

Incredulities and Inconsistencies

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This thesis titled
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ABSTRACT

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Incredulities and Inconsistencies is a collection of short stories that all take place at parties, many of which offer cads as the main characters. The critical introduction deals with how the voice of certain fictions relates to the idea of clichés, specifically in works by Philip Roth, Martin Amis, and George Saunders.

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Voice and Cliché: A Critical Introduction

Some weekend when I was about thirteen I sat next to my dad in our kitchen as he ate his lunch. We chatted. He said something to me. Something like, “I have a number of things to do today.” I said something back to him. Something like, “Is it a small number?” *Something like*, because it is not so important what was said, but the kind of thing that was said. These, the *bons mots* of my adolescence: The intentional misunderstandings. My favorite category of my unrelenting sarcasm. I was an indefatigable smart ass and he told me then, setting his sandwich back on his plate, interrupting his bite, “Zachary, you’re going to have to find a different way to communicate.”

I am twice as old as I was then, but my communication tactics, while perhaps more harmonious than at the time of this anecdote, are not significantly different. My jokes, I hope, are funnier, my misunderstandings more erudite, my sarcasm more pointed.

Sometimes I wish I could be more openly emotional, but I tend toward the ironic. When listening to someone speak I catch myself clutching at ways in which to pun on what has just been said. However, this does not keep me from being a good listener, if only out of a desire to be polite. Indeed, politeness has been important to me for most of my life even as my sarcasm grew along a J curve, even as my puns dabbled in vulgarities. Though not what I consider my defining sensibilities, politeness and bawdiness represent ways in which I relate to the world and inform my thesis, too. An attention to detail in diction and syntax, a self-awareness that is inherent to civility derive from the boy who charmed most of the moms working concession stands in Little League. Today I apply

these linguistic traits to the cads that make up many of the protagonists in *Incredulities and Inconsistencies*.

The self-aware writing and rakish characters go together. Beyond any thematic or narrative interest I have when writing, I am foremost concerned with the voice of the story and the voice of the character. This is where I begin. I am most insecure about my stories being boring and the way I usually end up combating this is with extensive descriptions and observations. Those observations and descriptions that I find the most interesting to write come from the point of view of anxious, superficial men doing battle with some question or in quest of sexual fulfillment. While the characters are idiosyncratic, their problems are often the stuff of cliché, such as sexual obsession or the hyperbolizing of superficial concerns. I aim to both satirize and create empathy for these men. These clichés not only present an interesting conflict of character when fleshed out with particulars and complications, but because they are inherently broad, they allow for an exaggerated approach to the pursuing action. This is the case in the novel *Portnoy's Complaint* by Philip Roth, which uses comic absurdity and melodramatic emoting to help create the voice of the protagonist. The tilt-a-whirl nature of his sustained hysteria allows for the onslaught of bared emotions that make up the novel's proceedings.

Alex Portnoy, the main character of *Portnoy's Complaint*, is fully aware of his status as a cliché. He says to his doctor during the extended monologue that comprises the entire work, "Doctor Spielvogel, this is my life, my only life, and I'm living it in the middle of a Jewish joke! I am the son in the Jewish joke—only it ain't no joke! Please, who crippled us like this? Who made us so morbid and weak? Why, why are they

screaming still, 'Watch out! Don't do it! Alex—no!' and why, alone on my bed in New York, why am I still hopelessly beating my meat?" (36-37). Alex's frustrations stem from his inability to enjoy a sex life free of the shame he associates with his kibitzing parents and their pervasive Jewish guilt. He is a joke. He is a cliché, but instead of limiting his character, this aspect serves as the foundation for his appeal. The struggle for much of the novel is how Alex tries and fails to break free of that cliché and the pain it causes him to recognize the limits of his capabilities. "Because to be bad, Mother," he yells in apostrophe, "that's the real struggle; to be bad—and enjoy it! That's what makes men of us boys, Mother" (65). This is key to the voice of the novel and of Alex. He is overwhelmingly sincere and pitiable in his ingrained doom. He feels acutely, yearns painfully, and takes his pleasures guiltily. Alex lives in a state of extreme emotional response.

Alex is also, of course, vulgar. But his vulgarity has the self-awareness of a penitent who wants desperately to debauch. Alex describes his inability to "control the fires in his putz" (51) as a way to illustrate the lack of jurisdiction he maintains over his own body and his inability to mature from the fifteen-year-old boy who realized while holding a three-ring binder over his erection that "every girl he sees turns out (hold onto your hats) to be carrying around between her legs—a real cunt. Still can't get over the fantastic idea that when you are looking at a girl you are looking somebody who is guaranteed to have on her—a cunt. *They all have cunts*. Right under their dresses. Cunts—for fucking!" (102).

Were this to be the thirty-three year-old Alex commenting in this way on the female anatomy, the effect would not be the same. From that age, the vulgarity would be oppressive. But because this is a boy of fifteen, the sentiment has sincerity and is more than simply a string of dirty words and reductive metonymies. It is instead a paroxysm of discovery. The use of the word “cunt” then becomes crucial to force this understanding to the forefront. Alex is rapturous. This forbidden thing (which he terms in the most forbidden way) is right there in front of him, wherever he looks. With such candor, the obvious takes on a new significance. Alex may be an asshole, he may be a misogynist, but he doesn’t take any of it lightly.

Besides the suffering that his desires cause him, another reason it is difficult to dismiss Alex for his licentiousness are the sheer acrobatics of his depravity. Masturbation permeates his early youth, but Roth gives us such wonderful details of his fantasies and the humiliations that constrain them as to deliver those scenes beyond the threshold of the banality of common crudity. In perhaps literature’s *ne plus ultra* in onanistic desperation, Alex uses his sister’s bra, strung from the bathroom sink to the door knob, to better imagine “LEONORE PAPIDUS’S ACTUAL TITS” while hearing this garment call to him “Oh beat it, Big Boy, beat it to a red hot pulp,” and his mother, under the impression he is undergoing a fit of diarrhea, demands to see what he has evacuated into the toilet while his father complains of his own inability to move his bowels (21). In this passage and many like it, Roth displays a sense of how much of too much is just enough and creates absurdities that justify themselves by the stunning breadth of what they encompass.

In many ways, this novel served as a direct template of style for my story, “True to Your Heart.” Specifically, both texts present their characters, despite their own reservations, without apology. I am a great admirer of fiction that presses events toward absurdity and that is what I hope to have achieved in this story. The protagonist, Douglas, makes clear from the get-go that his only goal is to have sex with Alicia. The plot is a stereotype: boy wants girl, girl is interested in another boy, boy is heartbroken, he strives to win the girl despite the odds. In this sense I see the story very much as an anti-romantic comedy, and the clichéd plot is a key component of the voice of the story and of Douglas. The clichés create a tension between themselves and the sincerity and vulgarity with which Douglas navigates the hurdles of the narrative. For instance, he narrates at one point that, “I feel so strongly about getting laid, it means so much to who I am as a person that my sense of moral character has blue balls.”

Sincerity keeps Douglas from disappearing behind his dubiousness as does his humility. He describes his competitor, Barry: “His smile made me squint. He shook my hand and I lost my balance. He smelled like a leather flower. What a man. Even his hair looked strong.” And soon after, “God, I want to hate him so hard. I want to hate him so hard, but he’s just so fucking cool.”

Martin Amis employs a similar technique in his novel, *Money: A Suicide Note*, whose protagonist, John Self makes Alex Portnoy look like Tipper Gore. At a strip club John asks a young lesbian, hired as the scriptwriter for the movie he will be directing and on whom he has an aggressive crush, “Can you see ok or would you like to sit on my face?” (174).

The novel features the character, Fielding, who is a foil to John, a caricature of consumption. In an early scene they play tennis. “I should have realized,” John narrates, “that when English people say they play tennis they don’t mean what Americans [referring to Fielding] mean when they say they can play tennis.” After a few sets of getting stomped he continues, “I kept wanting to say: [...] Do you mind if I stop? Because *I think I might* DIE if I don’t.’ I didn’t have the breath. After five minutes I was playing with more or less a permanent mouthful of vomit. It was the slowest hour of my life, and I’ve had some slow hours” (36-37).

John’s abjection is ridiculous but painful (if only physically) at the same time. This helps to keep his plight, not moving, but involving, the same as with Douglas in “True to Your Heart.”

Another way I seek to allow for the overblown narrative voice and character in “True to Your Heart,” is through the setting. It is parodic, containing a souped up combination of Applebees and Longhorn restaurants. Much like the gender-swapping, Hooters-send-up, Joysticks, in the George Saunders story, “Sea Oak,” everything here is vulgar and helps create a place for the fantastic narratives to exist. From the beginning of “Sea Oak,” we recognize that this is a world like the one we know, but heavily skewed in certain ways, and the setting has a great deal to do with the tone of the story and the plot. The narrator looks on at the crowd of silly, middle-aged women waiting to choose their server: “Does she want me to be her Pilot? I’m hoping. Inside the Spitfire is Margie, who says she’s been diagnosed with Chronic Shyness Syndrome, then hands me the [camera] and offers me ten bucks for a close-up of Thomas’s tush.

“Do I do it? Yes I do” (91).

In the world of this story, not only does Joysticks exist, but a woman who describes herself as chronically shy is still forward enough to make this request. By starting this way, Saunders legitimizes his reality TV parodies as well as a character’s return from the dead. While not literally true, the satire exposes cultural truths. The customers at Joysticks are clichés because they reduce themselves to such through their behavior and expose American male inanity through hyperbolic characterization.

The actions of the characters in “True to Your Heart” exist in a similar kind of exaggerated setting. The setting, in part, allows for the characters’ behaviors and for the tone and content of their conversations. The boorishness of their thoughts and inclinations come out in their actions in the same way that the more risible aspects of chain family restaurants are exaggerated in a deadpan manner. Douglas tells his friend Ezzy about his desire to have sex with Alicia, the “lust of [his] life:”

I’ve never felt this strongly about anything before. I can’t sleep. I eat all the time. I see her when I close my eyes, completely naked, doing all the most wonderfully vile things. This feeling. It overwhelms me sometimes. And now, I’m about to lose her forever. I wish I could make her mine, if only for one sleazy hour in a cheap motel room. I just want to see her naked. That’s all. Jiggling around a little. I can do the rest. If she’d just give me that, maybe I could be happy.

This sentiment is overblown its sincerity and in its vulgarity, and certainly fits his character and the setting.

I wanted Douglas to get the girl in the end because he has been true to his heart and left it up to her. She accepts, which is predictable. The terms under which she accepts possess the novelty. Douglas is a kind of twisting of clichés: the unrequited lover transplanted into a sex-obsessed libertine. His feelings may be reprehensible, but like Alexander Portnoy, he means them all painfully.

Being true to your heart (and the paradox it creates) interests me. In “The Barber’s Unhappiness,” by George Saunders, the main character, the barber, is a superficial man with little to offer in ways of looks. What Saunders does well in this story is to present a character who does not seem to deserve happiness and portray him in such a way that his caddishness becomes pathetic, leaving him if not sympathetic, then at least pitiable.

The superficialities and fantasies the barber thumbs through are funny for the same reasons they are dramatically pressing. This man makes us work to care about him, but his shortcomings are rendered in such vivid details that they engage the reader. Saunders often goes on too long, but he never goes too far.

[The barber] ogled old women and pregnant women and women whose photographs were passing on the sides of buses and, this morning, a woman with close-cropped black hair and tear-stained cheeks who wouldn’t be half bad if she’d make an effort, clean up her face a little and invest in some white tights and a short skirt maybe, knee boots and a

cowboy hat and a cigarillo, say, and he pictured her kneeling on a crude Mexican sofa, in a little mud hut, daring him to take her, and soon they'd screwed their way into some sort of beanfield where some gaucho guys played soft guitars [...] (91)

The fantasy continues, progressing through details more specific and bizarre until the barber begins to consider the practical constraints of "how could he meet her? He could compliment her hair and ask her out for coffee" (91). The nature and specificity of these details force the reader into dealing with the sincerity of the barber's feelings. The conundrum for the reader is the discomfort of such a despicable man who wants very much not to be better, but to be happy. His tastelessness is so ingrained that it almost goes unnoticed by the reader, and certainly by the barber. But it is definitely there, as evidenced in the final moments of the story. The main action concerns the barber's relationship with a young woman, Gabby, who would be completely out of his league except that her body, he says, is too big for her head. She is interested in him for reasons that aren't clearly explained, fomenting the barber's insecurities, insecurities that temper the less palatable parts of his personality. The final note of the story is quietly triumphant as the barber approaches Gabby on the sidewalk for their first date and, seeing her in unflattering clothes, wants to run. But he doesn't. "It wouldn't be easy. It would be hard work," he thinks, convincing himself to stay (172). And in what might normally be a moment of epiphany in another story where the barber would grow up and recognize that everyone has flaws, is here merely a continuation of the character we saw dreaming about

Mexican sofas. Appalled equally by her appearance and the thought of not having her, he consoles himself by imagining himself as her workout coach, shooting her straight, slimming her down, and her thanking him for his frank assessment and help. He has remained true to his heart down to its wanton core (172-73).

I attempted to create a similar discomfort in “Golden for Sure,” which begins as a lark about a man, Jim, who becomes carried away with getting a workmate of his to laugh at a particular joke he told for which he received no reaction. As the story progresses, though, the joke narrative serves as a framework for a story about a man who spends so much time reminding himself that he loves his wife that he does not notice having to do so anymore. The discomfort is due to his complaints being largely superficial or framed within the ridiculous.

Jim worries that his wife is fat, but the style of the story and his narration show him to be experiencing a crisis that goes beyond the merely superficial. He is concerned about his wife’s appearance and attitude, but also about what it signifies regarding his life. She is dutiful and he loves her, but the story leaves open why that is the case. She doesn’t seem to excite him anymore, and much of the time Jim acknowledges to some degree that this is ok. His hamburger monologue speaks to this. In it he pays his wife the most unromantic of compliments, however, that he should feel this way is romantic. He understands that romantic love fades, but what is left over is worthy and perhaps better than the exciting first flush.

Of course, this is not a romantic story because we don’t really believe Jim. Throughout the narrative he tells himself stories about how much he loves and

appreciates his wife, but is interrupted by currents of doubt and distaste for her body and attitude. Perhaps she doesn't understand him; perhaps he is being unreasonable. Though Jim's worries are played for laughs, and though they are clichés, they are real worries that give him real pause. The joke here is how often he makes superficial observations. For instance, after trying to quell a disagreement between his wife and dinner guest, Jim takes note of his wife's legs. "She crossed her legs at the knee. The top one stuck out to the side since they were both pretty big legs." The language puts the observation clearly inside Jim's head, hinging on the word, "pretty," which marks his observation as sincere, but also insidious.

By the end of the story, Jim thinks that maybe he could do better than his wife. He is in a clichéd scenario, but because of that he can wrestle with his acknowledged doubts and insecurities in a darkly comic way. He is a cad, but the story asks what makes him so. Is it wrong to have these thoughts? Does that alone make him a bad person? In many of these stories in *Incredulities and Inconsistencies* there is the question of how much agency a person has over his/her feelings, and the stories track the characters as they struggle to come to terms with what it means if they really are not likable people.

When I say that I lean toward irony, I mean it. When a character says or thinks something rude or outrageous, my hope is not only that it satirizes that thought or elocution, but also the idea that it is something to be satirized. When Douglas, in "True to Your Heart" discusses Alicia's "brain tits," it is, like Alex Portnoy's revelations about the female anatomy, part of a parlance of prurience that is at once deserving of outrage and consistent with the characters who give voice to it. In part, this idea falls in line with

what strikes me as a continuum of what is socially allowable in terms of taboos. First, and the most forgivable, there is a thought, then an inclination, a desire, and an outward expression of that feeling. It is one thing for Doulas and Alex to feel these ways, but the frank expression of those feelings, the simple act of voicing them, seems reprehensible. It is that voice I want to explore in my characters.

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Sucking Air

It's catching. There. Right here in the back of my throat. The saliva isn't coating all the way down and it sticks when I swallow, like some little hand clawing at me on its way down into my stomach. Like I forgot to take the toothpick out of the pieces of sausage I keep picking up as a way to look occupied. As a way to keep me from thinking that everyone here assumes I showed up just to see Jenny. This is happening a lot, this catching. Because it's hot in here. It's hot and I've still got on my blazer to make me look nice. To make me feel nice. But I don't feel nice. I don't even look nice. I hate camelhair. I hate camels. I hate deserts, especially the one that's growing along the inside of my neck.

What I'd like is a glass of water. And a coat rack. What kind of party is this with a bed as a place for a garment? The BYO Children is bad enough. Perhaps Albert's kid, what's his name, over there could fetch me a quick drop. That's all I want right now. That and I wish there were more thinking before talking since what happens otherwise is I get stuck next to Ned Poindexter who's talking like he's breathing through his vocal cords. I get that. I get breathing. I would even encourage it except that it creates a situation like this one.

I could go to the bathroom. Maybe. Yeah, I could get a drink of water there. It's closer than the kitchen and I wouldn't have to pass Nicole on the way over. Nicole, who is still talking about what things really mean to her and that thoughts are the children of feelings and light is time's way of making sure we're ok and "How sometimes," she says,

“I just think that art is the answer. That love is what heals everyone, but that would be impossible without art. Because all thoughts are beautiful.”

“Nicole, you can’t seriously believe that,” Larry and his gray wool pants tell her after having made the decision to be interested.

Nicole locks in. “Oh, I seriously believe this more than I seriously believe you or me. I can’t be not serious.”

Larry ponders what he’ll say next, I observe, not because he is serious. Not because he wants to get his point across. But because this woman is not his wife, she approaches remote attractiveness, and alcohol is the most amazing drug in the world. It creates times like this when he can ignore everything else around him like how weather is not art and how dreams are not the keys to unlock our souls and how viciously thirsty I am and how hot it is in here.

I don’t understand these people. Why can’t they just open a window? I can’t be the only one. Do they not feel what is going on? And this music. Jazz? Please. None of you listens to jazz except every few years after seeing something on PBS and thinking, there’s so much to do...we’ve got to start living up to our potential. It’s not too late. This year we’ll go to a film festival. Write a poem every week. Really get worked up and actually do something about minority rights. But just to show we’re not past it, they think. Just to get us on the right track we’ll start listening to jazz. That’ll be cool. Yeah, we’re not so old. We have some of it left. A lot, actually. And now we can have people over like we used to do back in college. And we’ll talk about things like we’re excited to be saying them. Put out little finger snacks and alcoholic drinks because we’re grownups,

actual adults, so then we get can get to a point where we don't all feel so achy and burdened with responsibility. So to set the mood, to get things going since it's hard now, we all understand (right guys?), to get comfortable, to justify leaving the house, we'll put on a little smooth, cool jazz. And talk about NPR. It'll be perfect.

For the sake of Christ, I haven't tried so hard and looked so desperate since a stretch of a week back in 11th grade when it was my sole purpose to convince Tonya Lornton to get naked in the same room with me. A skank, sure, but that was the point.

I saw her a few years later out on the street and talked to her for a full ten minutes before I put it together that her fishnets, hot pants, and eye liner weren't trashy, but professional. She told me 50 bucks plus the room for anything normal I could do in an hour. I rubbed my eyes and thought I would have paid twice that had she made the same offer after prom. Jenny didn't think it was so funny, this run in. How immature of me, she said. So serious with all her information about the cold, hard atrocity of prostitution.

Now Tonya, though, would have been an interesting party guest. Instead of Poindexter here, who treats conversation like he's giving a lecture. Like I don't have something to add every once in a while. He has moved on from describing how a Nebulizer works to now giving all the details of his recent colonoscopy.

"My concern," he says, and he's not even whispering, "was whether or not the blood actually was *in* the stool or streaking the outside of it. You see, I couldn't tell the difference, so I was scared stiff from the beginning." And then chortling, "As you can imagine."

Of course I can imagine. I have a goddam imagination. That's what it does. The general concept is already pretty familiar to me and pretty unpleasant too as I can't help glancing down at my sausage hors d'oeuvres.

"Actually, as far as the procedure itself was concerned, the bowel prep the day before was the worst part. Two weeks worth of laxative in six hours." And he's not even whispering. "I've had the runs before, but this was an all out sprint. In the end, though, all it turned out to be was what the doctor called an 'anal fissure,' which, actually, isn't so bad as it sounds."

Really? Cause it sounds pretty fucking gross. And listening to this should be worth way more than fifty dollars for the hour I have spent doing so.

"Of course, there were jokes at the office, you know, about the buggery. But a small price to pay for a little piece of mind."

He pauses long enough so I can finally say, "Sorry, Ned. Don't mean to cut you off, but I have the littlest hint of a tickle right here and I fancy a glass of water. So if you'll—"

"Oh, you do? You might be coming down with a case of the strep. Careful now that you don't have anyone to look after you." Ned waits for a laugh he doesn't get. His smile cinches up, lips zipping together. I let him suffer. He has a knack for gaffes. "Oh. Anyway, I mean that I should know. Donna just got over it. Had to miss a week of school." Then, making a real go to raise the camaraderie up a notch, he says, "But she said the cutest thing about toad stools the other day. Seems she was confused about their droppings. At her age though. So precious. You can imagine."

“Indeed. I barely have to. You describe it so well—”

“Oh, Madison.” His face is a firework and I use the distraction to stand up off the leather couch in the time it takes Ned to snatch up his kid. “Over here, honey. Come say hi.” Madison’s out of breath from the exhilaration she feels to have been away from her father and immediately begins to look as bored as possible in hopes she won’t be kept long. I’d tell her I’ve been trying the same thing, but I figure she might be able to take my place. Instead, she looks at me with her finger in her ear, burps, and walks away.

. . . .

“There you are, you old sir!” Daniel, another of my former workmates, is wearing a bow tie with a v-neck sweater. The sweater is too close to his chin, forcing the extra material around his collar to buckle. His cheeks are covered in pock marks, which he has done his best to cover with hair. His glasses glare back my reflection and I realize that even though he just referred a potentially lucrative client to me, I’m still not thrilled about being so close to his face.

“Stag, again, I see,” Daniel says. “Heard about that one. Sticky. Hey, not so bad with the stems sauntering around in this crowd.”

I can’t tell if he’s serious. “Actually, we ended it pretty well. Matter of fact, I’m surprised—”

“No bother,” he says. “I do love to get out and see a skirt or two.”

The bathroom is twenty feet away and I think the door might be closed. The kitchen is guarded by a throng of knuckleheads along with their children and I’m jack-knifed between Daniel and an end table. I need to plan my positioning more carefully

since I am incapable of excusing myself from any kind of chit-chat. I had thought Jenny might be here. It's been long enough.

"Something, this Middleton in the paper, don't you think?" Daniel says.

It is. I just read about it this morning. And the election's coming up, I think to say, but am distracted. This is the sort of juvenile behavior Jenny would have accused me of, this Middleton business. She could really be quite unfair. Thinking about things just from her side. Calling me immature. That there is a "right age" to be a father. Pretty ridiculous. Really quite unfair.

"Tricky stuff, staring in through the woman's window. Won't go over well with the stay-at-homes, I suspect. I've got a man downtown, though. Way he tells it, it's all little more than a bit of peeping tomfoolery. Just some good fun on a few lazy afternoons. And goodness, did you see what he was getting an eye full of? Can't say I wouldn't have done the same thing myself, actually." He laughs. "So what have you been into of late? Seems I never see you around anymore since all that. Any deals? Developments? News?

A beat. What have I been doing?

"I'm thinking of trading some stocks," I say.

"Oh, that's the stuff, there. Capital's capital I say. Interested in interest, that's me. It's a buyer's market, you know. Been doing a bit of day trading on line, myself. That and training our dog. Trading and training. Ha ha. Wife loves the runt, too," he goes on.

"Could barely leave him at home. Like one of the boys when they were young. Never expected her to get all mushy over him. Just a mutt, you know. But damn if that Professor Crumbles doesn't melt my mustache when he comes in and sits for his treat."

Jenny had a dog. *We* had a dog. Used to sit on her lap and we'd all watch *Jeopardy!* This was her way of preparing herself to be a mother, she would say. I should join in. Feel how good it was to take care of something dependent on you. Never wanted to discuss it outright, though. Just these kinds of suggestions. Drove me nuts. "Jenny and I had a dog," I say and it's out of my mouth before I know I've said anything.

Daniel doesn't notice.

"Did I tell you about my oldest?" he asks. "Just turned 15. Wants to be a doctor. All for it. Make a bit of money. Take care of the old man's what I tell him. Thinks he'll intern at the 911 over the summer if he can." The music stops. I hear the buzzing of the CD player changing discs followed by more drumstick brushes and symbols. "Children sure do put things in front of you. Taught me everything I know. Might think about it yourself. Find the right girl. It's never too late for a man, you know."

No, it's never too late. He's right. I just have to want it. I just need a little break to clear my head, shake the wrinkles out and make another go. Just hunker in behind the ball in my chest and push it free.

"I'm sorry," I almost stutter, "but I have to use the restroom. If you don't mind I can just squeeze through there."

"Certainly, sir. Far be it for me to be the one to keep a man from his monkey. Ha. Old college talk—never get tired of that one. You just be off. I'll go have a word with Ginger over there. See her top tonight, my man? God bless the 60s, I'll say that right now."

. . . .

A few years ago I saw a photo in a nature magazine of a monkey teaching a kitten how to sit on its haunches. Jenny showed it to me. We used to laugh at things like that. Used to joke about which one of our friends would have it on a calendar. Then it was our calendar. This was disappointing. Made us seem so tired. So old. I told her we were headed for stagnancy. At this rate we'd be leaving the house only for work and the grocery store. She disagreed, of course.

Of course. I am reminded of this and our kitchen wall as I look at the sign hanging from the bathroom doorknob spelling out in pastel, rococo letters, "Just a minute and I'll be finished: Your eyes can crinkle, your forehead wrinkle, but you'll have to wait. I need to tinkle."

I turn around and am almost speared in the sternum by the cocktail Jackie Launderers has been holding in front of her all night like she's shaking its hand. A friend of Jenny's from work. It used to be they were always at the same parties. I guess it's been a while.

"My dear heavens." Her laugh is loud like I've just said something funny and she anticipates I will again soon. "I was wondering where you'd gotten off to. I just said to Gloria how it's so nice to see you out. We weren't sure you'd make it after...well, anyway, she told me about what a great new job you got. How's it going?" My feet are starting to hurt, too. I can't stand on hardwood floors for more than forty-five minutes without feeling it the next day.

"I don't have a new job," I say. "Since I left you guys."

“Oh. Funny. Hmmm. I guess I’ve been hearing so many nice things. It’s so nice to see everyone out like this, don’t you think? She must have said a promotion then...”

“Nope. Not that either.” Jackie is screwing up her face in quizzical bafflement so hard I could open a bottle in between the wrinkles on her forehead.

I help her out. “Gloria got a new job a little while ago and got a promotion just after she was hired.”

“For heaven’s sake, you’re right. She was talking about herself. Well, good for her. She deserves it. I think she’s going to take a vacation or a cruise or something. Maybe down to Mexico,” she says, pronouncing the country like it’s spelled with an “h” instead of an “x.” She laughs again like she thinks it’s contagious and hopes I’ll catch it. She takes another sip out of the martini glass and I see her mascara is thick and clumping her lashes together, making her light blue eyes look like they’ve been dimed out, sent up, and locked away for a long time. She’s just about to lower her glass and I think this is a good opportunity to change the subject. “So, Jackie,” I say, “how’s work? I haven’t been over in a while, of course. Tim still fixing up that old car?”

Jackie scrunches up her eyes like she’s just seen a chick fall down in the barnyard. I am immediately sorry for what I have done. “Oh, sweetie. You know you don’t have to stay away from us. We were all friends. We’re all adults.”

“That’s not. I mean, I’m just making conversation—”

“These things are a mess, I know.” She is either determined or oblivious, but she looks earnest, I’ll give her that much. “But you ever need someone to talk to, you’ve got

my number. And hey, don't feel so bad. It gets better. Sometimes it already is. It just takes a while to see it."

"I really don't think you took my meaning." My head feels like an overinflated basketball. "And, I don't think you really understand the situation."

"Honey. What is there to understand? It's always the same. I've seen it happen twenty times. A real shame, though. I really liked you two together. We all did, of course. No one likes this new guy either."

She has her hand on my elbow and I find I haven't any words for her. This is nothing I want to discuss. And I don't know how to get out of it and I didn't know water was this hard to come by and then, *thank you*, the bathroom door swings open into my back. "Umph," I say. A small boy trods out wiping his nose on his sleeve and then brushes it across my trouser leg. "Scuze me," he says. His clip-on tie is falling to one side, his elastic-waist khakis are twisted in the opposite direction, and I resist the urge, despite everything, to pat his smartly-parted hair.

Jackie excuses herself to me and slips into the bathroom saying, "Good luck on everything, dearheart. Give me a call. Really. Let's go out to lunch. I miss you." She shuts the door.

The boy stares at the untucked half of his shirt before glancing up to me for a moment, looking like he is trying to solve a riddle and says, "My brain is sad." He burps and walks away.

. . . .

Albert, who used to have an office across from mine, is in the doorway on the other side of the room talking to someone I can't see standing behind the wall. It's a clear path over to him and he doesn't look particularly engaged in what he is doing. I thought that once I told his son where he was, the kid would be gone. But he just keeps hanging out next to me as if this is something he's allowed to do. As if his parents never taught him to be a regular kid and hang out with others of his kind. Looking down at him, I have a clear view of the top of his head and what I see confirms my suspicions of parental neglect. I wasn't even aware that someone could have dandruff at his age. He's otherwise unremarkable except for his ability to stare at me while talking, which is creeping me out and making me feel like I have something in my teeth.

"So then this robot walks up out of the thunder pit, picks up a hammer, and starts smashing Trilocon. He exploded into a thousand pieces and flew out into the universe to start new civilizations. I'm drawing a picture of it. Want to see?"

"Uh huh. This was at school?"

"No. It was on a TV show I watch."

"Oh. OK." I don't remember knowing this much about anything as a kid. "You think it's hot in here?" I can tell my cheeks are flushed and I might be starting to feel a little woozy. Who's this new guy Jackie was talking about? When did this happen? Oh, fuck. I bet it's that one she met in the park last Spring. That dog-walker-son-of-a-bitch. With his dead-wife sob story and missed opportunity for a family. She woke me up that night crying and when I asked what was up she said, "It's just so...sad." The man was a *Lifetime* movie in deck shoes.

“...Maybe it’s a *little* hot—But *Xandro*. It’s a great show, but what gets me is why I have to root for the good guys. They always make Testril out to be so great. But he’s just boring. He does cool stuff, but so does Spectroblast and he doesn’t have to worry about saving anything. He can do what he wants. He doesn’t have any responsibilities.”

I had just finished perfecting my fantasy-disembowelment of Walt Widower when I realize that this kid is on to something. What he has said seems to have chipped away at the wall between my brain and my mouth—which right now feels like a mound of pencil shavings.

“I know what you’re saying, kid. I’ve sort of thought the same thing. Social pressures are messed up. Let me give you an example from the real world: I’m allowed to despise criminals, right?”

He nods. The overhead lights are off, the lamps behind the kid’s head making yellow puddles around the room. It looks like a painting you get on a postcard every once and a while from the kinds of people who are here right now.

“Yeah,” I say. “And I can loathe any politician I want. I don’t feel any need to stop hating vegans. So, I’m allowed to hate. This is something I can do.”

He nods again, but warily. I don’t know if he’s following but he says, “OK,” and I keep going.

“So why can’t I dislike children? Why should it be such a surprise? Such a problem? I mean, you’re down there at ground zero. Am I wrong?”

He shrugs and his previous excitement goes completely out of his shoulders. All of the sudden, he looks ten years older. “No. You’ve got a point. I don’t really like kids either.”

“OK. Good. So you see where I’m coming from. But get this. You have to understand what’s going on here. You’re in a different boat. I don’t envy you that, certainly, but I’ve taken the responsibility of recognizing my feelings and so I take precautions. I don’t attend matinees. I keep away from swimming pools. I stay home on Bring Your Daughter to Work Day. I have avoided procreating. But here? Please. Take your kids away from me.”

“I’d rather be at home, too. Actually, I’m missing some TV shows right now. I asked my mom to record them, but it’s not the same as watching when they first come on.”

What’s with everyone assuming I never get out? Even the kid. “Listen. It’s not that I’d rather be at home. I have a life. I mean, sure, some TV shows are good, but my point is that this is a cocktail party. With sport coats. And dresses and skirts. With alcohol. With hors d’oeuvres. Hors d’oeuvres—You know that that means? It’s French for don’t bring your children.”

“I don’t think that’s true.” He’s looking up and to the right, like he’s thinking it over. Considering what I’m saying. So I’ll clue him in. He ought to know. I wish someone had told me. “You know what a kid is, kid? It’s what adults use to trick themselves into thinking their lives mean something. Adults come to a point when they don’t need anything anymore, so they actually *make* another creature that would die

without them. Just to give themselves something to do. It's pretty sick if you think about it."

The kid takes a short step toward the couch and says, "Do you want to sit down?"

My right hip is pretty sore and I say, "Actually, yeah." This little guy's not so bad. If he only had one of those camel packs for water, he'd be just about perfect. "I would love to sit down."

We move ourselves to the couch in the corner. "You should try not to breathe so hard," he tells me. "I do that sometimes and it makes me pass out."

"You're all right, kid. I know your dad and he did better than I thought he would. So, let me tell you something more about kids that I wish someone had told me at your age. Other people would have made a whole lot more sense." He crosses his legs at the ankle and leans back a little. Getting comfortable like he's in for the long haul. "So, sexual attraction..." Wait. How do I put this.

"What's that?" he says.

I haven't been his age in a long time. "Don't they teach you this stuff in school?"

He glances down and fidgets with his glasses.

"Hey," I say. "Are there some jerks giving you a hard time? Is that what this is about? Boy, knowledge is power and never more so than in the locker room for the next four years of your life." Huh. For as much trouble and worry as it caused me, I can't even come close to remembering my first pubic hair. And I looked forward to it like a vacation. When did my voice change? My balls drop? I should have kept a journal. I should have taken some pictures.

“That’s not it,” he says. He looks back up at me and he doesn’t seem as pathetic as when he first came over. He could probably get rid of that dandruff with a visit to the dermatologist. “I’m just curious.”

“Nothing wrong with that. That’s how you got here. How we all got here. All starts with a little curiosity. That’s all it is. You see what I’m saying?”

He moves forward to the edge of his seat, sits up straight. He says, “Does this have anything to do with condoms?”

“No.” But then, something breaks above me and light starts to filter through. “A little. It’s complicated. Let me give you an example. You got a girlfriend or anything?”

He laughs quietly and hunkers down inside himself. “No,” he says and furrows his eyebrows so they look like a couple of ferrets crawling toward the middle of his face.

“Oh come on, kid. We’re just talking. Here. I’ll go first.

“I had a girlfriend a while ago. By the way, you should get the first one out of the way early. It gets a lot easier after that. Except none of them are worth it. But I’m getting ahead of myself.”

The kid brightens like he just remembered where he hid his allowance. I’m nonplussed. “Oh, are you the one who blew it? Yeah. April was saying you were afraid of something, and can never be in a serious relationship until you take a hard look at yourself in the mirror?”

Jesus Christ, this room is a sewing circle. “Yeah. That’s me. But that’s only half of it.”

“And you disappeared for a week afterwards and wound up calling your mother to come pick you up in—”

“Ok. Ok. That’s enough. I think we both get it.” I knew office gossip was prolific, but I didn’t realize it transcended the generation gap. The kid looks more keyed up than when he was rhapsodizing over space creatures. “But listen. It’s not just me. These people you’ve been getting the stories from are a little screwy.”

“I don’t know,” the kid says. “From what I heard, Jenny seems really nice.”

What’s the deal here? This isn’t a party; it’s a half-hearted intervention. Well, they’re all wrong. “Listen, when you came up to me before, I was weighing the pros and cons of a trip to the kitchen because I’m so thirsty I just mistook my own hand for a divining rod. But in my way are at least a dozen people flirting with someone other than their spouses while their spouses flirt with someone other than them.”

“Everyone here always acts weird.”

“You see. It isn’t just me. This is what happens to people. All of them right now are doing their best to fight off middle age and the illusion that they’re not too old to do something stupid and fun and just for them. It’s tacky at the very least. Look at Jacob over there, telling stories about his friend, the rock star sky diver. Listen, everyone already knows he drives an BMW. Pam included.”

“You’re right. Jacob is a tool. Wait, what’s a tool exactly?”

“Sort of like a douche bag who never gets girls.”

“Man, all the kids in the grade above me just started saying douche bag. I don’t know that one either.”

“No matter. They’re all either douche bags or tools. You don’t actually meet anyone worth talking to.” Whoa. Is that true? I think it’s probably true.

“You sound sort of like a guy on one of the talk shows my mom watches. He was afraid of being with one woman because it made him feel like he was hurtling down a car pool lane toward death.” From across the room there’s a series of camera flashes. Pictures of an evening to remember. Arms around shoulders. Big smiles and bleary eyes. Nope. None worth talking to.

“Whoa, whoa. Slow down.” Who said anything about dying? “Let me ask you this, did the guy say that, or did some woman say that *about* him? Cause it’s a big difference. A helluva big difference.” This little guy is good, but I’m going to get the best of him.

“Everyone here has been talking about you and Jenny,” he says. “How you were such a jerk. That you didn’t realize what you had and you need to grow up and now you’re too proud to ask her back. They kept saying ‘misanthrope.’ It seems sad to me. I don’t get it. If you love someone, and they love you, you just get married.”

Goddammit. That’s just what Jenny said. It was like in a movie. A TV movie that we used to hate and she had started to love. Everything we said were clichés. I couldn’t get around them. It was like a maze. Ha. There it goes again. And now she’s shackled up with The Tearjerker of the Week and the two of them are eating Italian dinners like she used to make for me and telling stories about what happened at work.

I still haven’t unpacked my dishes.

“What do you eat on?” the kid asks me. Fuck. Did I say that out loud? I’m losing it. “That’s a good point, kid, about marriage,” I say. My throat is tight and the welling is getting tougher to fight back, but it’s also bringing some much needed moisture to my mouth. “From your perspective that must make a lot of sense. But in the end,” I say. The wall across the room looks like an aquarium, “marriage does little more,” my face is so hot my hair tingles, “than make those afflicted...” I can’t finish. I need a new game plan. I’m about to lose my composure and this house isn’t big enough to hide in.

The kid puts his hand on my forearm and I swear to holy everything this is what children feel like when their mothers pick them up. This kid is some sort of magic. But he’s not beating me. No way. “Let me explain it to you. This is what I tried to tell Jenny, but I could never get it out.” The kid uncrosses his legs and leans forward. He has the slow consideration on his face of a walrus. The wisdom of a kung-fu master. He can’t be of this world. Of this time. I don’t know if I’ve ever felt so at liberty to speak my mind. *So listened to.*

“There is nothing amazing about creating life.” This is helping. I know what I want to say now. “A kid—All a kid is, is a tiny piece of a man sucked into a little drop of a woman that has put in enough time inside her so that it can suck air on its own. That’s it.” I’m starting to remember more. Remember how I waited for the opportunity to say this to her. To rip apart one of her quiet suggestions and put it all on the table. No more immaturity. No more juvenility. Out in the open where it can mean something. Like adults should talk. “Sucking air,” I say to her “Blowing it back out. That’s life. No pleasure. Not even pain. Just sucking and blowing. In terms Walt might understand, let’s

look at it like this, O.K.? An anecdotal example: A daytime movie son has fallen over and hit his head. The parents scream, 'Jimmy's bleeding. He's not moving. Someone call a doctor. Call 911. HELP.'

"This is in every stupid, maudlin piece of television you've ever seen, Jenny. The Emergency Operator says, 'Please calm down. Yes, I'm sure Jimmy had a beautiful singing voice, but I need you to talk to me. I've already sent an ambulance but I need to know something.' And then the big question: They ask, 'tell me,' in their most calming voice, they say, 'I need to know is Jimmy still breathing.' That's it. This mom or dad is worried, terrified, that they will never again share in the joys of the child's laugh. Never delight in a simple report given of a day at school. Never take pleasure in seeing that he has a belly full nutritious food and sleeps easily in a home they've made for him. The question isn't, 'Is Jimmy running around in a field of flowers, grown waist high in summer.' It's not even if the weight the world has begun to settle atop his shoulders so that he yearns to be comforted by his loving parents, parents who make themselves physically sick with fear that he is hurting in a way they can't fix. 'Is he sucking air in and out of his lungs.' That's what they want to know. That's what life is. At the base. At the bottom. Over the phone when it matters most and no one knows what to do except hope and pray over and over again that their little Tiger Claw, their Honeysuckle, the flesh of their flesh is going to be ok, that he will someday recover and be alright and fully healed because how could we live, Jenny, how could we live with anything else knowing that we are responsible for his whole life. Every bit of it. It is none of these things, but only please oh please oh please is he sucking and blowing? Is he breathing in the world's

vapor through the wet holes in his face. Is his tiny chest rising up and down and that's all because it's really the only thing we can work with since I've already told you the ambulance is on its way and they will be able to help, I promise, when they get there because they are trained professionals with know-how and can-do and I'm so goddam thirsty and a whole bunch of other stuff, too, and I really, really wish that at least I didn't have to put the sheets on my bed when I get home. ”

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It turns out getting to the kitchen wasn't as hard as I thought it would be. This kid bulldozed right through and set me up quick with a strong hydrator. I feel much better. Things are clearer. Make more sense. And as junior and I drain the last bit of water from our glasses, absorbing the light breeze coming in from the open door, I catch my reflection in the window above the sink and think that camelhair isn't as bad as I thought and I say, “Actually, kid, if you don't mind, why don't we sit down over here and you can help me write a letter to Jenny detailing what a jerk I've been.”

The kitchen smells like lemon detergent and freshly-baked bread. The light is warm from real bulbs, not the halogens like I've got at my new place. The kid wipes his mouth with the back of his sleeve, the red of the cuff going burgundy with the water. He swallows again and says, “Why do you think she'll take you back?”

String Music

Kirk's mom just put microwave pizza squares on the table in front of us, but I already ate lunch before I came to the party. She says, "They're not Hot Pockets." I tell her I've already eaten lunch and then say thank you. But not because I want to, because I have to. My mom told me to say thank you when she dropped me off. I know but sometimes I forget.

I've never seen Kirk's mom before. He always rides the bus home. She's sitting on the couch watching Kirk and Tony playing video games. They're cousins. They're the same age. I'm watching, too, because there are only two controllers and they haven't let me play. There are no balloons here. On my last birthday in April we went to see *Crash Anderson*. My dad drove me in a go cart, too, but we lost to a bald guy who was by himself.

I don't have this game at home and I want to play it. At home I am allowed to play video games twice a week with my brother.

"Michael, do you and Kirk sit together at school?" Kirk's mom says. I can't remember for a second how I know Kirk. I like school when I am there, but I don't ever like going. Especially after a long weekend. "We're lunch partners," I say. Kirk mostly talks about video games at lunch, which is fine with me. He gets a lot of the good ones. I thought his house would be nicer. Their living room is sort of dark even though the lights are on and it's day time. The TV is sitting on the floor and has wood around it with buttons on the side. The present my mom bought for Kirk is next to me on the floor and I can see that there are long brown hairs stuck in the pillows on the couch.

“Are you sure you don’t want any lunch, honey?” Kirk’s mom says. Kirk and Tony are jerking their arms and moving their shoulders like they’re in a space ship. I feel kind of sad like it’s Sunday, but it’s only Saturday. I want to play this game. “No. I had lunch already.”

Tony dies in the game. He’s next to me and I reach for the controller but he ignores me and starts over. He has a pizza square in his mouth. I can hear him chewing. “Well. There’ll be cake and ice cream later.” I forgot there was a birthday party until my mom told me this morning. We had to get the present on the way over here. She wanted me to help pick it out but she did it anyway.

“Is this a good game?” Kirk’s mom says. “Yeah,” Kirk answers. “Uh huh,” Tony says, but he mumbles it because he has the pizza square dangling from his mouth. “O.K. Well, boys. I’ll call you later for the cake.” Kirk gets smashed, but he doesn’t pass the controller. His mom stands up. She is staring at the wall, or the TV maybe, but she isn’t moving. I think she might say something, because I don’t know why she isn’t leaving but she keeps standing in front of her chair. Her face is younger than my mom’s but it looks older. Her hair is dark down the middle but blond everywhere else and her skin looks like work shoes. Kirk jumps his shoulders up and down like he has a machine gun and his mom isn’t there anymore. There’s a man in the other room. He didn’t say anything when I came in. Kirk’s mom says to him, “Bill, it’s his birthday.” I want the controller.

“Can I play?” Neither of them answers me. I hear the man say, “Christ.” There’s a picture of some wolves on the wall. The carpet is orange and brown and I’d rather sit on

the couch even with the hair, but that's too far from the controllers. "Kirk, when is it my turn?"

"Later. After I die." He doesn't look at me. He has on gray sweat pants and a gray sweat shirt, but they aren't the same gray. He wears this to school a lot.

"You already died." My mom told me to put on my khakis even though they aren't very comfortable. I am still wearing my jacket since I don't want to put it away and lose my turn and it's kind of cold in here.

"Well, it's my birthday, so you can in a little while." It was his birthday on Tuesday. I know because he got a cupcake at snack from the principal. "It's my birthday party. You wouldn't be here unless I invited you." I wish there were three controllers because I know what Tony will say when I ask.

"No. I brought it. You can watch." There's a kid in my neighborhood named Jeffery who is older than me and comes around to play sometimes. Sometimes he's nice but sometimes he's a punk and tells me that I live in a house for retards and that I have training wheels on my bike which isn't true. He'll run away or laugh at me and that's always worse than what he says. Sometimes he just laughs so loud, I know he's faking. I say things to him that he's a punk and is so stupid he can't breathe. But he just keeps laughing and I get so angry that once I threw a wooden coat hanger at him from across my yard. I hit him in the stomach and he lifted me up against a fence and told me never to do it again. But sometimes we play one-on-one or my brother and I draw superheroes with him on my porch even though I don't want my mom to see him there. "That's not fair," I say to Tony.

“You can tattle if you want.” Tony is only a little bit bigger than me and he’s pretty much mean. Most of the time at school he’s my main enemy. He told me at break I couldn’t stand on the side of the room he was on because I was trespassing. I told him he was being a jerk and he said so what, it was his side of the room. Jerks make the rules. I told the teacher. But I didn’t tattle. This was on Wednesday. “I don’t tattle and I don’t want to tattle.”

“I bet you do.” Tony is still looking at the screen. “You’re a goody two shoes. You probably aren’t even allowed to eat here either.

“Hey Kirk,” Tony whispers, but loud so I can hear. “I saw Michael kiss his mom last week before school. Then he said I love you and called her ‘Mama.’”

My heart starts beating really fast and my throat tingles and I want to tell him that I’m going to pop his teeth out, but then Kirk says, “So?”

They both just keep playing the video game without looking at me.

I hear the door open and three men with scruffy faces come in. They all have on coats like the dummies at K-Mart near the fishing poles and two are camouflage. They talk to the man in the dining room about a game. “Birthday,” the man says and I think I hear also that we’ll be out of there soon.

I say to Tony, “Just because you brought it doesn’t mean you make the rules. It’s Kirk’s birthday, anyway.” I hear the men move some chairs and it sounds like they open a bunch of cans all at once. “Can I play when Tony dies?”

“He brought it.” Kirk says. “You can play when we switch games.”

. . .

The dining room at Kirk's has a big wooden table in the middle with scratches on the sides where the brown is lighter than on the other places. My chair is wobbly like I'm in a sea ship trying to find whales to take back for science. My brother and I pretend sometimes that our couch is a ship and he wants to be the captain, but I'm older so I win. I let him be the captain sometimes and sometimes we are nice and other times we wrestle like bandits.

The cake is a circle and it has white icing but I hope it's chocolate cake. The letters spell Kirk, but they're sort of shaky. I don't really care since I just want to eat it. Cake is my second favorite food and my first favorite dessert. Tony is next to me and Kirk is straight across and all of us are looking at the middle of the table.

The men in the living room turn on the TV and one says "You got anymore pizza squares?" Another one says, "Woman's work is never done." They laugh.

Kirk's mom comes out of the kitchen and says she has the candles. She puts them in the cake and asks us how school is going. "Kirk says that your teacher is nice."

"No I didn't," Kirk says. "She's a witch and she doesn't grade fair. She likes the girls more than the boys."

"Maybe that's because they don't call her a witch," his mom says. Kirk doesn't say anything. "Bill," she calls into the other room. The men left their cans here on the table but they're gone now. I like fetching beers for my dad and sometimes I try to shake them up so when he opens them they'll explode, but I get too scared of getting in trouble and just do it a little. "Where is your lighter?" she asks him. He says, "It's with my cigarettes where it always is. Why don't you bring'em to me and how about some game

snacks.” Another one says, “My birthday was last week.” They laugh some more and keep their jackets on.

She doesn’t answer him and says she’ll be right back with milk and we can get started. Tony says, “She’s not a witch. She’s a lesbian. That’s why she gives the girls better grades.” Stephanie told me that when her parents met with Mrs. Tambers, she told them Stephanie was flirting with boys. Mrs. Tambers showed us a ruler once that she used to smack her students’ hands with when she was younger and was allowed. It has all of their names written on it in their own handwriting. She is a witch. But my parents say she’s in charge and I should try to get along with her.

“She’s a lesbo,” Tony says. “My brother had her and said she got in trouble for rubbing girls’ shoulders and showing them her bra.” Tony says some of the girls in our class are lesbians and that his other brother told him that Johnny Templeton is a really a fag even though he has a girlfriend. That is what it says on the bathroom wall, too.

Kirk says to Tony, “What did you bring me for my birthday?”

Tony is sitting on his hands and rocking from one leg back to the other. “I brought that game we played.”

“That’s yours.” Kirk has his fork in his hand with the sharp part down, like a shovel. This is how he eats at school. I like it. He looks like a caveman. My mom saw me in lunch eating a peach half in one bite. She told my dad she was mortified and they laughed about it. She says this a lot when we have company, too.

“That is your present.” Tony says. “You get to play it.”

“Michael brought a present.” I really want to eat that cake.

“Cousins don’t give presents. You only give presents to people you want to make like you. Michael brought a gift card to Video Magic in a bag that looks like it has a Barbie doll inside.”

“Hey. That’s not yours,” I say.

“So what. The bag was gay and I wanted to make sure you didn’t give Kirk a gay doll or whatever.”

Tony is my main enemy mostly because one time after school when the teacher was gone, he jumped on my back and kicked at my legs and said giddy up. I couldn’t punch him because I couldn’t reach and I ran out after he got off, but my mom was standing outside the school so I stopped.

“The gift card is cool,” Tony says. “You can get games there, too. That’s where my brother’s friend works. He steals the older games and he gave my brother a couple of them. You should come over to my house and play sometime, Michael.” He puts his hand on my shoulder and I feel bad because I think he is making fun of me.

Kirk says he will buy the new Fox Fighter game with the card. I tell him my mom picked it out.

Kirk’s mom comes in and says she brought us a special treat. She puts the milk glasses down and starts to light the candles. “Sorry I was gone so long, but the milk is Kirk’s favorite.” There are some streaks of milk on the outside of the glasses and mine leaves a ring on the table when I pick it up to look at it.

“O.K. Here we go,” Kirk’s mom says and lights the candles and we all sing *happy birthday*. The men in the other room start in too at the end and are very loud on the last part. They laugh hard this time. They open more cans.

“I’m sorry Kirk,” his mom says, “I asked Bill to pick up some ice cream but I guess he forgot.” I take a drink of the milk. It’s sweet. I take another drink. Kirk’s mom says, “It has honey in it. This is Kirk’s favorite and he’s the birthday boy.” She smiles and rubs his head like my dad does to me when we watch *Night Runner* and it’s on commercial. Kirk has milk around his mouth and half his glass is empty. “Can I have some more?” he asks his mom.

At school they started giving us milk in plastic bags. They look like puddles, especially the chocolate ones that I’m not allowed to have. My mom says they give kids migraines. You have to stick a sharp straw into a place on one end to drink it. I can’t dunk my cookies anymore, so I squirt as many drops as will fit onto the top of them so it can soak in. It never does because the cookies are too hard, so I balance the cookie flat up to my mouth or the milk will fall off. Stephanie and I have contests to see who can put the most on and eat the fastest.

“Maybe,” Kirk’s mom says, “but you still have some left and you haven’t had any cake yet. I don’t want you to get sick. Remember what happened last year?”

Kirk doesn’t remember what happened last year. His mom starts to tell him, but the man in the other room yells out. I’m glad because I want her to serve the cake and not tell Kirk what he did. I didn’t even know him last year.

“Hey, you forget about those cigarettes, Sweetie?” He sounds like he is smiling. He sounds a little like Tony, too. My dad used to smoke before he had me, when he was young and stupid and wanted to impress the wrong kind of girls.

Kirk’s mom puts cake on the plates and gives them to us. She walks into the living room and says, “You know you can only smoke on the porch.” While she is gone, Kirk eats like a cave man and makes grunts that make Tony and me laugh. I am supposed to eat like a gentleman, but I slide a bite into my mouth without it leaving the plate. Tony doesn’t use his fork. “That’s how they do it in jail,” Kirk says to Tony. “You’ve got to eat your cake first so no one steals it.”

Kirk’s mom sits back down at the table and we all use our forks like we’re civilized. Kirk still holds his like a caveman, but he doesn’t grunt any more. “My dad’s friend was in jail for hitting a cop,” Tony says.

“I bet he deserved it,” I say like a tough guy or a gangster. Kirk and Tony laugh.

No one says anything after that. We eat some more. Then Kirk and Tony start talking about the show *Cops and Robbers* and about different times bad guys got hit in the head. I always eat all the icing on my cake first since it’s my favorite part and I want to finish it before I get sick. Kirk’s mom doesn’t have any cake. She has her hands together in front of her and is moving her thumbs around like she is thumb wrestling against herself. She is looking into the living room straight ahead of her and I see she has tears in her eyes. She is still moving her thumbs around and her fingers are white where they press against each other. She is making me uncomfortable like one time when my brother and I were playing lava floor. We put pillows down and pretended we could only

walk on them to get to the couch and the chairs or we would be burned alive. I pushed my brother down after I got bored and stepped on his leg to get across the pit. But he cried and kicked his leg and wouldn't get up even when I punched myself. I knew I was going to be in trouble but my dad was gone and my mom was in the shower so I had to wait and my brother just kept crying and kicking his leg.

"Why are you crying?" I ask her but I don't know why and I still feel like I'm going to get in trouble. Kirk's mom looks at me like she forgot I was there and smiles and says, "Oh," and smiles wider. Kirk and Tony are looking over at her now. None of us are eating.

"Grownups cry too. You know," she says.

I don't feel like I'm in trouble anymore, but I don't like it. I wish she would go into the kitchen. I want to do my gangster voice again. "Crying isn't something you just do when you're a little kid. You cry your whole life. Even when you're happy, sometimes." She uses her sleeve as a tissue and takes a deep breath like at the doctor's. She keeps smiling bigger and wider but her mouth is pretty small. None of us are done eating yet but she asks us, "Do you want any more cake, Michael? Do you boys?" I say, yes please, even though I am starting to feel sick a little and the cake isn't chocolate and it isn't very good.

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"I'm Michael Jordan," Tony says. Kirk has a basketball hoop in his driveway, but there isn't a net on it and the rim is bent down some. There is a car parked here too so we can't use one side of the court. There are two bumper stickers and the license plate says

“Dstroy.” I want to remember the name for the next superhero I draw. “You’re always Jordan. It’s my birthday,” Kirk says.

“You could be Jordan if you called it.” Tony shoots and it goes in. “Make it take it.” The ball rolls over to me and I give it back to him. “It isn’t your birthday, anyway.” Tony dribbles and picks it up. Dribbles and picks it up. He walks around the outside of the concrete and doesn’t look like he wants anyone else to have the ball.

“Still counts.” Kirk walks over and swipes at the ball, but Tony picks it up and stops dribbling. “You can be Pippen,” he says.

“They’re on the same team.” Kirk swipes at the ball again to try to get it out of Tony’s hands. Tony jerks it away and stops walking. “We were gonna do versus,” Kirk says.

My dad plays in our driveway at night in the summer and I watch him try for three pointers. I like to count down to the buzzer. 3-2-1. When he swishes it, he calls it “string music.” I said, “You could build a house with those bricks.” He asked me where I heard that one. I told him, “Your mom.” He said that I shouldn’t say that. I asked why because I wanted to know what it means and he just said it was rude.

“You be Jordan.” Tony says. “That’s your present, since you were whining about it. I’ll be Barkley.” He starts dribbling again, shoots it and misses. The ball comes to me. Then Tony says to me, “Michael, you’re ref.”

I say, “What?” but Tony cuts me off. “Let’s play Play Offs,” and he takes the ball to the top of the driveway.

Tony checks it, drives in and misses his layup. The ball rolls to me. "That was a foul," Tony says. "I get the ball back."

Kirk says, "What" and looks over at me. I say, "No foul." I keep the ball. It's cold out here and the sky is gray. I only like the cold when there is snow or at Christmas. I don't want to be the ref. "Give it back," Tony says.

"Why do I have to be the ref?" I turn and shoot it from the side of my head and it hits off the backboard and goes in. Tony runs over and grabs it. "Make it take it," I say.

"You didn't call that bank. Doesn't count." Tony walks over to the outside of the concrete again and doesn't dribble. "Plus, refs can't play."

"I don't want to be the ref. I'm Olajuwon." I want to make string music. I want to dog them. I want to set up from downtown and drain a bucket in their eye.

"Olajuwon sucks," Tony says. "He's just tall. You're the ref, we already said."

"You've got the right jacket on," Kirk tells me. "It's black and white."

My jacket is black and white in squares and I don't like it anyway and I want to take it off now, but it's too cold.

I hear the screen door slam and the men from the other room step out onto the porch. They all start smoking and pass each other a bottle to take drinks out of. "Dunk it," one of them yells and they all start laughing again and talking. I don't care about them. I want to cross over and drive into the lane. I want to try my hook shot and sky over them. I want the ball back.

I say, "Make it, take it, Tony."

Tony shoots and makes it. The ball rolls to me again. “Yeah. Give it back,” he says.

“No,” I tell him. I take the ball back over to the car.

“Hey, kid,” one of the men yells, “let’s see a three.”

I dribble the ball. My right hand. My left hand. I can do both. I put it between my legs. I spin it on my fingers. It falls off.

“Globetrotter,” another man on the porch says.

“So, what are you gonna do, just hold it over there?” Tony says. “This isn’t smear the queer.” He walks up to me and stands in front but doesn’t move.

“You’re trespassing,” I tell him.

“What are you looking at?” he asks me.

“Nothing much,” I say.

Nothing happens except my eyes are starting to tear up but I don’t want them to. I don’t think he can see, but one of my legs is shaky and I ate too much icing and then Kirk grabs the ball out from behind me and yells, “Jordan makes the steal and takes it in for an easy lay-up. What a play.”

“Sneaky little shit,” one of the men says.

Kirk gets the ball after it falls and says to me and Tony, “You two chumps just got played.”

. . .

Kirk is sitting on the back bumper of the car in the driveway. He throws the basketball up granny style to the hoop. It hits off the front of the rim and bounces straight down.

“H-O-R-S,” I say.

Kirk puts his hands up to his mouth and blows into them. He can do a whistle that way but not now. “You think we can play HORSES so I might have a chance?” he asks. Tony has H and I don’t have any letters.

Tony dribbles behind his back. He isn’t very good at it, but when no one is guarding him, he’s ok. “We’ll have to play HORSE’S ASS for you to have a chance.” Tony laughs and I smile a little like my mom smiled when I said “shit” to her last year, but then she told me it was trashy, even though she says it too.

“Shut up, man,” Kirk says. He is still blowing into his hands.

Tony takes the ball up the other end of the driveway and looks for a place to put up his next shot. I walk over to Kirk and say, “I like the license plate on your car.”

“That’s Bill’s. He says it makes him look like he’s going faster in his car. He’s built for speed. I have a go cart but it’s at our old house.

“Our old house is a couple of blocks away,” Kirk says. “It’s where my other aunt lives. We still have a lot of stuff there. My aunt used to live in our house. Last month we switched.”

I don’t know if this is true. My mom wants to move out of our house into something that has a little more breathing room now that we have an extra pair of shoes at the door. She told my dad at dinner that she wants him to look at a house she saw in the

paper. She doesn't think he wants to go anywhere but this is a family. My father is a man of contemplation.

Tony shoots and misses. He's pretty far away and it's an air ball. I catch it.

"Call a scout," a man says. "We've got a star."

Tony says to me, "Doesn't count."

"Yes, it does," Kirk says.

Tony says, "Didn't hit the rim. Doesn't count if it doesn't hit the rim."

"Those aren't the rules," I say. Tony told me at school that I was going to be an accountant because his dad told him that was what people did who were too were too stupid to know they aren't smart . He told me that if you have big feet you have a big penis. He told me that if you don't have a girlfriend by the time you're twelve, you're probably gay.

"You talk like Andrew, Michael." Tony comes over and takes the ball back.

Andrew has glasses and wears leather shoes instead of sneakers. I don't know how he talks.

Tony shoots again and bricks. A man across the street gets in his car and starts to pull out of the driveway.

"Who lives in that house over there?" Tony's face is like a rat. He has a long nose and little eyes. Even his teeth are sharp.

"Some old people," Kirk says. "Mom says they don't clean and it stinks over there. She took them something once."

Tony walks over and looks at me, but he talks to Kirk. “You know what it looks like when old people do it?” He takes his right first finger and makes it straight. He makes a hole with his left first finger and thumb. He puts his right finger into the hole really slow and makes a creaking noise. “Like this. They have to stretch first.” Kirk and Tony laugh, but whisper so the men on the porch can’t hear them. Kirk says, “They can use her wrinkles, too.” They laugh even harder. Tony is still looking at me. He says to Kirk, “His penis looks like a turd. Her titties look like this,” and he puts his fingers out from his chest on both sides. They laugh again but Kirk isn’t laughing as hard and Tony says to me, “You don’t know what we’re talking about do you?”

I say, “Yeah.”

But he cuts me off. “You don’t even know where it goes, do you? You probably think he puts it in her butt.”

I say “No.”

But he cuts me off. “I bet you’ve never even kissed a girl. If you want to. You ever kissed a girl, Michael?” Tony is close to me. He says, “Your mom doesn’t count.”

Kirk has the basketball and he says, “I kissed Stephanie last week. She asked me to do it with her. I touched her butt, too.”

Tony says, “You’ve got to get started, Mike.” He puts his hand on my shoulder like before. “You’re going to need to get going pretty soon.” He walks over to Kirk, who isn’t very far away and I can feel my ears are hot. Tony says to Kirk, “Michael’s parents did it.” And then to me, “Your parents did it. That’s how you were made.” He’s laughing at me but he’s looking at Kirk. “Your parents screwed each other. Your parents probably

do it a lot and you can probably hear them at night after you go to bed.” This time my tears are like Kirk’s mom’s and I don’t care if it happens all her life. I hate it. My mom picked me up from school early one time when I was a little kid but I had to go to the bathroom before we could leave. I was sitting on the toilet and I had the toilet paper in my hand and some boys came in and starting pulling on the door. There wasn’t a lock, so I had to hold it shut with my hand and my bottom was still dirty and I couldn’t at get them. I wanted to yell but I didn’t. I didn’t know who they were, but I knew they were older. They went away and my mom tried to find out who they were because I was still crying when I got out of the bathroom.

I’m not a crybaby.

“Look, Kirk. He’s crying. The crybaby is crying just because his parents made him.” I’m not a crybaby. I don’t want them there. I want to tell Tony he’s mean but he knows that anyway and I don’t understand why my throat is wet and my eyes hurt and I want to tell him I hate him, but he doesn’t care. I want to tell him he’s ugly, but he doesn’t care. I want to tell him I’m not a crybaby, but he doesn’t care, and I want to tell him things I can’t think of, but I can’t think of them, and I want to hit him in the stomach and I do.

Kirk stands there and looks at me. My hand is still next to Tony’s stomach and he is bent over and not moving. No one says anything for a long time. For a long time it seems like I have my hand in Tony’s stomach and we’re going to have to live like this. Like we will go to school together and sleep in the same bed and take showers with each other but then one of the men on the porch says, “You gonna take that?”

“Yeah,” Another one says. “You gotta fight back.”

Tony is standing up now and his face is scrunched on one side. I want to leave.

“You boys need to finish this out. That’s how it works,” the first one says. “Don’t be a wuss, Tony.”

I don’t know where Kirk is. I can’t see him and I can’t turn my head. Tony looks blurry. He is looking away from me, at the porch. He says, “Shut up.”

“If you’ve got a pair, let’s see ‘em.”

“Shut up.” Tony is really mad. He’s crying now too. I want to leave.

“Look. He’s crying,” one man says.

“They’re both crying,” another one says. I can’t stop making my hands into fists. My stomach hurts. My legs are tired.

“Shut up,” Tony says.

“That’s all you say,” a man says. “Come on, either hit him back or kiss his cheek so he knows you’re not mad.” They all laugh.

“That’s precious,” one says.

“Yeah. That’s a sweet birthday picture for the mantle.” Tony is breathing really hard like my brother when I trap him under me. “Hey Leona,” A man yells. “Come bring the camera. We’re gonna have a real sweet moment out here for the photo album.”

“Shut up,” Tony yells at them and steps forward and punches me in the mouth. I fall down. I can’t feel anything hurt, but I can taste the blood.

. . .

Kirk's mom is in the bathroom with me and tells me to sit on the toilet seat. It has a pink, fuzzy cover on it, but it's black and smoother around the edges. I don't know where anyone else is. My lip is split and I do what she says. I can move my neck now and my hands aren't fists. I feel very tired. I hate naps. I want to go home.

"This is going to sting a little bit," she tells me. She's right. I don't move. She asks me, "Does your head hurt?" I don't want to look at her. The floor in the bathroom has little hairs on it next to the bathtub. I don't say anything. This room is very small. I feel hot and I want to take off my jacket but I don't want to move.

"I called your parents, Michael." At home I like to stuff pillows under my clothes with my brother to make us look fat. Then we smash into walls and fall onto the floor because it doesn't hurt.

"I'll have to tell them what happened," she says. The floor here is made of tiles that are all stuck together and there is a piece missing in the corner. It's a black patch and the floor sticks up around it.

"What should I tell them?" she asks.

I got a C+ on my report card this Friday because the teacher messed up my points. My dad said we'd get it worked out. Kirk's mom throws her Q tip away and turns back to me. I want to leave this house, but I don't want to leave this room.

"Your lip isn't bleeding anymore." She puts her hand on my face and pulls it up a little bit and it feels nice but I don't like it there. I have to look at her now and she looks sad. Sadder than she did before when she was crying except this time she's not crying

and she says, “Michael, I’m really sorry.” She pauses a second. “Tony is actually very shy. And Bill, he’s a good person.”

But I don’t see how it makes any difference.

True to Your Heart

I am sitting down to dinner with several other *Video Magic* store managers at Applehorns' Fine American Dining, across from Alicia, the lust of my life, and celebrating our recent achievement of helping a new store get up and running. Like the Amish raising one of their barns, but with swearing, people asking for your ETA, and a lot more cellulite.

"Everyone, shut the fuck up for just one second. I think I might be in love with this song," Ezzy says. He works at the South Kensington store. He's tall and has the soft-fat torso of a prepubescent boy. I saw him change once and he's still got big pointy nipples. I'd say he's sitting now at about a B cup, like me, though he's lost weight recently. We're all pretty sure he's gay since he once told Larry who told everyone that he eats Oreos because he loves ingesting their white, gooey center; he refers to the crew of weight lifters who come in on Wednesday nights as "Yummies 1, 2, and 3;" and because when Jake, a Senior CSR on his way "to the top," asked us what instrument we would play in our imaginary band, The Video Magicians, Ezzy said "the skin flute."

"I'm gonna have to chair dance, you guys," Ezzy says. "Oh, God, I love Applehorns. All this Pop History everywhere. And, really, where else can you hear "Dance Robot" and throw peanut shells on the floor?" Ezzy's hair flops over his face. Sweat is already beading down his nose. "Come on, Douglas," he says to me from down the table, then singing along with the chorus, "Frolic Hard on your own /Turnaround, force field zone/Do The Prance, act The Flop Squat/Everybody—Dance Robot."

“You are the dance music that moves my wallflower heart,” I told a girl once. Anna. I was 21. I kind of meant it. I wanted her mouth around me so bad. A dark, wet secret and when she smiled it was just a little, like she was going to tell it to me as soon as we found ourselves alone and boy was it a good one. Ezzy looks like he’s trying to bite his ear and is moving his hands around like he’s laying out hors d’oeuvres, but that’s The Dance Robot. I join in mostly since I’ve heard girls find this sort of camaraderie between men attractive. Which leads us back to the drama for the evening.

As promised: The young woman across from me, Alicia, my fellow manager, with her rosy cheeks and ample backside. The way she fills out her *Video Magic* polo, how today her bra is a little too small and the controlled spill of those lust loaves ripple over at the top, that she’s even moderately attractive in an otherwise placid sea of small-town given-ups and hairspray addicts has had me so poised for action that I’ve ceased to be able to distinguish between drooling and salivating. *Is that cinnamon I smell or did I just get a chubby?* This might be the best opportunity for me to boff her, too, with all the bonding that went on today and these company trips acting like aphrodisiacs. Laura Wenders, sitting at the other end of the table—Rogerstown store manager—went out to San Fran for training. Came back, kept calling it “Frisky Frisco” until finally one of the newbies broke down and asked her what happened. This took, story goes, 45 minutes and ended with the boy’s resignation and Laura saying, “VDs? Big deal. *Very Desirable*. That’s what I called him. The Clap? I’ve had worse colds. It was worth it. I applaud The Clap. I give it a standing fucking ovation. I’ll take an encore after my shower and look forward to tomorrow night’s showing. This is modern life,” she yelled at Andrew as he

jogged through the vestibule. “Wrap it up, sure, but we’ve got penicillin, too. Don’t forget that!”

And I might finally be able to seal the deal with Alicia tonight—I might have been able to use the break room as a bachelor pad if it weren’t for Barry here with all his rippling manhood, dapper elegance, and cock block fancy talk.

“Dinosaurs, I was reminded last night by a program on the *Found It!* Channel, are really just the ancestors of birds,” Barry says. He’s sitting next to Alicia and she’s giving him all her attention. “And in that case, these beasts of the mythic are still here with us, roaming our streets while enriching us with their anachronism and standing in as nature’s reminder of the power of history.”

“I’ve never thought of birds like that before,” Alicia says. Her eyes saccharine with adoration. This is the other component of this evening’s drama: Alicia loves smart speak. She grew up, she told me one day in the break room, with two mute parents. Her mother was a professional lip syncher and her father was the manager. They were gone a lot. Alicia learned to talk by paying a revolving door of street men coffee money in exchange for chit-chat. She’s never really had a strong male presence in her life and she can’t get enough of words either. Barry’s right up her alley. His television habits include exclusively things like *Well, Wasn’t That Educational?* and *Honoring the Brave*. He has scads of confidence, which *FEM* tells me women love. It makes sense with what I’m seeing now as Alicia continues, “Barry. That was beautiful.”

“Oh. Thanks,” Barry says, ducking his eyes like he’s just realized he wasn’t alone. “Sometimes I get a little carried away.”

More on Barry later. I'm peckish and it's time to order. A boy who looks about thirteen years old comes bouncing along, high on motivation and professionalism and stops at our table. That is, he stops moving except for up and down. It doesn't look like he's quit smiling since last week. "Have y'all been to Applehorns before?" he asks. We nod. "Great. My name's Jimmy but you can call me 'cutie.' Jay Kay! That one was for the ladies."

I just chucked a couple of nut shells on the floor and Jimmy smashes them with his right foot, I think maybe on purpose. I feel better. All this drama makes me hungry. O.K., more on the whole Barry/Alicia situation.

Alicia, owing to her word habit, went pretty hard on the old dictionaries and thesauruses. Books, electronic devices, flash card games and other such devices. She had a small apartment over on the Meth side of town and would stay up all night tracing etymologies and memorizing definitions. This place she was staying—not so good for studying with all the traffic and heavy threat of explosions. Also, turned out, she wasn't that smart. Couldn't remember much. Doesn't bother me, of course. Alicia has a kind of presence that pretty much nullifies any shortcoming of brainpower. She doesn't move, but flows. Her voice sounds like when your name is called at the DMV. Her laugh, the clink of glasses raised in toast. Plus dumb chicks give the best dome.

So one day Alicia's spilling all this and crying her eyes out while I'm trying to look down her shirt without getting caught when Barry says something about how all those Meth fumes curtail the efficacy of the synapses needed to create that chimera of time and subjectivity we call memory. Basically, you know, Alicia's rack wasn't going to

suffer but her brain tits were definitely on the sag living in the waft of Johnny Jailbird's Chem Lab. This also explained, Barry said, her desire to down colas by the two-liter.

So, she moved right out of there and dropped the sugar jones, but she's still not doing so hot on the erudition. Like I said, not that smart. Thinks the world of Barry, though.

"I'll be taking care of you tonight," Jimmy says. I see above his bounding head one of the several pictures on the wall is of Bogey and Hepburn laughing cigarette smoke into each other's faces. "Can I get you guys going with some great-tastin' apps?" Jimmy continues. "We're featuring our extra-famous Slab A 'Sizzlin'® all month long and let me tell you, I don't think you'll find a better Sizzlin' anywhere else around here. And I should know, cause I grew up with my mom's Sizzlin' so I'm really picky. We also have the Fried Onion Bucket and that comes with a velvety fat sauce for dipping."

Check that: Not Bogey or Hep or smoking. Definitely Monty Cliff laying lip on Donna Reed. Barry says, "Do you know if that's a free range fat sauce?" After Barry corrected Alicia's living situation, I tried to get myself invited over to her new place to at least see if I could get a peek through her underwear. Anna's underwear was that kind that cut a quarter up her ass. So many colors. A neon kaleidoscope. I used to put on a pair with one of my Oxfords buttoned half-way up the chest and shake my can around the apartment. It was cute. I put a hair band on and catwalked around the living room. She did some liner and shadow for my eyes and tried to take photos. I told her to bend me over and don't take prisoners. She said you always take things too far. She didn't get it. I was playing *her*. It's what I wanted *her* to do.

I did manage to wrangle myself an invite over to Alicia's pad. It smelled like pasta sauce and cucumber melon. The lights were dim since the electric only worked on half the living room. Very erotic. I told her swell digs. She told me to take my shoes off. My big chance, so says *FEM*. "How 'bout we take a look at your underwear drawer," my brain said to my tongue. I stayed church mouse. Drat. *Guts it up you jerk*; Go for it, I said. Go for what, she asked me and I just almost told her when the doorbell rang. It was Barry. "Evening you two." His smile made me squint. He shook my hand and I lost my balance. He smelled like a leather flower. What a man. Even his hair looked strong.

He said, "For the hostess I brought wine and my needle nose so I can take a look at that wiring problem. Also, Douglas, your car is on a yellow line. I just flattered the Parking Attendant into giving you a pass, but you should probably move it down the block." He put the wine on the table along with the Ethiopian Jazz mix he told us about. God, I want to hate him so hard. I want to hate him so hard, but he's just so fucking cool.

Alicia likes all these dime-sized words; well I've been studying up. I can read, too. I can learn. Barry's not the only one with access to information. So what if he's good looking. So what if he's cool. I don't want to get cool. I just want to get laid. But let's be serious about this. I feel so strongly about getting laid, it means so much to who I am as a person that my sense of moral character has blue balls. I've rarely been so sincere in my life. Like a great truth that springs from righteous earnestness. The kind that infects a country, determines a Zeitgeist, changes the world. And with all this pointed in one direction, so focused and for all the right reasons, how can it be that I still can't bury a load?

“I want the Boulder Bowl Salad,” Ezzy says. “And does that still come with the French Fry Topping?”

“Sure!” Jimmy says. “Or you can get onion rings.”

“You shut the fuck up, you little boy scout. Aren’t you sworn to uphold decency? That’s vulgar and I want it. You mustn’t tell a soul. Give me double dressing, too.”

Jimmy finishes up with our orders and I hear Laura and Ezzy talking about stretch pants when Barry puts fork to glass and says that we have an announcement. The look on his face is something like pride and approval, making him look older than he really is. “Alicia has some news for us,” he says. She smiles shyly and I feel my bowels slip in desperation.

Surely. No. This can’t be. I’ve never even seen them hold hands. How could this happen. I just promised myself three minutes ago that I was really going to dedicate myself this time, no half-assing it, to making sure that some part of me entered her kitty before my next birthday and—oh fuck: I see it now. Those flame licked cheeks. The halo of femininity following her around. She’s glowing. She’s got The Glow. All this time, I’ve been squaring up for a play and Barry’s already slipped one past the defense. Is there anything this guy can’t do? Bowled a perfect game. *Finishes* crossword puzzles. Is a really excellent ballroom dancer and now he’s taken the apple of my loins and planted his flag, his seed, his hand right on top of her shoulder as she tells us all, “I’ve been promoted to Regional Manager. I’ve already got an apartment in Jacksonton. I start tomorrow.”

What is this feeling? These slippery insides, the black ice of my viscera. My heart fishtailing on my spleen. My stomach parasailing into a flock of ulcers. The room spins—or is it only the Merry-Go-Round in the middle of the Dining Arena—and my poor bowels. They gargle, tumble, dare themselves into holding their breath under water while tickling their underarms.

My sweet Alicia, how do you expect me to process this information? My joy at your enduring purity collides with my despair over your departure in the flash-bang emotional explosion that might happen after being told, “You were lucky to have survived, but you’ve lost the use of your legs.” Betrayal. Elation. How can I handle such contradictory states of mind without having an aneurism?

“Congratulations!” someone says.

Deep breath.

“You foxy cunt,” says someone else.

Search for peace.

“You really deserve it.”

Stabilization.

“You guys need any refills or more Butter Bread Mini-Loaves?”

“No thank you,” I say, answering for all of us. Proud, virile. Uninhibited. I am a man and I take charge of my life. The lines are drawn. I need to step up my game. I will beat Barry. He will fall under the weight of his own charm, toppling like a Sumo wrestler overwhelmed by girth and gravity. Tonight is the night of Douglas on the eve of his rebirth into the world a better, stronger—”

“Actually, I could use another Diet Bubble,” Laura says.

“And I’ll take you up on those Mini-Loaves,” adds Ezzy.

Jimmy hops away and around the statue of Dick Nixon setting his tape recorder. I set my sights and level my artillery. “Alicia. I’m really happy to hear about this promotion! I can’t say I’m not a little bit jealous. We sure will miss you around the store, though.” Alicia reaches for a peanut and her ponytail falls over her shoulder in a dark streak of libidinal promise. What I could do with that, a headboard, and a safe word is causing me to lose focus.

Charming. Smiling. Ingratiate.

“I don’t know,” she says. “I really don’t see this job as my life’s purpose, you know. I really see myself doing all kinds of things, really. I’d love to travel more. See something of the world. Meet people. Discover myself in their eyes.”

Uh huh, uh huh. Lean forward. Cradle your chin in your hand. Listen. Smile—not so big. There. Casual. Consider what she has to say. Think of her as a person, Douglas. A person. Douglas, if she is ever to hold your balls in her mouth, she is a *person*.

“That’s a lovely thought,” I say. “I’ve done a bit of sightseeing myself. I lived on a kibbutz for a while in my late teens. Learned a lot about alternative ideologies and the joys and pitfalls of promiscuity—by observation, of course. You’re right, too. I saw myself in a whole new way because of them.”

“How was that?” Barry asks. Sucker. He fell for it.

“Well,” I start, easing out the payoff. I’ve had this worked up for a while, but now is the time to drop it. “As a young man, I was very focused on myself. If I ever had a

problem, I looked within for a moral guide. I was reading a lot of existential philosophy at the time and really responded to the idea of man creating his own moral universe through choosing his actions.” Alicia turns to look at me. The interest is deep in her eyes and I can see her brain tits perky with my possibility. “But as I saw more of the world, I came to see that one’s decisions are so often narrowed by the possibilities that life provides them. We are each limited one way or another by the fate of our birth. This understanding produced in me a greater feeling for the complexities of human existence and helped me develop the empathy that I see as my greatest asset as a friend, an employee, a lover, but most importantly, a person.” Yes. A person. A person in front of me now, side-swept bangs framing her face like the cover of a stag mag, come-hither smile, those dimples, deep enough to fuck, and all of this focused at me.

“That’s an interesting position,” Barry says, his voice barely audible above the lust syrup pulsing around my brain. “It reminds me very much of an article I read a few months ago in *The New Review*. Small distribution but very bold, sometimes a bit outré for my taste, but always well done. You have a subscription by chance, Douglas?”

My bowels are back in the derby cars, racing around on the mud track. “No, I don’t, Bare,” I manage. “Can’t say I’ve ever heard of it.” Alicia’s eyes flicker over to Barry. She looks confused and torn, like a little girl who just saw a *better* pony across the stable. Quick, before she checks my mouth for gum disease, I can rebound.

But then, above the din of my panic we all hear Laura tell Ezzy, “So I get this guy back to my place and I swear I’m like clockwork, but I take off my pants and it looks like I’ve spilled cocktail sauce in my underwear.”

Ezzy grabs a drink of Laura's Diet Bubble and asks, "So, what'd you do?"

"What'd you think? I cleaned myself up, came out of the bathroom plugged and in my garter, and offered him back door. I'm not the kind of girl to go and cancel a party just because the caterer dressed the salad ahead of time."

Barry shifts his weight and runs his hand through his hair. "Laura, please. Not at the dinner table. I know that's just how you are, but my stomach is sensitive to tales of any such gallivanting."

Laura lets off one sharp, short cackle and says, "Sorry, Barry. I forgot I was in the presence of a lady. Anyway, it's just fucking. How do you think you got here?"

"Not that way as you described. I'm familiar enough to know that's not how it works."

"Hey! There we go. You're right. See, man. Now we're having a good time."

Jimmy comes by with our entrées, asking each of us if we'd like fresh-grated cheese sticks on top. I use the break in conversation as my opening: "Actually, I saw a very interesting program last week about the birth process. Did you know that in some states it is illegal for a woman to deliver her baby outside of a hospital?" Alicia lets out a small gasp, allowing her pickle spear to linger tantalizingly in her mouth. Score. "To me, this is outrageous. A birth is a miracle of unity. It stands outside of all governmental protocols as all miracles should. It is the purest form of love and beauty we have in the world and transcends any authority except those the parents choose to let in."

"No way. It's just creepy," Laura says. "You've got this other thing inside you. Growing. Swimming around. Sucking stuff out of your blood."

“Well, how do you think you got here?” asks Barry. He sets his napkin in his lap and crosses his legs under the table. His smile pops like the tab on a soda can and goddamit, I was just about to ask her the same thing.

“Very clever, Bare. Not for me, that’s what I’m saying. I’ll take a cat and my waistline unfucked-with. Anyway, you know how much work delivering a baby is? How gross? I’d lay some shit down right now if I didn’t know how sensitive you are.”

Ezzy cuts in, “My mother told me when I was twelve that I was the biggest disappointment of her life, and when I cried until I threw up in my lap she said that nothing she could ever say would hurt me as much as giving birth to me hurt her. And that was what it was to be a woman.”

“I told you.” Laura says. “It’s rough,”

“That’s awful, Ezzy.” Alicia says. “I wish I had something to say that could show how hard it is to give birth, but also convey the beauty of the process that I’m sure your mother felt, too. I think we could all use that right now.”

My brain is 500,000 open filing cabinets. It is a rolodex the size of a stern wheel. I am swimming in a brackish reservoir of anecdotes, trivia, memorized quotations and my own feeble attempts at original thought. Why can’t what I have already said be enough? Can I just repeat that? O.K. *Birth is a beginning and like all beginnings is scary and difficult but also full of the wonder of the unknown.* Yes. This will do, just a little polishing and—

“And put ice chips like snowflakes on a blood curdled tongue, melted then swallowed, their purpose undone by the straining, the sweating, the partition of one, until gleaming and bleating, it’s finally sprung.”

Man, fuck Barry. Rhymes? How did he do that. I love rhymes. But everything else, too. The concrete references. The use of figurative language. I wasn’t listening to him. *I was there*. It’s like he wrote that just for me.

I wish I could stop crying. I’d be making a fool of myself with the torrent coming out of my face if it wasn’t for everyone else looking only at Him, adoration mounting like the blood inside my dick, the hard on I have for Alicia in her tender and vulnerable state of emotional paroxysm reaching a fever pitch.

“Wow, Bare. Nice going.” Laura says. “I’m now having some doubts about what I said. You’ve definitely given me something to think about.” She leans back in her chair, her face slack, her mind full and far way.

“I had that tattooed on my shoulder as a birthday present for my mother,” Barry says. “She wrote it right after I was born. The happiest time in her life, she told me.” And then, hiking up his shirt sleeve, “Here. I’ll show you.”

“Was your mother a poet, Barry? Is that where you get your way with words?” Alicia asks. Her sweet-lumped front pointed and arched right at Barry’s impressive pectorals. “Did you get your strength from her, too? Where did you get these strong biceps I see now that you have your shirt rolled up?”

This is more than I can take. I’ve eaten too much grated cheese sticks and free range fat sauce. My protruding belly is shaking as I pull myself up with these pepperoni

roll arms and I make my way to the bathroom, not even caring if my erection is noticeable.

This restaurant, on the whole, is a pretty clean cut place. But the bathroom is foul. I've never seen so many condom machines with so many varieties and had the smell of urine so thick in my nose. These machines are everywhere. *Electric Pounder, Mountain Muzzle, Chocolate Surprise*. I must say, I'm surprised. Like when Anna told me to go out and rent a video for our Quiet Saturday Alone and I came back from Crazy Mitch's Xanado Boutique with *Triple Decker Pussies 4: The Cheese Is Back on the Sandwich*. Jeez. I can't do anything right. The last straw, she told me. Where's your intellectual curiosity, I asked her. How did the cheese get off the sandwich? What's it doing back on there? All the answers are right here!

No such luck. I don't know what she was doing with me anyway. She was right, too. There wasn't actually any cheese on the sandwich.

Wait. I do know what she was doing with me. She settled. I was the best of what was around. But then the stupid fucking rest of the world showed up and I didn't look so great anymore with my hairy back, limited job prospects, and constant pleading for anal sex. But this is me. I have limits and that would be fine if there weren't all these Barries running around stealing my Annas away. How can I compete against him when he is so clearly better than me at everything? In looks. Charm. Gentlemanliness. How is this fair? That's just what he showed up with. The kind of guy he is. So what if I'm a bad person. So what if I'm selfish. I know the effects of my behavior. You think I *like* being this

way? This is just what comes out of me. Might I deserve a little respect, a few breaks, a sweet piece of tail every once in a while? God, whatever woman would be interested in me I would seriously have to have a low opinion of myself to want to reciprocate her affection.

Ezzy walks in through the door and immediately yells, “*Fuck Explosion*. UH. It smells like a lump of shit drank a bowl of puke and urinated directly into my nose—Hey Buddy! You doing all right in here?” He walks over and pats me on the shoulder, gets a look at my mug in the mirror, and winces. “Oh, shitcicle. You look wiped. What’s up, broheim?”

“It’s nothing.” I say, aware again of my erection. I tuck it up under my belt.

“Oh, boy. It’s definitely not nothing. This is something if I ever saw one. Now are you going to tell me, or do we have to hug it out?”

I cave. I need a friendly ear. “I’m disappointed is all. In my life, I guess. With the way things are going. I don’t feel like I’m doing what I want to be doing.”

“Hey, we all have our moments like—“

“That’s a lie, Ezzy. I don’t care about any of that shit. I just want to fuck Alicia.”

“Oh.”

“But I want it so bad. It’s so *real*. I’ve never felt this strongly about anything before. I can’t sleep. I eat all the time. I see her when I close my eyes, completely naked, doing all the most wonderfully vile things. This feeling. It overwhelms me sometimes. And now, I’m about to lose her forever. I wish I could make her mine, if only for one

sleazy hour in a cheap motel room. I just want to see her naked. That's all. Jiggling around a little. I can do the rest. If she'd just give me that, maybe I could be happy."

I feel sick. This is exactly what I didn't want to happen. That last part of what I just said isn't even true. I won't be satisfied unless I get to play the full 18 holes and, anyway, now my secret longing has been tainted by weakness. I have turned myself into office gossip. A week-long joke whispered in the breakroom and at the managers' station, sniggered at as the lowly loser who couldn't keep his tongue in his head or get his dick out of his pants.

"Man. That was really lovely, what you just said. It was so...pure. I really felt you on it."

"What?" I shake my head and try to focus my eyes.

"Yeah. Your sincerity. There was a purity to it. An innocence. Like maybe one day you could do great things. I could see it, all right there when you said it."

"Oh. Thanks."

"That's what you need to do. You should tell Alicia how you really feel! Women eat that shit up. Sincerity bowls them over. You've got to be true to your heart, man. I've seen top notch babes go for dudes way crumbier than yourself because they had the balls to open up. I'm telling you, if you do half as good with her as what you just showed me, we'll all finally see the cheese get back on the sandwich."

And then it starts to make sense. I see the progression. Be confident. Say what I mean. Bowl her over. Get some.

“You’re right, Ezzy,” I say, my chest swelling, my eyes finally dried and clear. “I just have to be myself. You’re a good friend and I won’t forget this, man. Let’s walk out with our shoulders back, our breath clear and deep, filled with a new sense of confidence and see if I can’t get my dick wet.”

“Oh boy! How romantic. *Let’s go break you off a piece!*”

“You’ll need an entrance,” Ezzy says. We are in the middle of the restaurant. I look around the room for inspiration. What would the great film stars and pop culture icons of yesteryear have done? I say, “Let’s search the walls for our muse.”

Peter O’Toole is ahead of me pouring a bottle of brown liquor into his face. Fatty Arbuckle flashes his pearls next to a Coca Cola. A laminated advert on the table extols a special chocolate liqueur served in a cookie glass.

“You guys looking for directions back to your seats?” Jimmy asks us, smiling, still unblemished in his enthusiasm and youthful innocence. “If you’re looking for a desert menu, I can start off by recommending the Chuck Buster. It’s got a peanut butter truffle glaze on top of fudge brownie double stuffed batter biscuits—”

“Jimmy,” I say. “How would you like to earn some extra scratch?”

He waits a beat, the smile runs off his face like raindrops. “Shit, man,” he says. “You think I do this stuff just to get out of the house? So what are we talking about? If it’s spit, I can let you do it or I can ask one of the boys in the back. That’s twenty-five. Anything thicker’ll set you back at least double. And that’s just for starters.”

I hadn't actually considered this option. I could spring it on Barry later, at the Christmas party—no. Stick to the plan. “Actually. I just want you to introduce me. To my table.”

“Fuck. That's it? You need me to sing or anything? I can really belt. They never let me get too loud for the birthday jingles, but I'm getting this band together. Actually, if you guys want to come check us out—”

“That's not necessary,” Ezzy says. I'm starting to get a little antsy like I'm about to lose my nerve. “We just want something a little old fashioned. Some ‘Hear ye, hear ye. I'm pleased to...’ something like that.”

“Here's thirty bucks. If it works, I'll send you the same in the mail.”

Jimmy looks down at the money in his hand like he's receiving communion and says, “You're the boss, chief.”

We move at a pretty good clip across the floor. But what do I say? What will work? How can I trust language to convey what I really feel? Platitudes are not always disingenuous. Clichés are not necessarily insincere. There is so much pressure to be honest and at the same time interesting. If only there were an interpreter, someone trained in these matters who could—

“Hear ye, hear ye,” Jimmy says. His posture is really good. I hope he's not more impressive than I am. “I give you all, um, this guy, whose name I guess you know, who has something he wants to say and seems like a pretty chill dude as far as I've known him, so listen up.

“You're on,” he whispers back at me. O.K. Here goes nothing.

Everything.

“Alicia.” She looks up from her Garden of Eatin’ and her eyes are so pretty and her hair so shiny that I almost forget what I’m doing. “We’ve worked together for a long time. Or, six months, which is pretty long considering we’re not that old.”

“What the fuck is this?” Laura asks. I can’t see her face, but her voice is hard and sharp, acid eating through my ears and into my brain. “Shush,” Ezzy tells her. “He needs to concentrate.”

My right leg is shaking and my throat feels like a pumice stone. My eye twitches hard but rhythmically and gives me some sense of order. “I know,” I say, “that you’ll be leaving tomorrow, and, it seems to me that it’s a shame that people can go their whole lives without knowing how someone really feels about them.” I can hear the forks on plates. The air conditioner hum. My eye lashes thwacking against their opposites as I blink. “Since this is my last chance, I wanted to tell you that ever since I saw you the first time, in your white blouse that was a little too short and showed the belly button ring I figured meant you might be down—”

“Spit it out!” Laura yells.

“Yeah, brother!” Ezzy yells. “Go for it!”

Right. Just open up the old blood pump and let it pour. True to my heart. *Go for it.*

“I want to see you naked. I want to roll my wet fingers around your nipples until they’re hard. Flail around like cats. Treat your box like a pie eating contest. Hear you scream so that you surprise yourself. I want to make the place in between your breasts a

sex organ and keep it up until the police tell us to stop and in the morning wake up next to you and feed you coffee and my banana nut muffin.”

The whole table is still. I step back, see Laura’s mouth is agape. Ezzy’s eyes are moist and he is holding his fists together at the side of his face. But Alicia. I can’t get a read on her and I’m worried, but mostly glad it’s over with.

“Douglas,” Barry says. “I think you should probably—”

“I can handle this, Barry,” she says. “Listen, Doug. I’m leaving tomorrow. I’m going to be two and a half hours away, and I don’t actually even know you all that well. And really, Jacksontown is a Big City. I’m young and good looking. I want a boyfriend with *money*. You work at Video Magic.”

“Oh. Right.” Of course. I don’t know if I’m devastated or just relieved it’s done. It’s too close to call.

“But if you want to make the drive up some Saturday, what you’ve just described sounds like it might be fun.”

“Huh?” I say.

Jimmy gives me a slap on the back, “Check that, man. Right on. Double the money for Jimmy.”

“Sure,” she says. “You’re not bad and I’m gonna need some buffer time to establish myself. Anyway, I like a guy I can sink some claw into.”

Barry moves his chair back with a loud screech. My arms are tingling with anticipation, or maybe it’s just that all the blood in my body is back inside my erection. I am so primed and pumped!

“So that’s all it took?” Barry says. “You go for him after I told you he still lives with his mother?”

“Um, Bare.” I can’t help but be smug. “That’s *grandmother*.”

“Barry.” Alicia pets his arm, looks in his eyes delicately and *I’m gonna get laid*. Triple yes! “Don’t be upset. You just never asked. But, of course, you can come too.”

“Really?” Barry says.

“Sure.” What grace she has. What style. A real class act. “I’m pretty much up for anything.”

I see that same picture as before, and, yep, I’m pretty sure that *is* Bogey. The good Bogey. The confident one and I look at Barry and say, “This is great, man. We’ll save on gas money!” He stands up and we all start to put our coats on. I throw my arm around his shoulder and tell him, “You know what? As impressive as you are, I’ve pretty much always resented you. But now, with all that’s just happened, I think this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

Golden for Sure

This is all right, Jim thought. Being here. Out with the guys. A little loud, though, this bar. This Squiggles. But the laughs still register. Life sure is rich with friends. And a wife. Yeah, the wife. Back at home. There when I come back. But that's later. Now's now. And now's where it's at: A mug of lube for the jawbone and faces around the table I don't mind looking at. Don't mind being seen by. And the laughs. I've got keep my foot in the door. My finger in the pie. I've got to keep up with the laughs.

"You were reading Freud, Doug?" Charles said. "Jesus Christ, this is your free time you're talking about here. When was the last you got your dick sucked?" Charles wiped the foam from his mouth. Doug looked at his groin, grabbed it with his right hand and said, "He's right, right? Blow jobs over blowhards." They were all kind of drunk.

"Blow hardons," Jim said. They sniggered. Not bad. I'm keeping up. Getting in some good shots. Like that one. Tell it to Barb maybe when I get home. Jim loosened his tie some more. Felt the swell of fraternity. He smiled. Put the Happy in Happy Hour. He looked at his watch. 7:30. Time flies. Like back in school. Man, that was the stuff. Had time to work out. Thirty-one inch waist and hangover proof. Bench pressed 275.

Demigod? Time flies. Stupid copywriting. Stupid advertising. Just a Demagogue.

"I got with this redhead on a counter back in college because of what I said about Lacan," Ryan said.

Did he just flex a pec. What a tool. Wife likes him, though. Says so, anyway. Ryan smiled at Jim. He warmed. Felt the swell of fraternity again. That's better.

Ryan said, “She was almost licking the words out of my mouth. Every one of them bullshit. We made out in front of her boyfriend, too. Man, I miss being in school.”

Licking words. Not bad. Not a joke, really. Evocative, regardless. Good one, Ryan.

The waitress came by. “Tara,” she’d told them. Slid her hands down over Jim’s and Ryan’s shoulders. Oooh, Nice try. Tips, I get it. But still pretty nice. Come on, back and forth, back and forth. Keep it up.

“You boys all right for now?” she said.

Doug took his hand off his groin. “Another pitcher, please.”

“You look all right,” Ryan said. “Can we get another one of you?” There were sniggers from the rest of the guys. Doug put his groin-hand over his face. Ryan. What a tool. What balls.

“Oh, I knew this one looked like trouble,” she said. Flirty eyes. Took her hand off Jim’s shoulder and put it on Ryan’s. Wait, come back. Back and forth, remember?

“You boys keep an eye on him for me, ok? Make sure this troublemaker doesn’t get into any real trouble.”

She looked pretty here. Pretty enough, anyway. Sort of. In the dark. Even with that nose. Good backrub, too. She walked away. Turned back to look at Ryan. Winked. Jim lost interest. Flat ass, definitely. Sour grapes, maybe.

“Pig tails,” Ryan said, turning back from looking at Tara. “Whew.”

“You know what Freud would say about that,” Doug said. “About you.” Jim had three books of philosophy at home. Extensive markings on the first twenty-five pages of

each, then nothing. He remembered how insightful his margin notes probably were. I'll get them out again. Did I put them in the box with that Bible? What was Freud's first name? Seinfeld? Ziggy?

"He would say you haven't progressed," said Doug. "In your subconscious."

"Do you even know what you're talking about," Charles asked. "Do you even know what your subconscious is?"

Jim felt the gold go through him. What they all called it when the idea moves on its own. It clicks. Swells. Skipped out of his mouth. *Subconscious*. He was going to nail it. "It's the part of your brain that deals with sandwiches," he said.

"Ha Ha," Doug said.

"Hee hee," said Charles.

Jim laughed, too. Sandwiches. He knew. Good one. Better than "submarines." Dodged it there. Too obvious. No need to jot it down. Already memorized.

Ryan took a gulp. Said, "Pig tails, guys. Says a lot about a woman. Closest thing you'll get to a school girl, too, without being labeled a sexual predator."

Jim remembered looking up the sexual predators in his neighborhood. His wife's idea. "But we might have kids," she said. "Someday." Can't even check her e mail. Sort of cute. They looked together. An internet date. With perverts. It was nice, though. That sandwich pun. That was satisfying. Out with the boys. Cracking jokes. Riffing. Having a few.

Ryan took another drink. What's up with him. No chuckle. Not even a smile.

"Hee hee," Charles had said. That was a gold one for sure. He felt it. Did the Bible talk about the gold ones? Did they have something to do with Jesus, maybe?

Ryan flexed his other pec. Tool. What does he know about what's funny. He still does mad libs.

O.K. Those are fun at lunch. If we're stuck in the office. Point is he still has them. He's a prop comic. Please.

Do I like prop comedy? Maybe a little. But I know better. That's the important thing.

The waitress returned. "Here's your pitcher guys. I went ahead and put it on the troublemaker's tab." Both hands on his shoulders. Little tart. Was that a shoulder squeeze? Oh, what a kink I've got. Get Barb to rub it when he got home. Frail little hands. Never satisfying. Not like that sandwich joke. Doug had said, "Ha ha." He knew.

"She likes you," Doug said when Tara left. Stared at her flat ass.

"She likes money," Charles said. "These girls are strippers with clothes."

"You guys think too much," Ryan said. "Pig tails. You can learn a lot from that."

Jim stared at the pitcher. Bubbles. Foam. Pilsner. Golden for sure.

. . .

"Have a good time?" Barb said. Sitting up, reading in bed. Glasses from CVS. What time was it? 10:30. Jeez. This is exciting. Is that a flannel nightgown? When did she get that? Did I buy that for her? Why did I do that?

“Oh, yeah.” he said. Sat on the edge of the bed next to her. His lower back up against her hip. He heard her put the book down. “Gets busy at work, you know. I forget how much I like those guys. We don’t get to talk much while we’re there.”

“What about lunches?” she said. Her glasses off. She put them on the night table.

“Oh, it’s different when you’re drinking,” he said. Took off one shoe. Rubbed his foot. Wished it hurt a little. Wished it felt good to rub it. “There’s a sense of something. At night. Like we’re in it together.”

“Fraternity?” She started rubbing his shoulders. Ah, that’s nice. Sort of.

But this was nice. Really nice. Fraternity. That’s it, exactly. She understood. Who needs exciting? What a gal. Glad I scooped you up when I did. This is nice. Nice and easy.

She kept rubbing. Did a little scalp work. I love you. In a nice, easy way. Like a really good hamburger. No, like a great hamburger. Like the best damn hamburger I’ve ever had. Yeah, baby, that’s you. That’s the way to do it to me. Nice to come home to. Easy to get along with. Never get sick of that. Solid. Reliable. Satisfying. What was a body, anyway. She still felt good. In the dark. That’s all I need. That was nice. That waitress’ hands. Whew. Was she a waitress? Bar maiden? Little pops of goose down sprouting along my neck. Ryan get those too? What was his deal? That sandwich joke was really funny. Kinda gets better with time. Ha ha. Maybe Ryan will think about it later. Maybe he’s thinking about it right now. Now he gets it. Probably he gets it now. It was a little arcane. But in a clever way, of course.

“Have I ever told you about Gold. Or sometimes I call it Golden?” he asked Barb.

“Or *Gold Ones*?” This is nice. She’ll understand. This is what counts. Right here. No trouble. Easy. Close. Something like that.

“When you get an idea so great it doesn’t even feel like you came up with it. Like it just came out of you.” Jim remembered other golds. *Get with the pogrom. An embarrassment of stitches. Antioxidants are racist Asians.* Context is key. “Like it always existed and you’re just sort of a vessel for it.” Was this philosophy? It sounded a little like philosophy. Maybe I’m in the wrong job. Maybe I should go back to school. Maybe Ryan just doesn’t eat a lot of sandwiches. “It’s so perfect all you have to do is just get out of the way.” Jim sighed dreamy as a thirteen-year-old girl. Self-satisfaction. A nice thing.

“You mean you shouldn’t get credit for it?”

“No no.” Jim shook his head. Laughed a little. She was like a child with her computer questions and small-picture thinking. How nice it was to be able to explain things to her. Teach her about the world. “You get the credit. Sure. It’s inspiration. It has to come from somewhere.”

Jim could hear the clock ticking on the wall. A ticking clock for the bedroom. That was a bad idea. He thought of deadlines. Being clever under pressure. Hard to do. Remembered when Ryan came up with calling a tongue a mouth flap. Said it was a word muscle. Nothing to do with the account. But lightened the mood. Got them re-energized. He had something going on upstairs, that one. Mad libs? Big deal. Ryan was no lug. He could appreciate humor. So what’s with the sandwich? And there’s the rub. There’s the backrub. Ha, ha. Good. Not gold. Maybe silver. Silverish. Jot it down later.

Jim's breathing came out in pants. Barb said, "Were you ok to drive home?"

She'll understand once I tell her the story. Once she hears that, we can both laugh together. That will be good. Wait. An old joke + a new audience = a new joke. Ha ha. Philosophy could be fun, sure. But I'm making it funny.

Jim finished the story. "Huh," Barb said. Was that a "ha?" Jim didn't quite know how his wife laughed. Strange. But good. There were still secrets to explore. This is never going to get old.

"Get it?" Jim said. "Because the 'sub' is a pun on—"

"I get it. I just don't think it's really all that funny." She stopped rubbing his shoulders. Gave a yawn. "Is it really already almost eleven?" It was 10:35. "Time flies, I guess."

"You're missing the point," Jim said. "The point is that it *is* funny."

She slunk down in the bed a little. Gave another yawn. Is that possible, Jim thought. Can a person really yawn that much? Is she doing that on purpose?

Barb said, "But didn't you already make that joke a couple of years ago?"

She sounds so disinterested. This was my day. What I did. The staple marriage question. She asked me if I had had fun. This is my answer. So rude.

"Well, right. That's how I know it's funny. Double golden. That's like twice the gold."

"I don't think gold has multiples."

Her attitude escapes me. Sure, it took me a while to turn into a supportive listener, but I came around. I know when to put in the "aw shucks." When to up it to "That sucks,

honey.” What does she think this is? A marriage is work. What did we do all that Pre-Cana for if not to prepare for just this?

“Are you upset?” She put her hand back on his shoulder. Gave it a little pat. Like you give a child. She could be patronizing, too. Why tell her? Why tell her the rub. She didn’t even like the joke.

Well, maybe she’ll understand my feelings anyway. That will feel good. Get it off my chest. Yeah. Tell her about my feelings. I’ll just be open with her.

Jim felt a change in mood. Wow, that’s better. She really is like the best hamburger. She’ll understand the situation. We’ll bond that way. Man, this is good.

He finished. Barb said, “You really put a lot of thought into sandwiches. I didn’t know you liked them so much.”

“I don’t.” Well, everyone likes sandwiches. They’re great. Practical. Convenient. Satisfying. But that’s not the point. “That’s not the point.” Not liking sandwiches is like not liking spring. Huh, another theorem.

This joke. She’s beyond it. I mean, it’s beyond her. Probably a guy joke. No need to get upset. Just part of being a woman. Jim felt better. Assuaged. But Ryan. He was a good guy when it came down to it. A tool, a little, sure. But I can put up with a lot. He deserves another chance. He’d come around. Just needs the right frame of mind. The right setting. That’s all. Then we’ll be rolling in sandwiches. Jim liked the sound of that.

Barb slipped all the way horizontal and folded her hands under her head. So precious. Like a cartoon angel. Huh. Guess I’m not getting any tonight.

She was right. He was still drunk a little. Not DUI drunk. Just gotta-be-careful drunk. A nice place to be. And that's still a nice face she's got. Easy to look at. And not so pretty I can't look away. Who needs that. Really, I'm a lucky guy.

"Barb," he said. She yawned. Really? Again? "I was thinking. We never really have any dinner guests over anymore. Wasn't that fun? Remember? Wasn't it? How about Ryan, next week?"

Barb nodded, yawned, smiled, and closed her eyes.

. . .

Ryan handed Jim a bottle of wine at the door. "Here you go, old man. A hostess gift." Slapped Jim on the shoulder. Fraternity. Feels good. Maybe a little too hard. But a good start.

"This is Tara," Ryan said. That is really some nose she's got there. Ryan had his hand around her waist, Tucked in a little down her pants. Are you allowed to do that? Of course. Guests can do whatever they want.

"You'll remember her from Squiggles last week, I imagine." Tara put out her hand. She chewed her gum. With her mouth a little bit open. Guess she put out.

"Come on in, guys." Jim said, leading them into the living room. "Guess you know, Ryan, that we treat our guests right. A full spread here at the Pereta house." And now for the groundwork. The context. The first hint. "Nothing like soup and a *sandwich*. Not here, right honey?" Jim called into the kitchen.

"Nope," Barb called back, taking the frozen lasagna out of the oven. What was that voice she used. Was that appropriate for company? Was that her company voice?

This wasn't like her. I know she wasn't raised in a barn and never once knew what it was to entertain a guest.

Jim took a couple deep breaths. What a gal. There in the kitchen. All that work. Sort of. I mean, frozen lasagna. He checked in on her. Oh, an apron. With little cows all over. And those ruffles around the outside. How darling. This was definitely how he had pictured marriage. At some point. After things settled down a little. Later on. "Are you ok in here my sweetest darling?" and me meant it, that "sweetest darling" bit. She looked up at him from the oven. "This is still kinda frozen in the middle," she told him. Her face was a little red from the hard work she was doing. A little broken out, too. Thought she was too old for that. But, still, a good face.

Jim walked back into the living room. Gave his guests some cocktails. Sat down on the couch across from them. How sophisticated. How nice. This is surely a better place to speak with friends than a bar. Surely a better place to hear and make jokes. Hey, they sure are close together on that couch over there.

Ryan said, "Tara was just telling me about a news story she heard on the radio. Why don't you tell Jim here what you were telling me."

Ryan smiled at Tara. They gave a little kiss. A tap on the lips. Was this ok? Should he feel disgusted or perhaps at least slightly disgusted? Is that what Barb would say?

"Hey, Barb," Ryan called. Get your big beautiful ass in here and have a seat. This is a party."

Jim liked that. Ryan saying his wife had a big beautiful ass. Reminded him of his real catch. Maybe I should say something about Tara's body. Was that appropriate? Maybe when we're a little drunk. Maybe she'll rub my shoulders again.

Barb walked into the room. Wow. That is a big ass. I can see it from the front. And she's got that apron on, too.

"Oh, Ryan." Barb said. "You shouldn't talk like that. You'll make me blush."

Blush. He hadn't noticed. Was that a little rosacea she was trying to cover up? With that comment. Whoo. But a nice face. And look at those teeth. They might be her best feature. Not her smile so much, but she really did have some pretty ok teeth.

"This guy I heard about." Tara said. "He was standing on the curb too close to the street and a bus came by and just ripped his face off." Tara snapped her gum.

That's kind of attractive. I hope she does it again. Can I ask her to do it again? I'll just wait.

She blew a bubble. It popped. Jim swallowed.

"Is that appropriate conversation for a dinner party?" Barb asked. "Face ripping, I mean?" She crossed her legs at the knee. The top one stuck out to the side since they were both pretty big legs.

"What's inappropriate?" Jim asked. She was quite rude there. Just then. To a guest. The first thing out of her mouth. Maybe she was kidding. Probably not. Knowing her. And I do. Mostly. Except for all those surprises. Little presents. "A man gets his face ripped, he gets talked about. At that point, he has given up his right to anonymity. Ironically."

The laughs. Oh, they feel good. That was clever, too. I can say so objectively since I only thought of the joke as I was saying it. Soak them up, Jimmy. Poor skullface, though.

But no more Halloween. Time to get the mood right. For the big second chance. Maybe send Barb back into the kitchen. Would that be ok? Could I get away with that? Without sounding like a big pig? Like a total oinker?

Set the mood right. "I wonder what Freud would have said about that guy?" Jim asked. A little loud. Big wink over at Ryan. Like, remember? Ah-ha? Right?

Ryan smiled. Jim couldn't tell. Could just be polite. He decided to push it. "That Doug." Jim smacked his knee. Put his hand on Barb's leg. A lot of give there. Turned to her like the adoring husband. Looked at her face. Almost. Pretty close, anyway. "Barb," he said. "We've got this guy at work. Sort of new."

Ryan cut in, "This isn't going to be interesting, Jim. Let's let sleeping Dougs lie."

Laughs. Rebuffed, but ok. That was a good one. Whoa, Ryan's hand is really far up her thigh. This might make Barb uncomfortable. She has a mouth on her, too. Might make a joke. Except not really a joke. Not really at all.

The timer dinged. "That's dinner," Barb said quick. She got up from the couch. Had a little trouble. Isn't that just for old people. Isn't that kind of a bad sign?

The dinner table was neatly set. Jim saw Tara and Ryan playing footsy underneath. Ryan sat across the way. Tara was next to him. Those are some tits she has on her. And I don't feel bad for thinking that. I like the word "tits." "Great tits," I might tell her later after we're all good and drunk. "I love the way that sweater makes your tits

look.” Just to be friendly. “You like my wife’s ass, Ryan. Well, don’t get me started on Tara’s tits here. They’re superb.” There are lots of places I could go with this.

“Should we say grace?” Barb asked.

Grace? What is this? I don’t even know a prayer. Our bible is maybe in a box. Or lost. Who is she fooling. What does she have to prove. “Good God let’s eat.” Jim said. A little loud. He picked up his fork and dug into his salad before anyone could object. He ate in what he thought was a friendly way to maybe make up for that prayer. Which was probably a little sacrilegious. A good subject for some philosophy I could write. He munched.

“You know what I like,” Jim asked. He kept some lettuce in his mouth while he spoke to show it was ok to talk with your mouth full at his table. They weren’t too uptight in his place. They liked to enjoy themselves. “I really like puns.” Jim wished they had something other than this low fat stuff for salad dressing. What difference did seventy calories make anyway. Not like Barb was close to getting back into her two-piece. Man. She sure blew up fast.

“My friend used to say they were the lowest form of humor,” but that’s not really true. “That would be mockery.”

“Mockery is the lowest form of humor,” Tara said in a mocking tone. Wow. That was quick. This girl is more than just great tits and an ass that looks round enough in the slacks she has on tonight and whose nose is really only unattractively large from the side.

“That a girl,” Ryan said and grabbed her face and gave her nose a little lick. Then he gave it another little lick. They made some soft cooing noises.

“Oh, I think I’m about to get a bit sick, you two,” Barb said. She put her napkin up to her mouth. Did she just spit her food in there?

Ryan and Tara stopped, but didn’t seem to notice Barb. Two nose licks seems about right. I guess that’s probably normal for this kind of behavior. Nothing weird going on here. He looked over at his wife. Huh. I’ve never seen that face before. Is she jealous? Maybe she took that big beautiful ass comment to heart. Maybe she was thinking things about Ryan like me with those tits. I can deal with that. Shows she’s still alive. Nothing wrong with her having a little crush. Huh. Is that ok? Should that sort of thing bother me more? Has that mole on Barb’s forehead always been so big? Are those two different colors in there?

“I love puns,” Ryan said. “You know. We’ve had this convo, Jimbo. Remember, I said I was a pundit.” Barb laughed loudly. Like she was trying. She also blew a little food out of her mouth. Ew. That’s kind of embarrassing. Not attractive. No one else seemed to notice. Tara slid her hand over Ryan’s chest, pushing down the fabric of his shirt over his pecs, revealing their heft. She put her mouth around his ear.

“Whoa whoa,” Barb said. “You guys are gonna need a room or something. And I mean like a bedroom. At one of your houses.” They stopped. Looked over at Barb. “This is seriously too much. I can’t eat when you do that. Can I seriously be expected to eat with you doing that? Jim?”

Oh, she had to put me in this. Hot under the collar. Not just an expression. I knew she would ruin it. I think she likes to ruin things. We used to have fun. We used to play board games and call each other on the phone and send each other surprise packages. Jim

drew his hands over his scalp. A little thin up there, maybe? Maybe. These are my guests. It would really be rude of me to go against them. I invited them here. Plus I need to keep Ryan in a good mood for that joke.

Ok. Two birds. The joke to lighten the mood. The hope anyway.

“Well, Barb,” Jim said, throwing his fist across his body in check mark. “You’ll probably have to look into their subconscious to figure this one out.” A little pause. “And I don’t mean the part of their brains that deals with sandwiches.”

Glorious, life affirming laughter. Ryan’s got such a hearty chuckle. Makes a guy feel warm inside. And Tara. Such a sweetheart. The way she just grabbed at my elbow. “Good one,” she said.

Barb was all business. “Didn’t you make that joke last week, Jim?” Saboteur. What a rascal. She’s not going to allow me any fun.

“I’ve never heard it,” Ryan said, still laughing a little. “Sandwiches,” he said softly. “Classic.”

That makes sense. Didn’t even consider it that way. It was loud at Squiggles. I’m sort of a delicate speaker. He just didn’t hear me. Was probably thinking about this girl here, too. Makes sense now. Oh, and look at her go. Still smiling wide, looking at me like I’m the only one in the room. This is a great feeling. Well, now she’s looking at Ryan. Kind of like he said it. But it was there. Her and me. And it was nice.

Jim looked at Ryan and Tara. What a great couple. A great couple of people. These are the kinds of people I want to associate myself with. Good laughs. Fraternity. Really nice tits. Makes a guy feel good about himself. Good about the world in general.

And they like me, too. Wow. He looked at them holding hands, watched Barb excuse herself to go to the bathroom. This is the sort of feeling that I really like most and Barb does have all those great qualities of being a lovable hamburger and has nice taste in aprons, but she doesn't really laugh at my jokes too hard anymore. And then as an inkling but then golden for sure, you know, maybe I could actually do a little better than I've given myself credit for.