

## ABSTRACT

### FOREIGN DISPATCHES FROM A WORLD OF MEN

by Paul Howard Sorensen

*Foreign Dispatches from a World of Men* is a collection of thematically linked stories featuring a group of young male protagonists struggling with notions of masculinity in late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Each story focuses on the difficulty of establishing oneself as an adult within a culture that is increasingly pornographic, narcissistic, and anti-intellectual, and in which the traditional role of men within working class communities has all but disappeared.

FOREIGN DISPATCHES FROM A WORLD OF MEN

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## CONTENTS

iii	Acknowledgements
1	Little Girl in Bed with a Pineapple
8	Turtle Power
15	Re-launch
29	Break Point
36	The Last First Time
41	The God Who Comes
59	Nach Küssen

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## LITTLE GIRL IN BED WITH A PINEAPPLE

No one had ever loved Ryan Story. This was good and right. If it seemed unfair, unfortunate at times, it still made some kind of sense, and kept on in the spirit of what he knew about the universe.

“Hey,” his voice echoed, metallic and black.

“Hey.”

“So...” He shifted his weight and leaned in further, the non-skid tiles punishing his knees. “I guess I... can skip the first part... and ask what’s wrong.”

Ryan hadn’t been regional manager long when a dispatcher from the city of Flint’s police department woke him up in the middle of the night to tell him that something had tripped the silent alarm at restaurant number three-five-seven. He had expected to find teenage vandals or, more likely, no apparent cause at all. He hadn’t expected an unlocked door, a dark kitchen, and a young woman bent over with her head in the bread oven.

“I don’t exist,” said the sad darkness, cold and from all sides.

“Oh,” said Ryan. He tried to move his center of gravity out further in front of him, pulled up one leg so he was only down on one knee. The grating was cool on his cheek, but hard. He rotated the weight of his head up onto his skull, and tried to position his diaphragm so he could speak more than a mouthful of words at a time. “Did you ever get mail before?”

The figure in the dark turned back towards him and suddenly the void was a girl again, though it was too dark to see her face. Though he didn’t know her name. “What?” she asked.

“Have you,” he said, and put his other knee back on the ground. The sole of his sneaker squeaked and he struggled to keep his balance. “Have you ever gotten mail? A bill... or a... letter.”

“Yes,” said the girl.

“Well then you exist,” he said, now up on both feet, rocking on his haunches, rattling the rack. He didn’t know how she managed to stay so perfectly still. “Like in that movie... about Santa.”

“Oh,” she said, and turned away from him. “I don’t watch Santa movies.”

“That’s too bad.” Ryan extended his left arm, trying, unsuccessfully, to rest his face on his shoulder. “It’s good practice,” he said through broken breaths and grunts of discomfort. “Lessens the blows later in life. When you find out... about God... and your own being.”

“You’re sweet,” she echoed to him. “This meant a lot to me.” She turned back towards him. “But you should leave. I’m getting sleepy and can’t have long now.”

“Well, actually,” he said, moving again, “this is an electric oven.”

\* \* \*

Ryan had seen a photo once. It was black and white. It was a picture of a little girl in communist Hungary, snuggling up with her first pineapple. And that’s what he was in the months after he met Rebecca: a little girl in bed with a pineapple.

\* \* \*

Ryan worked for a major fast food chain. The one everyone has heard of. As the regional manager he was *encouraged* but not *required* to perform unscheduled checkups of restaurants within his market. That is to say, it was the kind of thing that never got done. But Ryan began stopping by restaurant number three-five-seven on Thursday nights, when Rebecca was heading up the closing shift.

“I’ve seen things,” Rebecca would say, poking the suck-end of her cigarette in the air.

Ryan looked around at the blue rusted dumpster and the red glow of brake lights in the drive through. He looked at the parking lot for the public library across the street and the price of gas as displayed on a Shell Gasoline sign. He looked back at Rebecca, cataloging those items in his head. “I’ve seen things too.”

“You haven’t seen the *shit* I’ve seen.” She said it in a tone of voice that could only come from having wisdom beyond her years. Ryan always thought that having “wisdom beyond your years” was one of the best indicators that someone was hopelessly immature. It was a quality predicated on being young and thinking you knew something.

“You haven’t seen the nice things I’ve seen,” he said back.

“The shit that I have seen,” said Rebecca, shaking her head and smoking her cigarette.

\* \* \*

Ryan’s friends often lectured him on his emotional immaturity, but he saw nothing in their relationships that warranted such criticisms. Admittedly, they had a way of carrying themselves that he could pinpoint as older, but it didn’t seem to have much substance. They cared for each other passionately. They were unfulfilled. They were bored. They were married. They were cheating. They were happy. They got drunk and beat each other up. If all Ryan would ever know of love was idle conversation and a smoke with a girl twelve years his junior then so be it.

\* \* \*

Rebecca was lit up by the fire of her own experiences. She would lecture him for hours, on any number of subjects. He didn’t believe anything she said, but loved to watch her talk. She’d burn holes in his arguments with that cigarette and use slender, angular fingers to turn invisible keys - like reality was one big mechanism that she could alter with explanation and thought.

She was beautiful, with fair skin and dark, tangled hair. She was tallish, but so thin, with tiny little shoulders that made her otherworldly. Her resplendent blue eyes were offset ever so slightly, and it prevented her from being cold, flat like an advertisement in a magazine.

Ryan tried to tell her, but she shrugged it off. Beauty was such an ugly word. So common and used up. “Did you ever read a book,” he asked, “and then there’s a detail, and it’s so specific and real, but... it’s so specific it’s universal...” He floundered, and reached out with this his right hand and tried to turn one of her invisible knobs, “like when Hemingway writes about making love to Maria, ‘for her everything was red...’ and you feel...”

“Flowers in last month’s newspapers.” Stevens. I know exactly what you mean.”

“Good, yes,” Ryan said pointing a finger in his own nervous manner. “Well, that feeling you get from that detail, whatever that feeling is... that’s how I feel when I look at your face.”

\* \* \*

Some of the ways in which Rebecca affected Ryan would not become clear to him until after the fact. She didn’t have a boyfriend and that was a happiness he took with him everywhere he went. She was what? Twenty-one? Twenty-two? (He never wanted to be sure.) At the height of her desirability she was choosing to be alone. It gave isolation a certain legitimacy it otherwise lacked. Some people chose to live this way. Ryan hadn’t, but apparently some amazing people had.

\* \* \*

He didn’t like it when she talked about love, because she talked about love like everyone else did.

Loose.

Rebecca was always making his insides loose, like he was carrying an armload of somethings important and one in the middle, one he didn’t have his hand or an arm on, was starting to slip out.

Love, the way they talked about it: it was a dirty little secret everyone knew but him. It was everywhere and nowhere. It was spelled out over his head before he could read. It was mouthed silently behind his back when he turned away. For years he tried to deny it for want of finding it, but eventually had to admit it existed the same way a deaf man must concede the presence of sound.

Rebecca’s relationship stories were filthy vignettes of self-abuse. Perverse in that the ultimate aim always seemed to be self-destruction. But he held hope for her. Her singleness now might be a step. Despite the certainty in the way she spoke, in the way she gestured, she had to be growing disillusioned. And in this disillusionment she might finally see what he saw - the world that no one but him could see. That possibility alone made him love her.

\* \* \*

Statistically, it was best to assume that everything was nothing, as this would be true in greater than 99% of all incidents. Perhaps all incidents. Rebecca's life was filled with things. And the thing that had happened between them, that after hours thing where they both knelt with their heads in the bread oven, it was a tiny little non-thing. The kindness that she showed him in return was a tiny little non-friendship. He knew this. But it was impossible to be sure, and maybe it didn't matter.

The night he chose was warm and wet. Passing cars hissed, and though it was no longer raining, everywhere water dripped, puddled, and ran.

He tried to stay composed. Talk low. Talk slow. And don't say too much. But he was too nervous, too excited, too happy to hide it. His words were quick and jumbled, his gestures frantic. If Rebecca's gesticulations were industrial, mechanical, Ryan was a conjuror trying to swell the world's deep, hidden magic, a conductor reconciling an orchestra's sound.

"I'm lightning that doesn't flash. I'm thunder that doesn't roar. I'm wind that doesn't blow. And I'm sorry that this ended up being an extended storm metaphor. It wasn't intentional. But can you honestly think of a different kind of example?" He paused for a moment. "But, anyway, that's why I have to tell you. I don't expect you to love me back. I don't expect anything to change, but... I love you, Rebecca. I love you."

"A shadow in a dark room."

There was an intake of breath. "Okay, I guess that's similar, but..."

"You don't love me." There was the kind of silence that only comes with years of meditation.

"What? No, I mean. Yes. I do."

Rebecca took a long drag and leaned back against the wall. The orange glow was the light on a copy machine or the little clock face that pops up on your computer. Processing Job. Please Wait. She finally exhaled. "No, you don't love me. You're a control freak." She flicked ash and tilted her head, like she was looking for the right invisible key. The one she would turn to change what had just been said. "You've been trying to control me from that first time we met. None of this is real. You're not real."

She tossed her cigarette into a puddle and walked deliberately towards the entrance. Her left arm wrapped around her waist, bouquet in hand, she reached out with her right and pulled open the glass door. She turned back to him. "And this isn't love."

He watched her as she moved inside the dining area. Through the fogged window she removed the flowers from last month's newspaper that he had brought her and threaded them through the permanent, plastic plants that dotted the restaurant. She threw the newspapers away and his gift to her was gone. She had recontextualized him out of existence.

\* \* \*

Ryan had once seen the young son of a friend play with soap bubbles at a birthday party. If the boy reached out to grab them they popped. If he let them land on something they popped. If he let them float away far enough they popped on their own. Ryan was a little boy playing with soap bubbles.

\* \* \*



No one had ever loved Ryan Story. This was good and right. But Ryan Story was not allowed to love anyone else, and this did not sit well with him. He accepted the void, had only wanted to shout into it. But in space, no one can hear you scream. If she had cursed him, laughed at him, at least he would have existed as an object of scorn. But now he was immaterial. He was a ghost.

“Hey.”

Rebecca nodded wordlessly and walked passed. For the first time since Rebecca had tripped the silent alarm Ryan had necessary and mandatory cause to go to restaurant number three-five-seven. He had gone on a Sunday morning, hoping she would not be there. He had not seen her in two weeks and now here they were together. He would have called the restaurant in advance, found out if she was working, but felt too ridiculous. He had assumed that various crewmembers knew that they were friends, but that was before she had vanished the flowers. Maybe he was invisible all along. Maybe they had never *been* friends.

He was delivering and assembling promotional materials for a new line of chocolate desserts. There were posters. There were centerpieces. *Sinful. Decadent. Goopy. Drenched. Overloaded. Crammed. Drown. We just had to call it chocolate chocolate! Indulge.* Disgust: the new desire.

Rebecca was popular with the crew. Of course she was. She laughed and squealed as they teased and flirted with her, and it hurt him the way the fabric of his shirt did on days when it rubbed on sunburned shoulders. Ryan couldn't get over how normal she was, how happy. Whatever weirdness he had caught her in and that had continued to color his perceptions of her was revealed to be the tiniest part of a complete, complex, and normal young woman.

He was standing by the register, inserting tab “B” into slot “2.” A woman with red hair and a denim jacket waited patiently for the crew to begin bagging her order. Ryan smiled and made conversation. He did it to try and ignore the scene. He did it because standing there in his shirt and his tie, the one with tiny little corporate logos all over it, he knew he should reprimand them, but couldn't bring himself to do it.

“That was a really big order.”

She looked at him and spoke through chapped lips. “I work at a Sunday school. We're having a special lunch today.”

He imagined putting his hands in all that red hair, pressing his mouth to hers. He could feel those lips, dry and thirsty.

One of the boys came up from behind Rebecca and threw her into a playful headlock. The blur of motion caused Ryan to turn. They had slept together. She had slept with them. Not all of them. Not a majority. But a plurality. He was paranoid. He was jealous. But maybe he was also right. He looked back towards the bread oven, though the view was blocked from where he stood.

Rebecca threw the boy off and half-jokingly commanded them to start working. Ryan waited with the redhead silently as bags and drink trays began to appear. When the order was complete he carried the sodas to her car.

\* \* \*

Ryan was rejected. Ryan was jealous. But there was something more, dark and worse. For Rebecca, love was something dirty and secret, and being alone was a string of casual affairs. She would *never* know what it was like to be alone. No one was as alone as he was.

\* \* \*

Ryan helped the redhead load the food into a small, yellow hatchback. They leaned deep into the car and arranged the bags and trays to create stability. When they were done they came out and Ryan, checking that she was out of harms way, slammed the trunk shut.

“Well, thank you for helping me.”

“I love you.”

She smiled wide in disbelief. She put her hand to her sternum in what for a moment looked like flattery. Then she laughed and, still smiling widely, still looking back at him walked to the driver’s door and got inside.

He took a step back, the yellow hatchback pulled out, and she drove away. He turned as the car left and his gaze fell upon an old couple in a Cadillac, idling just past the drive-thru window, checking their order for mistakes. “I love you!” he called out to couple.

The old man rolled down his window. “I’m missing a chicken sandwich!” he called back.

“No, no,” said Ryan. “I said I love you!”

The man conferred with his wife for a moment, and then quickly drove off.

\* \* \*

“You look panicked.”

Ryan glanced over. It was a woman at the circulation desk. She was in her late fifties with a wide, friendly face and too much jewelry.

He couldn’t go back into the restaurant, not yet, and without thinking he had shuffled across the street into the library. He looked up at the domed ceiling above him. It was filled with the soft yellow light that architects must have thought would have filled the buildings of the ancients if they had understood electricity. He took tentative steps towards her and rested his wrists on the counter. He stared at her. Past her. Through her.

The woman at the circulation desk looked into Ryan’s empty eyes. She looked down at the corporate logos all over his clothes. She smiled. “You’re from the community college, aren’t you?”

Ryan furrowed his brow and swirled his tongue, trying to lubricate his voice. “Yes.”

“You’re in that journalism course, aren’t you?”

“How did you know?”

“You think you’re the first one to run in here today? Leaving these things to last minute certainly doesn’t help.” She waited for him to ask a question, like he might if he was actually on deadline for a project. When he didn’t, she continued. “Well, resources

are scarce now, but come on,” she said, walking out from behind her post and waving her arm. “I’ll show you how to how to use the microfilm.”

Ryan followed the woman to a room in a basement where she showed him how to find documents and operate an archaic projector. There were knobs and dials to be adjusted and a translucent screen.

“Well, you’re all set now, but if you need anything else come find me. I’m Martha.”

Ryan looked into her eyes. “Martha, I love you.”

She smiled and placed a hand on his cheek. “I know, sweetheart. I know.”

## TURTLE POWER

"This is made up," I said, skimming through the handwritten pages of what was ostensibly Elena's autobiography. Across the room Elena primped in the mirror, applying a hot crimping iron to her newly cut bangs.

"Like how?" she asked, glancing momentarily at my reflection and letting her weight drop back on her boney, twelve year-old hip.

"Like how there's lies in it," I said, flopping down on her bed, the impact scattering stuffed animals and pillows every which way.

"How would you know?" she said, more annoyed than I expected. "It's my life." I flipped to the second page of the large, loopy cursive and read aloud:

*At breakfast one day my mother said, "Elena, your father and I have something very important to tell you. We are getting a divorce." I had never heard the word "divorce" before and wondered what it meant. "What is a divorce?" I asked.*

A moment of silence passed while I waited for her to address the truth that I felt was so self-evident. "That didn't happen," I finally pointed out to her, when it became clear that she wasn't going to say anything.

"Shut-up."

"It's a lie."

She turned towards me. "My parents are divorced!" she shouted, as if she were confessing a dark secret that she had been keeping from me for years. I was too stunned at the intensity of her outburst to respond. She stared at me long and hard for a moment, before turning her attention back to her mirror. Her mirror, which was still then lined with the truth, pictures of things that had actually happened stuck beneath its wooden frame. Halloweens and Christmases. Us at the carnival. Us at the aquarium. Us on the first day of school.

"Your parents got divorced when we were babies. Before we could talk or eat or sit in a chair or do any of the things you say." I was appealing to reason now, logic. Still too young to know how pointless such an appeal can be.

"You can't remember being a baby," she said, applying a final coat of hairspray. "You can't just write the things that you know happened. There wouldn't be any stories about babies. You have to make a story." She was calming down, realizing at least that I wasn't deliberately antagonizing her. That there was some obvious truth to what I was saying.

"Based on true events."

“Right. Besides, it’s good for my therapy.”

Elena had been in therapy basically her whole life. As close as we had always been she kept it more or less secret from me. So much so that I often forgot that she went. “Good to make your life into lies?”

She put the bottle of hairspray down hard onto her bureau, turned again and gave me the look I always got from schoolteachers and adult relatives who had no children of their own.

“It’s time for you to go home today.”

“What?”

“You’re starting to act too *you*.”

I picked up my backpack, let myself out, and walked across the three yards that separated our houses. My mother was at the sink when I got home. “Where’s Elena?” she asked, as I walked past her to my room.

“At her house.” I continued down the hall.

“Did you just leave her?” she called out. “She’s afraid to be alone.”

“Not anymore.” She picked up the phone and called the house to check on her.

Elena’s mother was born in New Haven. Somehow or another, she had met a Greek immigrant, married him and moved to New York. He started abusing her, physically and mentally (though I wouldn’t learn of all this until I was much older). She got pregnant, got divorced, and moved back to Connecticut. Her ex-husband went back to Greece. She became fast friends with my mother, who was enlisted to baby-sit for her daughter, Elena, as she rejoined the workforce. Elena began attending therapy sessions with her mother shortly thereafter. She had no memory of her father.

From my bedroom I could faintly hear my mother. “We don’t like closed doors in this house.” I dropped my bag by the small metal desk/chair that sat in the corner and fished out my “dittos” – the latest in a series of limitless developments that was going to forever change my life for the worse.

We hadn’t been getting homework at the beginning of the school year, but a block of girls, Elena included, had begun pushing for it in mid-October. *We weren’t babies anymore. We needed homework.* This met resistance of course, from the boys and the unpopular girls, and even our teacher Mrs. Carone, who must not have been too eager to let a group of ten and eleven year olds dictate her curriculum. They kept it up, though: the complaining, the whining. And then, at the start of the month, November, the dittos had appeared.

What those girls needed of course, was to be able to stand around in the morning, before the doors opened for school, and complain about things they had only read about in *Sweet Valley High* or *Forever*. Homework and sex and a dozen other things that didn’t really bother eleven year-olds. Who was a virgin. Who had been drunk. Who was reading *Flowers in the Attic*.

I hated those dittos. Didn’t want to have to think about them enough to complain. On the corkboard above my bed were photos, mostly of Elena and me. Mostly those from Halloween, my favorites. Two years in nursery school: He-Man and She-Ra, Superman and Wonder Woman. First grade: Frankenstein and Bride of Frankenstein. Second: Zombies. But then, in the third grade, a rift. A pirate and a “Punk Rocker.” The fourth: the Grim Reaper and Marilyn Monroe. And this year, the fifth grade, a mummy and a French maid. It was a big moment for me. My first big realization. Halloween would

never be reconciled. Each year Elena would find some new variation on the theme “slut.” I was wrong of course, but it would only have made me feel worse to know that after the seventh grade Elena wouldn’t dress up for Halloween at all.

I moped around my room for several hours, finished up most of my weekend homework, and then hungry, went to check on dinner. Something was off. The house was quiet, and there weren’t quite enough lights on. “Doobie da!” my dad called out from the living room.

“Where’s everybody?” I asked, entering the room.

“Your mother and the Hoodiladee went to the movies.” My dad was always making up nonsense words. Nicknames for me were generally variations of “doobie.” My sister’s were always preceded by the article “the.”

“By themselves?” That would have been unusual.

“With Elena and her mom.” I began to feel anxious and hurt.

“Why didn’t we go?”

“Oh,” he said getting up from the couch, “they went to see some girly thing your mother said you wouldn’t want to see. A Disney movie.”

“*Fantasia*?” It had just been re-released. An anniversary or the “Disney vault” or some such nonsense.

“It’s okay,” he said. “Us guys are going out for dinner. The Ground Round.”

The Ground Round was easily my favorite restaurant, and to this day I love my dad more than anyone else in the world, but I wasn’t excited that night. All I could think about was how I had been left behind. My dad was taking me out to the ‘Round not to celebrate a report card or a soccer game, but as a consolation prize. Because he felt sorry for me.

I pouted through dinner like only a ten year-old can. My father eventually cheered me up with a stop at Toys-R-Us, where he bought me the “Wacky Action” edition of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Michelangelo action figure. The Wacky Action line featured the turtles in surfer garb and making crazy faces. The cool part, the reason I picked Wacky Action Michelangelo, was that you could wind him up, causing him to swing his Nunchukus in a way that would knock over enemy figures. I went home pretty happy.

The following day, Saturday, I was still holding a grudge against Elena. Two o’clock rolled around and I was still refusing to call her. My parents had babysat for her 5 days a week since her mother had come back to Connecticut. That we spent Saturdays together by choice was a given. But that Saturday I was making a point, and Elena didn’t care to see me.

Someone noticed. Or my father had told my mother I had been upset. Either way, by 2 o’clock my mom was giving me a talk. A talk that didn’t seem to have anything to do with what was bothering me. About boys and girls being different. And changes in our bodies and minds. I felt wronged and confused. Trying to keep my mouth closed so I wouldn’t cry. Swirling my tongue around against my teeth so she wouldn’t see the big, honest frown that I couldn’t seem to get rid of.

I choked out a few words, “I wanted to see *Fantasia*.”

“...” and then a look from my mother I didn’t yet recognize, but would come to know well and see everywhere. The look like I get when someone thinks I’m crazy, that asks why I can’t understand that  $2 + 2 = \text{fish}$ . She smiled a forced smile and walked out

of the room. A few minutes later Elena called sounding like a she was a hostage relaying a message to the police. Would I want to go to the mall with her and her mom? Sure.

The trip to the mall was awkward and generally uneventful. Elena and I used to have a relatively good time following her mom around at the mall, picking out furniture and carpet samples for the house we were one day going to share, and hiding in the clothing racks.

I was bored but well behaved. In the girls section of G. Fox we were looking for a belt Elena would wear at her eleventh birthday party next weekend. I was waiting patiently as she and her mother circled the displays when one caught my eye, the ugliest belt I had ever seen. Obviously plastic, in some parts made to look like chrome, in other parts clear, it linked together a dozen fake gemstones in ridiculously bright and clashing colors. Stop sign red, teal, fluorescent purple, orange, a honey-like golden yellow, and then pickle green. Repeat the pattern. It was hideous.

"How about this one," I called with a half laugh, holding it up above my head. Elena's mother walked over, gave me the look I get when someone feels sorry for me or runs into me on the street the day after standing me up.

She took it from me and put it back on the rack. Placed her hand on my shoulder. "That is a pretty one," she said in a slow, soft voice, "but sometimes boys and girls have different tastes. Let's let Elena pick out her belt." I didn't talk much the rest of that day.

At school on Monday I found out early from Kara, a girl in my class who wore a denim jacket and those plastic slap bracelets that would eventually have to be banned because kids were hacking their limbs off, that Elena's birthday party, which come to think of it I hadn't received a formal invitation to, was to be a girls only affair. Kara was just the type of girl who would have loved the idea of a girls only party, just the type of girl that would have double checked to make sure that I wasn't coming, and just the type of girl who must have delighted in telling me. I passed an angry and hastily written note to Elena, who sat two rows over and one seat back, demanding explanations. Her reply? That last year I had been the only boy at her party and it didn't "go well." And that I wouldn't fit in or want to see the movie *Ghost*, which apparently was what they were planning on doing. Furthermore, I had been acting "like a jerk" and "no one really liked me."

At recess, Elena ignored my one attempt to talk to her, abandoning our usual game of freeze-tag to lean against the school wall with the rest of the "in crowd." The betrayal had shaken the remainder of our group, and lacking the enthusiasm necessary to justify all the running Linda, David, and I passed a red, rubber kickball between us.

"You know why she's doing this?" Linda said, holding the ball after the catch. "It's because of George." She threw the ball back to me.

George. Early in our lives Elena and I had unquestionably been best friends. We didn't know anyone else. In the first grade a common topic of our sleepover talk had been "best friends lists" in which we always topped each other's. By third grade, Elena had begun breaking her list up, "best guy friends" and "best girl friends." At the beginning of this school year, the fifth grade, George had suddenly appeared on that list. Debuted right in the number two spot. My position was beginning to look tenuous.

That he was a jerk was indisputable, but he didn't even strike me as particularly cool. He was dirty, his kick ball skills average, and he sported one of those ridiculous "rat tails."

“Psyche.” I said, throwing the ball to David, but keeping my attention on Linda.  
“Nu-ungh. It’s true.”

Linda and I had sort of become friends through Elena, who had taken gymnastics class with her. But Elena had rather quickly abandoned Linda who was a dork and who I sort of had a crush on. She was really lanky and I guess sort of awkward looking, but she was so different from the square little people that made up my family. Even from Elena. She was all legs and neck with narrow shoulders and big eyes that were perfect circles. And I remember her skin, not dark and uniform, but fair, with three distinct shades, eggshell all over, then yellow, then pink on her cheeks and around her chin and nose in a way that reminded me of lilies.

Linda wasn’t going to Elena’s party either. And I knew she wouldn’t lie to me. “I heard that her mom’s gonna drop them all off at the theater to see *Ghost*, but then George is gonna get dropped off with his brother and him and Elena are gonna go see *Child’s Play 2*.”

“What?” I asked, watching the ball sail from David to Linda.

“Yeah, that’s what I heard.” Her voice dropped and she took a step towards me. “I heard George puts his hands up Elena’s skirt and at the theater they’re going to have s—e—x.”

“WHAT?”

She walked closer still, until I could see the smallest details of her braces. She leaned down and whispered, “You know, *humpin*.”

Shocked, disgusted and afraid, I told my mother all of what Linda had said as soon as I got home. My tale set in motion a blizzard of phone calls first from mother to mother and then from student to student as parents across the city interrogated their children, made stricter rules, confiscated books, and initiated endlessly awkward sex talks. The fallout would continue well into middle school. Elena’s birthday was cancelled. And I had made a vicious new enemy in George.

Of course, I didn’t know that yet. On Tuesday, Elena’s mother took the day off from work and kept Elena home from school. My mother made plans for me to ride the bus home with David, and play at his house that afternoon. It was the sort of thing that happened from time to time and it didn’t seem so unusual. I learned quickly; however, what had gone down. Just about everyone was in trouble. Elena’s friends were all punished for sexual impropriety, though how much had actually gone on between them and the boys and what was pure fiction is still anyone’s guess. Even Linda, poor, geeky Linda, was punished for lying, though I still believed her. Not that all that stuff had happened necessarily, but that she had just repeated what those girls were saying. That she wasn’t making it up.

The day was filled with tension. It was after lunch and I hadn’t suffered more than a few taunts of “faggot,” (something else that would stay with me through high school), and an onslaught of dirty looks. I had even made it through recess just mostly ignored. It wasn’t until 2:30, with barely more than half an hour to go, that the storm broke. We were supposed to be working in our “study groups,” on the dittos that, if unfinished, would become our homework, when I was struck by something hard, and irregularly shaped. I cried out in shock and spun in my seat to see George standing behind me. Mrs. Carone called out, what I don’t know, as George took a step back and then spiked whatever he had already hit me with off of my face. I stumbled out of my chair, tripped



and fell face flat onto the floor. In front of me, also sprawled out and facedown, was Wacky Action Michelangelo, which George had apparently found while going through my backpack. Laughter was already everywhere around me as I scrambled to my feet. Mrs. Carone strode across the room.

“Go ahead; play with your toys baby. We want to watch you play.” George looked down at me the way people do when they know they’ve got the best of me.

Mrs. Carone grabbed George by the shoulder and began pulling him towards the door, but he wiggled and resisted, keeping the spotlight as long as he could. “Let him play!” he shouted. “Let’s watch him play. TURTLE POWER! TURTLE POWER!” were his last words as he was yanked into the hallway. The laughter in some spots was now maniacal. I dove on top of Michelangelo and stuffed him into my pocket as if they might forget they had seen him.

“Turtle power!”

“Baby!”

“Faggot!”

Even then I knew that the Ninja Turtles movie had come out less than a year ago, and all of us, ALL OF US, had loved it. What transformation had supposedly occurred in us since then? Why were Elena and Kara telling people they weren’t virgins? When had they all become monsters? Why? Why, God, why did it have to be the *Wacky Action* Michelangelo?

I sat on the couch at David’s and watched T.V. until his mom asked me if I was ready to go. He was a dork too, and really, my friend, but he had laughed as hard as everybody else. He had played with action figures just as often as I did.

Elena came by that night after dinner and asked me to come outside. It was just starting to get really cold, and I knew we wouldn’t talk long.

“Look,” she said, sitting down on the steps behind me. “I talked to my mom today about a lot of stuff.”

“Stuff like what?” I asked, turning to face her.

“Stuff like growing up and puberty and....” She trailed off for a moment. “You, know, George is Greek. My dad was Greek.”

“So?”

“It’s patterns,” she said looking at the ground, “That’s therapy for you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, so confused that I was just trying to be as honest and as clear as possible. “I was mad because you ignore me and we aren’t best friends anymore and you go to the movies with my sister.”

“It’s like this,” she said, “We’re changing. We’re going separate ways. That’s natural life.”

“I’m not changing.”

“I am.”

“What does this have to do with your dad?”

“Everything. Men and women. The changes that come between us.”

“I don’t think you know what you’re talking about.”

“I do. My mom told me. She showed me a pamphlet.”

“This is crazy.”

“No, this is natural. We can still know each other, my mom says, without being all the time friends. I’ll probably see you ‘til high school.”

She stood up now, and looked across the lawns back to her house. I looked around too. There were memories of us everywhere. Sidewalk chalk, jumping off swings, a hill we took sleds down in the winter. A summer we spent dedicated to killing ants, a tree we had both fallen out of and broken our arms, a lilac bush we used to hide in, my mother's flower bed that we had picked clean one spring the first day the tulips blossomed. Tents and cookouts. Learning to ride our bikes in the driveway. Dares. Double Dares. Catching the ice cream truck. Catching the bus. Fun Dip. Pop Rocks. Spinning 'til you were dizzy and fell over or threw up.

"What happens at high school?" I asked in a soft, wet voice.

"Well, I don't know," she said, matter-of-factly, her contemplation gone. "But that's why. We don't know these things."

It started sinking in. Elena and I were done. Forever. This is what forever meant. "But what about after school?" I asked. "Your mom still isn't home when we get off the bus."

"I'm going to take turns getting off at Liz's and Kara's. It's only a couple of hours." A couple of hours she couldn't bear to spend with me.

"I still don't get it. I don't get what we're talking about."

"You will," she assured me, walking down the stairs and towards her house. She stopped and looked back at me the way people do when they're sorry they're hurting someone, but not sorry enough to stop.

"Later." I waited for her silhouette to disappear into the darkness, but not much longer. It was getting late and I had homework to do.

## RE-LAUNCH

Karl washed ashore after the explosion. To the East, just on the other side of North America's continental shelf—on the abyssal plain—two oceanic whitetip sharks, a common minke whale, plankton uncountable, and the remains of his wife were a shadow or a smear, an oily cloud spreading invisibly in the dark along the ocean floor.

Four hours ago, a masked man had infiltrated the Hydrosphere. He sabotaged the station's communications system, stole an unknown item from the armory, strangled Mirah—Karl's wife—and detonated a small incendiary device. These events had happened very quickly, but shortly after the murder and seconds before the bomb, the saboteur had taken a moment to identify himself. His name was the Black Tide, and he was here to destroy the world.

\* \* \*

When Seth was feeling down, the only thing that could make him feel better, *really* feel better, were mastectomies. He didn't know much about mastectomies, the scarring or stitches, and that made it easier. He liked to picture Melissa lying flat on her back with two hollow semispheres of missing flesh—clean and precise circles like the cup holders in the center console of the Ford Focus he sold when they moved together to the city. In those daydreams, they would lie together, and Seth would lay an ear across one of her hollows and hear the same rushing waves you'd hear in a seashell and cold, cold air would billow up out of her, gently moving the mosquito nets that lined the bed. Which was weird, because in this fantasy they lived in Montreal. It was petty, and it was sick, and it was wrong, but as Seth dreamed Melissa talked on in the same soothing tones in which she always had, except that now when *he* spoke he could hear his own voice echo inside her.

\* \* \*

Karl pulled off his helmet and blinked. He had slipped it on as Black Tide began his escape—but now it was leaking, damaged in the explosion. It was nothing but a relic of a life that had ended four hours ago. He dropped it onto the sand and let it roll slowly towards the water. On his belt he wore a forty-year-old, Soviet--made SPP-1M pistol, which wasn't worth a damn out of the water. Oh sure, he could kill someone with it, but not from any distance. He'd have to be right on top of him, have to bury the barrel into Black Tide's chest and pull the trigger. He could swim back to the Hydrosphere, in hopes that something could be salvaged from the armory: an assault rifle, an ASM-DT or an

APS (thank God for the Russians), or he could get to a telephone and warn the Guard, but no. Better to grab *den Stier bei den Hörnern*.

His pressurized Hydrosuit normally doubled as body armor, but it was heavy out of the water and without the helmet would only slow him down. He removed the titanium chest plate and pulled the Kevlar shirt over his head, leaving his body clad in only a grey wetsuit and boots. His skin was very pale, confined as it usually was, or bare but deep beneath the ocean's surface. Combined with his fair hair and light eyes, it gave him a sickly appearance, quite the opposite of what was expected in his line of work. Karl ran a hand across his chin as he looked out over the waves. He had forgotten to shave again. He had been caught up in his laboratory for nearly two days, closer than he had ever been to recreating the conditions of his transformation. Mirah had checked in on him occasionally. He could not recall which inconsequential words to her had been his last.

No matter now. His gills already ached in the dry air, and he wouldn't last more than a day on land without water. But Black Tide had a head start to Empire City. Karl Fischer, alias the Aquanaut, looked to the sea one last time and headed inland.

\* \* \*

Work trouble. They had given Seth a promotion, rope to hang himself with, and a chair. Outside his window, midtown bustled with tourists and suits and delivery men, but inside there was little to distract the daydreaming of Seth's troubled mind. He wanted something, he had it, and inevitably, irrevocably he was going to lose it. So much for wanting things. So much for wanting things worth wanting.

"*Mastectomies*" was the word on Seth's lips when there was a soft knock on his open door. It was Shelly, the receptionist, wearing the same horn-rimmed glasses and blank facial expression she usually sported, and in a more flagrant disregard of the dress code than usual: a simple white t-shirt that read "Gowanus Canal Swim Team" and a pair of ripped jeans. Seth frowned, but it wasn't at her appearance. Shelly possessed a dumpiness of the soul that was endlessly depressing.

Seth mustered half a crooked smile. "People don't really swim in that canal, do they?"

"It's ironic. You have visitors," she said blandly before disappearing back into the hallway.

A thin man with sharp features, dark eyebrows, and a smoothly shaved skull stepped into Seth's office. The Nosferatu of Williamsburg. His glance moved from desk to wall to shelf and then he sat—announced but uninvited—in one of the two chairs across from Seth. Neither spoke, and for several seconds the only sounds were the muted rings of office phones down the corridor and a muffled voice which grew closer with each second.

"You too, *bubeleh!* You too!" With a laugh a second man—who Seth would have recognized anywhere—poked his head through the doorway: dark prescription glasses, porn star mustache, slick salt-and-pepper hair, and a five hundred dollar shirt unbuttoned to the sternum. The man was a legend he had written himself, senior citizen or not. "Fuck, Ian. Is he in?"

The man in the chair, Ian, narrowed his eyes and spoke in a thick Scottish accent. "You know Jack undoubtedly, and I'm sure you know my reputation. I don't know you

from Adam, but I know what you're up against, and I know why you're sitting here, staring at the wall like somebody just drove over your puppy. But I assure you, the cavalry has arrived."

Jack tossed his overcoat onto the open chair. He nodded his head enthusiastically.

"Relax, Seth," Ian continued. "We're here to save your job."

\* \* \*

"Well you *look* sick." The driver had only cracked open the window.

"Please, I... I need your help," Karl said. "I don't even need a ride; if you have a cellphone..." They stared at each other through the glass.

"Wouldn't think there's much to see off the Jersey Shore." The car was a Buick Roadmaster, one of the last full-sized wagons to roll off an assembly line. When Karl had moved to the States following the war, his first car had been a Roadmaster, but its gleaming chrome grill and whitewall tires bore little resemblance to the egg shaped machine in front of him. That was before he had moved underwater, of course. Before he had started living apart.

Karl looked helplessly down at his outfit. "Actually there are thousands of shipwrecks, but I'm not a scuba-diver. I'm a... one of the... I'm Aquanaut." He lowered his voice an octave. "I'm *the* Aquanaut." Karl had washed up on Island Beach State Park. Determined to intercept Black Tide, he had been attempting for just over twenty minutes to commandeer a vehicle. This was the first car that had stopped.

The engine idled. In the back of the car were fishing rods and a tackle box. The driver looked to be in his early seventies: thin with age and with wispy white hair sticking out from the dark green cap that matched his all-weather pull-over, someone's grandfather enjoying his retirement.

"I guess you lost your helmet," the driver said with a chuckle. "You should be flopping around on the ground like a bluefish." He turned his hand over several times to simulate the movement of a fish out of water, but it was a slow and measured gesture. He was obviously tired, and he was more than a little wary of Karl. And why shouldn't he be? Crazy didn't mean harmless, after all. "I'd like to help you, young man. But my minutes are only *coast to coast*." He hacked up a dry, worn laugh.

Karl futilely scanned the lot for other drivers. He turned back and leaned in to make eye contact with the man through the small opening above the glass window pane. "I'll die without my suit. My wife is dead, and a man," he grimaced, "a super villain, is on the loose in Empire City. Now, I need your help." The driver looked back with disbelief. In frustration Karl slapped the car with enough force to rock the cabin on its suspension.

Inside the station wagon the man cowered behind the driver's side door. He said nothing and stared blankly at Karl's hip.

Karl followed the man's gaze, took the pistol from its holster, and looked at it in his hand. "It's Russian. The Russians are the only ones who ever took underwater combat seriously. The Americans make a couple of models too, but theirs only fire five times and then they have to be shipped back to the factory to be reloaded." He uncurled his fingers from around the handle and laid the gun in his open hands so the man could see it.

He looked up at Karl's face. "Is that true?"

Karl tucked the pistol away and leaned, casually this time, on the frame of the car. “You know about those fancy pens that astronauts use in space? Well, Russians use pencils.”

The man thought about it for a moment. “My wife likes that other fellow. With the black cape.”

“He's a good one.”

“My name's Ed, Edward Hubbard.” He reached over and pressed a button on the car's center console and the metal lock on the passenger door jumped up with a mechanical clank.

Karl let himself into the wagon and buckled his seat belt. “It's nice to meet you, Ed.”

Ed shifted into drive and placed a foot on the brake. “I don't know what I'd say to a fish, if I were given the chance.”

“Anything you want to. They're great listeners.”

\* \* \*

“I'm a little confused,” Seth said, after the pitch was complete.

Ian placed a boney finger to a bare temple and spoke as if he was used to dealing with people who didn't understand the scope of his ideas. “We're breaking new ground, finding new audiences. This series gives voice to a community that has been thus far totally excluded from mainstream comics.”

“It's political,” Jack added, with a certain pride. “You know, this is how things used to be, back when I started out.”

“Exactly,” said Ian. “It's political. It's empowered. We're not talking about commerce anymore; this is art.” He allowed for a dramatic pause before leaning forward accusatorily. “Unless of course, you're one of *those* Americans.”

“Not at all,” Seth said defensively as he turned over the loose sheets of paper they had given him to peruse. Fifteen minutes ago he was sitting in the exact same spot wondering how he could complete his first, impossible editorial assignment: finding fifty thousand monthly readers for a character who was universally despised. And now, out of nowhere, the solution had walked into his office, and for some reason he felt a lot worse. “There's just nothing about marketing a book about a half-naked lipstick-lesbian to twelve year-old boys that strikes me as particularly... *progressive*.”

Ian turned to Jack. “Listen,” Jack said, unbuttoning his shirt another button, “there was an issue of *Cosmic Comics* I did a few years back, you probably know it, where the Urban Guard got sucked into a parallel dimension with just wildly different laws of physics. The censors thought it was all speculative fiction, and really the whole thing is about me and Lynda Carter tripping balls after ComicCon in '74.” He reached out and tapped a fist on Seth's desk. “Those are the kinds of stories you could be publishing.”

Seth flipped through the sketches. Here was naked woman tied up in the chain of an anchor. Here she was being swallowed by a giant clam. “This one with her riding a giant phallus?”

“That's a porpoise!” Jack laughed. “A porpoise. He's starting to get it.”

“Mine and Jack's name on this get us to the top of the charts,” Ian said, “but this project will get real press. I'm not talking shitty trade journals; I mean *Entertainment*

*Weekly*. I mean the bloody *New York Times*.” Ian leaned back and stretched his legs wide. His left knee fell against Jack's right, and Jack pushed back playfully. They smirked at one another.

Seth pressed the palms of his hands against his eyes and breathed in. “And this would start soon.”

“Absolutely,” said Ian. “We just wind down whatever *rubbish* was planned in a month or two. We'll get somebody else to write that, or I could do it. Ack! Without my name on it of course. Anyway, then we hijack this Black Tide person, love the name, and set him up as *our* foil and go.”

Seth frowned. “I'm not sure about *hijacking* Black Tide. He's Joey's character, and besides I don't think it'd be right to pull the guy off the book without giving him a chance to finish his story. That'll be another six months. But I really like the idea of diversifying the book,” said Seth. He shuffled Jack's drawings into a pile and placed them between himself and Ian.

Ian snorted. “He 'likes our idea,' Jack.”

“And it'll be a huge honor working with you both. The *sales* will be huge,” Seth continued. He turned away from Ian to escape the rising tension. Jack's focus had drifted, and he seemed to be bunching up the fabric of his trousers, enhancing the bulge of his crotch.

“But,” Seth said, trying to find the right words, “I'm not so sure about some of the content.”

Ian squared his jaw as he prepared to speak, “You're not sure about the content. Jack and I are bloody sure about the content and that's all the assurance you need.”

“It's just that some of this is a little...” said Seth. “I know there are a lot of *those* comics in England...”

“Pardon your ignorance, but Scotland,” Ian corrected him, “is an entirely different country.”

“I'm sorry,” said Seth. “Its own country, with its own currency and Olympic team and postage stamps and everything.”

Ian glowered.

Seth smiled. “Well, maybe you've got your own definition of 'country' at least.”

With that Ian stood up. “Well, Jack,” Ian said. We've made the pitch. That's all simple artists can do. If this enlightened editor sees fit, then I guess our story will be told.” He turned back before exiting. “And bravo to you. I scarcely thought New Yorkers could live up to their reputation as the rudest of an already boorish, uncivilized lot.”

“I'm from New Jersey,” Seth said coolly. “It's what you would consider an entirely different country.”

Jack looked up from his pants and watched over his shoulder as Ian walked out. He looked back at Seth and frowned. “Kid, hey, you're upset, and I didn't expect that, but now that I think about it, I get your meaning. Two giants like us walk in here acting like we're granting wishes for you, and maybe we've got no right. I thought we should at least schedule an appointment, but Ian, well, you know Scots. Anyway, I'd don't want for this to get all cocked-up.” He hesitated. “I'd hate to have to go over your head on this, but well, there it is.”

Ian poked his head back through the door. “Sales of *The Aquanaut* have been in the tank for fifteen years. And that's why it needs more *chebs* in it.” With that they both

left. And a million dollars of merchandising potential seemed to go with them.

Seth had made a lot of mistakes in his life, but up to this point by far the most costly was joining a tape and record club his senior year of high school. *Tape and record*. They were CDs, twelve for a penny, with a commitment to buy four more at regular club prices over the next two years and also the looming threat of two more albums a month if he didn't remember to return the "no thanks" card, which he rarely ever did. Roxy Music, Velvet Underground, New York Dolls: it was a survey course in proto-punk with a stated goal of re-launching himself as a new persona before college. He'd need records if he was going to get serious, but first he needed a record player, and he needed more than anything else to know the music. So CDs it was, in bulk.

Seth had never heard anyone say they didn't like music before, so he didn't say that about himself, but that was the truth. There were songs he liked, there were radio stations he preferred, but he had never had a favorite band or a reason to get caught up in music before. Melissa changed all that.

She was a miracle or a curse, the way she exploded into his life that summer. For a boy who was passionless, or whose passion at least lacked direction, Melissa was almost too much. She filled his bedroom with books the way a character in a cheesy sitcom carved notches into his bedpost. Seth, for his part, was a willing student, and Melissa soon learned that all he required was the careful application of reward and reproach. He was left-of-center now. He was low-fi. He was a peacenik. He had a faux-hawk.

Melissa seemed to understand the importance of buying low, and Seth had potential. She was a dancer, a wage slave in a coffee shop, hired for her charisma and bad clothes. She was a tourist attraction for real people with real jobs, but she didn't know it. Cappuccino and biscotti with a side of Bohemia – to go.

Seth, on the other hand was the worst parts of genuine. His aesthetic: heartfelt. Politics: the sincere. Melissa just saw a lump of clay. She spun vinyl like a potter's wheel. Got him hot to mold him into shape. He was blown glass. This was metal shop.

Melissa told stories like she was delivering lectures. Conversations ended with quizzes and resumed with material covered. He repeated them back to her, and sometimes they would wonder which stories he had been present for and which he had only heard. Her apartment walls were lined with bad photography, and in the photos taken from a distance it was easier to discern the places he had never been from the boyfriends he was not.

\* \* \*

Shelly approached her job with the drive and focus one typically reserves for shooing a fly away from a picnic basket, so it came as something of a surprise to Seth when he picked his head up out of his hands and saw her sprawled across the chair in front of him.

"So you're going to kill him, eh?"

"Yes."

"How does he die?"

"It happens fast, on his way to Empire City."

Shelly stared blankly.



“In the issue that *you* just helped put out, he's on his way to Empire City to avenge his wife. Jack and Ian want Black Tide to be unmasked as an evil Aquanaut from the future. Black Tide would then kill the Aquanaut.”

“He kills himself.”

“Yes, I guess so. And a bunch of other people. And then we'd re-launch the title with a new Aquanaut. This woman.” Seth handed her Jack's sketches, which she assessed with the same boredom she reserved for everything else. “She's powered by 'orgone energy' and gets tied up a lot, from the look of things.”

“But she doesn't talk to fish?”

“No, she most certainly does not.”

On the wall was a fifty year-old Aquanaut poster that Seth inherited when he took over the book. Modern artists made all sorts of apologies for his costume, streamlining the shape, toning down the colors. But here he was at his most iconic: bulbous 19<sup>th</sup> century diver's helmet, bright orange suit. He had no face to speak of, but something about the portal over where his face would have been was reminiscent of a smile. Whereas most heroes were depicted as functionally naked, exaggerated physiques plainly visible through their spandex uniforms, the Aquanaut's costume was more like a sack, the fabric beneath his armor plates floating in the current. On the poster he was joined by a dolphin, two seahorses and a mermaid—Mirah—who was not yet at the time of the drawing's creation the Aquanaut's wife, who was not at that time dead. It was probably one of the last pieces of art done before the retirement of the Aquanaut's original creator, Jerome Shuman.

Shuman had fled the fascists in Germany during the 30's, and had created the Aquanaut as an anti-Nazi crusader. Karl Fischer became the world's first Jewish superhero, and upon the United States' entry into the war was quickly incorporated into American propaganda, urging readers to buy war bonds. Unfortunately, at any point in his history the Aquanaut was more well-known than liked. He was most famous for talking to fish and for dropping dead on dry land. After the war the Aquanaut spent more and more time underwater, experiencing the closest thing he ever had to a heyday, battling monsters and raising lost treasures. He played cards with sharks and used phosphorescent jellyfish as nightlights. At his wedding a manta ray was his best man. By 1970 sales of *The Aquanaut* had dried up, and he was re-launched as an environmental crusader, protecting what were, for lack of a better term *ocean rights*. He was to eco-terrorism what Uncle Ben was to black power. He cut fish free from plastic six-pack rings. He lectured about the dangers of mercury. He kept talking to fish. He was remade over and over again in 80s and 90s, each version *grittier*, less compelling than the last. Since then, he had just drifted.

“Well,” Shelly said, “That's kind of stupid.”

“I kind of like him stupid,” said Seth.

“You know what they say,” Shelly said, stretching her back, “sex sells.”

Seth frowned. “Sex is just one more thing they're selling us.” He leaned over his desk and rubbed his temples. It wasn't like he had much of a choice. Even if he said “no” it would make a lot more sense for the company to fire him and make a million dollars selling the book. Or, more likely, give him six months to generate the sales on his own and then fire him when couldn't deliver.

Shelly handed the drawings back. Seth held them gingerly by the corner and

dropped them into an open drawer on his desk, as if he feared that he might become infected by them.

“At least it's diversity.”

Seth slid the drawer shut. “I don't know how 'diverse' gorgeous women with big tits are. Why aren't we creating heroes for guys whose wives are cheating on them, or for people with cold sores? That would be a lot more representative of our audience than this X-rated Barbie doll.”

Shelly leaned back further and tossed her legs over the armrest. “Mark likes Batman. He says he identifies with his dark rage.”

Batman, of course, had seen his parents gunned down in front of him and dedicated his life to vengeance. As far as Seth knew, Shelly's boyfriend Mark worked at Whole Foods. “I can't believe I'm going to let this happen. I can't believe I killed his wife.” Seth sighed. “Anyway, have you finished that spreadsheet yet?”

“What? Oh, no. I've been on the internet all morning.” She confessed this as if she didn't work at AmazingComix, as if Seth wasn't her boss. “They found a whale in the canal.”

\* \* \*

“I'm sorry about your wife.” It was nearly a two-hour drive in Ed's Roadmaster from the beach to the heart of Empire City. Ed didn't carry a cell, but he had pulled over at a payphone so that Karl could notify the authorities, which he did. As of yet there had been no sign of the Black Tide. There had been no signs of trouble at all. “She was a mermaid?”

“Yes. She was an Atlantian. Older than me, if you can believe it.”

“And how old is that?”

“A lot older than you.”

Ed looked over at him incredulously. “You look good.” He kept scanning the radio for breaking news, trying to be helpful. “Forgive me,” he said, “but I don't seem to recall your story. I don't think I've ever even seen your face before.”

Karl leaned his head against the window. They could have been driving to the airport, only that wasn't it at all. “I was the Aquanaut, and my helmet was my face.”

“Was?”

With everything he had seen, merpeople and leviathans, sorcerers and sea monsters, he had remained a man of science, but now Karl felt something else. There were larger forces at work that day. “I was born in Mecklenburg, Germany just before the revolution started in 1918. The Grand Duke owned the whole damn country until then. Not that it helped much when he gave it up. The land wasn't very good. I left my family when I was 15 and went to Munich where I developed an interest in marine science.” It was his life, but it was also a story he knew through rote memorization, his “origin” that had been told so many times before. “There was an accident in my laboratory. I had been working with Greater Blue-ringed Octopodes when one of them bit me. Very few octopus species are venomous, but this one is. I blacked out. I should have died; my respiratory system shut down. Something had happened to the octopodes that had changed them, chemical exposure or mutation, I've never been sure, but I didn't die, and when I came to I was fine, better than fine. I could hear the call of the ocean.”

Ed nodded. "But why the rest? Talking to fish... if you don't mind my saying so, doesn't seem to have much to do with being a hero."

It was a good question and one Karl had never thought about before. "I don't know. During the war, when it became obvious what the government was doing, I defected to the West. I contributed a small amount to the design of the U-boat, just consultant work really, but I guess felt I owed the world something for that. So I sunk a few of them. And afterward, I found some treasure ships, I freed a lost city from the rule of the Piscicorn, and then, well it was fun. It was different back then, I don't think I could ever explain it to you. It was just so much fun." The flow of traffic picked up as they neared the city. Karl was almost there.

\* \* \*

By lunchtime Sludgy had a name. Reports were still pouring in, but it was commonly believed that he was a baby minke whale who had gotten lost during a nor'easter that had hit earlier in the week. All indications were that he was alive and well, but views on the canal itself were mixed. Most people knew it by its dual reputation as an infamous mafia graveyard and the most putrid body of water in the world. However, there was a quasi-scientific minority opinion that Sludgy the Whale would be alright. While the canal had been stagnant for the last half of the twentieth century, after a worker dropped a manhole cover into the pumping station during the 1960's, in 1999 the pump had been rebuilt and fresh water had been flowing in and out for nearly a decade. Of course, the pump did nothing to remove the layer of highly toxic gunk that had accumulated along the bottom of the canal for forty years. And then there was the city's sewer system, which dumped untreated waste into the canal whenever it rained. In spite of all that, there were repeated assurances from local news sources that Sludgy was doing fine. His condition was being monitored by the coast guard, and if he did not find his way out the canal after a few days, efforts would be made to herd him back into the open ocean.

"But it doesn't say if whales can *catch* gonorrhea," said Shelly. Only *the Post's* website refused to follow the party line. Along with announcing that residents had taken to calling the whale "Murky," which nobody was, *the Post* also ran a sidebar gleefully announcing that biologists from the New York City College of Technology recently discovered that the Gowanus was infected with the clap.

"I didn't think canals could catch it," said Seth. Unreported was the effect Sludgy was having on productivity within the city, as every office worker still allowed unfettered access to the internet was huddled over a monitor waiting for the next break in the story. Shelly was always looking for a reason to abandon her post, and usually it took a suspicious bag at JFK or a gunman downtown before Seth would tacitly sanction it. But something about Sludgy's plight was compelling even to drearily industrious Seth. Seth could scarcely think of something more sympathetic than a whale: all brains, song, and heart.

"Maybe the toxins aren't potent enough to kill whales," Seth said. "Maybe a whale is so big that it takes more toxins to slow it down, like with vodka."

Shelly scrunched her nose in an effort to concentrate. "I don't think it's that disgusting. People boat on it and stuff."

"You told me that was all irony."

"They don't *swim* in it. But Mark says in Red Hook and Park Slope people are trying to reclaim space, make use of the water. They call themselves the Urban Divers. He says New Yorkers are the only people in the world that don't care that they live on the shore."

"And so he's down there, in that poison, like the whole world isn't already dead. Like riding around in a canoe is going to change things."

"I don't think he needs things to change. I think he's just doing what he wants."

\* \* \*

Seth's most recent re-launch occurred only five years ago, shortly after his wife left. Seth thought they had married too young. Melissa thought she had married too Seth. It's not that she wasn't happy. It's just that she didn't think she was happy enough. As lonely as Seth had been since, he was also terribly relieved. Melissa was really just way too incredibly good looking to be with Seth, and yes, she had really great boobs. They had gotten along famously, from the first time they met, but the attractiveness gap was always lurking in the shadows. They'd run into an old friend of Melissa's, one he hadn't yet met, and he'd sense just a hint of embarrassment, or he'd catch her looking unhappily at the reflection they made in a mirrored window outside the storefront at Saks or Macy's.

Her personality was remarkably well-developed given how pretty she was, but her value system was frighteningly Nietzschean at times, and the idea that certain faults might be endearing was entirely alien to her. There was evidence that she had been searching for an excuse to break it off since the very first day they met, but Seth had anticipated this and countered by being perfect. For five years. He never complained. He never missed a punch line. Never allowed himself to be in a bad mood. He planned Saturday nights the way men of a nobler generation had planned the invasion of Normandy. For five years he made sure that every day of her life was a goddamn parade, and when finally she was gone he was convinced if she had stayed a day longer he would have killed her.

He walked away from the relationship with only a hand full of trivia, a broken heart, and a pair of shoes that never quite fit. And so it was in her absence, after a three-month sulk, that Seth started over again. Remembering the failed record collection of his youth, he tried for something more organic, a reboot that had its origins in what he already was.

The biggest change this time would be a change of careers. He applied for and got a job in the shipping room at AmazingComix. It was from there that he diligently worked his way into the editorial office. The pay was lousy and the job lacked a certain seriousness that he might have liked, but he hoped it would make him more creative and more fun. Or at least seem that way to the outside world. Seth thought that working for a company that was tied to treasured childhood memories would make his life more meaningful, but in fact it did not.

He had at least fantasies that working on highly recognizable pop culture icons would lend him a certain amount of celebrity, at least compared to other guys in line at the deli counter, and it might have, if anyone had ever asked what he did for a living.

The work itself made him as miserable as any other form, and at all times

throughout his day he wanted the only thing he ever wanted, which was to be at home on the couch half asleep with his head resting on Melissa's lap while she droned on about the minutia of her life. There was something in Melissa's tone that was pleasurable independent of the words it sounded.

While his coworkers at AmazingComix, with the exception of Shelly, made for a more interesting backdrop than those he had at the call center, he never hit it off with them. They were all as friendly as their small, ultra-hip, irony-soaked world allowed them to be, but they never became Seth's people.

Seth also purchased a gym membership at this time, though he would only ever go twice. He never had the sense or the patience to make fashion an important part of his life, but felt that he at least had the discipline to wear a scarf during the winter to dress up his overcoat. On this count, he was wrong. He also started using a fancy soap that promised to clear up his bad complexion and oily skin, but stopped when the twice-daily application process pickled his hands.

\* \* \*

Forty minutes from Empire City the reports began to surface. A massive tidal surge had all but swallowed the metro area. Automobiles, homes, lives, all had been swept out to sea in one terrifying wave. Thousands died underground, drowned in the city's subway system. Closer to the shore, buildings had toppled like sand castles, overwhelmed by the power of the sudden storm that had emerged without warning from clear skies.

Karl continued to make his way on foot, having sent Frank on to higher ground. The Adams Bridge was gone, but he made good time and temporarily replenished his supply of oxygen by swimming through the Madison Tunnel. He emerged to find an American Venice, water still flowing through the streets waist high. The destruction was incredible. Taxi cabs had been upended and piled like so much sediment. Overthrown streetlights hissed and shorted out. Everywhere, everywhere bodies choked the streets, victims of a calamity no one on Earth could have foreseen.

Above him the buildings that still stood, their foundations rattled, groaned. Pressed to the windows of those glass skyscrapers were the survivors. Helplessly they waited for rescue, or for the next wave. They stared down at him as he moved in eerie silence, the sounds of traffic replaced with the gentle lapping of waves. The highest point in the city was the top of Freedom Tower, and Karl had been doing this long enough to know that's where he would find Black Tide.

The philosopher's stone. This is what the Black Tide had stolen from the Hydrosphere. It had been used in antiquity to sink the island of Atlantis. Now the Black Tide was trying to use it to sink a continent. Karl didn't know if the stone had that kind power. He had recovered it from the evil Pisciscorns on his first trip to Atlantis. On the day he had met Mirah for the first time. Very few people knew of the stone's existence, and Karl was the only one who knew that it was kept in the Hydrosphere. Who was the Black Tide?

It was slow going through the streets. The water wasn't deep enough to swim in, but far too deep to run through. And there was something else. Something else was slowing his progress, making each step harder and heavier than the last. It was the

suspicion that whatever good fortune that had buoyed him thus far was ready to run out, the unspeakable fear that this was the last adventure of the Aquanaut.

\* \* \*

Seth took his lunch at his desk, consuming a can of diet soda and a candy bar behind closed doors. There was no reason for him to be invested in the fate of Karl Fischer. Jack and Ian would turn the book into a hit, and Seth would ride the wake of their success. He didn't know why they had come to him. Maybe it was just to prove they could, that they could take a book that nobody liked and push it to the top of the sales chart with just their names. They would be the real heroes of the story. And maybe it would last after they were gone. Maybe the market for cheesecake books and scandal would keep the title afloat, or maybe they would get bored after a dozen issues, walk away, and sink Seth's career. But that's not what worried Seth.

In truth, he had never much cared for the Aquanaut himself. There was nothing cool about him. Definitely nothing sexy. But AmazingComix managed an entire universe of superheroes; they couldn't all be studs. Some of them had to be specialists, support guys. Even comic relief. Karl Fischer wasn't Iron Man, but more importantly he didn't want to be. Where had the sages, the tricksters, the scapegoats gone? Why was the only archetype of the twenty-first century a porn-star?

Take this whale, for instance. What hero but the Aquanaut would save him? Wolverine would be more likely to hack a whale's head off than save its life. Superman could do it, fly him back out to the Atlantic Ocean, but even Superman was a comic that it was harder and harder to get people to buy. There was no stopping Jack and Ian. He would let them publish their story. He would claim a small share of credit for its success and he would keep moving forward. He was sorry that the past was gone, but he would be a fool to think he could bring it back. If only for one second he had power over his own life.

Poor Sludgy, Seth thought as he surfed for updates on the story. Both of them had been lured by false storms to this city, and both of them would die there.

\* \* \*

Almost all of Karl's physiology had been affected by his original transformation, and these adaptations were almost universally advantageous. Except for his ears. His hearing had been unchanged by his mutation and years of relying on his telepathy, of growing accustomed to the ease with which sound moved through water, had left his auditory sense dulled. So much so that he almost missed it, the muffled cry of a child trapped in an upended taxi cab.

He couldn't walk away. He knew that there were hundreds, if not thousands, of survivors buried in the rubble around him. He knew that he couldn't save them all, even if he wasn't running out of time before the Black Tide's next assault, even if he wasn't on a quest for revenge, even if he wouldn't die without returning to the open ocean. He had been disregarding them, pushing them out of his mind as he picked his way through the devastated streets, but this he heard and could not ignore. When he worked with the Urban Guard, he was often relegated to doing just this, combing through the rubble for

survivors, while Virtue soared on ahead at light speed. Yes, if Virtue were here, he'd be barreling down on the Black Tide already, flying and fighting too fast to take in the suffering around him. Vengeance, if Vengeance were here he'd, scowl. He'd scowl, wrap his cape closer to himself in a theatrical nod to "the greater good" and rev the engine of his jet ski or speedboat or whatever ridiculous contraption he had handy for the situation.

Karl high-stepped towards the cab as fast as he could, clearing hurdles of water. He was close enough to make words out of her cries.

*"S'il vous plait, aidez-moi."*

French. Karl reached the car, bent over, and peering inside beheld a small girl of four or five shivering with fright, or maybe just cold, and two bodies, a man of Middle Eastern descent and white woman in her late twenties. *"Ça va bien se passer."*

*"Ma mère. Ma mère est morte."*

Karl looked at the woman. Did a child even know what those words meant? If she hadn't before, she did now. He looked back at the girl, into the large, dark eyes of her childish face. They weren't panicked like the eyes of an adult would be because to panic is to lose a kind of control that a child never has over her own life. There was only deep, mournful sorrow. The door was locked. *"Non, peut-être pas. Reculez-vous. Vous aurez du mal."*

*"Aidez-nous."*

*"Reculez-vous."*

The girl moved back and with a single controlled blow Karl shattered the glass. *"Ça va bien se passer."* He crawled into the car and pulled the girl to him with one arm. He looked at the woman, afraid to move her in the event that her spine had been broken. *"Ce n'est pas grave. Elle est vivante. I've got you."*

This was within his power to fix. The woman was unconscious but not in mortal danger. He would tend to her for now, stay with the girl, hours if need be, until help arrived. He would make sure that they were saved first. This he could do. Black Tide was going to kill him anyway, and that could wait just a little while longer.

\* \* \*

The canal was all the contradictions the reports on Sludgy made it out to be. It certainly stank, but in a way that Seth expected an enclosed body of water to stink. More disturbing was the water's surface, which shone in the morning sunlight like dishwater, slick rainbows of purple and yellow undulating with the slow current. Boxes and bottles floated along the shore straight out of a cartoon meant to galvanize a future generation of environmentalists. Dr. Seuss or *Ferngully*. In the distance a tugboat belched smoke and trolled across the landscape of derelict buildings and abandoned factories, while along the concrete bank several groups of fisherman cast lines into the water.

The Urban Divers commanded a motley armada of rowboats and canoes that had been salvaged or donated, all of which were made available to the public free of charge. The turnout was higher than usual that morning, but the tour leader, a thick-bearded, small-eyed man in his early thirties with no particular expertise in whales and no knowledge of Sludgy's whereabouts (the Coast Guard having lost Sludgy's position overnight), called out the same landmarks and bits of trivia from his usual script. "There's a blue crab." "There's our new IKEA, which the community fought very hard to block."

Soon the group scattered, some boats unable or unwilling to keep pace, and his voice was lost on the wind and in the sounds of the city.

While the water pooled oil-slick along the sides, in the center of the canal it was not an entirely unpleasant shade of green. It didn't look clean, not by a long shot, but beneath the surface Seth could see small fish darting back and forth amidst the accumulated debris. There was trash everywhere, the stuff he expected: plastic cups, cigarette butts, candy wrappers, tires; and stuff he didn't: bird cages, a rocking chair, and a skateboard being among the most surprising.

Seth found it hard not to be moved by the persistent struggle of life in the form of gulls and Brooklynites, making what use of the water they could. In most places it was the urban that seemed timeless. With its subways and skyscrapers, it was hard not to believe that the city had always existed, buried beneath the crust of the earth and then bursting forth with steel and steam. Here the artifice was exposed, and that which was truly eternal fought to reassert itself. Was the crusade of the Urban Divers laughable? Perhaps. But if so there was something beautiful about it as well.

Seth followed the meandering crowd in his canoe using the Indian Stroke that he had learned that morning. By rotating the handle and leaving the blade underwater a canoe could be maneuvered silently and in a straight line, even against a strong current, though one was not present here. He worked deliberately; piloting the small boat had not come at all naturally to him. And then he saw it.

About ten lengths of his boat away something dark and large briefly crested the water's surface and then with a belch disappeared. He looked for a reaction from his fellow tourists but no one seemed to have notice but him. He waited a moment, and when nothing happened he began to doubt if he had seen anything himself, but then it appeared again, and this time was followed by what was unmistakably a tail.

Seth stood carefully, but flopped over the side ungracefully, none-the-less. If the canal had looked almost like water, it certainly didn't feel like water. It was thicker, slipperier. Seth kicked frantically and strained his neck to keep his face as far above the surface as possible. Carefully he pulled himself closer, one arm length at a time.

Sludgy was in a bad way. He was moving in a small circle and bobbing up and down along the surface. It took several minutes for Seth to reach him, and in that time others had noticed him in the water. He could hear their frantic voices on the wind, but they were muffled, distant. The whale came back around on his next lap, and as he passed Seth reached out for him.

They floated together for a moment, the whale motionless as Seth clung to him. "My wife left me," he said. "After four months. We had been together for years before, but... I knew she didn't want to marry me, but I knew she wouldn't have the heart to say no." With one hand he softly stroked the whale's smooth body. "I'm sorry about everything. I'm sorry this isn't a better world. Now go. Get out of here."

The whale rolled to one side, gently dislodging Seth, and, spraying a short burst of water from its blowhole, took a deep breath. It slapped the surface of the water with its tale and began the slow journey back to the Atlantic.



## BREAK POINT

If you couldn't throw from short to first, yeah, it probably meant you were queer, but I mean, really, who was going to give a shit if you couldn't play tennis? That's what drew me to the sport. That and the way the tall fences made each court its own little world, and how pathetic was that anyway?

But it went beyond the fences. No one wanted to play the game but us and a handful of middle-aged adults. Basketball, man, it was a constant battle for hoops. Losers walk. And if you were a real loser? Well, you might not get your chance to challenge at all. Tennis was a whole different story. There wasn't even pressure to play. We spent more time lying around making chalk drawings on the concrete than we did chasing balls, and that was cool. No one wanted to use the damn things anyway. I had started dating Jamie over Christmas break and other than my bedroom or her backyard it was the only place we could hang out without getting hassled. We were each a target on our own, but man, get us together, and we were real shit magnets.

Like, when we started I was using this twenty-year old wooden relic. It weighed about four times as much as a modern aluminum racket but had a head that was only half the size. Worse still, it had the name "Chris Evert" emblazoned on the side, just in case you didn't realize the Goddamn thing had belonged to my mother. Imagine bringing a girl's softball glove to the baseball field. You'd be a laughing stock. But tennis, man, you could get away with anything.

Not that I didn't feel some internal pressure to upgrade the damn thing. At first my dad wouldn't hear of it. "You play as well as Chris Evert and you'll beat any man on that court." Truth was dad had just lost his job. "Too nice," was the final verdict. He had worked in banking for twenty years and had done well, moved over to mortgages when that's where the money was, but when the housing market hit a cool down he found himself without a job. It wouldn't have been too big a deal, except things had been changing for longer than he had been out of work. By the time there were jobs to be found companies were more interested in 22 year-olds with college degrees than a man with 22 years of experience. And so my father found himself working at a car dealership: the last gig following America's industrial decline where a man with no education and no background *might* be afforded the opportunity to support a family.

Except that my father was lousy at it. Working in mortgages could be a lot like sales, but people don't walk into a bank lobby needing a loan and then tell the first person that greets them *buzz off, we're just looking*.

One of the early perks of the job was supposed to be a company car, earned when a certain sales quota was met. My dad was excited and so was I. Every night I would

check the kitchen window for a brand new Town Car or a Crown Vic but instead the same old 1978 Chevy Malibu rumbled in over the gravel.

He wasn't bringing in any commission and money was as tight at the house as ever. I could have endured any hardship, suffered any withholding if I didn't have to see the way my mother looked at him when he dragged himself home each Friday, paltry deposit slip in hand. It was too hard because I mostly knew how he felt. *Mostly* knew because there was so much of him in me; didn't *entirely* know because there was no one in the world that had ever depended on me. I could imagine what it would have been like for him the first few days: the rejection, the frustration. What I didn't know, what I'd hope I'd never know, is what it was like in those final desperate weeks when he knew his time was nearly up, and with a marriage, a home, and two kids depending on him—with his whole Goddamn life on the line—he still couldn't make the sale.

Anyway, there probably wasn't anything in the world my father wanted more than to take me down to the Sports Authority. Dad had always wanted me to play sports and I had never even had a hobby that he really understood. Not that he ever pressured me. He was a lousy athlete himself, but the way he told it, our town was a lot smaller then, and there was plenty of room for a guy to just play lousy if he wanted to play. That was the only thing that had ever disappointed him. "Kids are still kids," he had said, when we slunk home from soccer tryouts together, "but adults used to act like adults."

So it didn't take too long for him to scrounge up that money from God-knows-where. "Remember," he said as we walked down the aisle, "go easy on my wallet." I approached the rackets with trepidation. This had all the makings of a broken dream. All the cool rackets would cost a fortune and I was going to end up walking home with a child's toy and big fake smile and the empty feeling I got whenever I had to humor my father. But I was wrong. Right in the middle of everything was *the Avenger*, it's name immediately speaking to the comic book geek that still lived inside of me. It was a Wilson, an honest to goodness name brand, and the black handle was marked up in a brilliant orange—my favorite color. And it was on sale for \$15.99.

So I had a place to hang out, and something to do with my girlfriend, and something to share with my dad other than the feeling of *how are two saps like us ever gonna get by in this world*. And if you get all that you might get what it was like when those two little punks showed up.

*They're hunting us*. That was what I first thought when I saw them. Here we had gone out of our way to stay off of everybody else's radar, and these two fucking little punks went looking for us. There was always the chance that they were just passing through, but how realistic was that, and when they stopped by the fence and took a moment to watch our volley Jamie and I both knew where this was headed.

"Are you boys or girls?" It came from the one on the left. Just some fucking little dirt-bag, maybe ten years old with a crew cut. We didn't answer. Again, I tell you, Jamie and I, we were a couple of shit magnets, and I have a theory on that. What pissed the rest of the world off, I think, was that they could tell. See, Jamie and I, we were weirdoes on our own, but as a couple? She had reached her adult height, 5' 11" by age 15. And she looked, well, I would have said "strong" then, but I'll tell you now that she had a face like a cigar store Indian. Me, on the other hand, if you looked at my face you wouldn't have believed I was out of grade school and I had all this poker-straight blonde hair down past my shoulders to boot. We never said it to each other but the first time we met we

both must have realized it. Well, wouldn't this just be a big, fat "FUCK YOU" to everybody else.

So that's where the boy/girl comment came from and believe me we had heard it before. We played through. Not exactly. It had been Jamie's serve but when the point ended with the ball on my side I picked it up and hustled back to the line and served it. We didn't have a formal policy on harassment, but over the course of our time together one had kind of fallen into place. That is, we would start off pretending to ignore it.

"Hey, boy/girl. You a boy or girl?" It was crew cut again, and this time he and his cohort abandoned their mock sincerity to laugh at us. I don't know if Jamie and I were actually talking less, but we felt more quiet. The pauses between each word we spoke were cavernous, and our dialogue was empty and false, sort of like how my mom sounded cheering when she tried to watch a Yankee game with my dad. *Come on, Jeter. Score a point* Jamie's return landed slightly out of bounds.

"Nice hit. It was a good try," I said, jogging over to the ball. More often than not these things ended quickly. Usually it was somebody on their way from here to there, a lot of times in a passing car, taking a couple of seconds out of their day to shout obscenity at us. This was not that, as these guys were sticking around to see our reaction. That wasn't necessarily a bad deal either. Most people, when they saw our reaction was no reaction, would throw in a parting shot, something generic usually, like "assholes," and then be on their way. If it carried on any longer than a couple of minutes, we retreated to safer spaces. What choice did we really have?

"Hey, faggots, you suck," said the other kid, getting in on the fun. I sort of recognized him too. I was almost certain that his family owned an insurance agency in town, the one that took out a big ad in the back of the church bulletin. I had seen his father and oldest brother on the steps of the Church after mass shouting and mingling like they got a commission for every handshake.

I kept my head down as I readied my serve but tried to scope them out peripherally. Man, did it suck that they were just kids. It was bad enough you had to accommodate every jackass that was bigger than you, but now we were going to suffer at the hands of these little monsters too. But what could you do? I could shout back but I wouldn't be as good at it as them, and they knew damn well I wasn't going to do anything about it. I had been in more "fights" than I could remember, but they mostly involved me lying on the ground with my arms over my face. I wasn't about to jump a couple of little kids.

They kept it up for a couple of minutes, but who remembers what they said exactly? And anyway this, finally, is where the story really starts, because on that particular day, though it doesn't seem to have much to do with anything, I kept thinking about my dad. Specifically, though I wasn't there and he never told me about it, I was thinking about him watch that last customer walk back to the crummy old car that they came in with and drive away. Something seemed off about that even if wasn't sure what.

We played another point and as I moved around the court I pretended not to notice a rock that sailed over my shoulder and landed ineffectually on the ground. Pretended not to notice for nobody's benefit but my own, because hey, if I didn't see it I couldn't be expected to do anything about it. The volley ended quickly with Jamie driving the ball into the net. "Fuck," she said calling my attention to her. It was hard to look at each other in the middle of something like this, and when she stared straight into me I

knew it was her way of saying that she had seen the rock and that it was time for us to get out of here. She was probably right. She took a step towards the gate—not the gate that led straight out, mind you. Not the one we had walked in through that was 3 yards from where those two little gutter punks were standing. No, there was the other gate that led from our court, the lower court, up through the midlevel, the upper courts, and finally outside the whole thing at the top of the hill.

Man, I knew we should have left, but I also knew that if we did leave we weren't ever coming back, and I wasn't ready to give all of that up. I walked over to the net, picked it up, and scooped the ball underneath it to my side of the court. I looked directly over at the kids for the first time. They were just a couple of kids standing there, the one with the crew cut resting his arm against the fence. The other was clasping the straps of his backpack. They both stared back at me lazily. They couldn't have looked less menacing.

"What's that, 30-all?" I asked, making up the score we were no longer keeping, signaling my intention to stay. Jamie stopped in her tracks and looked at me angrily. I put my head down and bounced the ball on the court as I walked back over to the baseline. *Screw those kids. They'll go home eventually.*

I brought the ball and racket together down low in front of me as I set to serve. I looked up just in time to see a blur of motion and see Jamie's hand fly up to the back of her neck. "*Sticks and stones*," I could hear my dad say.

Jamie let out a grunt of pain and without another word turned, with no regard for me, and headed for the upper gate. *Great*, I thought. *That one's my fault.*

It was startling how angry I wasn't. I was feeling bad mind you, just awful, but not angry. Like maybe Jamie and I could still find some quiet place together where we'd finally get away from everybody else and it would be cool and damp and we could just lay down and wait to die. I started to follow Jamie because I knew that's what I was supposed to do, but at the same time, it felt like maybe I was the last kid whose parents had told him to suffer this shit with a smile. It seemed like everybody else's mom or dad was always making some big fucking scene, you know? Getting their kid more playing time. Arguing that "C+" to a good, solid "B."

I felt so ashamed, and if that feeling had sort of lurked around inside me before, man, did it really hit me now. It was overwhelming and it was bodily. My arms felt weighted and my shoulders slumped forward, shriveling like a salted slug. That's when I decided to run.

I didn't run with anger, and I didn't run with purpose. I ran to move, to shake the physical sensation, to create action. I ran towards those little punks.

I had to break left to reach the gate and the boys scattered to my right, towards a short nature trail that led from the thin line of trees to the next housing development. I was relieved when they ran because I didn't know what would happen if I reached them. They would disappear into the woods and I would at least return having scared them off. Maybe we wouldn't come back to the tennis courts, maybe it wouldn't be the same, but it would not end in total retreat. I rounded the gate and thought I felt Jamie stop as I made my exit. A scramble at first, my legs found a rhythm and my joints firmed up. Something horrible was happening. My strides lengthened, my back straightened, and my arms pumped. I was gaining on them.

I hadn't really counted on that. I was used to being slow, so much slower than anyone, but now when catching up was the last thing I wanted, that's exactly what was happening. Still, there was time. Even as the gap between us shortened there was time to think this through. I needed to plan. When they decided to turn and face me what would I do? I was still carrying my tennis racket. I was armed. They weren't. *Try to swing it*, I thought. *Try to catch them with the edge. Hit the little fuckers in their faces. Stride, stride.* The crew cut glanced over his shoulder and saw me coming up fast. He hesitated and turned back in my direction. I was out numbered. *Run through him. Knock him down. Then swing the racket at the other one.* But crew cut wasn't thinking of holding his ground. He was terrified. He made a stutter step of indecision and then ran off the trail into the brush.

He was immediately caught in a tangle of bush and weeds and was now much easier to catch. I thought about continuing on after the kid with the back pack just to forestall the confrontation, but I was too afraid to leave one of them behind me, to have Crew-cut between me and Jamie. I went in after him.

He tripped just as I reached him and I was able grab on to his wrist as he fell, gaining by chance leverage and an authoritative hold of him.

"Let go!" He tried to pull free and I for a moment I found myself caught up in how powerful I was. I could jostle and move him virtually without effort. He was so much lighter than I thought he'd be and the angle of his arm must have been painful. He jumped and scooted with the slightest direction. "Get off! Bastard! Let go!"

"Shut up! Just shut up!" I was holding him tightly and yet trying to keep my distance, dancing arms-length around him to stay clear of his thrashing legs. I was terrified, but quickly realizing that he was helplessly in my thrall. His eyes were wet with tears now. I tugged and twisted to force yelps and whimpers from him. He cursed and wriggled and I took it all in, the tears, his weight, the soft smooth skin trapped helplessly in my hand. *He was a child*, I remembered.

I was a kid, by any reasonable estimation, but this was a child. Nine, maybe ten years old tops. I had chased a little boy into the woods and was in the process of beating him up.

"Calm down! Jesus." He stopped resisting for a moment. Looked at me like maybe I should say something. "What?"

He let out a roar and reengaged in struggle. It was my move but I never had any intention of catching him and didn't know where to start. I had been roughed up plenty, but suddenly I couldn't recall any of the specifics of those encounters.

"No, listen. Just!" I wasn't getting through. "Why didn't you leave us alone?" My fear had dissipated. I was contemplative now, my physical supremacy so complete that my detachment had become almost academic.

"FUCK YOU, ASSHOLE! FUCK YOU!"

"Listen, do you see this racket?" I asked, holding it up. "I can hit you with this. I ..."

"Raarrgh!" He scooted and spun, almost like he was break dancing, and I moved with him to keep his arm pinned painfully over his shoulder.

"Look, I'm going to..." I thumped him on the back with the racket lightly, just to make it clear these weren't empty threats.

He reacted insanely, “Ahhh! YOU FUCKING FAGGOT! I’LL FUCKING SHOOT YOU.”

My frustration began to mount, and I was ready to give up the situation. “Fine. Say you’re sorry and I’ll let you go. Just say you’re sorry.”

“Never!”

Wham. Wham. Wham. I brought the racket down hard. “You’re pissing me off; say you’re sorry and I’ll let go.”

“FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU!”

This time I reacted poorly, clubbing him with the racket half a dozen times, at first hard, then too hard, and finally with the conscious intention of hitting him as hard as I possibly could.

“SHUT! YOUR! MOUTH!”

He was sobbing now—sobbing like a child being mercilessly beaten by an adult with a tennis racket. “MY FATHER WILL KILL YOU!”

“Say sorry.” I waited a moment for the apology and when it still didn’t come I started in with the racket again, punctuating each word with a viscous blow.

“You! (thump) Will! (thump) Understand! (thump).” I wasn’t so fixated on his shoulders anymore. I was letting the racket drift a bit, *accidentally* hitting him in the back of the head. Furthermore, who could even tell you what I was shouting? “This is all because of YOU (thump!) We’re total (thump) strangers (thump)! It was your idea to get hit with THIS (thump) FUCKING (thump) RACKET (thump)?” My voice cracked with raw emotion. I was surprised to find I was crying now too, and not the polite tears of someone at a funeral, but the jagged breathed, convulsive tears of a bewildered crazy person at their absolute wits end.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” The simple apology was no longer enough.

“Why?”

“...”

Thump. “Argh!”

“Why are you sorry!?”

“I started it!”

“Are you going to bother us again!?”

“No!”

It was all reaching a satisfying conclusion. “Good. Now remember. REMEMBER!” I whacked him three more times for good measure, hammering his new awareness into place, and let go of his arm. He scampered to his feet and stumbled out of the brush back onto the path. I wiped tears and snot from my face, dropped the racket to the ground, and put my hands onto my knees, trying to catch my breath. He stood on the path for a moment, assessing the damage I had done to him. He was going to have some serious bumps, some serious black and blues, but thankfully, I hadn’t really hurt him. Well, not really. There was silence, neither one of us ready, capable, of just yet walking away. I wondered where Jamie was. I was disappointed she hadn’t followed, but glad she hadn’t seen this. Everything was calm now. The woods were quiet. We were both still. Crew cut looked over his shoulder down the path where his accomplice had fled. *It was a cathartic experience*, I was already rationalizing. I had achieved so much in that moment, for empathy, for justice, for civilization as a whole. It was a win.

The kid with the crew cut looked back at me, his jaw moved forward and his eyes opened frighteningly wide. “You’re a FUCKING ASSHOLE!” he shouted, a bass present in his voice that hadn’t been there a moment before.

I stepped forward. “Hrahh!” He bolted down the path and I didn’t pursue him. I finished wiping the tears from my eyes and picked up my racket. I was glad my father wasn’t there to see me.

Things were okay with me and Jamie. She was none-too-pleased that I had attacked the little punk, but I had a way of telling it that was, well, a whole lot funnier than having been there. I mean, if you had seen it, you’d have wanted me arrested. We never did go back to the tennis courts that summer, but I did run into that kid a lot and, man, did he give me a lot of shit. But only when he had his bicycle.

## THE LAST FIRST TIME

This story is written in the second person omniscient, but then, *you already knew that*. Psych. But this is just another story about some girl, so there will be plenty of times when it feels like you've already heard this one. I do apologize for writing about such a topic at this late date in the Western tradition, but due to circumstances beyond my control it could not be helped. My name is Jim, and this story is about Karen.

Karen. Karen was fifteen, flunking out of school. Fucking up in a lot of the right ways. I loved that about her, like I had loved Ally Sheedy or Dinky Bossetti. She loved horror movies. Dreamed of working on those films one day as a makeup artist. She was a lousy painter, but a brilliant sculptor. Karen had a nose for anything illicit, or at least she had wanted to. She regularly announced that she could smell weed or sex or a bonfire. *She* always smelled like the attic in my grandmother's house. She wore a red, zipper-front hoodie from September to June. That type. For a while after it was over we hated each other, then eventually we became friends, and finally we grew apart.

She was always making the first move. The first kiss. The first touch. I was practically taking marching orders at the beginning—the instincts of a domesticated gold fish. Everything was “touch here,” “unhook this,” and “more tongue.” “Right here,” she said, directing my hand to her clit. “Can you feel that?”

“No.”

“Here,” she said, moving my hand slightly to an area that felt completely indiscernible from the first. “Now, clockwise. *Clockwise*.”

“That *is* clockwise,” I corrected.

She was quiet for a moment. “For me or for you?”

“For both of us.”

\* \* \*

Maybe everybody feels this way, but it was a tough time to grow up. Magic Johnson had tested positive for HIV four years earlier. Mrs. Santoro's fifth grade class was immediately bombarded by public service announcements. We were told that people like Johnson were no threat to the public, and simultaneously, that they were biological weapons carrying payloads of toxic AIDS blood. We were told that people with AIDS shouldn't be ashamed, but that they had gotten AIDS from shooting heroin and visiting prostitutes. We were told we would be safe if we didn't do those things, but also that we might catch it from hospitals and dentists, saliva and spouses. They told us it was best not to have sex but that abstinence was impossible. They told us our wives, our husbands, would cheat on us and give us AIDS. They didn't tell us that HIV was a *virus* that could only be spread from one infected person to another. They also never explained what sex



was. It was a wild couple of weeks in Mrs. Santoro's class before it all got sorted out, everyone standing stone still on the blacktop with their mouths closed, afraid to run. Afraid of skinned knees. Of course, that was ancient history by high school. Pedro Zamora had lived with AIDS and died of it. The Ray brothers, Kimberly Bergalis, Ryan White: that early 90's phenomenon that was the AIDS celebrity.

Anyway, the learning curve seemed unfairly steep on my side of things. Mostly, I just wasn't ready. Sex was something I was curious about, but it wasn't something I had given much thought to actually doing. It was the difference between saying you'd like to see Paris one day and booking a transatlantic flight. I wasn't packed yet.

There was no room for men like that in a world like this, so I scrambled. I spent an afternoon sprawled out in the erotica aisle of the Barnes & Noble at the mall trying to match my blind gropings to diagrams and learn some technique. The day ended with me trying to convince two security guards that I hadn't been jerking off. And then one night, after two hours or so of heavy petting, Karen slipped a condom into my hand.

Blink and you would have missed it, but it was good. As good as it was supposed to be—for me anyway. We held each other a while and exchanged “I love you,” and then, ten minutes into our adult sexual lives I moved to take her again.

“Wait,” she said, and started to turn over. “We don't want to get stuck in a rut.”

Because if there was one thing we knew about sex—besides the whole AIDS thing—it was that it got boring. All the obvious forms of kink: bondage, swinging, foreplay, were doomed half-measures. It was on the cover of every magazine. It was in the faces of our absent fathers.

\* \* \*

I couldn't go back to the mall, but my parents had cable.

*Are you Scared?*

On screen in *Body of Evidence* Madonna used candle wax to sear her bound lover's flesh. It was more of the same, night after night. My coming of age had just so happened to coincide with the rise of Sharon Stone's career and a golden age of erotic thrillers. *Basic Instinct*, *Sliver*, *Fatal Attraction*, *Jade*, and dozens of others. It's no wonder gun control wasn't politically relevant; people only seemed to be dying from a post-coital knife to the chest. There just wasn't a whole lot of Hollywood's supposed glamor that I felt like incorporating into my life.

Karen kept way out in front of me anyway, with new positions and new locations: her mother's bed, on the front porch of her house late at night, the men's room at the Friendly's near the on ramp. In spite of all this, the thing I really didn't understand about Karen was that she didn't seem to enjoy sex at all. She'd drag me to a dark room at her mom's house or mine, spend ten minutes talking dirty and convincing me we wouldn't get caught, strip down, and then it was like I was making love to a piece of furniture or a turnip.

“You know,” I said lying next to her on her bed after what seemed to be a particularly disappointing romp, “we don't have to have sex.”

“Why wouldn't we?” she asked quickly, and rolled up onto her elbows.

“I didn't think you liked it.”

She pushed herself back and moved her legs to one side so she could sit up. "You're the one who doesn't like it. You're so repressed. Or maybe just *queer*." Karen, who was more comfortable with herself naked than I was with my clothes on, turned away from me, suddenly demure, but also furious. I had hurt her, which wasn't even something I would have thought possible.

"Don't be mean," I said, feeling stung myself. "I just want to make you happy." I reached a hand out and placed it on her shoulder.

She let the anger drain from her face, and then, arching an eyebrow, she leaned towards me and got on all fours. "If you want to make me happy, then come over here and fuck me."

It took me a few minutes to get ready and as I kissed and touched her prone body I realized I was making love to an object again. She was as passionless once we began as she was adventurous before we started. Putting it out of my mind I moved back behind her and pressed my body against hers. Once, twice, and then... I hit something.

I can't think of any other way to say it. I hit something, hard, like the universe had turned around inside her and was fucking me back. Karen let out a muffled groan of discomfort. I saw stars, slipped back out of her, and stumbled off the bed.

"What was that?" I asked, half thinking she had orchestrated it.

"I don't know."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Are you?"

"No." My stomach ached and soured, as if I had been kicked in the balls, or had rammed my erect penis into a rock-hard mystery organ. I leaned forward with my hands on my knees, trying to wait it out. Karen sat back on her heels.

"So are we going to finish?"

\* \* \*

Stupidly, I felt pretty good about myself as I walked back to my house. My confidence had been eviscerated by this entire month long experience, and I was happy, for a moment, to let myself think that whatever had happened was due to my supernatural manhood. But that self-delusion couldn't last long. I knew I wasn't that big the way a quadriplegic knows he can't run.

The World Wide Web was in many ways still in its infancy at that time, but already the only place to go with a question like mine. I couldn't find anything that specifically addressed my concerns and eventually wrote to a person or organization calling itself *Doctor Internet*. I checked back the next morning and had received a reply.

*Dear Hit and Run,*

*Chances are what you felt was the pressure of your penis against her cervix. The cervix forms the base of the uterus. Typically, when a woman is aroused, her uterus and cervix will ascend, lengthening her vaginal barrel. This usually means that the penis doesn't hit the cervix. If she feels pain, perhaps it's her body's way of telling her that she's not quite ready for penetration, or that you're in too deep. If it continues to bother her she should see her gynecologist.*

In addition, there were links to websites that opened me up to the world of female sexual dysfunction. Women who found sex painful, who never had orgasms. The vast ocean which already seemed to separate our experiences expanded to flood some theoretical sixth dimension: the kind of thing that the mathematics of string theory necessitate be true, but which can never really fit into the human mind. I had been raised with a certain type of naïvely liberal understanding of gender that postulated that men and women were fundamentally the same thing, and that Barbie dolls and Tonka trucks accounted for any perceivable differences. But the more I read, and I couldn't look away, the more they started to seem less like men and more like *creatures*. To that point I took for granted that Karen was normal, and I was somehow deficient, but the sudden realization that it might not be entirely my fault made me angry rather than relieved. I felt duped, deceived, which was ridiculous because all the evidence suggested that Karen was *at least* as confused as I was. But I was a kid after all. And besides, it's not like I ever really figured it out. Was Karen screwed up? Maybe. But not necessarily more so than any woman I've known since.

That night I watched Geena Davis' fat, ugly face fly off the side of a cliff with her grandmother in tow and that was enough to convince me to ignore Karen for a little while and take responsibility for my own sexuality. There was an adult movie I had swiped from a friend's stepfather that I kept buried in a box of old clothing, but I couldn't even look at porn anymore. All I could see was some coked-up skank's vacant eyes, and some jackass pounding away behind her making a fool of himself. Making a fool of all of us.

\* \* \*

By the third day, I had calmed down. I wasn't feeling any better, but the terror had turned to listless depression. Karen phoned, and I took the call. I met her at her house. It was just after supertime on a beautiful day in July. She was upset that I had disappeared, but more "hurt" than angry. We walked around the neighborhood, until the sun finished setting. We looped back around until we were at her front porch again. She walked up the stairs and opened the door for me. "My mom won't be home for a few hours," she said.

We went up to her bedroom and I really put it an effort. Books, film, websites, I tried a little bit of it all. "Does that feel good?" I asked.

"Here," she said lying on her back. "Do this." She took hold of my wrist and moved my hand to her throat.

I couldn't move.

"It's okay," she said, and squeezed my hand.

"No," I said.

"It helps," she said. "I'll finally have an *orgasm*."

"No," I repeated and started to pull away.

"I *want* you to," she said. "Don't be so boring."

"But I don't want to. I don't want to do this anymore." I picked up my shirt off the floor and slipped it over my head. She panicked when I stood up. She asked me not to leave. Started to cry. She said we didn't have to do that, that we could do anything I wanted to do, but I was done. I *had* been in too deep, and now I finally had the sense to pull out. I left her half-dressed on the porch and walked home.

That night I was too afraid to move the television off of kids' stations. I didn't want to have to think about sex. I didn't want to watch beer ads and shampoo commercials. I didn't want to watch police officers take semen samples off of corpses or goddamn Dr. Ruth. I know things only kept getting worse later—first base became sexting and third base became anal—but it was bad enough.

Instead I watched cartoons and superheros all night, until long after everyone else in the house was asleep. At two o'clock, I thought I heard a noise. I froze, momentarily panic stricken, but there was no sound except from the TV.

*The yellow sun of your new home will give you great physical powers, but it cannot console your spirit.*

I began to relax but then heard it again. A clicking noise. I listened.

*...all that remains of a once great and powerful civilization.*

It was coming from the window. I peered out from behind the blinds and saw Karen down in the bushes. I waved to her in annoyance and tiptoed downstairs to the back door.

When I opened it, I saw that she was tear-streaked, disheveled. We didn't say anything for a moment and then she walked passed me inside. I followed her to the living room where we sat down on the couch. She broke down in tears before pulling it back together and speaking.

"You don't want me anymore," she said. "You're bored."

I tried to console her. I told her that it had nothing to do with her and that I loved her and that hadn't everything gotten awful and what if we went back to the way things had been, but she wouldn't stop crying. I knew what I had to do: the only thing the world seemed want out of or expect from me.

I pushed her gently back onto the couch and she laid back passively, tears still welling in her eyes. I removed her pants, haunted by the image of changing a baby's diaper. I had to pull her shoes off to remove her from her jeans, but I didn't bother taking off anything else. I felt like a rapist.

I slipped out of my boxers and realized I was still completely flaccid. Nothing was said between us as I moved my hands over her, trying to fire myself up. When it was over, I felt nothing. For a split second I was actually worried that I had accidentally pissed in her, but I hadn't. It was just the single worst sexual experience of my life, an experience, finally, that the both of us had shared.

## THE GOD WHO COMES

Jane had “a thing” about New Year's, the thing being that she hated it and refused to participate in any of its associated revelries. Alby never asked Jane why this was because he, who in so many other ways was like Jane, knew when to leave well enough alone.

But this year, she was coming home with him. In New York, New Year's Eve isn't something that you can just ignore, like Valentine's Day or children after a divorce. Midtown chokes on slack-jawed tourists, trains run on a holiday schedule, and if you are lucky enough to find a cab you probably can't afford to ride in it. And no matter how hard you try, you always get caught up in some absolutely absurd activity, as if the whole city is a giant rip tide. One minute you're on your way home from work insisting that you'll order-in and watch a movie, the next you're handing over twenty dollars to stand inside a cake shop with a plastic champagne flute pinned to your chest, while Carol from marketing recounts for you a list of songs she was listening to around the time her dad died. If Jane were really going to avoid all that she'd have to use a vacation day and put herself under voluntary house arrest. It was better, she insisted, to tag along with Alby on the Metro North, back to his annual reunion with his childhood friends.

“If you didn't want to go, you wouldn't, so I don't know why you're acting like this,” Jane said.

“You know I like to be miserable,” Alby said, “so stop trying to talk me out of it.”

“You do not.”

“Going home is complicated,” he said, taking Jane's hand. “I just don't want you to see me like that. It's like Superman back on the planet Krypton, or Roosevelt in his wheelchair. You know what it is, it's the historical Jesus arguing with his mother about the right way to put up a cross.”

Jane squeezed his arm. “That's ridiculous. The short end goes on the top.”

\* \* \*

Alby had met Jane at an unexpected retirement party, after the principal of his school was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Alby had been ordering a Portobello mushroom sandwich when he heard someone scoff behind him.

“I'm a vegetarian.”

“Maybe you're a pussy.”

Alby changed his order to a porterhouse, and, just to be on the safe side, ordered a liter of lager to go with it, though it turned out that Jane wasn't much of a drinker. They started talking and as it turned out, she liked most of the books that Alby had always pretended to have read, and they liked most of the same movies and music.

There were more important things too. When she was young, Jane had been so terribly uncoordinated that her parents had enrolled her, on her school's advice, in occupational therapy, or as she called it, "retard gym," where she had to complete all sorts of training in the normal modes of locomotion that the rest of us take for granted. There was a trashcan filled with popcorn and M&Ms that she had to open by pressing a pedal with her foot. There was also a colorful Slinky that she had to slide back and forth between her hands like a waterfall of rainbows, rigorous games of hop scotch, and intricate block stacking. Retard gym consisted of everything that might normally be considered "fun," but quantified in ways that would have given Doctor Spock nightmares. The end result was that her adult movements had a quality that was beyond grace; there was a mindfulness in each of her gestures that was both subtle and magnificent.

She was involved in a number creative endeavors, photography, cello, and she wrote features and book reviews for a handful of left-leaning websites. She liked living in the city but considered it a priority that one day she maintain a garden. She spoke French well, but cooked French badly. Her specialty was a hollandaise sauce that had the taste and consistency of scrambled eggs.

She had the full eyebrows of the kind that Hollywood actresses once sported in the movies of Alby's childhood, and although she was extremely slender, she had a very soft chin and chubby cheeks. She referred to bad mornings in front of the mirror as "her dizzy days," in homage to Dizzy Gillespie, but she was too hard on herself. Alby's favorite thing was to pinch and kiss those cheeks. "Don't bite my face, you idiot!" Jane would sometimes have to scream, and she had a point. But it's not like Alby could really help himself; he had never loved anything more.

\* \* \*

"Anyway," Alby said, leaning back in the pleather seat of the train. "Jack and I have a history. We don't get along anymore, but we still care about one another."

Jane laughed. "Are you trying to tell me that you and mom are getting a divorce?" She rested her head on Alby's shoulder and tried to fall asleep.

\* \* \*

Alby and Jack had been friends growing up, but, just as Alby explained, things had gotten complicated. They had always been different, or, really, Alby had always been different. But as a kid you don't get a whole lot of say in where you grow up, and, for Union Avenue, Jack was the best you could do. They were both pretty quiet as kids, reserved, a little bit brainy—not by the standards of anywhere else west of Moscow or east of Chicago—but in the neighborhood it didn't take much, and most importantly they both wanted to stay out of trouble. Which is not to say that growing up in the Hill was that dangerous, but it was a place where going out on a Saturday night automatically entailed two or three arrestable offenses, some combination of drugs, vandalism, shoplifting, fighting, underage drinking, and loitering.

So, Jack was not a bad kid, but he was a hustler. For instance, back then, everybody knew three package stores and two bars where you could get booze, but you

couldn't say the same thing for adult movies. In the ninth grade when a pawnshop went out of business he paid two hundred dollars for a stack of almost eighty pornographic VHS tapes and sold them at school for ten dollars apiece. Remember, this was still before the Internet could deliver video on demand, but after cable TV started running those commercials for the Mardi Gras girls all night long. Six hours of black-bar covered breasts bouncing all over your television and there wasn't anything anyone without a credit card could do about it. He made a killing. There were other things too. He gave tennis lessons in the summer, fixed computers, hooked-up printers. He'd go with his mother to the discount club to buy cases of chocolate bars and then walk around selling them as if he was going on a field trip. When Jack and Alby's friend Rob needed a car, Jack talked his uncle out of an old truck for a thousand dollars and then turned around and sold it to Rob for fifteen hundred. He loved making money, and he was good at it too, but he also loved to spend it. And not just on himself, on Alby or their other friends or anybody who was willing to have a good time. He was like a Mid-Atlantic Caesar, pillaging all day and then tossing the spoils of war to the masses by night. And half the time when he did something nice for you, you were the one he had screwed over in the first place. Maybe it was more like the Marshall Plan.

Alby was, in that sense, completely different. He was what we might today call "artistic," though on Union Avenue he had just been thought of as a little faggy. While Jack was out on the streets earning another dollar, Alby was usually at the coffee shop thumbing thru books he could never bring himself to read and trying to make time with the waitresses, all of whom were ten to fifteen years older than he was, and as a forgone conclusion, were not interested in him. He also drew a little bit—charcoal sketches and other high school art stuff—and he wrote poems and played a little guitar. The drama club at Alby and Jack's school was laughable and insular, but Alby had performed a handful of times with a local theater group, playing the part of Jake in a production of *Annie Get Your Gun* and Winthrop in *The Music Man*. He also made fairly regular trips to the modern art museum, though he lacked the patience or enthusiasm to study any of the theory or history behind the exhibits.

When he was eleven, Alby had received a calling to join the priesthood. His mother was so pleased, she called the rectory to set up a meeting between Alby and Father Mark, but behind closed doors, despite Alby's insistence to the contrary, Father Mark *insisted* what Alby really needed was not ordination, but "pussy." Even so, Alby was allowed to become an altar boy and continued in that role until his confirmation. It was during those years, when he got a chance to spend a relatively large amount of time around the Eucharist, that the concept of *consecration* became very important to him. His deployment of the term extended well beyond any practiced dogma of the Catholic Church. Opening up the tabernacle, looking at those wafers, seeing incontrovertibly that they were still pieces of bread, but knowing beyond all doubt that they were the body and blood of the risen Lord, he came to believe that everything in the universe was utterly banal until made holy and meaningful by human intercession. Hence, Alby's books—the incognizant trips to the museum—to him it was all highly ritualized, a physical performance of a life well lived. Granted, it was all a little stupid, but whatever; he was fifteen.

His religious awakening, and what was probably an innate tendency toward sentimentalism, resulted in Alby becoming something of a hopeless romantic, which was

the primary reason he never had much interest in the girls with whom he went to school. Alby was uglyish, but not so ugly that he couldn't have bought any of the girls from the Hill with a bottle of peach schnapps and a couple of Xanax swiped from the medicine cabinet. Even so, he always thought of romances of this sort as somehow beneath him, which is why he was always courting older women with flowers and poems and portraits. The one real exception to this was Cathleen Reily, who Alby pined for off-and-on from grade school thru junior high. There was something in Cathleen's face that made it easy to picture her in her thirties and forties and even what she would look like as a grandmother. This made it easier to slide her into the various stages of his imagined life. Of course Cathleen was not interested.

Alby occasionally had affairs with Jack's ex-girlfriends. Jack was not a particularly bad lover, but he got bored easily, and Alby, who was otherwise immune to the charms of the tanning salon set, was easily seduced by their heartbreak. Jack wasn't bothered at all by this, and while sometimes for the short duration of such a relationship it was necessary for Jack and Alby to keep their distance from one another; in Jack's mind, it was another thing that he could share.

\* \* \*

Jack's annual New Year's Eve Party was the grandest manifestation of his generosity. It also had the perk of being an institution in which attendees could be envious of his increasing success. Most people would think the second part of that undercut the first, but Jack valued both equally, and besides, most people are really quite stupid.

This year's party wasn't just an incremental improvement; rather, it was an indication that whatever Jack had been up to in the last twelve months had brought him wealth by an order of higher magnitude. He had rented out the entire *Thirsty Turtle*, upstairs and down. To fill the stage he hired a band, and not some garbage cover band, or a bunch of college kids with bad haircuts, but an honest-to-goodness, label-signed band—even if it was one that followed more people on Twitter than had fans to follow them. The bar was, of course, wide open, and the dance floor was ringed with serving stations, each staffed by a white-jacketed server and offering a tantalizing hors d'oeuvre.

The upstairs had been turned into a VIP lounge. Actually, the upstairs *usually* served as a VIP lounge, but it was something new and strange when introduced to segregate, not celebrities and their public, but a single group of people who were still, nominally, friends. You danced, you listened, you talked, you ate, and then at some point Jack's brother, who was eleven years his junior and had been long groomed for the role of stooge, would make it known that your presence was requested upstairs.

When it was Alby's turn, he decided not to answer the call right away.

"Make him wait," Alby told Jane.

"This is a strange and confusing new side of you."

"I'm not going up there to kiss his ring. The last time I knew what Jack did for a living he was selling toilet paper out of the back of a van."

Jane's expression livened slightly upon hearing this information "Did he *live* in the van?"



"No, he was making a killing. But let's not make a big thing of this. The food's good. The music's good. The drinks are free. Finish your rumaki, we'll grab a couple more glasses of champagne, and then head up."

"Alright," Jane said. "But I'm already kind of drunk."

\* \* \*

Upstairs, Jack and his brother sat at a small bar sipping whiskey, while a handful of men, only a few of whom Alby recognized, shot pool and mingled with women who were all extremely blonde, exceptionally thin, and conspicuously Russian. As soon as Alby stepped off the staircase, he felt uncomfortable. He hadn't been in a club that allowed smoking (and really, this one didn't either) in years, and now the sight of smoke slowly curling in the columns of light beneath the low-hanging lamps struck him as threatening and particularly seedy. Alby and Jane joined Jack at the bar, and Jack poured them each a drink as he made small talk with Jane. He was charming and attentive as she talked—a salesman—and while he didn't have anything to say about the subject matter of an article she had just placed, he was surprisingly knowledgeable about the technical aspects of online publishing.

"Are you doing something with computers now?" Alby asked.

"Something like that."

"You know, Jane and I are going to the writer's retreat at Wesleyan this summer. We *both* got the funding, so we'll be up there for two weeks."

Jack raised his eyebrows in a way that deliberately signaled only feigned interest.

"It's exciting," Alby continued, "Richard Bausch is going to be there this year, and it's a good chance for Jane to get feedback on her book. She's got a short story cycle that's almost ready to be published. I've started writing too—a coming of age story set against the backdrop of the American Revolution."

Their conversation was interrupted by the approach of one of the women who had been quietly haunting the room. "*Privet.*"

Jane reacted to her the way some dogs do to their own reflection, with bared teeth and a growl. She had drunk too much, and it was beginning to show.

"This is Mila," said Jack. Alby said hello, and she smiled, but then stood there mutely. Clearly she didn't speak much English, and Jack, unexpectedly, was at a loss for words.

"What does she want?" Jane asked.

"Jane, don't be rude," Alby said.

"She's a Russian," Jack said, touching her arm. "What do you think she's after?"

"Warm water ports?" said Jane. Alby, who hated scenes, glared at her.

"Cocaine and a work visa," said Jack. He took her by the wrist and pulled her closer to him.

"Hello, Mila," said Alby trying to smooth things over. "That's a very beautiful name. How are you enjoying the United States?"

Mila continued to smile without the slightest hint of recognition. Jack called out for a man in a wheelchair named Ryan, who coasted over and handed him an envelope filled with coke, which Jack cut into lines on the bar and offered to his guests.

Alby had done coke only one time before, and that had been with Jack, on the night that their friendship hit the skids. It was late in the summer and Rob (you remember Rob, Jack sold him a truck for fifteen hundred) had a cousin named Kelly who had just graduated from Our Lady of Victory, the Catholic school on the other side of the river. She was leaving for Mount Holyoke in a week, and before she left she wanted to make the most of her home town. For Kelly, this meant doing blow with Alby, Jack, and Rob in Jack's mom's house and getting drunk on cranberry vodka. At about three in the morning, just after Rob passed out for good, Kelly suggested that she and Alby and Jack play strip poker. The boys were skeptical, but Jack pulled out a pack of cards and dealt them out anyway. Lowest hand removed an item of clothing, and Kelly lost the first three. Much to both of their surprise Kelly was just as quickly shirtless. There's no need to go into details, but things progressed rapidly from there, and, long-story-short, they screwed that girl six ways to Sunday.

Things were a little awkward the next morning. For Alby, the whole thing had been a bit out of character, but he couldn't say he hadn't had a good time. For Jack, it was the ultimate culmination of his share and share alike mentality, the bond that should have sealed them as brothers once and for all. Instead, the next morning Kelly told her mother that she had been raped the night before. She never pressed charges, but that doesn't mean the damage wasn't catastrophic. Everyone in the Hill knew about it and half of the city, including Alby's parents and his *nonna*.

The fallout from that night would come to define both of them. The day after the fact, Alby couldn't believe he had been involved. He could remember what had happened, but not clearly, and with each hour the memory faded a little more, like a dream after waking. He could say with absolute certainty that anything that happened had been instigated by Kelly, and he could also say that no one had used any kind of force, but he wasn't proud to have been there at all and had a natural inclination towards guilt. It had been an occasion of sin, just like his mother had always taught him. He had laid down with the dogs and had gotten fleas. He was furious that he had compromised himself in such a way, and swore to clean up his act—an act that really was pretty clean to begin with.

Jack's response was the complete opposite. Unlike Alby, who blamed himself, Jack blamed Kelly, and the entire humiliating experience made him incredibly bitter. Jack had always been street-wise, but after that he became hard and mean. While, in his own way, he was still generous with his friends, he was a terrible misogynist, and where women were concerned he could be downright sadistic. If he did feel he had lost something, some piece of integrity or reputation, he just worked that much harder to replace it with financial success and the envy of others.

The incident with Kelly had put Alby and Jack on drastically different paths. They each gained something from the choices they made, but they each lost something too. All of which had to do with these annual meetings. Each year they'd get together and brag about their latest triumph. In Alby's case it was some dilettantish achievement, something he had made or read. Meanwhile, Jack would spend more, buy more, all in a futile attempt to dazzle Alby with his material riches. They had to keep competing, each to

convince himself the choice he had made hadn't been wrong, but it was a competition that neither of them could ever win. They simply didn't want the same things out of life.

\* \* \*

"I'll try some," said Jane, taking a small piece of PVC tubing from Jack's hand. She bent over and snorted a line. Standing back up, she brushed at her nose, and looked at Alby. Jane, let's face it, was always a little confrontational, but when she drank it stopped being cute. Alby was furious, not so much because she had done the coke—which he wasn't thrilled about—but because this was all part of Jack's test, the test of paths, of destinies, and Jane had just switched sides, all because Alby had been nice to the Russian.

"None for me, thanks," said Alby, "I gave up most illegal drugs around the same time I stopped going to work in shorts and sandals."

"You've always been in such a hurry to be old."

"You've always been afraid of acting like a man."

Jack laughed to break the tension. "You know who this is," he said, motioning to Ryan, who had brought the cocaine over in his wheelchair. "You remember the girl you had a crush on in high school? Cathleen? This is Cathleen's husband."

"They tell me I better look out for you," Ryan said.

"I was always crazy about your wife," said Alby. "But not as crazy as I am about walking around on my own two legs."

"Could you excuse us, Jane," said Jack. "I need to discuss something in private with Alby." Jack's brother took Jane, who a moment ago had been defiant but now looked lost, by the arm and began leading her towards the stairs.

"It's okay," Alby said to her. "I'll be there in a minute."

"Jane's a *nice* girl," said Jack, as he traced Mila's mouth with his finger. "But you know what these girls have that Jane doesn't?"

"Track marks."

\* \* \*

When Jane was gone, Jack got down to brass tacks. "So, I've got a new business," he said, producing a card from his pocket.

Alby examined it. It was cream colored, nice texture, with raised black lettering. The card was very tastefully designed, something that could have been straight out of *American Psycho*, except that what it said was: "FuckBuddies.Com *Porn with Benefits*."

"Do you know where reality TV started," Jack asked, rhetorically. "With reality pornography. Thirty years ago, porn was masquerading as art, now art is masquerading as porno."

Alby looked at him skeptically.

"In 1996, *Girls Gone Wild* is introduced. It's a bunch of teenage girls lifting up their shirts. No hardcore, no simulated sex—nothing! But people went crazy for it because it was real. Four years later you had *Fuck Truck*, a bunch of guys driving around pretending to pick up women—fake, but pretending to be real. No scripted dialogue. No cuts or editing. No music track. It became the biggest grossing adult site on the internet.

"Looks like your site is ten years too late, then," said Alby.

“No,” Jack said, “because I was the first one to really understand the phenomenon, which makes us better. And it's not just a site.”

\* \* \*

Jack's network was a series of seven adult websites, each of which offered varying degrees of user interaction. Every week, each site drew individuals from the pool of customers and flew them in to shoot a video. So, for example, the network's titular site, *fuckbuddies.com*, offered ordinary men the chance to star with a beautiful actress (which is where girls like Mila came in). *Fishbowl.com* took three sets of couples and mixed and matched them in a swinger-style orgy. *Extremefuckbuddies.com* challenged men to various sexual dares, including popular tropes such as sex with an amputee, sex with a four hundred pound woman, and “sex dungeon.” There was even a site that offered nominally “straight” men \$5,000 to have sex with another guy. For all of this, Jack charged \$75 a month, which was three times what a normal adult paysite would cost, and had ten times the retention rate. He was raking it in.

\* \* \*

“I hope you don't think I'm going to be impressed by this,” Alby said.

“I thought you'd resist it, which is why I want to give you something else. I want you to come by the studio tomorrow and be in one of my movies. We're going to shoot the next episode of *Fuckbuddies*, and we'll set you up any way you want. You could have Mila here, or we could do a couple of girls. Asians, teens, whatever you like.”

“Please,” said Alby, “I have a decent job, a woman who I'm in love with, and a clean conscience. I don't want anything to do with your dirty money or bald pussies.”

“That's not fair,” said Jack, hiking up Mila's dress, “she has a very nice bush.”

And really, Alby found himself thinking, she did. It was nicely manicured, but still natural looking and, for pubic hair, seemed like it would be quite soft. She slapped Jack's hand and pulled her dress back down.

“What do you say,” said Jack. “Don't let your whole life pass you by. You're missing it, you're missing out on everything.”

\* \* \*

“I want to know what happened up there.” Back at the hotel, Alby had dumped a very drunk Jane onto the bed.

“I told you,” he said, pulling off her coat. “Jack and I talked for a while, and then we got into the same old arguments, and I got pissed off and I came to find you.”

“I don't mean with Jack,” Jane said through slurred speech, “I mean with those stupid Polish whores.”

“You're jealous,” Alby said, happily.

“I was trying to make *you* jealous, you idiot.”

“You were? When?”

Jane grunted in frustration and kicked the mattress with her heels, like a child throwing a tantrum.

"This is why people who don't drink much shouldn't drink much," Alby said.

"After I had to leave you alone with those dumb *Polacks*. I talked to that Kevin for like an hour and a half."

"First of all, they were Russians. And secondly, Why wouldn't you talk to Kevin? You're a lot more outgoing than me, I thought you were just being friendly."

"And how did you know I wasn't going to sleep with him?"

"You wouldn't do that. We've got a good thing here. Maybe someday, you know, when I finish losing my hair, things will be on the rocks, but not now. They'll have perfected Viagra by then, probably, but I still won't be able to swallow pills. Even so, I'd say that gives us another five years, easily."

Jane laughed. "That didn't take long. 18 months keeping his dick wet on a regular basis and he's suddenly very, *very* confident."

Alby winced in disgust. "C'mon, don't be a pig. And don't talk about me in the third person; you know I hate that." He lifted her right leg up to pull her shoe off and let it fall to the floor.

"How do you know what I wouldn't do?"

"You're just trying to pick a fight with me. Because you're a mean drunk. And because women are ridiculous."

"If only you knew," Jane said, punctuating each word, a hint of malice in her voice. She looked out at him from under half-drawn eyelids.

Alby stopped, Jane's left foot still in his hand. As a boy, during nor'easters, he would peddle his bicycle to the harbor and count the seconds between lightning strikes and thunder as the storm rolled in over the beach. "You cheated on me," Alby said. He meant it ironically, a statement of disbelief, but his voice was thin and tight. He let her other shoe drop.

"No," Jane said, twirling her foot in Alby's hands, "and yes."

"*No and yes*" Alby let go of her leg and sat with his back to her on the edge of the bed. "What, you shared a cigarette with that jerk-off from the coffee shop. Come on. 'No and yes.' Yeah, right." Alby began undressing himself in haste, yanking his belt free from his pants as if he was drawing a rapier.

Behind him, Jane pushed herself up onto her knees and moved towards the end of the bed, stalking his small, slumped figure. "The first time we were together. The first night we made love."

Alby felt relief creep up in his chest like dawn creeps up on the horizon. He had actually stolen Jane away from someone else, though it was a bit more complicated than that. She had been engaged once, before Alby knew her, to a man named Marco. Marco had left her, and, heartbroken, she had spent two very unhappy years in a rebound relationship with a colleague of Alby's, Ted. Ted had brought Jane as his date on the night she and Alby met, and they became friends. One evening, in early December of that first year, Jane had learned that Marco was to be married to someone else, and, unable to confide her grief in Ted, had ended up in Alby's apartment where they shared a bottle of wine and Alby's bed. In the early morning, Jane had decided she needed to leave, in order to sort things out. It had begun snowing while they were together and Alby walked Jane home in those hours before the dawn. He had no other memories like the ones from that walk. Just thinking on it for a moment was enough to make him feel the cold, dry air in his nose and the snowflakes tangled in his eyelashes. Even sitting there on the bed, he

could hear the crunch of the snow underneath their feet, four feet, belonging to two people, walking along together. Alby had met Jane for lunch the next day and they had been together ever since.

"Ted," Alby said. "The morning you left him."

"I went to his apartment the moment you were gone," she said. "I told him about Marco. He wasn't mad, and we made love."

It was okay, Alby thought, slowing down his breath. Sure, he had spent those few hours rapturously in love while she was taking her ex-boyfriend on a farewell tour, but break-ups, beginnings, these things were tricky, messy. Breaks were never clean. "Wow," said Alby. "I don't know what I'm supposed to say. I knew you two were together, that you were still together that first night." *He didn't take her from me*, Alby reminded himself. *I took her from him. She chose me. She had us both, and then she chose me.*

"After I told him about us, he was furious. We had a fight. He threw me out."

"I can live with that," Alby said, in a long, exaggerated exhale. "It's not the best news I've ever gotten, but I can live with that. These are the kind of things that get stricken from the history books all the time, and I should know."

Jane's lip curled. "And then..."

"And then."

Her face went white. It was like she had woken up from a dream. The haze of her anger, her drunkenness, lifted moments before her confession, but still too late.

"Nothing."

"No, and then what. *And then what.*" Alby said, turning towards her.

"And then," Jane moved back to the head of the bed and looked away. "And then I went to Marco and threw myself at him."

"Jesus Christ."

"We weren't together. I didn't know if it was going to be just a one night thing."

"Goddamn it, Jane. You know what I was doing while you were screwing your way around the Five Boroughs. I was here thinking about how crazy I was about you."

"I'm sorry," she said, starting to cry. "I never should have told you."

Alby lay down on the bed beside her and turned off the light. They didn't say another word to each other that night and they slept in their clothes. For an hour or so, Alby could hear Jane crying on and off, quietly to herself. It made him want to comfort her, to remind her that everything was in the past and that it didn't change the two years they had been together. And part of him felt that way. But another part of him wanted her to suffer, wanted to douse himself with gasoline and set the whole room on fire.

\* \* \*

The next day Alby and Jane rode the train back to the city in silence. Alby knew that he had no right to be angry at Jane, but knowing that didn't make him feel any better. He had never been a particularly jealous person, as evidenced the night before, but now he was unspeakably angry. The absolute best night ever, the happiest day of his life, Jane had been with two other men. He was completely emasculated.

Jane was suffering from a severe hangover, and so, when they got back to their apartment, spent the rest of the day in the space between the bed and the bathroom, while Alby paced nervously between the living room and kitchen. In the moment, he had barely

been tempted by Jack's offer. Sure, when Mila's skirt had been up Alby felt a little charge, but that was all the autonomic nervous system. She hadn't even been a temptation, because being tempted would imply that he had wanted to have sex with her. Which simply wasn't true. He walked down the stairs one hundred percent committed to Jane and a monogamous lifestyle. Jack's offer hadn't fazed him in the least.

But ever since Jane's confession something had changed. He tried to watch television, to read, but he couldn't focus his mind on anything in front of him. His thoughts volleyed back and forth between images of Jane screaming out in ecstasy in the beds of other men, and the sumptuous and pliant Mila. He still had Jack's business card, which he fingered nervously inside his pocket. He had no idea what the schedule of a porn studio was like (he even thought it a little odd that they would film on New Year's Day), but in his mind they couldn't work past eight. It took two hours by train to get there, and so if he could hold out until six the window would close and everything would go back to normal. When six o'clock came he sighed with relief but he also noticed something else. Deep down, in the fourth chamber of his heart, he felt a nagging regret.

\* \* \*

The next day, January second, Alby was glad to be back at work. He and Jane still hadn't made up, or spoken more than a few words to each other, but he was confident that with their normal life resumed things would quickly settle down. Through what was probably no more than good luck, Alby had ended up with a job outside the city along the so-called Gold Coast, where teacher salaries were closer to that of computer analysts than baristas, and where the students were smart, parents were involved, and everyone was white.

He was quite popular with the students. Alby had not particularly wanted to be a teacher, but as his options narrowed toward the end of his college days, he was happy enough to be in the field. He remembered very keenly what it was like to be a student, how difficult it was, especially that last year, and did what he could to make the lives of his students a little easier, at least for the forty-five minutes a day that he was responsible for them.

There was also his teaching style. While the rest of the department, riding a pedagogical wave that had yet to crest after 30 years, de-emphasized military victories and meta-narratives in favor of lists of chores that were the responsibility of pilgrim women, Alby, who counted among his scholarly inspirations Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, taught history as an epic of warriors and heroes. His students, who had come of age on playgrounds where you could be suspended for pretending your index finger and thumb were a pistol, suddenly found themselves charging across the soccer field in a Spartan phalanx and on a trip to the nearby paintball park to stand stone-still in the face of enemy fire, like contingents of British regulars and continental volunteers. He deliberately compromised historical facts where necessary in the service of good story telling. He wasn't being paid by scholars to turn students into historians, after all; he was being paid by the state to turn them into Americans. In the long term, Alby was headed for censure from his peers, but, in the immediate, he had become something of a hero himself.

\* \* \*

“Hi.”

There was no one that Alby was more of a hero to than Shauna. She was a tiny wisp of a girl, with dark, sad eyes and a small, crooked mouth that was always twisted in an expression of worry or despair. She had joined Alby's class in October of her sophomore year, after being home schooled her entire life. Needless to say, her transition to the public education system hadn't been an easy one. If you've ever read about what happened to the Rapa Nui when Europeans started showing up on Easter Island, you'll have some idea what it was like for her.

She was pretty, but in a fragile, unusual way that her peers would never see until she was well out of her teens. She was a little underdeveloped for her age and had fair skin, and she wore homemade dresses. Anyone with a fully formed adult brain would have noticed her in a crowd immediately, but while she was in high school she would be no match for all the little Lisa Barnums, with their day glo tans and prepaid debit cards. After several incidents of bullying in the cafeteria (at the hands of Lisa Barnum), Alby had allowed her to hide in his empty classroom during her lunch break. Sometimes he would have her put notes on the board for his later classes, or make her help him set up for some lesson, but mostly they just ate lunch together and talked. Shauna was a fan of various fantasy novels, some of which, like *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Alby had read himself as a boy, and after a little prodding she would talk excitedly, between bites of tuna sandwich about fauns and elves and Minotaurs and lions.

That day she talked about *Eldest*, the second book in the *Inheritance Cycle*, a series of novels which Alby had never read. Still, he was glad to be talking to someone about something so innocent. It was at the end of the period, after the bell rang and she had gotten up from her seat, that she turned more serious. “Do you believe in New Year's resolutions?” Shauna asked.

“I've made them, if that's what you mean,” Alby said.

“I made one this year too.” She took a step closer to him. “Do you want to know what it is?” With that she leaned in, and placed a small, nervous kiss on his lips. As kisses go, it wasn't much, but Alby felt it, an explosion of warmth, in his entire body, like stepping under the shower on a bitter cold winter morning. He put his hands on her small waist, though whether it was to draw her closer or pull her away he hadn't yet decided.

“Shauna,” he said, and held her there while he took a step back. A moment later her eyes filled with tears and she walked into the hall.

\* \* \*

*Surreal* was the word that kept swimming through Alby's mind on the train ride home. This was all unbelievably ridiculous. He had gone catatonic when she kissed him, he couldn't think or move. After she was gone, it was all he could do not to run after her, but his section of US History had started to flood in and the moment passed. Thank God. He'd be fired, imprisoned! And besides, he loved Jane (who fucked other men); he really did. He had lived for fifteen years in a world in which events like those that had occurred in the last three days only happened in movies and dirty magazines, and now they were happening one right after the other. Jane. And Ted. And Marco. And Jack.



The train was making him increasingly claustrophobic. It was too hot. The air tasted a little too much like someone else's stale breath. When they finally reached the station, Alby raced to the street. With each inhalation, the smell of the city—exhaust, street meat, the damp, human smell of woolen winter coats—moved him out of the past and back into the present. Jack wasn't anything to be worried about anymore and neither was Marco. Alby just needed to stay out in the air for a bit and keep his feet moving. Instead of crossing Fifth Avenue and taking the F train home from Bryant Park, he turned north on Madison. He trudged on without direction or purpose, making two walk-signals before being stopped by a steady flow of taxicabs. He didn't want to stand still, so, instead of waiting, he turned east on Forty-Fifth, against the flow of traffic, towards United Nations Plaza. Not that he ever made it that far.

Somewhere between Lexington and Third, he was stopped in his tracks by a small white sign that happened to catch his eye. It was barely noticeable, sandwiched between the much larger and brighter signs and awnings that dominated the block, but its small size and simplicity were what made it so strange. The only thing written on it was the word "spa," in pink letters, and beneath that there was a phone number. It wasn't at all obvious which building the sign belonged to, and it struck Alby like something out of a fairytale, positioned where it was, as if you had to speak a password or knock on the right brick in order to make an entranceway appear. Realistically, it would have to occupy the space above the Chinese noodle house, or below the Japanese Restaurant, but both of them looked absolutely abandoned.

He had always known, of course, what went on in places like that, but not in the way he knew it in that moment. Somewhere on that block were women who would screw him, right then and there, for a hundred dollars, maybe two. It was like the difference between knowing that everybody dies someday and being diagnosed with cancer. He was right up against it. They were just on the other side of that door.

If he could find that door. He walked down the steps to the storefront beneath the Japanese Restaurant. There were pieces of cardboard tacked up against the windows, completely concealing the inside, but simply not being able to tell what was happening behind those walls seemed like a kind of evidence all its own. Jane did owe him one. He could give her a pass on Ted, that was only fair, but that still left him trailing, one to nothing. At the same time, once he did it there'd be no going back. For the rest of his life he'd be a guy who'd gone to a prostitute. A john. And besides, he didn't know the etiquette. He had a hard enough time ordering dinner in a restaurant he had never been to before. There might be things on the menu he couldn't pronounce, and he'd end up pointing at the page like an illiterate. What if he walked out without knowing he was supposed to bus his own table? No, there was far too much at stake. He looked up at the blank wooden door and sighed.

But then again, he could just walk in and ask for a massage. People got massages every day, and who was he to assume that just because a place had a little white sign that only said "spa" on it in pink letters that, that place was automatically a brothel. Maybe he had even gotten a recommendation about it. Yeah, some guy he sees often on the train, he might have said to check out the place with only a little white sign on Forty-Fifth. And if Alby were to go in there looking for an honest massage and something else was to happen, well, so be it. Jack paid for sex. Hell, he got paid to pay for sex. Alby would just go in and ask for "the works." If it was just a massage then that would be good enough—

a woman's hands on his body. Even as he tried to convince himself it was no big deal he found that he had begun clutching at his chest, his heart was beating so wildly. He leaned forward, and grabbed the door handle.

It was locked. He pulled it again, just to be sure, and then tried pushing it. He wondered how many customers a place like this could service at one time, or if it was just a matter of being "occupied" like an airplane bathroom. He knocked loudly on the door. "Hello?" Maybe the place was abandoned after all. He was about to turn away when he noticed a security camera up above him, with a little red light suggesting it was on. He waived at it and called out again.

A woman's voice, heavily accented, crackled and popped over the intercom, asking Alby what he wanted, and a few seconds later a heavy-set Asian woman who appeared to be in her late fifties opened the door.

\* \* \*

Inside, the lobby was furnished like a run-down kitchen. Badly damaged cabinets whose doors hung loose and lopsided on their hinges lined one wall, while a table and two chairs were pushed up against another, underneath a rotary telephone. Most everything, the furniture, the cabinets, the tiled floor, had been white once, but that was obviously a long time ago. On the other side of a wrought iron security door Alby saw six women sitting on the floor around a television set. The mamasan knocked on the glass and they walked out into the lobby and lined up silently in front of him. They all seemed attentive but unenthusiastic, except for one on the end, who absent mindedly ate handfuls of *Captain Crunch* cereal from out of a box as they waited.

They were definitely sex workers, he thought, but while now he wanted nothing more than to leave, he had the sinking feeling that it was too late. The moment of unthinkable insanity was when he had walked across the threshold. Now, he was trapped. His anxiety, which normally would have kept him out of this kind of situation, was working against him. What kind of a person would he be to walk into a whorehouse and then leave without screwing anyone? They'd think he was a fool.

"I just want to make sure, before I trouble you anymore, that you take *Visa*," Alby, said, ready to walk out the door insisting that he'd been to Oriental massage parlors up down the East Coast and that all of them, all of the good ones, took *Visa*, and what kind of a bush league operation was this, anyway?

The mamasan opened up one of the cabinets and took out an old-fashioned credit card slider and a piece of carbon paper.

"That's good," said Alby. "Because you know, I've been to Oriental massage parlors up and down the East Coast and they all take *Visa*. All of the good ones, at any rate."

The mamasan put a hand on Alby's shoulder and turned him back to the women. He looked them over. He didn't want anyone who didn't look at least thirty. He had already had a run in with a minor, which was more than enough for one day, and so that eliminated two. Of the remaining four who were definitely grown women, the second from the left was by far the prettiest, and while he had never been a john before, Alby knew enough about the world in general to realize she would cost the most and give back

the least. He maybe didn't want to do this, but if he was going to, he ought to get his money's worth.

He picked the third most attractive, a woman in her mid-forties who the mamasan introduced as "Jane," and she escorted him to another room and then left while he undressed. He laid down on the table, positioning the small white towel she left him over his butt. She returned a moment later, now dressed in a pink silk robe that was barely tied closed with a white sash, and which only covered anything so long as she stood perfectly still.

Alby was sweating in his anxiety and this only made him more nervous. She began to rub his shoulders. "Don't be disturbed by the moisture," he said to her. "I just got out of the shower. I think that's only considerate, if you're going to have someone touching your body, to have taken a shower right before hand. That's not sweat, though. I'm not disgusting."

"Oh," she said, in a way that indicated she understood him even less than Mila had.

*Why don't any of these girls know English*, Alby wondered, before remembering it was because they were being exploited by the socioeconomic structure of the early twenty-first century. "Say, and I want you to be honest here," Alby picked his head up a bit and tried to look over his shoulder at her. "This isn't any kind of human trafficking situation, is it? I mean, you haven't been *trafficked*, have you, because if you have then I don't know if I can go through with this. A dollar is a vote, after all."

Jane shook her head to indicate she didn't understand and continued working her way down Alby's back, until she had slipped her hands under the towel and was massaging his rear end.

Alby yepled with surprise. "You probably, couldn't say anything even if you had been," he rambled. "Give me some kind of signal though, a wink or something. I certainly hit a lot of *traffic* heading back into the city today. How about you? How did you find the *traffic*?"

Jane began working her way back towards Alby's head and he relaxed for a moment. Then, as she reached his shoulder blades, she threw a leg over the table and mounted him, rubbing his back and grinding herself on his behind.

"Okay, wow. Am I cheating right now? I'm scared. I don't know what's happening, I..." he rolled to his side abruptly, pinning her leg while knocking her over, so that she went to the ground with crash, like a felled tree.

Alby didn't understand her words, but he could tell from her tone that he was being cursed at. He leapt into his boxers with both legs, as if he was jumping rope. "So I'm going to head out," he said dressing as quickly as possible, "but I thank you for this, and I tip well, and I certainly hope you don't hit any *traffic* on the way home."

\* \* \*

At school the next day Shauna didn't show up for lunch. It was for the best, Alby knew, but he couldn't help but be disappointed. After the especially embarrassing incident at the massage parlor he had sulked all night in front of the television, while Jane sat in front of the computer. He was looking forward to seeing Shauna, for if no other

reason than he needed an ego boost. Instead, he spent his free period stacking desks and chairs along the wall in preparation for his American History class.

In the depths of the department's supply closet he had found an over-sized map of Western Europe along with plastic soldiers and model tanks. Setting up the display took up nearly the entire floor of his classroom, and he intended to use it in order to illustrate troop movements and key battles during World War II. It wasn't the most exciting lesson he had put together, but not every day could be a goddamn parade. The bell rang and he positioned himself in the Mediterranean, looking north, and got down on one knee. He envisioned his students walking in the door and being immediately drawn in by the sight, gathering around him like the coach of a football team he had never played for. Instead, they lined up silently along the far wall and just stared at him. The second bell rang.

"Alright, alright," Alby said, waving them over. "Everybody get down here with me." The class moved over and squatted around him. "Now, prior to the United States entry to the war in 1941..." he looked up. Around him were Joey Slater, whose parents were hoarders and fat little Shannon Flanagan with a lazy eye and green teeth. And right there in front was little Lisa Barnum, wearing a tiny skirt and no panties.

"Everybody up, up, up!" said Alby, leaping to his feet, desperate to close Lisa's legs before anyone else noticed.

What business did a sixteen year-old girl have walking around with no underwear on? It had ruined his lesson. If this had been twenty years ago he would have sent her to the principal's office and had her suspended. Now, no one would care. Or if they cared at all, it would be to blame him for noticing. Little Lisa Barnum. Alby wondered for a moment who she could be fucking, running through a list of students that seemed like they were possible candidates. Which of his students seemed handsome. Popular. Then he thought again of Jack. What would Jack have done in his situation? He wouldn't have gotten her to stand up, that was for sure. He would have done the opposite, dragged the lesson out. He would have found ways to spread her thighs wider apart. He would have tipped off Joey Slater, so the both of them could look and share secret smirks with one another.

*Little Lisa Barnum.* She was still just a kid, right? Even if she was walking around with no panties on, screwing everything that moved she was a sixteen year-old kid and his student and he was her teacher and a thirty-five year-old man.

Alby continued on the with lesson, standing now, pacing, or at least he tried to. He was filled with frantic, nervous energy. He could feel every second of his wasted life passing him by. He had been living a cloistered existence, while all around him the world rejoiced in a reckless orgy of forbidden pleasures.

\* \* \*

The day ended and Alby took stock. He was acting ridiculous. He was man, a grown thirty-five year old man, and he was terrified of some teenage girl's sexuality. This had to be stopped. He fumbled with his wallet. FuckBuddies.com: *Porn with Benefits*.

Alby went to the station as usual that night, but rather than heading back to the city, he boarded a train in the opposite direction, looking for the address on Jack's card.

\* \* \*

Jack's "studio" was in a small, nondescript glass office building that was otherwise empty. Alby let himself into the lobby, past an abandoned security desk, and made his way up a flight of stairs to suite "c." The hallway smelled empty, like fresh paint and carpet fibers and dust. He walked cautiously, taking small tentative steps, past a men's room, towards the door. He could already hear commotion coming from the "set," the muffled sounds of human ecstasy and the throaty howls of a cheering crowd. Alby was shaking. He was about to pass from his world into another, to acknowledge a side of human existence that he had shut out and denied for eighteen years. Every destructive, wanton impulse he had ever had bubbled up inside of him, and threaten to boil over. He bit his lower lip and stepped inside.

The room could have been any generic office he had ever seen, except that rather than being filled with cubicles and desks, water coolers, philodendrons, fax machines, and computers, the only thing inside was a sheet-less bed, to which two burly men with waxed chests and sizable penises were pinning a smaller, third man, while a fourth thrust away behind, fucking the living hell out of him.

"I changed my mind! I don't want to do this!" wailed the man being fucked, tears streaming down his face. This elicited whoops and laughs from the others and caused the camera man to take a few steps forward, zooming in on his face.

"He is *desecrating* your asshole dude! Desecrating it!" shouted the man with the camera, who reached into his pocket and whipped a wad of bills at the man. "Earn that money, dog. Earn it."

Nothing in any LGBT studies course that Alby had taken in college could have prepared him for what he came face-to-face with that night. His stomach heaved its contents up into his throat and he ran for the bathroom, spilling bile and vomit and mucus into the sink. He splashed water into his face and scrubbed at his eyes, as if he could wash away the memory of what he had just seen. Sex and violence. Was that man being raped? He had flown across the country to get fucked, had taken five thousand dollars in exchange for it, and then it seemed, changed his mind. Or had he? Maybe saying he had been raped was all part of the experience. What the hell was wrong with human beings? What had happened between him and Jack and Kelly that night?

"Privet."

Alby turned around. Behind him, Mila was sitting against the wall, mascara and tears streaking her face. She said something to him that he couldn't make out, a jumble of Russian and snuffles.

"I don't understand," Alby said, kneeling down beside her.

She started again, but it didn't make a difference; Alby hadn't learned any Russian in the preceding six seconds. This time it was Alby who was left mute, who could only shake his head slightly in incomprehension, a forced smile on his face.

"I'm sorry."

She reached out and tenderly put a hand on his face. "Alby," she said, in her thickly accented voice.

He stood up. He had no idea who Mila was. He had no idea how she had ended up on the floor of a men's room. But he knew that she had been someone's daughter once, maybe someone's sister, and hopefully someone's lover. He knew that whatever path she had taken to get here was not one that he envied, and that whatever life awaited her in the

future was not one that he wanted for himself. And he knew that Jane was at home, waiting for him, waiting for an apology, that was now three days past due.

## NACH KÜSSEN

Let's say it's been years since your last kiss. No. Well, yes. You kissed Kelly that one New Year's Eve, but even that was probably years ago now. And your last kiss *before* your last kiss? Years again. And now here's this woman, and God help you because she's a *woman*, and it's time for her to get into her car and head back over the Q. But instead she's standing there on the green level of the Temple Street Parking garage, the stench of piss and oil all around you like packing peanuts, and she's holding your right hand in her left and you know, not really from any experience, but because you don't live under a rock, goddamn it, that it's time to kiss her.

\* \* \*

You weren't attracted to Sarah when you first met her. You weren't attracted to her when she hinted that you should ask her out. And well, let's face it, if you were attracted to her on the day you finally did, you never would have had the courage to.

But it wasn't that bad. No situation with that many unknowns could be. You knew her first name. You knew that you had heard her last name but had forgotten it. You knew that she asked you, and you specifically, to help her carry boxes to her car, and that surprised you, because of all the guys standing around that office, all under obligation to help her, you certainly didn't look like the box moving type.

\* \* \*

You suspected she was older than you, but you didn't know for certain. She was shorter than you were, and that was a relief. She was fat, and not in that alluring feminine way, with a big keister and oversized breasts. No, her average-sized chest sat on top of a big beer belly that sat on top of a wide, flat ass. She was built like a snowman. Worse, she was built like you.

Her hair was relatively short, chunky red curls held together by product whose color faded away as they spiraled toward her scalp. Square head. Green eyes. And good skin. Really good skin, and that was a relief because you've always said that if there was only one thing you could control for in your partner it would be clean, clear, porcelain skin.

She was friendly. She was nice. You didn't know anything about her sensibilities, what she thought was funny, if she liked big crowds or secluded beaches but thought you could sense in her the same desperation you felt in yourself. She had a pair of "X"

chromosomes, and a pulse, and that place on the back of the neck where hair fades to soft, golden nothing.

\* \* \*

Standing here, now she is a little attractive, because what ultimately is more attractive than availability? No, not availability. Possibility. Hope.

\* \* \*

Hope had been in short supply, though there were fleeting moments of it. Kelly was your last kiss, but not your last kiss opportunity, because after her was Haley. Haley lived on your floor senior year of college. She was raised an Evangelical, married right out of high school because you don't got much choice when you think even dancing is a sin. And you knew when she showed up at your door, hysterical that after two years she didn't love her husband anymore, that she had chosen you because you were safe; you were harmless. And as much as you hated it you were harmless, because you let her lie there with her face buried into your chest, mouth so close you could smell sleep and hear spit pop when she spoke, and did nothing. Nothing but rub her shoulder with your left hand and let her sleep – the dead weight of her head one of the only things you still know about another person's body.

But you didn't kiss her, because kissing her could have meant one of only two things: taking advantage of a kid more naïve than you were, or being taken advantage of and breaking up her marriage for her, and no way, no way did you want any part of that. No, instead you just let her lay there and tried to appreciate the moment, tried to soak up and store that feeling of, well, unloneliness, and told yourself, promised yourself, that it wouldn't turn to a bitter slush of poison and resentment. Which it of course did, in time.

\* \* \*

You were not hopeful about your date with Sarah as you munched appetizers over drinks. Did you know how old she was because she was kind of thinking you didn't. She insisted that you guess her age and that was a red flag because what kind of person (a psycho) forces someone into that corner on a first date? But you guessed twenty-eight because you thought she had to be a handful of years older than you, and then she laughed wildly and your cheeks flushed. Your big, stupid cheeks that would give away everything about you if they didn't have the same response to everything: shame, lust, heat, cold, pride - all of it red. And when she finally stopped laughing, stopped and told you that she was thirty-six, you were still the one who was embarrassed, as if being thirty-six wasn't something to be ashamed of.

\* \* \*

You have plenty to be ashamed of. You were drunk when you noticed Matisse. Noticed, sensed, perceived, discerned. Without even looking around knew you were the two ugliest, loneliest people on the dance floor. She was badly made up in black lipstick



and eye shadow and quoted Poe between sets at the same local nightclub where you were a regular and she was not. Conversation was forced but necessary. She finished her drink; you went to the bar. Time dragged before the opener and you moved to one of the uncomfortable booths that lined the wall. She confessed to you that she had never kissed anyone. Twenty-one and *never kissed anyone*. And you thought that this was it, money in the bank. There was temptation to kiss her right then and there, but there was a table between you, and throngs of people. *No*, you thought. *Keep your head*. When the crowd spills out into the street, when cold air replaces discord, you'll ask for her phone number and become her first and last kiss.

Standing outside afterward, smoking cigarettes, you met her friend, Tina, a trendy scene queen you recognized as being from around. Tina beamed at the two of you, her pride in little Matisse overwhelming. You kept stealing glances of you and Matisse together in storefront windows. A feeling crept over you, the same feeling you got whenever you caught yourself telling people that your university was *a good fit for you*. There was the suspicion that each of you was more ridiculous in the presence of the other, begging the world to consider you as existing within a sexual context, a context the world would have likely liked to ignore. Time came to kiss Matisse good night and you were too goddamned embarrassed to even try. She took your number and over the course of several weeks sounded increasingly disappointed as you made excuses why you couldn't see her.

\* \* \*

But that won't happen this time. You have no pride left, but don't show it. Be calm. Go with the flow. "Good night," she says and flutters her eyes in a comical caricature of seduction. You lean in with a poker face. No puckering, *Jesus*. You're counting on muscle memory. Some combination of that and mirroring. Your mouth open, no it's closed, but it's not sealed. You try, you try to remember what a kiss feels like, and when you can't, when you honest to God swear on your immortal soul before the Lord can't, the corners of your mouth bank, and now you're bringing a little bit of that frown into the kiss whether you like it or not. You think back to Kelly at that millennium party. Wait, *millennium* party? What year is this? Where did your whole life, your long, dark, kissless youth go?

\* \* \*

What you had perceived as desperation in Sarah made her attractive. Your bitterness has consumed you, defines you. You can no longer know, understand, love anyone who doesn't proudly display a brutal scar across her heart. You had gotten over the fact that she was eleven years older than you. Did it make her look any worse? Did it make the buffalo wings more expensive? No. It did not change these things. But when you found out about her ex-husband it gave you pause. Staggered you.

You rewrote her history to include a diamond ring and a honeymoon and his-and-hers towels. But here she was with you. Divorced, so it wasn't that bad. Years ago, perhaps. Abandoned. Her last kiss more distant than yours.

That is fiction. She described herself and him as “close.” He went to prison. Prison. Convicted of armed robbery, but didn’t commit it. No, committed robbery and just so happened to be armed, because carrying a handgun on your person is the most natural thing in the world.

She wrote a 400-page novel about the death of her mother that her father, well, she shouldn’t call him her father because he’s not, burned on her twelfth birthday – but you’d get into that later. And you thought all of that was creepy as hell, because what kind of back-story *did* this chick have, and why did she delight in telling it? It wasn’t a soulful confession or even bleak, black humor. She relished the detail as if she was gossiping about someone besides herself.

*You’d get into that later.* Later in the story? Later tonight? Or later on in your lives? You realized two things: This woman’s life had been absolutely heartbreaking, and worse yet, she lacked the intelligence to truly appreciate it.

You were now not surprised when she told you she had a child. Disappointed but not surprised. The gulf between you widened. You shrank in the face of her romantic history. Her boys were her life. Her *boys*. And you know that’s fair and right, because parents can live for their children. Children, no, they can’t live for their parents, but parents can live for their children just fine.

You thought of your own empty life and you knew Sarah would never need you the way you needed her. It amazed you to think that by a sheer product of being woman such an ugly little thing could be entitled to so much love, and you hated her, hated all of them. But the moment passed. You knew that if she would have you then that would be enough.

\* \* \*

You tell yourself not to worry about your hands but bam, now you are. She’s still holding your right, so easy, but your left jumps up on its own and tries to cup her face. You order it back down, it dives, leaps back up, and gets caught out, like a squirrel in the road that doesn’t know if it’s more likely to die if it keeps crossing or turns back. It finally plants, fully extended at the elbow, with your hand just above her right breast, like a cop directing traffic. She sways back just a bit and you’re relieved for a moment, having unintentionally put a barrier between you and her, but she looks at you with confusion and now you’re worried about not only your ego but hers too.

\* \* \*

You have no ego left to speak of. All around you people bounce from lover to lover. Pop culture is so sex-saturated you feel you can’t breathe. The air is thick with want and shame. You don’t know what’s real and what’s a pretense. Just what is normal anyway? You couldn’t possibly be a freak.

But maybe you are because maybe if there were other people like you around they might make a little noise about it once in a while. And maybe if there were other people like you, Microsoft wouldn’t underline “kissless” as if it wasn’t a real word.

You wonder if something is wrong with you. There are plenty of things wrong with you. The list is never far from your thoughts. That said, you puzzle at how you are

still worth less than the sum of your parts. You tell yourself that even if all your worst fears are true, that if you are grotesque, the situation is still not that bad. You've been to the *Gourmet Buffet*. Sat for sometimes near an hour and watched Darwin come undone. Pair after pair of them, male and female, march in together as if God had commanded Noah to build a second ark filled with t-rex and Neanderthal and sphinx and then hurled the whole, hideous thing into the darkest part of the deepest ocean. You sit there and you judge them and you wonder if the problem isn't that you aren't even uglier on the inside.

\* \* \*

God be damned. Darwin be damned. A larger force has brought you Sarah tonight. A naked manifestation of the will. The human desire to survive, to transcend, to reproduce. You will not let this by; you will not mess this up.

You're aiming for the top lip. Top lip to top lip. That's the contact point. You just want to be there. You'll be there and she'll respond and then you will respond back. And hopefully, by grace or luck, your mouth will find its way.

You wonder what she will taste like because you can't remember that either. Solient green. The taste of people. Lying in bed one night three months ago, you ran your tongue along your wrist but it didn't taste of anything at all, leaving you to wonder: is that how people taste, or is it a weird thing where you only don't taste yourself?

You didn't get a chance to taste Kelly all those New Year's Eves ago. You barely knew her, asked her in a way that was all at once too formal, too facetious, and too sincere. She was beautiful. She was easy. She had sharp features and dark eyes. She was as nice as she looked mean and when that ball finally dropped she leaned in and kissed you the way you remember your grandmother kissing you. It doesn't even count, but you let it because if it didn't count, if doesn't, there's nothing at all, no bridge, no boundary between you and that infinite stretch of time between the omnipresent now and the one true, great love of your life.

\* \* \*

Sarah's face is so close you can feel the intake of her breath. You wish you were thinking something romantic but instead you find yourself wondering if a twelve year-old really could write a 400-page novel, and if so, why would her father burn it? *Unless he had killed the mother?!*

That train of thought is derailed as your lips meet. Your mouth doesn't respond quickly enough and for a second she sucks hungrily at the outside of your face. Your timidity is present, vulgar but only for a moment. Your left hand, your traffic cop hand, grabs her shoulder and pulls her towards you. You let go with your right and bring your arm up around her waist and simultaneously step in towards her. The tables turn, she pivots and moves back, and you press her against the door of her car. Thoughts fade and if you are aware of anything it is only how the endless ramble of words – what you typically understand to be you – are gone, and yet you still remain.

She tries to come up for air, and you panic, realize you missed it, so you dive in once more, this time consciously making memories. The scrape of teeth, the give and

hold of her flesh, the subtle taste of the booze she had drunk present but not nearly so much as art would have you believe. You end the kiss but linger for a moment and let your nose run along her cheek as you pick up your head, the scent of perfume or soap, maybe with cucumber, competes with smoke and city and exhaust.

And you smile. And she smiles. And these are big, stupid smiles and you laugh and when she asks why you say you don't know, but really it's because you're surprised at how something as simple as a good kiss can salvage such a bad date. You still know that you are barely older than her nineteen year-old son (nineteen!), and are vaguely aware that somewhere in the future lies a meeting with her ex-con, ex-husband but you let all of that go for a moment, because the moment is good enough.

\* \* \*

You kissed Deanna for the first time, you kissed anyone for the first time, when you were twelve. It was in her mother's living room, just before Halloween. Her mother had decreed that you should have to leave as soon as *Young Frankenstein* was over, and when it ended Deanna crept surreptitiously back over to the VCR and rewound the final few scenes. And then it happened again, and after the third time, with the house dark and silent and with your whole life still before you, you kissed her.

Though you remember the circumstances you don't recall the details. Nor do you recall the details from the thousands of kisses that came between that one and the final one, years later as she left your hometown for good. And while you can remember that day, you remember the strange emotional quiet and the gnawing heartbreak, you don't remember the goodbye kiss at all. You only remember that it happened, and that then she was gone. And strangely, you remember looking forward to your future as well, because as far as you knew it was all so easy. You had no idea.