. "I'll bet it's almost as funny as giving bullhorns to panhandlers."

Was John really homeless? A disgruntled exec who'd been accosted by a bum with a bullhorn looking for a handout? How would my brother have handled this? He would have had the bravado to call John's bluff—tell him to fuck off, take a bullet if he had to. I needed him. "It's not me," I said, but he pressed the coat hard into my groin, and I felt the solid tip of something thick and blunt.

"I wonder," he said, "if I shoot your nuts and they explode, will semen go everywhere?"

I looked for help, but the raw air in the park was deserted except for a few people hurrying with their faces pointed at their feet.

"You will probably still be alive," he said. "Maybe I can make you eat that, too."

I took the pigeon from his hand, and he stopped pressing the gun into me.

"Head-first," he said.

With two hands I held the bird around its gritty down—still warm. Its head hung to the side, as though its neck had been snapped. I raised it to my mouth—the putrid smell hit.

"Now," John said.

I opened my mouth wide and shut my eyes. The ruffled down of the head and neck passed under my teeth. The sharp end of the beak pressed into my tongue. A musty odor filled my throat, and I started to gag.

"Hold it down, fucker, or I swear I shoot," I heard him say. Somehow I did.

"I'm leaving now," he said, "but I want you to stay like that—I'm watching you."

I forced my eyes open to see him leave, but all I saw was wavy gray feathers, and I went cross-eyed.

“I’m serious,” he said, this time from somewhere behind me. “I followed you here, and I will follow you again.”

Then there was just the wind blowing feathers against my nose, and my brother’s voice came over my headphones.

“Okay, folks—you know what time it is,” he said. “Silence, the envelope please?” He pretended I was there, and no one knew otherwise. If Claudia still listened, she thought she was about to hear me. The drum roll started. “Thanks bro,” he chuckled. The drumming stopped. “Performing Oral on a Sub, Stroking Sand Dollars,” he whispered. Then silence. In the silence, the pigeon seemed to disappear. I knew I would not go back to the studio. Though litigation would ultimately stop him, my brother would go at it alone. We were never Butch Cassidy and Sundance—not Abbot and Costello, nor Kirk and Spock. We had no dynamic—if there was one, the dynamic was his. In me there is only absence. Our empty room on Shock Radio Avenue would be filled in a nanosecond.

On the bench, John having escaped to who knows where, deep in Radio Silence, my jaw went slack, and I felt myself returning there—to that state of absence I know—to our dark bedroom. I visit again and again, until one day I will run my hand over her gray thigh and my palm will leave a trail of color and from her skin heat will emanate. She will shift her body closer and I will feel warmth and pressure and my heart will flutter. She will moan, and, when I dare to speak, I will be able to say exactly what I mean.

SILHOUETTES

1.

Today I receive another letter, the third, from my brother who incinerated himself twelve years ago. Postmarked six days ago in Caledonia, Michigan, a place I have been within towns of, the envelope's stamp is upside down, an old code between us for *do not write back, do not try to find me*. The envelope itself looks stepped on, folded, flattened, and stained with dirt and dry sleet—signatures of a laborious and hesitant trip. Holding it, I smell the smoldering ashes of the morning he disappeared. I kick off my shoes, work a finger under the envelope's lip, and step out of the drafty mud room into the parlor where my wife is under the spell of a talk show hosted by a man who channels the dead.

* * *

The last day I spent with Scott, the day before he staged his fiery death, began with a nightmare, when he kicked me out of dreams of loving my high school's cheerleading squad. I woke with my fingers still locked around a swishy polyester uniform, a dough-ball breast, which gave way to a sheet and pillow, knowing that I had been only seconds from dreaming the warm sensation of skin. He kicked through the mattress again, and my crotch popped like a knuckle.

"Cut it out," I said into the breast-pillow. Dreams for my brother were still a different kind of intense: monsters under the bed and trees used to hang witches. That would all change when he hit high school, I had told him. Everything would make more sense, and everything else would be abstraction—warts, green skin, and cauldrons eventually mature into pasty Puritans, bread-mold hysterics, and *The Crucible*. But abstractions and Puritans, my brother didn't listen to those things—to an eleven-year-old, one was a kind of theoretical math and the other was the way really good bottled water tasted.

When I looked under my bunk, I knew that my brother had had a nightmare about the hanging trees.

We had spent our lives so far in Salem, Massachusetts. As kindergartners, we had been taught about the trials that were born of fear, isolation, and change—an entire community

frenzied by the same feelings that tore my brother out of sleep. Our impressionable minds were saturated in its formaldehyde of accusation, hanging, and pressing by stone. No one was even hanged in Salem, not during the trials of 1692 anyway; it all happened in the neighboring town of Danvers, when it was known as Old Salem Village. Salem got the name and the tourism cash cow; Danvers got the farm. Halloween did for Salem what Christmas does for Catholic Mass. We had our first tastes, whether we knew it or not, of reinvention, of how someone or something can become whatever people agree it is—how a doe-eyed Puritan girl became the Wicked Witch, and a town used pointy hats and broomsticks to commercialize tragedy. My brother's school, Witchcraft Heights Middle, had been my school. There were trees on school grounds, massive husks of black oak that teachers identified as historical, witch-hanging trees. If we misbehaved, we held class outside under the hanging trees, and two or three kids would end up calling home for a clean pair of Underoos. Those things we just accepted. What kind of effect does such an environment, a mix of fact and fiction, immersion in it, have on the young? I was ready to accept anything and equally prepared to deny everything. An adolescent old man set in my ways, in an Etch A Sketch world.

This was the first time my brother and I had been north to summer camp in the White Mountains of New Hampshire.

Pale light leaked through the cabin windows; it was going to be a rainy day, and no one in the cabin was awake, save my brother and I. With the light snare of rain on the cabin's tin roof, the Christian camp felt un-churchy, maybe like the regular nature camps our friends were at that summer. My brother had to go to the bathroom.

When I took my brother outside to chill and piss, it was only drizzling, but the air was raw. He said he couldn't walk all the way to the outhouse, I could tell the place scared him, so he went behind a tree. First thing after our mom dropped us off, we learned that Camp Whitman was named for a transcendentalist who found God in everything from mountaintops to music and bare feet. We also learned about the camp's trees. "If Whitman was right about God," the counselors said, "every time we cut down a tree, it's like we're chain-sawing one of God's digits—blasphemy." I didn't remind my brother that what he was doing could be, in many ways, worse.

Before she drove away, our mother said, "Keep and eye on your brother." I swear, as I watched the car's rear window, I thought I saw the silhouette of my mom high-fiving her

boyfriend, Pablo. I knew that the week of religious summer camp was meant to be reformatory. Earlier in the school year, I had written a short compare and contrast that likened religion and faith to the magic feather—the placebo feather—in *Dumbo*. Like the young elephant, I wrote, we need to be weaned from the feather, i.e., going to church, or we might become so confused that we find ourselves jumping from a really high place, piously clutching, as we hit the ground, a powerless feather. It was only angst; nonetheless, concerned phone calls were made. Rather than have a we-need-to-talk, my mom put her son, the burgeoning skeptic, under the counsel of college kids who worked at a camp only because they didn't have enough money to follow The Dead tour that summer. As the older sibling in a dad-less family, I was Scott's default role model, and he became an accessory to my heresy. Later, when the counselors had to explain the charred hole in Scott's mattress to our mom, when everyone was pointing fingers, shooting blame and nailing me with crossfire, I would learn that camp had been Pablo's idea of a healthy place to board us while he and mom jaunted off to some island to drink rum and get irie.

My brother finished his business behind the tree and slouched back. With a stick—a holy knuckle hair, if I understood the counselors—I showed my brother that the camp's evergreen, oak, and maple limbs were too high for anyone to hang witches.

"Don't be stupid," he said, his hair beaded with drizzle, "witches can fly."

"Witches melt in the rain," I told him.

"That's a girl's movie," he said. He knelt and pretended to be really into a wet pinecone.

I chucked the stick hard and it cut the air. "It was a book, first."

"So," he said. He was fully awake now, embarrassed that he had acted like a goddamn baby, which he still was, and I told him so. My brother had to be taken down hard. I knew he already had an idea of how kids my own age treated me at school. Some of his friends' older brothers had probably said something, when they heard our surname. How else could I explain, weeks before, when he muttered "fucking fairy" after I fumbled a ball Pablo had thrown. A regular verbal ass-kicking was the only way I could make sure my younger brother knew his place.

But he looked at me then, kneeling, pinecone in hand, the way those other kids knew how to look—an arrogant flash of someone older, weighing me to the nearest ounce. That kind of look took the bones out of me; I felt it every time I almost called something *pretty* or *fabulous*. Every time my mother's camera caught me with limp wrists or hands on hips.

“Look,” I tried, “teachers just tell you about those trees to scare you.” Then with authority: “Aren’t you a little old to be scared of witches?”

“Aren’t you a little old not to have a girlfriend?” he said. When verbal sparring failed, it was time for karate. He resisted, but I easily pushed under my brother’s right arm and locked his head in a half-nelson. Here was our intimacy. When we wore socks, using only his momentum, I could pitch my brother across the tiled family room. To punctuate how simply I could overpower him, I pulled him back onto the wet grass with a lunch-money takedown. My fluidity was stallion-like; it was a textbook maneuver that Master Dave at the Y would have bowed for and called “paradigmatic.”

Behind us a guitar twanged.

“You guys are up early,” a counselor with guitar called. Who knows how much he saw. Even though they introduced themselves during a Sign-of-Peace-like barrage of handshakes the day before, I didn’t know the counselors’ names. This one had had a guitar when we met yesterday, so that must have been his thing. He liked to have his hand on your shoulder while he spoke, and it sounded like it was all he could do not to say “little guy” at the end of his sentences.

“We couldn’t sleep,” I said. My brother sulked on the damp ground.

The guitar counselor snorted in a bunch of drizzly air. “Ah, morning has broken,” he said.

I laughed because I thought he meant the sky was leaking rain.

He pulled his hair into a ponytail and hawked a goober on a rock. “Outdoors lesson number one, Bruce Lee”—he helped my brother up and put his hand on my shoulder—“if you have to go outside, go on a rock. Urine on a rock is like Gatorade for deer.”

“Were you watching me?” Scott demanded.

I wanted to ask whether phlegm was deer Bubbalicious, but did not.

Instead of answering, the counselor strummed random chords. He looked pleased—he would tell his girlfriend about this, and she would say what a good dad he would be—and began loudly strumming a song I would later identify as The Animals’ “House of the Rising Sun.” “Every morning this week,” he sang over the guitar, “you’ll wake up to this song.”

In our cabin’s windows, no roused heads appeared, and I doubted the music carried even twenty yards.

"Beats the heck out of 'Reveille' on a bugle," he said. He strummed harder; a paragon of scoliosis, his neck grooved like a chicken's. "You guys should shake hands."

I looked at my brother. He smirked and menacingly squeezed my hand, a gesture I disciplined myself from returning; with my knowledge of martial arts, I could have easily shattered his grip. Then he walked away. That's one of the last images I have of him: ambling through the gray morning, as though the counselor's guitar had awakened something that called my brother away, toward our cabin, where, oddly, sleepy faces of other campers had begun peering out the windows, no doubt wondering what rendered that awful song.

Scott turned up late at breakfast assembly, which, if you were hungry, was a nightmare itself. Fifty or so boys and girls, a sea of powder blue t-shirts and khaki shorts, most of whom seemed locked in a distinct solitude—some combination of hunger, homesickness, and diffidence—crammed in a dining hall. With its pew-like arrangement of tables and benches, the hall must have doubled as a chapel. I sat at a relatively empty bench. In the foreground, the famished Son of God loomed over the altar where eggs, muffins, cereal, and bacon were arranged buffet-style. Before food there was prayer, then, courtesy of the counselors, an interminable montage of homily improvisations: "God's love is like the damp side of a rock where soft mosses grow . . ."; "The Word we can only hear in complete silence . . ."; " . . . Heaven is a great time, even though my dog won't be there"—all served bumbling and half-baked. I think I was the only one who noticed my brother sneak in from the narthex and take a seat near the buffet at a table packed with kids who looked tough, even in powder blue and khaki. But everyone, or at least every introvert with whom I shared a table, saw the girl who sneaked through those ornate doors after him. With the same quiet aplomb a diver breaks the surface of a pool, she entered the dining hall and sent little ripples through us. My scalp tightened.

She slid onto the bench across from me and turned to watch the homily. Above her elbow, a canary yellow armband hugged her left arm. She caught me looking, and we, kids who would one day marry, exchanged our first hushed words. "It's because I'm pregnant," she said, "so you can quit staring."

"Cool," I said.

She looked at me like I was crazy. "Well, whatever, it also means I get first dibs on breakfast, so all of you"—the other kids pretended they weren't listening—"back off."

2.

Maternity wasn't all it's cracked up to be. Even with my girlfriends cooing, saying it was so cute and shit, it was almost as though I knew motherhood was temporary; like I could sense that no one, especially not I, had signed on the dotted line. Delivery, therefore, wasn't guaranteed. Besides, I told my girlfriends, there's nothing cute or guaranteed about being preggers at fifteen. Well, maybe one sure thing: I had sown the seeds of a glamorous career in appearing on talk shows with commiserative hosts to whom I would lay it all down for the two hundred bucks and trip to the city. If nothing else just to hear the crowd feel sorry for me and boo him—the guy who did it, or at least certainly did his part. The guy. As far as my parents were concerned, he must have been some insidious god, must have borrowed the form of rain or oxygen to penetrate my immaculate virtue. The guy. More accurately: the crew team's insouciant Adonis, the coxswain with geometric brown arms and lithe torso, and his persistent *stroke*, *stroke*, *stroke*. Christ—the persistence! That's what I found cute. He needed only ask a third time to make *please* a charm.

I opened the box of troubles, and out effervesced my little white trash fantasy. I ran the early 90's talk show gamut: *Montel*, *Jerry*, *Jenny*, and *Ricki*. It was Mother's idea, really; I don't think my father came home from his office for nine months. The plan was *improvise*, and I became one of the first non-celebrity talk show circuit runners. We boarded plane after plane, Mother and I, and sometime between departure and deplaning the metamorphosis would occur. Mother defrocked herself of her literal maternal role and took on the airs of "Staid Baptist Grandma-to-Be" or "Smoker Mom with a Black Heart." I would answer by conjuring "Pregnant Pollyanna with a Third-Grade Education" or "Pregnant Because It's Fashionable." You've heard stories like this before—I mean, after awhile it became hard to believe there were any legitimate crackwhores or hillbillies. We brought our act to themes like "Who Says I Can't Hang Near Microwaves?" and "Shut Up, Single Moms!—Where My Baby's Daddy?" We put on such a stink; it was really un-fucking-believable how pro we were. Our goal, though we did not reach it, was to accrue enough clout to break onto *Oprah*.

All the gains and losses of altitude, all the building and releasing necessary to maintain cabin pressure—flying was like spending hours on the state fair Gravitron, though a quick flight to New York was not so bad. To those lucky passengers assigned the third seat in a row with Mother and I, our transformation must have been stunning. She would be sitting there, reading

one of her New York magazines, and suddenly it was like, “Damn, I want a cigarette. Don’t you?”

I would look incredulous and do a pelvic thrust. “Duh.”

“Oh, that’s right, *you can’t have one*.” She would pretend to go back to the magazine. “Forgive your mother,” she would say, without looking up, “for being so ensconced in the ideal world that she forgot your teenage pregnancy.”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this now.”

“Doing what? At least I’m still *doing*—your father is so abashed, he’s given up on you.”

At about this time, the baby would make a deft movement, and I would say, “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Yoo-hoo, stewardess, my daughter needs a drink, though nothing with caffeine—one in the oven and all.”

“You’re not helping.”

“I’m doing all I can.”

“It’s too much.”

“Well dear, if it’s *too much* it’s to make up for the obvious *not enough* I’ve done in the past—where do you learn to get pregnant at your age, anyway?”

“It’s not a learned behavior, Dr. Scientist.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” She would drop the magazine, and, as the tears were cued, her eyes would grow huge—a masterful act to demonstrate an emotional wellspring, without ruining her mascara.

That particular performance happened just after the religious summer camp, when we estimated I was at eight weeks, and we were off to Chicago to tape my first sonogram—one of our first appearances on either *Jenny* or *Montel*. The show had its own perinatologist, who, I swear, was trying to make me let go of my bladder on camera, he pressed so hard with the doppler.

“My uterus isn’t dough, herr doktor,” I said. The audience loved that. The show’s producers did a split screen between my dopplered tummy, covered in goo, and the monitor; then, a third division slid in to catch Mother’s ever-present cast of mortification.

I remember the nebulous printout from that day: nestled in a grainy universe, a fourteen-millimeter kernel of gray that would soon discernibly bear the characteristics of a small boy.

Before all that, before we began acting, my parents' fervor sent them into a frenzy of religion wherein they tried to instill inter-womb, third-generation morals. They sent me to this hippie camp where, among other emblazonments, I was assigned a yellow armband to keep rough-housing kids from fucking with me. The armband's purpose, also, I presumed, was to afford me enough segregation and solitude to develop monkish meditation that would lead to devout self-loathing and, ultimately, salvation. Maybe that was supposed to happen, but someone wasn't planning ahead. Out of approximately sixty campers—half guys, half girls—there were fifteen yellow armbands. The obvious teenage-boy-to-yellow-armband ratio only becomes pertinent when you are reminded that at their age those boys saw pregnancy, and the only thought that registered in their adolescent monkey brains—until it throbbed at the end of every synapse—was *she puts out*.

I myself met my future husband there, at the infirmary, after he tried to fight a table of troglodytes I sicced on him. Then, of course, his brother spontaneously combusted—or so it seemed. The camp kept the incident hushed and away from media coverage—and it really doesn't matter that they did; later it was all revealed to be an elaborate prank. But if there were news footage from that summer, if you could see it, you would notice the girls standing in the background, slightly out of focus—a sisterhood of mothers-to-be, each hand in hand with a naïve boy, a failed chastity experiment, yellow armbands livid against the low gray sky.

3.

I still do not know why my brother wanted people to think he was dead. A week after he staged his death, Scott called to say he was living in Montana with our dad. My mom, Pablo, and I were in the blaring kitchen, chewing pork chops, when he called. After she hung up, my mom strode out of the kitchen, and we heard her bedroom door solidly close. She would only express herself behind drawn blinds; her composure was sacred, and the only strong emotions she ever expressed were muted silhouettes, images I caught through the window of a car as she sped away.

The morning my father left, he turned the ignition to his packed car, stepped out, shut the door, and we huddled in the wet driveway—a team down to one game-deciding play. Mom regarded my father as if he were going to run a quick errand and said, "Drive safe." We watched his car get smaller and smaller, and the weight of his hand lingered on my shoulder until he was out of sight. Then, just as unceremoniously, her divorce attorney, Pablo, began showing up more

often than was necessary for signatures on papers. Before long, he had a place in our kitchen, eating pork chops.

Pablo looked at me confidently, patted his mouth with a napkin, and tromped after my mother. From the bedroom came the sounds of furniture being pulled across the floor and papers being spilled. I went into my room, which was adjacent to theirs, put on my *gi*, and practiced *kata*, which is like karate for one.

"—because I don't want to call the police," I heard my mother say.

Pablo brazenly declared he would go to Montana to retrieve Scott. "With custody, Sheila, you have a legal responsibility," he said. "If anything should happen to him out there—"

Glass clinked. "Pablo dear," my mother said, "my ex-husband operates a ranch. His idea of fun is breaking in horses, not litigation—he will dismantle you if you go out there."

She was absolutely right; even when he boarded the plane to Montana, my mother must have known what would happen to her relationship with Pablo.

I keep trying to decide why my brother would fake his own death, and I am brought back, time and again, to the day before it happened—the day at summer camp when I met my wife and karate failed me.

* * *

We were in the chapel/dining hall. The smell of bacon was maddening, and, judging from how most kids were murmuring and fidgeting on the benches, a ravenous mutiny was imminent. My future wife—Emily, I would later learn—sat across from me, absently running a finger under her yellow armband and perfunctorily listening to the pre-breakfast homily drone on about how "His Gift is a sort of foot washing at the foot of majestic mountains."

"How about He wash my hunger with some damn bacon and eggs!" someone near my brother yelled. A wave of laughter broke over the assembly. Necks craned to get a look at the jester. I'm not sure why, but I stood to see his face. He was a mottle of freckles with close-clipped hair, head plopped on a thick neck and stout frame, sitting at a table that was filled with boys, even girls, who were molded from the same clay as he, including my brother.

I did not realize I was the only powder blue shirt standing, until a few of them began pointing. Sound died. I looked down, and I was straddling the bench, hands fisted with palms up; arms slightly raised, chest puffed—instincts had me in modified horse stance. When I

looked up, the jester was watching me, smirking, even as the guitar counselor bounded off the stage and tossed a black armband at him.

"Hey, fists of fury," Emily said. She was smirking too, though differently. "You should probably sit down."

I did.

"Good morning, Camp Whitman." The guitar counselor had taken the microphone from the foot-washing counselor, who stood confused near the buffet. "Breakfast is about to start, but first we need to make something clear." He put his hand on the jester's shoulder. "Morning worship will be a part of breakfast everyday this week"—groans throughout the assembly—"and misbehavior will not be tolerated. A few of you may have noticed some young ladies with yellow armbands among you. These young ladies are *with child*, Camp Whitman, and—except for the obvious difference—they are each like the Virgin Mary"—Emily was looking at her shirt, holding the side of the table as though for balance—"in that they deserve your courtesy and prayers."

A bustle rose as the campers sought yellow armbands. Everyone at our table and some of the surrounding benches pinpointed Emily, whose knuckles were white.

"And," the guitar counselor added, "since they're eating for two, they will be served breakfast first." Emily swung her legs over the bench, ready to go up. "Those of you with black armbands, of whom there is just one"—he patted the jester's shoulder—"are under probation and will be served last." The counselor stepped away. "Sequential rows," he said, "will be served starting in the back. Now, if there are no questions, young ladies with a yellow armband should choose someone to help carry her tray, and step up to the stage."

My future wife turned to me and held out her hand. "Fists of Fury? I'm the Anti-Virgin, and I need to eat while I can still hold food down, so let's go."

She gave me her arm, and I held it—warm and rough by the elbow—just under the band. We fell in with the others and marched to the stage in an awkward procession. She did not look pregnant—none of the dozen or so yellow-banded girls did, although some had the pallor and uneasy stagger of morning sickness.

"Do you take karate, or something?" she asked.

I must have said something goofy. I was eager to fall in love, certain that if I did I could shut up the kids at school and prove my brother wrong. I liked girls, I knew I did, and my

eagerness to show it had become a nag that took on its own alarmingly misogynistic voice: *Hel-lo*, it leered, *did you get a look at that ass?*

"How long have you taken karate?" she asked.

"Eighteen months," I said.

"What belt are you?"

"Blackbelt."

"Wow," she said. "You must be really good." We were in front of the buffet. "Get me a little of everything," she said.

"I practice a lot," I said.

"Do you mean fight a lot?"

"Karate lets you know yourself," I said, regurgitating one of Master Dave's lessons. "If you want to achieve something, you only need to believe you can." I finished loading our plates. We left the stage and walked toward Scott's table where everyone was admiring the jester's black armband—they all had something to work toward.

"Hey sister," the jester said as we passed. I stiffened. "*Not* you," he said, "*You*," he regarded Emily, and his thin lips stretched into a grin. "I'll be your baby for some of that bacon."

"I wouldn't encourage the cannibalism, you pig," she said.

I looked for the guitar counselor—any counselor—but he was directing the rear tables to the stage. The line for food and traffic exiting the buffet snaked around us, boxing us in. The jester looked confused, and kids around the table stopped to watch. He sneered and regarded me: "What do you keep looking at, homo?"

"He'll smear your ass, porky," Emily said.

"Please," I said, handing her the tray. Translated, *karate* simply means *the empty hand*. Some say you are supposed to warn an opponent when you hold a blackbelt—your empty hands are masterful enough to be lethal, and your opponent deserves notice. But I wasn't interested in formalities. My body fell into a loose, right fighting stance; I cracked my neck, and I was volcanic. My arms, pillars poised to rain fire. Behind my vision, a map of fight choreography opened, and beyond it I saw the jester stand and assume a glib boxer's pose. "Bring it, Daniel-San," he said.

The line to his unguarded solar plexus—one of eight deadly sensitive areas—opened, just as he lunged. I had him: upward cross-block to mask prepping my right leg; smack his lower leg with my shin; then, my right knee pointed at his solar plexus, roundhouse kick to forefist punch; finally, a lunch-money takedown to backfist strike. The routine was burned into my mind, and my body began the motions, until he punched my Adam's apple. My diaphragm expelled an inhuman groan, as the jester took his time and measured his next punch, the one that would turn out the lights and deliver me to the floor, the infirmary, and my future wife's love.

* * *

Given time, illusion melts away, and every once in a while someone comes along with a shovel to scrape off a layer or two. Before I was knocked on the ground, I did not know there was a difference between a weekly karate course at the Y under the instruction of a sensei named Dave and an intensive study of martial arts. I did not see the connection between every kid who signed up for soccer getting to play—regardless of ability—and the inevitable acquisition of a blackbelt. But when I woke in the infirmary, I was cold with a fear I thought had melted when I was Scott's age: I did not trust what I knew.

My brother had something inside of him I did not. We both had bb guns, but, while I was content to shoot at birds, Scott wanted to retrieve the body, tear off the wings, and glue them to a rotting squirrel. At home, we played Lewis and Clark and hid from Indians under tablecloth forts buttressed by rows of chairs. And once, when a persistent warrior tribe cornered us, my brother used a trowel to tunnel an escape through the dining room drywall—he was pulling out insulation by the time Pablo yanked him out. In these ways we differed, but I have to think we were both driven to know what we could trust, and given that it should not surprise me that he disappeared. I found my magic feather in *The Karate Kid*, and he found his in escape artists like Houdini and Ace Starry. He had books of magic and pranks that he would escape into when he was being punished. What is an escape artist if not one who makes a breathtaking spectacle of his inner struggles? What was my brother's disappearing act, if not a show? I think of the morning I was raked from my sleep by the persistent chords of "House of the Rising Sun." When I looked under my bunk and found, in place of Scott, the charred outline of a small, incinerated person; the smell of smoldering mattress; and ashes scattered on the floor, strangely full of beautiful motion in the quiet cabin. I jumped out of the bunk, sending ashes everywhere, and screamed. Before I was finished, before everyone woke up and the guitar counselor burst

through the door, I saw it: the book that explained how to start over. How to use leftovers from a campfire to fake your own incineration and abscond to your new life. If I had been awake hours earlier, I might have seen him and my father pulling away.

Granted, it is easier for me, twelve years later, to ascribe order to that part of my life and the events of that summer. It is easier for me to see that no matter how deep the snow, elusive solid ground lies somewhere beneath—the very reason I still study karate. I hold a third-degree blackbelt, and I am a master to several students twice a week at a mid-town dojo. My instruction at the ground-level—beneath all the stances, blocks, kicks, and belts—is this: you may come seeking power; however, you will find only inner-knowledge is worthwhile.

Now, I settle into the couch, next to my wife who asks no questions, and remove the letter my brother has sent from its weather-worn envelope. Under the glow from the tv my wife watches, I search the words in his letter for solid ground.

4.

I remember hands. If you are ever uncertain whether someone intends to be gentle or malicious, look to his hands. Are the fingers extended or curled? Close together or spread apart? Palms up or down? In the flurry of hands and tumbling bodies, there were some who were trying to break up the fight, I could tell. One boy, however—the boy I would later identify as his brother—crept under the flailing arms and scrambling legs. He used one hand to balance as he crouched. The other hand reached tentatively toward his brother, but it stopped, battened into a fist, and popped him in the ribs.

I must admit the man I would marry at first seemed as lilted as an Easter parade. But Kevin stood up for me. I could not believe it. That monosyllabic, under-the-bridge bully started talking shit, and the lilt disappeared. I was certainly no distressed damsel—my pregnancy, not a dark tower—but when Kevin handed me that tray of food and said *Please*, that intrepid utterance—at once a request and a command—made something inside of me swoon. Even though he had his clock cleaned—no, *especially* since his clock was cleaned—it was the most romantic thing I had ever seen.

I was totally embarrassed to come out of the brawl without a mark, and I admit I matted some blood that ran from his nose into my hair, while his head lolled out of consciousness. We talked in the infirmary, trading names and all, and I held an ice pack over a welt on Kevin's neck, while the nurse changed the gauze plugging his nose. He came across a bit self-deluded,

explaining where he was from and all kinds of psycho-babble about the way things were vis-à-vis the way they appeared. I figured it was just the concussion talking. We had even been to one of the same places in his hometown: The Salem Witch Museum. We both thought it was completely inappropriate that the tour began with a re-creation of a 1692 witch trial and ended with visitors finding their way through a darkened haunted-house-like maze called "The Witch Dungeon."

His brother sauntered in wearing a black armband and sat down. From the look they exchanged, I knew I did not have to say anything.

I asked the nurse if Kevin would be okay. "We have to make sure he doesn't fall asleep," she said. "We'll call his parents."

Things would not get serious until we attended another camp together the following summer, and there was nothing urgent in how Kevin and I said "See ya." Neither of us knew what would happen the next morning.

I wandered and wandered that day, oblivious to what was happening inside me, and oblivious to the scheme that had hatched inside my mother—the tour that would occupy the next eight months of my life. I think of how quickly it came, and I am baffled. We never taped the shows, and out of all of them I only kept one transcript:

RICKI: This is the big one—Emily, how do you feel?

EMILY: Sad, I guess. Relieved. Tired. Overwhelmed.

MOTHER: I would like to emphasize *relieved*, Ricki.

EMILY: Who asked?

MOTHER: And *tired*.

RICKI: Now, we're about to bring out the adoptive parents—Emily, you haven't met them, right?

EMILY: No. I mean, we talked on the phone.

RICKI: How did you choose who would care for your child?

EMILY: The agency was so helpful. They had books—tons of them—I couldn't believe.

RICKI: What were you looking for?

EMILY: I don't know . . . the right feeling? I mean, you would flip through the pages in these books, and there were some couples that you just knew immediately, they wouldn't cut it—something so smarmy about them that it came across in their photo. I guess I was looking for a

sound family history, idyllic environment, strong income, balanced psychological profiles, standard religious upbringing—

MOTHER: *Strong morals*.

EMILY: —oh yeah, and a family with deceased grandparents.

MOTHER: You can be so hurtful.

EMILY: Well, it's a conscious effort.

RICKI: Thousands of hands reaching out to help . . . What made the Davenports stand out?

EMILY: There was a space in each profile labeled *Dreams, Hopes, etc.* where most couples would either write something idiotic about world peace or, worse, leave blank. But the Davenports had written something so candid it was almost unreal. Mr. Davenport wrote that he hoped to someday operate a lobster fishery off the coast of Maine, and his wife—this was the killer—wrote that she would like to run one of those shacks along the coast that serves lobster rolls.

RICKI: Wow. Stunning.

EMILY: See what I mean? It was almost ridiculous. That and they didn't mind the anonymity clause in the adoption.

RICKI: You won't have a role in your son's life.

EMILY: Why complicate things more?

RICKI: Well, let's bring them out . . . Mr. and Mrs. Davenport, how are you?

ADOPTIVE PARENTS: Great. Fine.

RICKI: Well, Emily, what do you think?

EMILY: Suburban, yet chic; approachable, yet elegant . . . Perfect.

Believe me: if you were there, you would have thought so, too. Motherhood, I took a bow. What would you have had me do? I'd already sent Chastity and Pleasant-Dinner-Conversation and Childhood to Siberia; it was only a matter of time before you were banished as well. I see them everyday—the people who can't let go, who aren't sure of what to do next. They sit in an audience, waiting for a message from beyond the grave; they've lost one thing and another has taken its place.

5.

Scott’s letter turns out to be an invitation to join him at our father’s ranch in Montana for Christmas. If we go, Emily and I will meet Scott’s wife of one year—her second marriage—and their daughter who has just started kindergarten. I have never been to Montana, and in my mind it is a desolate place—a place Pablo never returned from, though my brother swears our father only threatened to have him disbarred for unethical conduct with a client, our mother.

“What is it?” my wife asks. Her talk show has paused for commercials.

“Nothing,” I say. “Bills.”

If we do not go to Montana, Christmas will be spent as it has been in recent years—with her parents in Rhode Island, which has been fine.

I stand, go into our bedroom, and open my top bureau drawer, which is filled with old papers, pictures, and lottery tickets.

I can’t tell my wife how it feels to come from a divided family. There are times when we go quiet, she and I, lying in bed and pretending to find pictures in the cloudy ceiling, hours spent under the TV’s lulling hum, and I want to tell her about my life. I want to take her hand and pull her from her pictures in the ceiling and, together, open the kinds of introspective portals that will connect us. *You feel that? I think about that all the time—I thought I was the only one!* I would tell her that as a kid I read—no, voraciously devoured—sci-fi stories about astronauts. Thousands of miles from home—and not side to side miles, *up* miles. Alone save all those blinking red and green lights on the dash, and, out the cockpit’s viewing window, a darkness whose infinity is only punctuated by the dimness of distant stars. The programming that’s supposed to make the spacecraft’s onboard computer sound more human is awful.

These are the portals we would open together, mine then hers. I would tell her about the embarrassing time, after Scott’s first letter, that I sent my brother, without explanation, a tape with both sides filled with Bowie’s “Space Oddity.” *“Ground control to Major Tom . . .”? You like that song too? What does this mean?* His next letter had no return address. We would laugh at this, my wife and I, maybe too much, so much that we would be drunk with it all, the cocktail of laughter and introspection and our naked inhibitions. After the fit of laughter I would look at her meaningfully and say, “The harder I strive toward harmony, the more dissonant I become,” and she would nearly crumble with understanding, and we would kiss because there would be nothing left to say.

But when we lie on our backs in bed looking at our ever-changing ceiling and I take her hand and she says, "Do you see it?—like a steaming cup of coffee," all I ever say is yes, yes, yes.

In the bureau drawer on top of scattered lottery tickets is my brother's wedding invitation—the last thing he sent. I lay the Christmas invitation on top of it, push on the bureau drawer, and solidly it closes.

THE SECRET LIVES OF ADULTS

The heart of what I am about to put forth is kept beating by the fact that my father and I never shared the proverbial beer. Never a starlit night when, with my mother's back turned, my father muffled the crack of opening the can, took an obligatory swig, then passed it over—no hidden pleasures deeply imbued. In my father's defense, he doesn't drink. If my father were defending himself, he would say that my mother never turned her back for a second. This discussion is not founded in outright anger, vindictiveness, abuse, or an Oedipal throbbing in my loins, nor is it about those things; it is about becoming an adult, and the moment that it happens.

Can the step over the threshold of adulthood be defined by a moment? I think it can. It is not the first time you have sex, when you get married, or turn twenty-one; but it is a moment, just as orgasm, *I do*, and 12:00 A.M. are moments. And if you try to put your life on a timeline, between the poles of BIRTH and DEATH you would record such footnotes (—Orgasm— or —Day I met life partner—), which metaphorically add flesh to your skeleton. Rites of passage are metaphors themselves; a moment of living art that becomes a memory, which if done wrong becomes a living cliché. In one sense, my father did impart said beer over the phone, when I was twenty-one, under the guise of snow blower operating instructions, but I'm not spoiling any surprises by giving that away; the snow-blower instructional is not the moment I'll designate as my step into adulthood. I am honestly not sure yet whether I will say at the end of this that I have, by graceful step or stumble, crossed the threshold into adulthood—but I believe I can forecast how I will know when it happens. I am eighty-nine-percent positive that the satellite systems of this forecast are books, especially John Updike's.

"A Constellation of Events"

When I was nine, my parents gave me the *"What's Happening to My Body?" Book for Boys, 2nd Edition*. Two awkward boys shooting hoops graced the edition's cover. For a number of years, I was convinced that once I went through puberty I would suddenly garner interest in basketball, the stupidity factor of which is right up there with my mistaking "Hey Jude" for "Hey Dude" and my habit of pulling my pants all the way down at urinals. Both errors were corrected

the hard way, in public school—one at a slightly later date than the other. From that book, I remember diagrams of intercourse that seemed improbable and ejaculation explained with a "big-sneeze" analogy. I never took my parents up on their invitation to "chat" about any questions I had, and the subject wasn't brought up again until I had crunchy hair under my arms, at which point my parents and I convened in my room for a serious talk. They asked if I was okay with the crunchy hair. What if I had said no?

Conversations about sexuality floated somewhere in the purgatorial ask-if-you-have-questions realm in our household. Aside from the puberty book, media with ostensibly sexual themes were not allowed. I remember this rule provoked a real on-the-floor temper tantrum when I wasn't allowed to watch *Baby . . . Secret of the Lost Legend* on HBO because the *TV Guide* confirmed one of its PG-makers to be "sexual situations."

However, so long as the cover wasn't of an unclad waif exasperated in the arms of a well-muscled man with flowing mane, my parents' censorship never found its way into the books I read. "What are you reading?" my parents would ask. I sighed as though I were trudging through some arduous volume from the nineteenth century. "Just something for school," I said. In actuality, I was sweating my way along the carnal prose of Elizabeth McNeill's *Nine and a Half Weeks* or Anne Rice's *Exit to Eden*. Abusing our library's practice of lending books with uniform, unincriminating covers, I read the novelizations of those sexy movies, and, after a time, I must have read the book version of every Stephen King movie I wasn't allowed to see. I was one of those children who camped out under the sheets with a flashlight after lights out, but not just because I was reading—I was convinced a child-eating clown lurked just outside my bedroom door. Every creature—werewolves, Tommyknockers, baby-zombies, telekinetics, vampires—was real to me, more so than they would have been had I seen the garish Hollywood productions. My god—that leper scene in *IT* . . . that girl under the porch, when she found that perverted corpse that wanted to suck her clit . . . . That was what else I found in Stephen King: expletives—saxonisms, the words that made English interesting. In the daytime, in the schoolyard, looking for recyclable cans with my friends (or whatever we did), the razor-toothed things that kept me under-sheet-with-flashlight at night disappeared. The words, however, remained.

There was a time when I didn't think that people used such language. No, my family did not live in a cave in the Swiss Alps, but I believed that such words were reserved for murderers,

men in movies with guns, and fictions. Curses had an association with violence: violent language elicits violent behavior. It never occurred to me that people swore in times of joy or passion. Looking back, my misconceptions seem extraordinarily naïve, my home life so genteel. However, I was a child who once, after watching my father shave, smeared Desitin on my chin and waited, uncertain of what happened next; keen perception and careful observation were not my forte. Joy and passion to me were Christmas and Valentine's Day, and I never imagined Santa Claus saying "ho-fuckin'-ho," or that I might receive a chalky heart candy that said "I'm yours; cunnilingate me." But soon enough, my friends and I were walking shoulder-to-shoulder—true *Stand By Me* style—and someone would exclaim: "Oh goodie, a fucking can; now I can get a nickel, which I can use to buy goddamn Bazooka," or however one of us might have spoken in third grade. This language, once a strange fiction, materialized in the daylight hours. Soon neither I nor my friends would notice as it walked with us, shoulder-to-shoulder, invisible as a ghost.

The beginning of my adolescence was marked by the moment it was not novel to swear, the moment the words no longer felt like something that fell off the page and into my life. The morning I woke up, pushed aside my Masters of the Universe sheets, stretched, yawned, and proclaimed: "Fuck, I'm still tired," without irony—that morning I was an adolescent. I woke oblivious to the change, like a soldier who hundreds of kilometers from the front wakes oblivious to the end of his war.

Most of King's monsters would make sense, too. Of course the world was filled with bloodsuckers, animals in people costumes, and even the occasional Tommyknocker rapping on the door. The monsters were imaginative revisions of characters on the nightly news and that's what made them chilling. Soon thereafter, I had the crunchy hair and the serious talk with my parents, and the symptoms described in the *"What's Happening to My Body?" Book for Boys* pillaged glands, pores, voice and grace. Time made a believer out of me. Etc.

Updike

I remember the precise moment I felt renewed interest in John Updike's books. When I first read *Rabbit, Run*, in eleventh grade, it bored me shitless. I picked the book up because of Pink Floyd's obscure reference to it on the *Dark Side of the Moon* album: "*Run, rabbit, run / dig that hole / forget the sun* . . . ." I thought Pink Floyd was *hot*, and anything that influenced them would certainly speak to me. While there was a part of me that knew I should appreciate

Updike, there was a really pushy part of me that didn't know what all of Harry Angstrom's moral pacing and running were about. So I skipped most of the middle, skimmed through the end, and told my friends I had read a great book and they should do the same. That was me in a nutshell, high school junior year.

During my third year in college, just months before I met a woman who would entirely alter my universe, Updike gave a reading my school. One month before the slated reading date, I panicked. My Updike appreciation was largely summary, Cliffs Notes appreciation, and the chair of my school's creative writing department gave us his any-writer-worth-his-salt-should-appreciate-Updike spiel. By this time my trust in intuition had been replaced by a reverent vulnerability to professorial opinion. I read *Pigeon Feathers*, *Trust Me*, and *The Afterlife* in a week. And on a technical level I saw what all the hoopla was about. The way he told a story, using language that I both at once understood and required I break out a dictionary. His vision captured the underside of the suburban iceberg, purveying an analytical deftness I previously thought began with Ann Beattie and Raymond Carver, who inspired Rick Moody and Lorrie Moore (I still hadn't read Cheever or Chekhov).

But my appreciation of Updike's content wouldn't manifest itself until I again, before his reading, picked up *Rabbit, Run*. I was reading in an outdoors campus spot, trying to get comfortable on an angular stone chair, when a child of the 60's I knew from writing class happened by.

"What're you reading there?" he asked.

I showed him. I confided that I was having trouble getting into it for the second time.

"Wonderful book," he said, "but it won't make sense until you're married. You'll understand." If there are only, like, two ways that someone can say that without sounding condescending, his was one way. My problem occurred to me later: Updike's subject matters—marriage, children, age, eventual unhappiness, divorce, freedom, more imminent unhappiness, reflection, hope—were as distant to me, and therefore seemingly fictional, as child-eating clowns. When I read Updike, I was a twenty-year-old in an exotic adult-run land; an American—separate, judgmental, and sybaritic—in some Caribbean port. A tourist who just didn't get it. The Angstroms, The Maples, Henry Bech—they were characters of a certain age who made contracts (e.g. handshakes and wedding vows) that I believed in as blindly and

innocently as I once believed in Saint Nick. "You'll understand." It wasn't condescension; if he had tried to explain, it would have been cruel.

This has been one of the hardest things for me to accept: what I at twenty judged and valued as exceptional, persevering, and worth fighting for might, once I lived a little longer, change. All of my ideals, hopes, and aspirations could be transient, even sophomoric and fleeting. I would make contracts—handshakes, wedding vows—to hold me to the decisions I made. That animal which besides flesh and water we're all made of—integrity—would become the wall that kept the contracts contained. But eventually these contracts would melt into a solution that could erode that seawall of integrity. One day I would read *Rabbit, Run*, and although the story would be as fictional as a monster, the material would feel as sincere as an exultant curse.

I don't mean to come across so melodramatically and pessimistically. I'll probably be embarrassed at having written all of this in a couple of years. My parents, unlike Updike's characters, never separated. Divorce happened to some of my friends' households, but nobody talked about it. What's important is I finally understood that the amount of fiction dedicated to the subject of middle-aged moroseness and affairs was by no means an exaggeration. These phenomena really happened. I didn't think of most of this until after I saw Updike read, although the kernels were heating up. Then into my slowly pooling life backstroked the woman who would tell me she'd had an affair with my father.

My Father's Secret Life

The three of us were waiting in the Mexican restaurant to be seated. My friends Thomas and Carrie, Classics majors, were playing a game, trying to cast a movie version of Euripides' *Bacchae*. Thomas wondered if Edward Norton could conjure enough decadence to pull off Dionysus. Carrie seriously considered this. A mariachi played somewhere in the back, behind the partition that separated us from the dining area, the melody muffled.

"What do you think, Ryan?" Carried asked. "Ed Norton as Dionysus?"

Thomas raised his eyebrows.

"Michael Keaton," I said. "Definitely him." They got the obscure reference to Keaton's unlikely casting as Batman in 1989 but looked at me like I was crazy anyway. So I escaped to the restroom.

I don't mean to knock it, but people didn't have our type of conversation all the time. I can think of only three people who would have our conversation: 1) students, 2) scholars (students who got slapped on the back while posing as scholars), and 3) snobs (weird composition of 1&2). We, however, thought we were being adults. We also drank wine we couldn't afford (chosen by date, not label) and arranged dinner parties where we'd namedrop obscure current issues like the Turkish control of Northern Cyprus.

When I returned, my friends were already seated. Thomas began dinner conversation like this: "Man, you have a stalker." It seemed I missed something special while in the restroom. And that was the beginning of my adult problems. Rather, the beginning was a year before but I hadn't known it then.

* * *

A year before, I was minding my business, studying at a bookstore. I was wandering, taking a break from hitting the books, when a woman stopped me.

"Ryan?" She was much shorter than I; her head tilted to the side, remembering me.

Reflexively: "Hi." My memory was bad, so un-athletic social reflexes tried to compensate, as though I just needed time to remember.

"You don't remember me. I'm Rhoda." My body had probably made every I-don't-know-you pantomime in the Sicilian book. "We met when you were in Tampa with your dad." I'd never been to Tampa with my father, though at the time he and my mother lived close.

"Right." I shook her hand; her handshake was the kind you don't know when to let go of.

"So you're going to school here now?" I was a junior at the time. Her head was still cocked.

"Yeah, three years." I pulled my hand out of hers, and her head straightened.

"Let me guess—a writer?" I wouldn't let someone get away with calling me that. If there was a writers' karma that coexisted with standard and occupational karmas, then it seemed there'd be a massive backlash of misfortune to any student who, especially unpublished, called himself a writer.

"No, ha-ha. I'm studying English."

"Ah." Her head went to the side again. She looked around my shoulder to where I'd been sitting. "Are you still with your girlfriend?" She was referring to the girl with whom I was sitting. I looked over my shoulder at her.

“No!” I almost shouted. “I mean, yes.” How would she know any better? Who was this woman? I asked: “What is it you do again?”

“I’m an attorney.” This didn’t ring true.

“That’s right.”

She started backing away. “Okay, I just wanted to say hi. I’m sure I’ll see you around. I’m always in the bookstores.”

I returned to the study table with a gut feeling that something was wrong. People talk about such feelings all the time, but this was my first experience with it. I could not ignore the fact that her story felt like a lie, and although I couldn’t imagine why she’d want to lie to me, I had a compulsion to call my father and make sure she was wrong.

“Who was that?” my fake girlfriend asked.

“My father’s friend,” I said. “I’ll be right back.” I went to the in-store payphone and called my dad. He had never heard of her and pointed out that with a name like “Rhoda” he’d remember.

When you have a gut feeling, follow up on it, and end up being right, you do not always feel satisfaction. It can be unsettling and vaguely sinister. A year before the Mexican restaurant—that was technically the beginning of my adult problems.

* * *

The mariachi, once muffled and quaint, strummed cyclonic riffs, directly next to our table. His voice ranged from whisper to boom; his guitar followed, sounding at times like a distinct series of thuds.

“She said she’s psychic, dude,” Thomas said.

“Who did?” I asked.

“Your stalker,” he yelled. He thought I couldn’t hear over the music. “Some lady with red hair. She came up to me and Carrie when you went to the bathroom.”

I knew they were talking about Rhoda the Attorney. “What did she say?” I asked.

“She asked if we were your roommates,” Carrie said.

Thomas continued, “And when we said yes, she said she knew we were because she’s psychic. She said you represented all that is truthful and dignified in a brilliant world.”

That mariachi was really thwacking the chords. “Who the hell was she?” Carrie asked.

I started to tell them about the day at the bookstore and the phone calls that made the whole thing seem sinister, but a waiter interrupted: “Something to drink?” The mariachi belted something very diaphragmatic and trilled.

“Tecate!” I almost shouted. Then the music stopped and there was polite clapping. I finished recounting the bookstore encounter.

“Fuck, man.” Thomas unfailingly knew the perfect thing to say. “She said that the two of you have entangled destinies.”

“Entangled?” I asked.

“Something just like that,” Carrie said.

The drinks came and Thomas’ sentiment felt right to me, too: “Fuck, man.”

During my first year as an undergraduate I quickly learned that not everyone who leaves home for college adjusts well. I saw the maladjusted in the coffee houses and local bars; a particularly large congregation gathered outside the school’s philosophy department. Tell-tale signs: squinty eyes; lots of cat hair on sweater; spoke in cadences that were the verbal equivalent to absent rocking back-and-forth in a chair; sat at a table alone with a live iguana, Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, pocket tape-recorder, and potted cactus; lapped coffee with tongue; told friends her nipples were *so brown*; offered a cigarette and said, “I fucking love pegs like you, Ahab” when it was refused; talked about “the University’s eye,” and when I asked what she meant, touched her index finger to her temple and said, “Ah-ha.” Two—maybe three—of these, or comparable, idiosyncrasies equaled someone harmless and cool. Three-plus signaled, *say placating things and slip away*. Rhoda was different. Most of the whackos I’d come across didn’t claim to be attorneys and they sure as hell didn’t claim to know my dad or my name.

“Was she by herself?” I asked.

“No, with some guy,” Carrie said.

“What did he look like?”

“He looked normal,” she said.

* * *

Months later, my parents had moved north to New Hampshire. I was at the bookstore again, taking notes for final exams, when I last saw Rhoda. She asked if she could talk to me. I said okay. She led me to a remote corner of the store, and this is what she said: “I know that you’ve thought for some time now that your father has been unfaithful to your mother, and I

need to tell you that I'm the woman he's done so with." Then she started crying. This woman—dressed in Anne Taylor, clutching a briefcase and way-too-many-to-be-phony yellow legal pads—knelt in an obscure corner of the bookstore and cried. What could I do? I touched her frizzy red hair and told her it was all right, a tentative gesture. I helped her up and held her until she quieted. Noble, sure, but I have never felt more awkward in my life.

What did I know about Rhoda?

- Claimed to be some kind of attorney
- Frequented bookstores
- Hair: Phoenix red
- Claimed to be psychic
- Claimed to have had sexual and post-coital intimacies w/ my father
- A new genus of maladjustment
- Nothing, really

So I kept quiet, as I do when I feel awkward, and, when she regained some composure, I let her do the talking, as I've heard one should do with psychics.

"I'm so sorry to lay this all on you," she said. "It's not fair, is it?"

I had one question: "How did you know my father?"

"We met at a ball at the Governor's Mansion," she said.

My father had never mentioned anything about any governor.

"Governor Lawton Chiles—your father and I were so heartbroken when he passed on," she said. And from here on it was apparent that either my father led a secret life apart from the one I knew or—as I thought before—she had mistaken me for someone else. Or perhaps she was screwing with me. My father did not—absolutely did not—mingle with government officials, let alone go to balls.

"And my mother?" I asked.

"Janice knows about everything," she said. My mother's name is Carol.

But still I asked, "She does?" I was taken in. I wished for distraction—a loud noise, my coffee to spill itself, spontaneous combustion—so I could slip away, but a desire that lay somewhere between fear and masochism held me paralytic. Why had my countenance replaced

that of the Ryan she was looking for? What would she say and do next? Was I in danger? I was wary and worried about upsetting her; I treaded lightly like one trying not to wake a sleepwalker.

I couldn't help myself. "How long did this go on?" I asked. Now I was the bad guy. Instead of nudging the sleepwalker back to bed, I lead her into oncoming traffic.

"Off and on for two years," she said. "Your father and I traveled to Washington, Los Angeles—all over." Her eyes were flinty, looking somewhere behind me. "All over," she said quietly. "I'm sorry I did this."

"Did what?"

"Told you."

"Why did you tell me?"

"I just need someone to talk to," she said.

Therapist, I thought. "I need some time to think about this," I said. "I need to go."

"No," she said, "I mean, *I* should go." *Fucking right, you should go,* I thought. *You can't do this to me. Do you even know who I am? You think my father was friends with Lawton Chiles—do you know that I've met Lawton Chiles, that I've swam in his pool? Wouldn't he have said, "Ryan, it's a pleasure after knowing your father all these years . . ." or something? Do you know who I am? What I'm capable of? Who my friends are? We could break your reputation with our student-powers of organization, demonstration, and rally. We'll be outside your law firm every day with placards and protest-chants and hippies for reinforcements. We are young and strong and filled with multi-vitamins and Ramen. We study at fucking bookstores.*

"Can we talk sometime?" she asked.

And then it came, my social knee-jerk: "Sure." We shook hands and then she exited.

For the rest of the day I couldn't let it go. My mind would replay certain scenes and revise them. In some revisions I would be more confrontational:

"I had an affair with your father."

"The fuck you talking bout?"

In others, we had a meta-dialogue that threw a blanket over verisimilitude and seemed contrived to reveal something really key and poignant about the situation:

"I had an affair with your father."

"I don't believe you."

"How can you not believe me? Do you even know your father?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"I'm serious."

"I know a lot about my father! He was born July 8, 1952. He and my mother were married in 1977. A year later, I was conceived. He has a shy and awkward demeanor. His hair has recently gone salt and pepper. He is an accountant and has an MBA, which he got taking night classes when I was eight years old. He likes basketball, The Beatles, Schwarzenegger movies, plays the lottery, and has a penchant for UFO-conspiracy stuff."

"I asked if you *know* him. Those things you just listed are so superficial—they're the kinds of facts that psychics can know after only spending a few minutes with someone. This confrontation—you versus me—is happening to you right now and all your brain keeps doing is remembering stories you've read that contain similar situations, themes you might remember to guide your response. Since you've never read about anything like this, the memories start skipping like a record, and you revert to kitschy technique, like a fetal drooling child unable to handle something so adult.

"You don't know anything about your father. What really scares you about this confrontation is not whether your dad has had an affair, but that you may not know *yourself*."

"How can I doubt the man who diligently provided for my sisters, my mother, and me?"

"Who says he can't provide for you guys and carouse at the same time?"

"I can't question the devotion of the man whose coat pockets I'd forage through after he got home from work, to find a toy or a note that read, *Nothing today! I love you. –Dad*."

"He could have been both devoted *and* promiscuous. You're talking about your father and I'm talking about a person like you and me."

"I . . . ." I was popping like a scratched record.

Something in me thought Rhoda could be right. I sat down in the chair where I'd been studying and remembered the last time I'd visited home. My father picked me up at the airport, which surprised me because that sort of thing was normally part of my mother's realm. Was there something to the fact that his hug hello felt awkward? Wasn't that always the case? We are not a touchy family. And on the drive home, after we'd had the preliminary how's school / how's home talk, did the truffles of silence signify that a problem wasn't addressed? Weren't we always quiet? Didn't the clinking of plates and silverware—not conversation—provide the soundtrack to most family dinners? Later in the supermarket, I suggested we buy some beer.

“I feel like I missed out,” I joked. “We never shared a beer while I was underage.”

“Well, that could be because I don’t drink,” he said.

Later that day the winter’s first nor’easter blew in and dumped five inches of snow in under two hours. My dad called me from work.

“How does the driveway look?” he asked.

“Pretty covered,” I said.

“Have you ever used the snow blower before?” I hadn’t—we never needed one in Florida. He told me how to operate the machine. He drilled me with questions: *What do you do if the starter doesn’t catch? Do you plug it back in, if it stalls? Where should you direct the piles of snow?*

“Dad, I think I’ve got it,” I said.

“Okay,” he laughed. “Don’t say we never shared a beer.” We both laughed. The metaphor didn’t make total sense, but his cleverness caught me off guard.

“That doesn’t sound like you,” I said. It was true: after twenty-one years, I didn’t know him as well as I should have. My compunction wasn’t caused by the fact that I believed Rhoda, she was nuts; it was due to the fact that I couldn’t say with certainty that extramarital affairs were beyond or beneath my father.

The Secret Lives of Adults

So I decided to do a little investigative journalism. Who is Rhoda? Who is my father? Who am I? I began asking questions about my father, and, in doing so, I learned something important: in my family, and others I imagine, information that might embarrass the kosher family dynamic was discussed only at the level of gossip, thereby sounding more fictional than real.

I told my aunt—the member of my family who piles on the least amount of bullshit—about the Rhoda encounter. “Your father doesn’t have the balls to do anything like that,” she said. I assured her that I agreed with the essence of what she said, but that the encounter made me realize that I don’t know enough about him. I wanted an honest assessment. “Honestly, I think he’s a pervert,” she said. “Not a pervert like a child molester or anything, but he’s, you know, done some things.”

“What things?” I asked. I got all the gossip. When I was younger, I was told, my father used to get rides to work from co-workers. The drivers were always women, but, for some

reason, my father couldn't keep his rides; they constantly changed and on many days he had trouble getting to work. My aunt speculated that he was creeping these women out. There are many stories, she went on to say, of my father doing things like mistakenly walking in on my aunts' showers, while he was dating my mother; while taking baby-me from the arms of women, using the hand-off as an excuse to cop a feel. Maybe, she said, my father was too touchy-feely with his rides to work. But then maybe it was something completely different—perhaps he refused to split the cost of gas.

"Although, I will say this," my aunt confided. "You father tells a lot of sexy jokes and that might make some people uneasy."

My father tells sexy jokes? Why did that surprise me? My father *is* a person, right? But it was a side of him, like most things adult, to which I was never privy. These were issues that dwelled somewhere *outside* the purgatorial ask-if-you-have-questions realm of our household.

"I'm just gossiping, though," my aunt said. "You should really just talk to your dad."

Of course, she was right, but she was providing a lucid imprint of my father as a flesh and blood human being. If Rhoda had stripped my perspective of filters, my aunt fitted me with the correct prescription. By reevaluating my father's role—forgetting his role—in nascent adulthood, seeing him as a three-dimensional human, it happened: I experienced a moment as an adult.

To myself I say, "The step over the threshold of adulthood cannot be encapsulated in a moment, dummy!" It can't be approached by syllogisms or techniquey writing. We have glimpses during which we test the atmosphere beyond that doorframe—reading, orgasm, jubilation, love, grief, rumination—all this heavy stuff to which we avert our eyes until we're ready. The gravity across the threshold of adulthood is much stronger. Who is my father? He's a guy just like me, and looking at him isn't looking at a dad, it's looking at a mirror. These are his eyes, here's his sense of humor, and these are gray hairs like his. There's a lot of gravity in that reflection, my friend.

And what of Rhoda? My encounters with her seem more metaphorical than literal now. She was my ignorant guide to a rite of passage that certainly avoided cliché. And what if she wasn't mad but aware of everything and fucking with me? So what if she was? I could kiss her for it—if there were only more people as interesting. I haven't seen her since that day she made her quick exit from the bookstore. For a while I saw her in dreams, silently rising from the ash

of incinerated books, her red hair livid against the gray. Wherever she's absconded to, I wish her well.

Here I am, somewhere past the age of shaving with Desitin and bare-ass peeing, getting to know the man who happens to be my father. The more familiar he becomes, the more I think that perhaps I was wrong when I thought adulthood is a scary time where adolescent ideals, hopes, and aspirations prove to be transient. I look at a picture of my parents on their wedding day, neither of them much older than I am now. Of course they look younger than they are today; but the longer I stare at the photo, the more blurry the signs of age become, just as moments like the first time I cursed without irony have started to feel hazy and indistinguishable from the pool of other flashbulb memories. My parents are dancing on an otherwise vacant dance floor, looking into each other's eyes. Off to their side, wedding guests snap pictures like the one I'm now holding. My parents are thinking who-knows-what, but I'd like to believe that it's something along the lines of *it's moments like these that make life seem as though nothing is transient*. And that's what makes it all so goddamned scary.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ryan Walsh was born in Salem, Massachusetts. He received his B.A. in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing, in 2000, followed by a Master's in Creative Writing, in 2003; both degrees were earned at Florida State University. Walsh currently lives in Lakeland, Florida where, at a rural high school, he teaches seminal novels of the English language.