



Signal to Noise

Eliot Wilder

Everyone carries a room about inside him. This fact can be proved by means of the sense of hearing. If someone walks fast and one pricks up one's ears and listens, say in the night, when everything round about is quiet, one hears, for instance, the rattling of a mirror not quite firmly fastened to the wall.

Kafka

ONE

First I was born. Then the troubles began. Most people have a tough time remembering their pasts. Me, I can't forget mine. Not that I really want to talk about it. Not that I take pleasure in whining about how my childhood was miserable or about how I was ostracized at school or about how I was flatulent at inopportune moments. The thing is, my teens weren't bad compared with most. Sure, I had the usual adolescent skirmishes with parents who behaved as if they were bizarre B-movie space creatures from a Saturday sci-fi matinee – but who didn't? As an adult, I've been fortunate enough to have more than my share of fiercely intense and intimate relationships with attractive and intelligent women, all of which I probably didn't deserve. Call me Mister Lucky.

Personally, I don't like to draw things out. Who wants to hear the bittersweet recollections of an aging roue? Snore. Besides, what's the point in talking at all? Most people don't listen, not really. They ask you what you've been up to or how you're feeling while they fixate on their own thoughts, the way an actor does when he's preparing for his next entrance. They don't want to know that you're a fucking emotional aneurysm. Because the moment you utter something that touches on anything painful or difficult or, worst, true, most people go blank in the face like a TV when the plug is suddenly pulled. I just hate insincerity. It makes me want to go crazy. Or crazier. Doctor Von Rauffenstein thinks I've got a few screws loose. What do shrinks know? He blames my problems on chemicals. I blame my cursed capacity to see with enough clarity that'd make a Mormon turn to caffeine. Nothing gets past me, boy. I'm like a finely meshed net that traps everything whether I mean to or not. What is the strange compunction I have to see life as that thing that it is and no other thing?

Anyway, the troubles. Perhaps mine are due to contrariety. When I'm given something and commanded to swallow it, my reaction is to spit it out. Tell me that I'm supposed to take baby steps and I'll perform "Swan Lake." Tell me to write a novel and I'll write a single word. I just wasn't designed to live up to expectation. Would that I was. It'd make things simpler, which is most amenable to me. Why then don't I just toe the company line? Call it a healthy compulsion. I'm a human petri dish, fertile and fecund – at least when it comes to my imagination. I am curious by nature. I often wonder what happens when you mix elements that don't belong with one another. Why is it that opposites attract? For the sake of creating something strange, unique and volatile? The way Allegra and I are. Or rather, the way we were. Seeing as how we are no longer together. We just couldn't sustain what had become an emotional funicular – one end up, the other down.

I remember everything. Unfortunately. Because remembering everything means remembering the event that came as rather startling news. The tragic, life-altering black hole from which no light will ever emerge. Until recently, it hadn't really occurred to me how much it affected who I am. Undoubtedly, it's the reason I am here at Rancho Colima Mental, the reason Doctor Von Rauffenstein has to pump me full of drugs – the theory being that if I suck down enough lithium and Paxil I'll sprout new feelings, better feelings, less crazy feelings. Maybe I'll emerge as if from a dream, metamorphosed into a man who's happy, whole and clearheaded. Maybe I'll cease having hallucinations, the burning sensations in my brain, the spider-like pulsing of blood in my veins. Better: Maybe I'll overdose and take myself out of everyone's misery.

Doctor Von Rauffenstein is optimistic about my prognosis. Like syphilis or ham, I *must* be cured. My good doctor says that if I take

my meds, that if I eat every scrap of food they put before me, and that if I stop swinging from the bedposts like a monkey in heat then I might get out of Rancho Colima Mental sometime soon. Maybe in a few months, even. But I believe he's either living with false hope or he's lying. More than likely the latter. I'm not going anywhere. I must be managed. Because for me there is no cure. Sure, I have a team of experts working on the case. They are doing their level best to help me maintain a semblance of normalcy. Then again, what's normal?

I don't believe anything Doctor Von Rauffenstein says. Frankly, I don't believe anything anyone says. Call me paranoid and you'd be wrong. That is to say, paranoid's not the accurate label for my condition. Because paranoid's not what Doctor Von Rauffenstein says is the nature of my dysfunction. Borderline Personality Disorder is the formal title. I'm delighted to finally have a formal title. I should have business cards printed: Moses Levy, BPD.

The good doctor also says I suffer from severe depression, and he encourages me to express my emotions, so long as I express them without hanging myself. If I get too expressive, Doctor Von Rauffenstein cranks up the psychogenics, which make me feel, for lack of a better descriptive, even. I would rather I felt angry or fuzzy or nauseated – anything other than *even*. Because the lithium and Paxil definitely take the edge off everything. Everything except the voices in my head, which form a dense chorus of white noise. They blur at the edges. They invade my waking days and spill over into my dreams. They are beyond my control.

Beyond my control. Was it beyond my control when I drank an entire bottle of sleeping pills and chased it down with a fifth of whiskey? I didn't know what I was thinking at the time, other than I

was looking for a way to drown out the voices inside my head. I needed *something*. But all I got was a lousy intubation tube rammed up my nose and down the back of my throat so the paramedics could pump my stomach. It's a nauseating experience that should be enough to teach anyone that if you're going to kill yourself, use a fucking thirty-ought six aimed directly at your temple. Because if you're cowardly or half-assed or clumsy, if you don't get the job done right, then chances are you'll wind up cohabiting with a lot of serious nut jobs in a place like Rancho Colima Mental.

Not that I'm not serious. I am always serious. Which is why I was put on a suicide watch and instructed to jot down my feelings and thoughts in a marbleized elementary school composition book. I write with such furor that I've polished off eleven journals in less than two months. At two hundred pages per journal, about twenty-two hundred pages total, that's an awful lot of me bitching about my shitty life. Mostly, I wrote things like "why is the universe so unknowable?" or "how can I stop from hurting myself?" or "I'm sick of being sick of being unhappy" or "I hate lumps in my mashed potatoes" or "I wish my mother might've loved me a little more" and "but, really, I just want to be happy." I've filled out umpteen pages with these relatively benign passages because I knew my caretakers would be reading them and because I wanted to come across like a credible, low-level crazy person. If I wrote, "I want to blow up a savings and loan" or "I feel like fucking a schnauzer" or "I believe that most of the people you see walking their dogs, standing on line at the bank or staring blankly at their computer screen in the pod next to you at work are really alien creatures from another planet disguised as human," my not-so-amused handlers would likely give me the look the kid on "The Twilight Zone" gave his parents right before he sent them to the cornfield. Then I'd be moved up to the fifth floor, the

shuttered floor, the floor where all the truly disturbed loonies are squirreled away.

I meet once a day with Doctor Von Rauffenstein, a strange, yellowish man who smells like butch wax. I fixate on his peculiar odor while he asks me what's on my mind, although, as I've mentioned, I don't believe Doctor Von Rauffenstein really wants to know what I'm thinking. Not really. Still, it's hard for me not to expound on my theories about the universe and my place in it.

"The Earth is one of nine planets that revolve around the sun," I begin, recognizing that with each damning word I edge ever closer to the fifth floor. "Although the sun is central to our survival here on Earth, it's really a minor star. Did you know that our sun is one of one hundred billion stars in our galaxy, and an average distance of thirty trillion miles separates each of these stars? Did you know that our galaxy is so huge that if you were to travel at the speed of light it would take you one hundred thousand years to get from one end of it to another? When you think about the actual space we human beings occupy in the universe measured against our anxiety, our self-consciousness, our anguish, our love, our suffering, our immodesty, our stupidity, our passion, our needs, our moments of failure and triumph – it gives you pause."

"Cheer up, Moses," Doctor Von Rauffenstein says, as if it's selfish of me to be pessimistic. "The universe is not so dire a place."

"I'm sorry, I'm feeling, um, tense," I say, and then I accidentally let go: "I can't stand the sound of my own voice. It's making me crazy. No, that's quite right. It's the ever-widening hole in the ozone layer, the destruction of the rain forests, the murder of baby seals. I'm lighting the wrong ends of my cigarettes. My left eye has been wandering – have you noticed? And sometimes I feel an ineffable

sadness. I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm constipated as hell. I haven't taken a satisfying dump in weeks and weeks. I think it's because I'm so far up inside myself that nothing can get out."

Doctor Von Rauffenstein ups my lithium and Paxil.

I don't see much of my sister Holly or my brother Dell. It must be fucking depressing for them to see me now and to deal with my greenhouse of problems. However, my beleaguered parents dutifully visit me once a week.

"We love you to death," Bunny and Seymour tell me repeatedly. No wonder I am having such a tough time living.

"I love you too," I assure them, "and I don't blame you for this mess I'm in."

I don't blame them. Honest. They did their best. So what if they placed more significance on deciding what color the living room carpet should be than on choosing what God we should worship. Sure, we were Jewish – with a name like Levy how could we not be? Yes, I was even bar mitzvahed. But between our Sunday ham, Christmas lights and right wing politics, it's not like we were your quintessential kosher-keepers. If we were typical of anything, it was of our fellow residents of suburban Rancho Colima, a town whose butter-bright qualities masked the darker cavities of human behavior.

Sure, I have a tendency to view the events of my life as if through a kaleidoscope, its fragments ever tumbling and shifting. I concoct my stories as a reprieve from my depression, which stretches out in all directions like an endless desert plain. I believe that if I can tell my stories – tales of madness, cancer and tract housing – I won't feel so miserable.

"You seem a little better," Bunny offers.

"Yes," Seymour adds, "Mentally and physically, Doctor Von Rauffenstein sees much improvement in you."

"Yes," Bunny continues, "much improvement."

"Yes, much improvement."

"Yes."

Bunny and Seymour both look grim. Who could blame them? With my matted hair, my eyes like twin ashtrays and my chewed-up fingernails, I must scare the shit out of them. And all I ever do is talk about the usual depressive shit. That's why my parents put me in Rancho Colima Mental. They don't have the energy or the resources to maintain a vigil over me so I won't slash my wrists in their bathroom or sneak out of their house in the middle of the night and jump in front of a train. I am now the sole responsibility of Doctor Von Rauffenstein & Co., who believe they can resolve my affliction by grilling me with stupid questions.

"If you were a color, what would it be?"

"Black."

"If you could be any animal, what would you choose?"

"Amoebae."

"If you had your choice of any dream job, what would it be?"

"Pedagogue. Or is it pedicurist? Pedophile?"

"Have you ever been in love?"

"Pentacostalist!"

Allegra is ancient history. Nowadays, I can only fantasize about the way we once were, all lovebirds and seahorse soup, long before all those hurtful things happened, before my world turned to shit. I can only fantasize about her coming to visit me, the two of us carrying on with hugs, tears and laughter on the porch behind Rancho Colima Mental, as a mass of bougainvillea would shower us with a magenta rain.

"How are you, Moses?" she'd ask.

"There's something in the air that makes everything seem exaggerated," I'd say in a medicated slur.

I'd sprawl out in a lounge chair, my pale arm a pillow. I'd appear slightly bloated, as if I was allergic to life itself.

"I've got a present for you," she'd say, taking out a compass. "Now you can never get lost."

The two of us would stare at it while the needle would spin around and around, before finally coming to rest.

"Look," she'd say. "True north."

TWO

Writing has always been a major cause of my troubles. Because what I choose to write about invariably gets me into deep shit. It's not easy being in a relationship with someone you love and "writing what you know." Because I don't live in a vacuum, I've been affected deeply by the ire or disconsolation of those close to me who misread some character foible or flaw as their own.

Still, as a teenager, a writer was all I'd ever dreamed of being. But writing, as I would later discover, is less an act of being than of becoming. What was I becoming? I so desperately desired to become a part of that rarefied fountainhead that included Homer, Proust and Joyce – even if the addition of the surname Levy might've made the pantheon sound like a law firm. I wanted to live the writer's lifestyle, up all night nursing a brandy while debating with other writers about what's in, what's out, who's cresting the newest wave and who's washed up. I wanted to have the look: pointy Italian shoes, classy leather jackets and black sunglasses to render my intentions opaque. I wouldn't shave or shower for days on end, and my hair would have that perfectly rumpled unkempt look, like some sort of writerly pop star. Oh, yes, and I wanted to become a writer because I figured it was an easy way to get girls.

"So you want to become a writer, Moses?" asked Miss O'Brien, my sophomore high school English teacher. "Why on God's great green Earth would you want to do that?"

"I want to become a writer," I would have told her then had I known what I know now, "because I am under the perhaps misguided notion that writing is in some way noble. Because in my heart, I yearn to discover what's beyond the dreary rectitude of Rancho Colima.

Because I want to go beyond the threshold of what's been explored, what's convention or what's expected.

"I want to become a writer because writers are fonts of untrammelled wisdom, making rich and profound differences in the lives of everyday people. Because I want to invent a new language – if I could compare thee to a summer's day, why not a credenza or a cactus? Because I want to discover what's true – and not what's true just for me but what's true for the entire universe. Because I want to feel each feeling to the fullest."

And that's not all.

"Should I become a writer, Miss O'Brien, I would not be a dilettante. I would not be ungrateful or peevish. To the contrary, I would brim with good cheer for having the opportunity to live the very special life of a writer, a very special life that I couldn't possibly imagine living any other way. It would be a life devoid of uncertainty or regret. It would be a life without compromise. It would be a life created and maintained by an act of will."

"So you want to become a writer, Moses?" Miss O'Brien asked me again, impatiently. "Why on God's great green Earth would you want to do that?"

"Because it's an easy way to get girls?"

"My dear, foolish, Moses!" she declared with a dead-eyed stare. "You write because you have no other choice."

Years pass. I am a reporter for the Rancho Colima Post Telegram, and my writing has become mannered and puerile. My job is as monotonous as a busy signal. My life has yet to happen. One day I am assigned an obituary for one Mary Margaret O'Brien. It is my job

to assemble the arc of her days like an artfully sewn doily. I speak with friends and family and discover that Miss O'Brien collected milk bottles from the '30s. She was allergic to the glue on the back of postage stamps. She kept her tonsils sealed in a jar of formaldehyde years after they had been removed. She had fancied being a poet but gave it up when a mean-spirited writing instructor called her work anemic, clichéd and derivative. She had once been a comely if somewhat repressed woman whose looks inevitably deteriorated, the lines on her face eventually spreading like cracks on a windshield. I toil with this ridiculously tiny obit like a dinner host fussing over an hors d'oeuvre platter when I am seized by a sense of despair and queasiness that could only rival Roquentin's nausea. Just who was Mary Margaret O'Brien? I continue to trawl the recollections of those who knew her or those who knew of her. I want to explain this life, to make sense of who she was and what she did. But what I am confronted with is a naked existence. How could mere words on a page ever explain that? Why, I have to wonder, would I ever want to become a writer? Why would I ever desire to deliberately bring upon myself such interminable solitude along with the punishing emotional and mental exhaustion against which there is no bromide?

"I want to become a writer," I would tell Miss O'Brien if she were around to hear me, "because I don't ever want to forget that one perfect summer evening when Allegra stared back at me from the window seat with her brilliant laughing eyes while the moon rested over her head like a perfect halo. "But mostly," I'd add, "I want to become a writer because I'd have no other choice."

THREE

Speaking of troubles, Allegra and I had known each other less than a week when I told her I was in love with her.

"I'm in love with you, Allegra," I said as she choked on her cappuccino. What else could I say? What choice did I have? Allegra's sensuousness opened a part of me I never thought existed. Then again, her come-hither sexuality also acted like a narcotic: addictive and deadly.

At first I didn't think that my being eleven years her senior would be a problem. Allegra looked and behaved like someone twice her age. On the other hand, I had all the emotional sophistication of a prepubescent boy possessed of the notion that he and he alone was the first person in history to ever fall so hard for anyone. The two of us together seemed to hold such promise, such hope. We were, above all, in love. That was in the beginning. In the beginning, we had an immediate John-and-Yoko sort of thing, staying in bed all day fucking each other's brains out, staring longingly and endlessly at each other and talking sheer gobbledygook.

"I love you and I will never leave you," I once told Allegra.

"I love you and I will never leave you, either," she shot back.

"No, I mean it. I love you with all my heart, with all my soul and with all my might."

"I mean it too."

"I'm not kidding."

"I'm not kidding, either."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Absolutely?"

"Definitely."

"Yes."

"Yes."

Yes, in the beginning what we had was love's dulcet folly. But in the end what we wound up with was love's holy shitstorm. It was as if we were on a roller coaster with the breaks off, one collision leading to another and then another. Which might have been thrilling to some. But to me, it was painful and terrifying.

"I'm having a spiritual crisis," I once told Allegra.

"I hate your hair that way," she shot back.

"Thank you. Except I fail to see how the two things relate."

"You're always missing the point."

"I'm not following you."

"Why must everything be about you?"

"I was going to say the same about you."

"It's always me, me, me, me, me."

"I was talking about my spiritual crisis."

"Does this dress make me look fat?"

"What?"

"Why do you always chew gum when you talk to me?"

"Huh?"

Allegra blamed the irrational, fucked-up part of her character – deservedly so – on her mother Patsy, and I would often observe echoes of Patsy's elliptical logic in Allegra's shtick whenever stuff between us would get heated.

"My fights with Mom had all the circuitousness of a Mobius strip," Allegra told me. "Our arguments were not about seeking solutions as much as they were about creating new and unsolvable problems."

Not that Allegra's relationship was that much better with her father Werner, a commanding but estrange presence who'd divorced Patsy when Allegra was only six and then left them both behind – something neither of them came to terms with.

"Whereas Mom was a distant beacon struggling to remain alight," Allegra once wrote, "Dad was an incandescent flare bleaching the details of the night with his superior brightness."

Dearest Moses:

I hate spending the holidays with Dad and my stepmom Beulah, my stepsister Elaine and their disgustingly happily familied life. I should be where I belong. I should be with you. Their home, their entire neighborhood feels so different and strange, like I've walked into a void. I can't breathe. I can't think clearly. I ache all over.

Yesterday at dinner, Elaine was telling me about how she plays games with guys, teasing them and leading them on, and about how I need to do the same. I was telling her she's full of shit. Dad was chewing militarily on his lamb chop, listening to us go back and forth. Finally, seemingly exasperated, he put down his steak knife with a thud and butted in.

*"That's the problem with women. They just play games with men."
Then he turned his gaze toward me and with his usual insinuating
menace said, "What do you think you gain from doing that anyway?"*

"I don't play games," I told him, sternly.

*Why does Dad constantly judge me? Why does Elaine tell me that I
have to play games with men before I get married when it's clear she
doesn't know what she's doing?*

*Dad says marriage is nothing but a social situation. That sounds like
bullshit to me. Personally, I think he would honestly like to talk to
Beulah about the shit he goes through each day as a reporter and
Beulah would honestly like to talk to him about the bratty kids she
teaches at school. But they both believe it wouldn't be nice to talk about
such ugly things in much the same way you wouldn't complain about
your shitty life to someone you just met on the street. So, instead, Dad
and Beulah talk about home improvements. They talk about how well
the smoker cooked the meat. They talk about how cold it is outside. To
them, marriage is like a cocktail party. No one should talk out of turn.
It's all so fucking polite.*

*Elaine says marriage is the death of hope. Yeah, I know, she stole that
line – but she really lives by it. As if we are supposed to spend our lives
hoping for something, or someone, better. A better party. A smoother
talker. As if.*

*My dear stepsister keeps asking me if she should call her boyfriend
Tom, given that he hasn't called her in a couple of weeks. She says she
deserves better and there are many other guys she would like to date.
Better guys? I told her she shouldn't call him. I mean, why should she
bother talking to anyone? What will she get out of it if there's no hope?*

Beulah and I are the closest in this house. At least she listens to me. But she's sick right now. She gets sick every day, if I remember correctly. Her sickness is reflected in her face, which is so careworn it's practically medieval. There's so much pain associated with being in this house that I feel sick too. The memory of so many awful holidays spent around the awful holiday table. It hurts to think about it. Dad's know-it-all, must-have-the-last-word demeanor makes me anxious and absolutely miserable. As for Elaine, she will never understand me, no matter how clearly I explain myself. What comes out of my mouth is an indecipherable code, like something she once read about and now only vaguely recalls.

I want to feel like I belong with my family and that I am a part of the life that goes on here. I watched a TV special on the life of President Truman with Dad. I made a stab at caring, asking Dad if I could get him something from the fridge while I was up. I made a successful joke during the news. I even told Dad about you. I said you were younger than thirty. I lied. He said I should go on more dates while I'm at college. I told him that people today don't date; people today just sleep around. He said, "Well, maybe that particular college isn't for you." Right. I should've checked out the dating program before I applied!

Dad says I act like I'm above it all, that I am too good for the boys at my school. But Dad has it all wrong. I just define my values in a different way than Dad. Of course, I do think my way is the best way, but I'm willing to believe his way works for him. I wish he would believe my way works for me. And I wish he wouldn't think I'm too young to know my own mind yet.

Is it impossible for me to understand complicated things about life? Elaine doesn't understand half of what I know, but Dad respects what

she thinks and how she behaves just because she's older. When does it become legal for me to understand values, relationships, social situations, manners, stereotypes, common courtesy, love and emotional stability? When is it OK for me to know this? When I'm away from Dad's influence? When I'm over thirty? When I get perfect grades? When I've dated a hundred men? When I can handle myself in dinner conversation? Doesn't the life I've lived count for anything? Was I so aware of it for nothing?

I am not superior. I have simply had to survive a lot of shit. And now that I have learned how to survive and I know what I want, why should I lack credibility just because I happen to be so young?

Dad once said he thought I was emotionally unbalanced and mentally unstable just because I refused to go to the prom in high school. Everyone else goes to the prom. Was I just too good not to go? The answer was, no. I was angry at my stupid fucking boyfriend at the time because I discovered he had been sleeping with my best friend and he thought that by taking me to the prom he would somehow right his wrongs. Wrong. I couldn't go with him after what he'd done – and Dad, not knowing a thing about my personal life, just thought I was being antisocial and above it all because I refused to go.

The thing is, he has always judged me. But he's never had the facts.

It's now the next night and Dad and I spent some time together today. I held the flashlight for him while he replaced a filter in the heating unit in the basement. We took some film to the drugstore to be developed. We bought new floor mats for his truck. We went to the zoo to see the pandas, but the pandas were asleep. Dad also showed me how to close the car door like a man. "Follow through with it, like a tennis racket." We also listened to an oldies country music station and Dad sang along with Buck Owens.

After dinner, Dad and I talked about how to best catch a fish. "Fancy feathered lures are no good," he argued. "It's live bait or nothing."

Later, I watched as Dad polished off his brandy, pulled a flannel blanket over himself and eventually nodded off in his easy chair. Beulah stared at him rather disgustedly as he snored.

"He makes such an unholy racket," she said.

"Yes," I said. "But ever since I've moved away from home I find it strangely comforting."

Beulah squeezed out a tiny laugh, put away her needlepoint and went upstairs to bed.

I made tea with honey and lemon, and plopped down in the easy chair staring for a while at Dad's framed photo of him holding a tremendous marlin he caught. It's the only picture in which Dad has ever smiled, a crooked smear of a smile that reached all the way up to his eyes, and he looked happy in a way I've never seen him since.

I was about to go to bed myself when I caught a second wind. I swept up and collected all the nutshells we had cracked open that night. I fluffed up the pillows and straightened the books and magazines, carefully moving the Playboys to the bottom of the stack. I went into the kitchen and did the dishes. Then I made tea with honey and lemon and returned to the living room. Dad suddenly woke up with a snort, and he switched off the radio, whose signal had started to drift in and out like so many annoying ghostly whispers.

"I think we can do without this," he said.

I said, "I think so too."

—Allegra

Inasmuch as Werner lived a charmed life, Patsy was a woman for whom the dust had long been off the butterfly's wing. When Allegra finally found the strength to extricate herself from the thumb-sucking, Southern Gothic madness of her mother, Patsy turned to a frightening combination of booze and pills. Her behavior grew increasingly wayward and extreme, until depression devoured her like a crouching beast. It all came to a crashing finale when Patsy blew her brains out with a thirty-ought six aimed directly at her temple. In her rose garden. On Christmas morning. So no one would ever forget her.

Enough.

There was a time when I believed that Allegra and I were what Grammy Levy would call *besbert*, Hebrew for fated. I have proof. It was a Sunday. Allegra and I woke up, showered and ate a stack of Belgian waffles slathered in whip cream and strawberries and downed several cups of coffee. We wanted to be alert for whatever it was we were about to experience. Allegra put a blanket, a small bottle of apple juice, some paper and pens into her backpack. We kissed. And then, after a moment's contemplation, we both swallowed a small capsule of Ecstasy.

The two of us zigzagged down a street a bit nervously, uncertain of where we were going, and eventually we ended up at a seaside amusement park. Allegra said to me, "I think I feel something," and I said, "No, you don't. It's much too soon. It takes at least an hour before anything happens."

The sun wasn't out, but it was still very bright so we stopped at a small knickknack shop to buy ourselves some silly sunglasses, the cheap kind you find only at amusement parks. Everything around

us was noisy. Everyone was busy bustling about. The two of us were excited to see what this drug would do.

We walked down to the boardwalk. At the entrance there were cops telling a couple of young boys that they couldn't bring beer into the park. I could tell that Allegra was nervous and that she thought that somehow the police might know that we were on something. So I whispered to her: "We're cool. The police can't tell just by looking at you that you've taken a drug." She laughed.

We went through the gate and directly to a giant building that enclosed a merry-go-round. We sat down on a bench, and I thought aloud, "What a wonderful carousel." The horses had such silly faces and the light coming through the yellow windows in the ceiling cast everything in a shimmering gold. "What a wonderful carousel." The calliope rang out with a sound pure, clear and familiar. I felt myself breaking into a smile. "What a wonderful carousel!"

Allegra wore an expression of perfect calm. The air held something weighty and important.

We soon found ourselves walking among a crowd of what seemed like grotesques right out of a Fellini film. There were ringlet-twirlers and gum-smackers, fatties in Speedo's and blue-haired old ladies drenched in grandma perfume. A Dixieland band was performing nearby on a small stage. The horns were loud, brassy and shrill. I stared intently at the tuba, declaring profoundly, "What funny instruments tubas are!"

Again, Allegra said she thought she was feeling something, like a tiny bug of happiness was scurrying around her brain. I told her it wasn't time yet and that it was just her imagination. But as soon as I said that, I felt something. It started as a small presence in my chest

and then it moved into my arms and legs. It was a warm, busy sensation, a kind of irrepressible tickle. And then I began to laugh uncontrollably. I looked at Allegra, who was laughing and hiccuping and sneezing and staring upward at the Ferris wheel.

"Let's go on that thing," she said.

"Yes. Let's!"

We got tickets, and as we were getting on the ride Allegra said, "I'm a little scared because I've always been afraid of heights. Will you hold me?"

"I'm frightened too," I said, "but sometimes it's a good thing to be frightened."

We liked the way the wind whipped up at us, the way our legs dangled underneath us and the way all the people danced madly to the Dixieland band. The smell of hot dogs and sweaty people had a heavy grip on the late afternoon air. And even though the sky suddenly turned dark, even though rain started to fall, even though we were becoming soaking wet, Allegra and I couldn't ever remember being so happy.

We exited the ride and began wandering around, our feet light on the pavement. We went to an arcade, the kind where you shoot water into a clown's mouth and it fills a balloon above its head. The first balloon to burst wins. Allegra blew about ten dollars on the dumb thing, and although she never won, I told her: "How bold you are to play this game. You really love to play games. And it's so perfect that I'm not playing because I really don't like to play games."

The two of us clung to each other, as if we were as one. Allegra's smile seemed to take over her face. She seemed suspended in space and time, a perfect painting with butterflies filling the space around her like colored air.

We ran to a photo booth. Everything was happening so fast. We didn't want to lose the moment. We needed evidence, something to show ourselves and our children and our children's children.

"Well," Allegra shouted when the picture came through the slot, "you're so gorgeous. Me, I look odd. But you, you look gorgeous."

Allegra and I couldn't stop laughing. Our voices were a laugh. Our skin was a laugh. Our tears were a laugh. It was all so unreal and yet not.

We kept clinging tightly to one another. Then I whispered: "Don't say anything mean to me. I feel vulnerable right now."

Allegra looked at me and shouted: "It's me. I'm here. I won't hurt you."

"And I won't hurt you either."

Allegra and I whirled around and around and the crowds, the vendors, the arcades all became a blur. When we stopped she fixed her eyes on me. It was a look I'd never known, a look that seemed to see me as I am: fragile, silly and human.

"What's happening to us today won't ever be forgotten," she kept repeating. "You won't forget it. You won't."

"I won't forget it. Ever."

Allegra and I walked to a fishing pier, hugging each other on the way. We sat ourselves down on a hard concrete bench overlooking

the rails, paper lanterns dangling above us. We began to talk, and we kept right on talking as the sky turned dark, opened up and released the rains. We kept right on talking until the rains stopped and the clouds parted. We stopped talking. Evening had arrived and Allegra's tanned skin glowed against the blackness.

A chilly breeze kicked up and we both started shivering.

I said to Allegra, "Is it good to shake? Do you like it?"

"Yes, yes, yes."

"I don't think I've ever been this cold."

"Neither have I."

"But it's OK."

"Yes, I suppose it is."

We wanted to tell each other so many things.

"I wish I could be you," I said.

"I wish I could be you too."

"I mean it."

"So do I."

"I'm scared to make love to you, Allegra."

"I'm scared to make love to you too."

"And I'm scared I might be crazy. I hear voices inside my head."

"I do too. Sometimes it's best to scream real loud to drown them out."

Everything was happening so fast. We talked fast. We listened fast. We felt stuff fast. Fast, fast, fast.

"Moses, Take me."

"Take you where?"

"I'm serious."

"I am too," I said emphatically. "I'm always serious."

I grabbed Allegra's face, shook her head, and with a full force of air, fully enunciated lips, I screamed, "I love you."

"Yes, I love you too," Allegra said, her auburn hair unfurling in the wind.

"We can do anything," she continued, her every word appearing to contain the weight of absolute truth. "With both our pasts, with all our fuck-ups, with everything that's happened and everything that's about to happen, we can handle it, together. We can make it. Together. And we'll be together forever."

Would that we were.

I have a fantasy that someday, one of Allegra's daughters from the less flawed, more dependable man Allegra hooked up with after I had had an affair and she dumped me will discover that a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist was once married to her mother. "You were married to Moses Levy?" she'll ask, incredulously.

Georgia – let's say that's her name – will force her mother to drive her out to visit me at my sprawling estate on the windswept shore of some Gatsby-esque beachfront where I have been living comfortably for many years with my cats, my books and my solitude.

Georgia will bring with her several copies of my novels to be autographed along with a curious appetite. So many questions. What was her mother like when she was younger? Is that really her

mother in my books or did I make it all up? Why did her mother and I get divorced? Am I as fucked-up as her mother says?

I'll answer all of Georgia's questions the best I can. I'll tell her the story of her mother and I, of a once great love, and that like many once great loves, it was somehow rent asunder. I'll tell her about our relationship, not in the way it happened but in the way I remembered it.

Georgia and I will sit in the waning light of a dimly lit room, and we'll talk and laugh and cry and drink tea while Allegra remains in the car, staring intently and perhaps somewhat sadly at the glowing dial of the radio.

FOUR

Growing up, our household wasn't that much different from the other families living their quietly troubled lives in suburban Rancho Colima. We ate our tinfoiled TV dinners, loved our Lucy and ducked and covered when the air-raid siren sounded every Monday at noon – just like everyone else. Perhaps it could be said we were too much like everyone else, a paper-thin sheet of lath and plaster separating one pink-stuccoed tract household from another. Years later it became clear to me that it was for that specific quality of bourgeois equanimity that Bunny and Seymour Levy had chosen to live in ready-made Rancho Colima, a town whose most symbolic landmark materialized the day a bolt of lightning zapped the S on the Shell gas station sign: It was hell from then on.

Holly and Dell were my elder siblings, neither of whom had I ever, or would ever, feel a close familial bond with. Not even now, now that I'm in the loony bin, now when I could I use a sister and brother the most. Holly was forever a mystery to me, as oblivious to the world as a dowager at a knitting machine. Bunny and Seymour attributed her poor grades in school and lack of aspiration on her dyslexia, which I believe became a handy excuse for her not doing anything fulfilling or creative with her life. Not that I don't accept she wasn't handicapped, but Holly seemed to willfully avoid facing her shortcomings. "This is all I am," she'd say, "and all I'll ever be." And when she married a smart and humble lawyer named Larry, who bought her a Mercedes and then a house in creepily upscale Santa Mira, that was, as they say, all she wrote.

"I'm going to retire just as soon as Larry makes partner," she told me.

"Retire from what?"

On the other end of the ambition spectrum was Dell, rugged, determined and brilliant, a gorgeous muscle of male youth with, as I seem to recall, a blonde and bronzed cheerleader girlfriend on each arm. Dell was also the captain of the varsity lacrosse team, a straight A student and someone whom, as a child, I found myself vying vainly and tirelessly against. But despite my nusus, I would never be on par with Dell. I'd never have rippling biceps, a washboard stomach or the kind of perfectly accomplished swagger that'd make girls swoon. Compared to Dell, I was physically mediocre in every way. Then again, when I was younger, I'd yet to discover that I would never be infinitely good at anything other than just being Moses Levy.

If only Bunny had ever come to such a conclusion about herself. She endeavored – engaged with unflinching effort and painstaking labor, she would assert – to maintain a kind of harmonic status quo, a yin and yang of placid domesticity. Bunny had longed to break free from what her Jewish immigrant parents called *tohu va'vohu*, chaos and desolation. Who, then, was the distant and cheerless person Holly, Dell and I would call Mother? Who was this woman whose depression permeated the house like nerve gas? Who was this woman with the cross-folded arms, this eternal flame of rage, this smudge pot of anger?

"My parents meted out their affections with an eyedropper," Bunny told me, "and saddled me with all the crap they couldn't be bothered with. My father forced me to scoop ice cream at his goddamn soda fountain for two dollars a week while my older brother Sidney was made assistant manager. And my mother forced me to clean house all day Saturday while my younger sister Annette had tea in the garden with her dolls. I wasn't allowed to question what my parents told me. Their word was absolute. They never validated my opinions

or gave me the benefit of the doubt. They never gave me the sense that what I thought or felt mattered in the least."

And that wasn't all.

"Did you know that I once aspired to be an actress? I appeared in regional theater, but my parents never gave me any sort of encouragement." And as the years slipped by, her ambitions and desires withered with neglect. Then she married Seymour. And by the time the kids came along, she didn't have the strength or the will or the desire to do anything other than cut out coupons, cook Salisbury steak dinners, vacuum behind the TV and straighten the tassels around the area rug. And, oh yes, clean, clean, clean.

All her life, Bunny struggled to maintain decorum, to keep things just so. She labored hard to maintain an inviolable sense of order. Each day she meticulously scoured the mildew out of the grout between the tiles in the bathtub with scrub brushes and harsh cleansers until every surface is as shiny and as disinfected as an operating room. But each day brings with it new grime, as if a slow accretion of filth was deliberately trailing after her. Which meant she had to live in a perpetual state of vigilance.

If neurotics build castles in the air and psychotics live in them, then Bunny is their maid. Because although she griped and grumbled constantly about how much she hated her chores, it was clear that she was a slave to them. Only Bunny could clean things up just so. And only I, the most chaotic, difficult and rambunctious child of the three, knew how to mess things up again.

"Moses, you make life unfit to live," she declared, reaching for a bottle of cooking sherry after I unthinkingly tossed my red baseball

cap into the wash with Bunny's favorite white linens. "See what you've done! You've driven me to drink!"

Yes, all her life, Bunny wanted things to be just so. But life, messy as it is, refused to cooperate. And when Seymour lost his job as an insurance agent at Rancho Colima Life and Casualty, Bunny, frightened and unable to cope, lapsed even further into an endless cycle of compulsive house cleaning and cooking-sherry drinking. She was Sylvia Plath by way of June Cleaver.

In a way, it's because of Bunny I am so driven. In a way, the distance between the two of us does not seem so great. In a way, the most indelible characteristic Bunny passed on to me may have been her relentless striving for something unattainable, austere and absolute, a state of unblemished purity that could never be achieved. Bunny spruced and scrubbed like an indefatigable soldier on the front line of filth – a neurosis that could be considered both a curse and a gift. Once I'd learned to rid myself of the curse, I was able to embrace the gift. Which may explain why I decided to become a writer.

When Seymour was a small boy, his parents abandoned him. It was obvious to everyone that in the story of his childhood, Seymour was a mere bit player. Preferring to leave the messy job of raising a precocious youngster to others, they shuttled him like old luggage from one relative to the next. He finally wound up with his Aunt Penelope, who'd never had children of her own and whose continual kvetching made him feel like a stranger in a strange potpourri-sachet-and-matzo-ball-soup-scented land. From an early age, Seymour was taught forbearance as if it were a virtue. He would sit up straight and not sass back. He would wash behind his ears. He would neatly fold his shorts in three places. He would not injure a

book's spine by lying it open on a table. He would be the perfect little gentleman in every way or he would be sent packing.

When Seymour became an adult, he craved attention like a man slaked by an unquenchable thirst, smacking his desperate, love-chapped lips while he begged Bunny to spare him just one little kiss. But beyond a quick smooch while he was out the door in the morning, she was as about as warm as an ice pick.

Once when Seymour got amazingly drunk, more drunk than he'd ever been before, he struggled vainly to give Bunny a kiss with his mouth slightly open. Bunny broke free of his embrace, and with a sickened look on her pincushion face she laughed with embarrassment and shouted, "Oh Seymour, that's disgusting." Seymour shrank away with the look of a small dog threatened by a newspaper.

Seymour found ways to get back at her. Bunny was nothing if not an anguished cipher, easily manipulated. Each time he quietly grabbed at his chest, or moaned under his breath that he was in pain, or lifted objects that were too heavy for him, or feigned some sort of ailment, Bunny would plead, "Seymour, what's the matter?" or "Seymour, should we go to the doctor?" or "Seymour, I told you not to lift that chair!" To which he'd respond, wheezing, "It's nothing, Bunny. It's really nothing, nothing at all. I'll be OK. Just give me a minute to catch my breath." These none-too-subtle dramatics drove Bunny crazy, playing on her very real fear of growing old alone.

Despite their seeming inability to ever get along, to enjoy each other's company and to feel any sort of abiding mutual love, Bunny and Seymour were in it to the brutal end – "brutal" being the operative word. Once, after having endured one of Bunny's tirades on Seymour's unwillingness to properly make the bed with neatly

tucked hospital corners, I suggested to Bunny that she get a place of her own, a place where she could make the bed any damn way she wanted.

"You can't be serious," Bunny said, looking at me dumbfounded.

As I said, I am always serious.

Certainly, Seymour and Bunny had been through so much together. Not only had they survived the nightmare of suburbia in the Fifties, they had also witnessed Prohibition, the Depression and World War II.

Seymour fantasized that one day his lousy luck would change, that his horrible boss would have a massive heart attack and die, that he would find an abandoned strongbox by the side of the road with a small fortune in it. Or that a long-lost relative would leave him a huge inheritance. Or that the ten million drachmas he brought back from Greece after the war might someday turn out to be worth more than a lousy twenty bucks. Or that he would win the lottery and buy for Bunny a dream house that looked like a big birthday cake with all the trimmings. But such was never the case. Alas, Seymour's life has never amounted to more than a sort of wicked polymorphous cliché, with Seymour a reverse alchemist that consistently turns gold into lead.

Notwithstanding his vicissitudes, Seymour was born to perform one function and one function only: selling insurance premiums. With the head of a Babbitt and the heart of a Candide, Seymour ordained his objectivist belief in the redemption that is Term, the salvation that is Limited Payment and the sanctity that is Malpractice.

"Just remember that if you make your payables through a protect annuity," Seymour would preach, "the costs should be minimal."

For fifteen years, Seymour dedicated himself to Rancho Colima Life and Casualty, a company, alas, more concerned with casualty than with life. For fifteen years, Seymour humped and hustled, shilled and bustled, tirelessly grinding out policy after policy until his features turned ruddy and his jowls hung from his cheeks like sandbags. For fifteen years, Seymour bolstered the coffers of Rancho Colima Life and Casualty until the company chieftains decreed that Seymour was overaged, overpaid and overqualified. In a word, then, Seymour was "over."

Seymour seemed to take well the sudden downturn in his fortunes, suppressing his despair with an outward cheer. Nevertheless, despite his seemingly sanguine facade, from behind his clunky black horn-rim glasses stewed a magma of rage – with me, the most difficult and rambunctious child of the three, the prime target of Seymour's ire. Seymour's unpredictable temperament manifested itself in steely stare-downs and hysterical flare-ups. One minute he would preach the virtues of abstemious habits and total fidelity, the next he would collapse onto the sofa in a drunken tempest, howling about his shitty luck, his missed opportunities and his unfulfilled dreams. One minute his face would ignite into a ferocious sneer, the next it would be sealed into an expression of unspeakable sadness.

I never truly understood how Seymour – or how anyone, for that matter – could reconcile such wildly manifold attitudes and emotions. At least not until I wound up a babbling nut case at Rancho Colima Mental. It was then that I grew to have an understanding of and a compassion for how complex and fragile people are. My heart goes out to Seymour now.

I tried to stay out of Seymour's way for most of my adolescence. But that wasn't entirely possible living under his roof. I had no privacy,

no power and virtually nothing I could say was mine, save an antiquated record player with a fidelity that ranged somewhere between tinny and muffled. Whenever I played the feeble little thing a notch above a whisper Seymour would burst into my room with a lusterless look in his piercing eyes and shout, "Turn that malarkey down!" It didn't matter what was playing. It could've been the Monkees, Mancini or Mahler. To Seymour, it was all malarkey.

It was around this time that I attempted what I thought was a hip pageboy thing. Bunny would laugh at me and say, "You look just like Little Lord Fauntleroy." Which wasn't exactly the effect I was after. But what did I care? I liked the *idea* of long hair itself almost as much as I liked wearing it long. It was not so much a fashion statement but a sensibility. It was a way of life. Of course, Seymour hated it. He thought everything about me was just so goddamn precious.

"You don't fool me with all your damn malarkey," Seymour would scoff.

When the time came for me to either trim it into a crewcut or risk Seymour not allowing me to get a driver's license, I opted for the hair, which demonstrated my staunch commitment to either counterculture ideals or common stupidity. Likely the latter. I'm fairly keen on stupidity, seeing as it follows hard on the heels of love as the most pervasive of human qualities.

Ironically, I never gave Seymour a real reason to be upset with me. I never gave anyone a hard time. I never took hard drugs, never vandalized a neighbor's home, never got arrested, never protested against a war or practiced civil disobedience of any kind. To the contrary, I made my bed every morning with the tidy hospital corners I learned from Bunny, I got good grades in school and I

minded my own little business. Other than the pageboy hair and driver's license debacle, I never really challenged Seymour's authority.

"If I could," I proffered Seymour the other day, "I'd build a time machine just so I could travel back to my childhood and give myself a crewcut."

"Malarkey."

It has been my passion to prove that not everything's malarkey. Not the Monkees, Mancini or Mahler. Not my Little Lord Fauntleroy haircut or my staunch commitment to counterculture ideals and common stupidity. Which may explain why I decided to become a writer.

FIVE

This will probably make me sound crazy, but I have a theory that most of the people you see walking their dogs, standing on line at the bank or staring blankly at their computer screen in the pod next to you at work are really alien creatures from another planet disguised as humans. This is no or casual observation. I'm not being glib or silly. I honestly believe that at some point – possibly at the end of the Sixties when the very last vestiges of empathy and enlightenment were forever extinguished – a covert siege of our planet, not unlike the one in "Invasion of the Body Snatchers," took place. It's as if someone or something stealthily infiltrated planet Earth – an amnesia plague, perhaps? – and spirited away the souls of its inhabitants, leaving in their stead zombie-like replicants. How else can you explain the obdurate behavior that more and more people exhibit? It's as if an entire population is sleepwalking through life, disaffected from and disassociated with what's truly going on around them. Like a crowd that looks on impassively as a man is drowning, and all they can do is describe the color of the water. How else can you explain such a thing, except to say that they are not human? At least not my definition of human. How else can you explain the troubles I suffered through at what I've come to refer to as That Job.

And after fifteen long and devoted years, I could safely say I'd had enough of being a reporter for the Rancho Colima Post Telegram Picayune. But after fifteen long and devoted years, it seems I'd forgotten how to walk away. Perhaps I'd felt a certain fealty to the place. Or maybe I'd become hooked on the manic pressure of a daily newspaper where I never had a choice but to get things done immediately. Better: yesterday. Which took the onus off me having

to make a decision about the future. Because That Job defined everything, colored everything, consumed everything.

"I don't know who I am anymore," I was telling Allegra. "I've lost perspective. So much of who I am is tied up in the Picayune." Never were my words truer.

"Maybe it's time to change your life," Allegra said.

Allegra was right. That Job – no matter how much I'd protested, no matter how much I'd said I hated it – had the allure of a mysterious lover who could not be refused.

To my right sat Jennifer Arnold, whose frightening flurries of mood and indigent self-esteem were emblemized by her tangled thicket of hair and the threadbare tent dress she wore every day. I had long since stopped wondering if the tattered thing wasn't just one in an entire wardrobe of threadbare tent dresses that dangled in her closet like so much shredded cheesecloth. Strangely, Jennifer had at one time been a fashion writer, and she still knew everything there is to know about haute couture. She was a virtual encyclopedia of labels, designers and styles, and she offered a keen insight into the manner of dress of those around her. Why she never applied that knowledge to herself was a question that would remain forever unanswered.

To my left sat Gideon Shannon, an oatmeal-skinned Irishman whose wit was so sharp you wondered where he hid the razors. "Beware senior editors who bury the leads," Gideon once warned me. I should've been more rapt.

Ahead of us, both figuratively and literally, sat Michael Oliphant, otherwise known to everyone but himself as The Immovable Object, who, after toiling obscurely and bitterly as an overnight rewrite man, had recently been anointed with senior editorship.

Not that it should've been a big deal, but Michael Oliphant was gay, a not-so-little-known fact he'd foolishly and mistakenly reckoned no one at the Rancho Colima Post Telegram Picayune would be keen enough to deduce. Wrong. As it happened, Michael drew more attention to himself by straining to pretend he was something he wasn't, going so far as to embarrass himself with telling gay-bashing jokes, a pitiful act of self-loathing that made him seem that much more ignominious and contemptible. Like a teenager who tries to cover a juicy zit with obvious makeup, Michael's strenuous efforts to camouflage himself and his lifestyle begged curiosity. And what worse environment could one choose to beg curiosity than at a newspaper, whose employees are nothing if not professional gossipmongers looking to pique their curiosity with someone's surreptitious behavior?

"If I could think of the least qualified, most absolutely wrong person for senior editor," I once said to Jennifer, "it'd have to be The Immovable Object."

"Because he's gay."

"No, because he stretches the truth as if competing in a taffy pull."

"No, because he's gay."

"Look, I don't care who he sleeps with. All I know is he's one sneaky bastard."

"Who just happens to be gay."

Suddenly, Michael's had wormed face between ours, his actions as a rule marked by a lizard's clockwork stealth.

"I've got good news for the two of you," Michael said, oozing awkward formality. "Now that I'm senior editor I'm planning to make *lots* of

changes around here, including opportunities for some of you to move up the food chain."

He gave us a downward look of modesty that seemed to suggest we shouldn't hesitate to talk about him behind his back the second he walked away. Which we did.

"There, see?" said Jennifer as she clumsily wiped doughnut crumbs off of her mouth. Her massive fingers exhibited a deftness that only became apparent when you saw them at work, banging out story after story with the same sleight of hand that prop masters use when changing sets in the dark.

"You've just got to have a little faith, Moses."

"After fifteen years at this job, I can safely I say I've lost my faith."

Several weeks went by with no apparent changes and no apparent opportunities. Then one morning I looked up from my computer to see Michael staring intently at me, whey-faced and silent.

"So, Moses, we should talk about the office food chain. There's an opening for an investigative reporter."

"You thinking of promoting me?"

"Anything's possible."

"But is it probable?"

"You're among the top candidates."

"Permission to speak frankly?"

"Always, Moses."

"Frankly, it's just too humiliating and demoralizing to keep getting passed over. I don't want to throw my name into the hat – unless I know I'm the sole name in the hat."

"At this point, it's between you and Jennifer Arnold. You, Jennifer Arnold," he paused and smiled briefly, like a flash of light along a blade, "and perhaps someone from the outside."

"Someone from the outside?"

"You know how it is, Moses. We need what's called a credible pool of candidates before we can make any decisions. It's merely a formality. So, what do you think? You interested?"

Part of me did not implicitly trust Michael, and for good reason. With his Mephistophelean mixture of charisma and sneakiness, I always felt as if he relished watching me squirm, as if he enjoyed seeing me fail. Another part of me believed the promotion should naturally go to Jennifer, who despite her personality quirks and bedraggled wardrobe was without a doubt the sharpest reporter I'd ever known. But deep down I knew she didn't fit the profile. She just didn't have the mayoral-luncheon look and brown-nosing attitude they were after. Hence, after more than twenty years at That Job, Jennifer had barely inched up the reportorial ladder. Then again, was I any better? Did the name Moses Levy invoke authority or respect? With my aversion to shirts and ties and my lack of ambition in the brown-nosing department, I certainly didn't fit the suit of someone ascending the corporate dung heap. But I could change my attitude and my style, and perhaps by doing so, I could change my life. I sincerely wanted to change my life.

"OK. I'm in."

"Good. Great. I'm glad. You're a good worker, Moses, a hard worker. You're a clever guy. Your abilities are – how do I put this? – rare and attractive."

Rare and attractive?

Michael placed a firm hand on my shoulder. I jerked away from him, readjusted my shirt and blurted out an awkward laugh. Michael never lost his composure. He just stood before me with a quizzical, almost impertinent expression. Maybe he didn't intend to make me feel uncomfortable, but I wasn't ready for a new, friendlier Michael Oliphant.

"There's something strange and unnerving about the way Michael was acting," I later told Allegra. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was coming on to me."

"You're saying he has a crush on you? OK, you're thin and neat," Allegra said, laughing, "but don't you think you're being a bit homophobic?"

"Homophobic? Look, I've got nothing against being gay. It's The Immovable Object. I don't trust him. He's impossible to read. He plays things so close to the vest. I say this whole promotion thing is all a ruse. He setting me up for a fall."

"What does he have to gain by screwing you? He needs you. You do good work. You're a great writer, the best they've got. Your abilities *are* rare and attractive. What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is that I've always sensed that The Immovable Object is envious of people who have a life outside work. It really bugs him that I can talk openly about my relationships, that I don't have to lie about who I am, that I don't have to worry about being found out.

Being found out – that's his biggest fear. Which is absurd because everyone knows about him. He just doesn't want to believe it."

"Let me get this straight: Because he doesn't want to believe you know about him, when deep down he really knows you know, he's going to find a way to screw you."

"Exactly."

"If he said you're a top candidate, you're a top candidate. I doubt he's going to ask you to bend over to prove how bad you want the job."

"What's the expression? Each man kills the thing he loves?"

Weeks went by. No word on the promotion, and I was afraid to ask about it. I wanted to confide in Jennifer but, apparently realizing I'd become her adversary, she began to retreat further and further into herself. Which made me nervous. Perhaps she knew something I didn't?

"What do you know?" I asked finally.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, has The Immovable Object said anything to you about a promotion?"

"Not a word. I thought he'd talked to you. You're the one he likes."

"Yes, Moses," Gideon chimed in. "I hear you give good headline."

"What makes you guys think he's got a thing for me? He's barely uttered a word to me since I've known him."

"I can just tell," Gideon said knowingly. "Something about his expression when I see him staring at you longingly from across the room."

Suddenly, Michael appeared as if out of nowhere, squeezing himself between us. He had the kind of face you could strap on the front of a ship to plough icebergs.

I jerked back.

"Didn't mean to startle you, Moses," Michael said. "Got a mo?" He loved to create a mystery, and "Got a mo?" was his standard prelude to one.

Michael dragged me into his private office, shut the door, drew the blinds and proceeded to look me up and down slowly with his gray prosecutorial eyes.

"Moses, I need to ask you something, something personal."

"Yes?"

"Have you been discussing my personal life with anyone?"

I swallowed a hard lump of saliva.

"You're personal life? What do you mean?"

"I've heard through the grapevine that you've been spreading rumors about me."

"Grapevine? What grapevine? What are you talking about?"

"You know damn well who and what I'm talking about," he said, his features converging to a point.

What could I say?

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You know exactly what I'm talking about."

"If you can tell me what you're referring to, then I can respond to what you are charging me with."

"Don't play games with me. You know."

"But I don't."

"But you do."

"I don't."

"You do."

"Don't."

"Do."

If this was the way he was going to deal with his own denial, how could I expect him to grasp that the entire office had been onto his charade from Day One? And if this was the way he was going to keep me from being promoted, then perhaps all of my suspicions about Michael's confused feelings of love and hate for me were true.

"Moses, you've got one last chance."

"I really have no idea what you're talking about."

"That's what I thought you'd say," Michael said, then after a dramatic beat added: "Let me make one thing clear, pal. You're not going to say anything more to anybody about me ever again. And if I find out you have, you're out of here. Got that?"

"Does this mean that I'm no longer up for promotion?" I asked stupidly.

Michael's expression became a cold, purplish snarl.

"You're so far out of the running it's not funny."

"This is nuts."

"Watch it, pal."

"You can't do this to me!"

"Can't I? I'm like quicksand. The more you kick up a fuss, the more I'm going to suck you under."

As if on some ominous cue, Michael blurted out a laugh that had an acrid flavor as he yanked open the curtain covering his window, revealing the curious stares of my coworkers.

"Somehow, The Immovable Object now believes he's become the topic of the gossip mill at the office," I told Allegra when I got home that night. "And somehow he thinks I'm the source of it. Which means someone's been talking to him about me, someone who doesn't want me to get the promotion."

"Who would do that?"

"It could be Jennifer, but it's hard to imagine she'd stoop so low. We've worked together for so long. I wouldn't do that sort of thing to her."

"You've talked about him, though, haven't you?"

"Well, it's not like it's never come up. It's just not the context he thinks it is."

"You have to tell him that."

"Tell him what? That him being gay is not the issue, but that him being an imposter is."

"So, he said you're not going to get the promotion."

"This is what he's wanted all along. Not only am I not going to move up, but he's going to make me so miserable that I'll want to quit."

"If you walk away," Allegra said emphatically, "you need to walk away on your own terms."

More weeks went by, and I grew increasingly anxious, made all the more so the afternoon I observed Michael and Jennifer conferring behind closed doors. Fuck. What about the time I told her I thought Michael was effeminate. I wasn't being derogatory, but who knows how my words might be misconstrued? Later I saw Michael huddling with Gideon. Shit. What about that crack I made to Gideon about Michael being a clotheshorse. "He's definitely got elements of style," Gideon had concurred.

"Got a mo?" Michael asked, signaling me into his office. "I've got something I need you to look at."

Michael handed me a job performance evaluation, in which he wrote that I had a bad attitude, that I'd supposedly stolen office supplies and that it had "come to my attention in recent weeks that Moses has a proclivity toward engaging in possibly inappropriate and damaging office gossip. If this alarming and abhorrent behavior should continue, Moses will be terminated." Apparently my abilities were no longer – how do I put this? – rare and attractive.

"What inappropriate and damaging office gossip am I supposedly spreading?"

"You know what you've said."

"No, I don't."

"Do."

"Don't."

"Look, this evaluation is plain ludicrous. I want out of this department."

"You're not going anywhere," Michael said, a watery smile coming to his lips. "I want to stop you from spreading your shit, which means you're going to stay right where I can see you at all times."

"You can't do this!"

"Can't I? It's a done deal, Moses. If you want to remain at this newspaper, you're going to do exactly what I tell you to do."

His resoluteness was terrifying.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" I felt my voice growing louder and my anger start to get away from me. "You just love to watch me squirm. That's the point of all this, isn't it? You're trying to screw me one way or another."

"One more word," Michael said, raising a threatening index finger, "and you are fired."

More weeks went by. Michael's radar seemed poised to intercept the slightest aberrant blip out of me, so I was reduced to arriving at work in silence, doing my job in silence and leaving in silence. I felt like a eunuch – no doubt what Michael wanted. Intimidate me long enough, he must've figured, and no doubt I would fold.

"Got a mo?" Michael called out, signaling me into his office. "I've noticed your work has begun to slip lately," he said, motioning to a pile of my clippings with sentences heavily circled in red grease pencil.

"Need I point out the flaccid prose? The shoddy fact-gathering?"

He shoved the clips in front of me.

"You call this reporting? I call it feeble."

"If I didn't know any better," I said, laughing at the absurdity of it all, "I'd say you're building a case against me."

"I'm glad you can take this so lightly, Moses. But if you don't improve the quality of your work immediately, I'm going to have to let you go."

"Why are you doing this to me?" I asked in an attempt to appeal to his humanity.

"Why?" he snorted. "You know why. I don't need to tell you why."

"Yes, you do need to tell me why. I've done everything you've asked. I've done my job. I've kept my mouth shut. I've been the good soldier. And yet, you keep on riding me. I don't understand what's going on here."

"You know exactly what's going on here."

"I don't."

"You do."

"Don't."

"Do."

Without warning, Michael cut back my work schedule, reducing me to a single day a week, and I wondered how long it would be until I occupied negative space at the office. My plum assignments dwindled and my writing turned into the worst shit imaginable. I felt as if I couldn't dot an I or cross a T without being ridiculed. Worst of all, neither Jennifer nor Gideon would look at me straight in the

eye or offer me a word of support – but, frankly, I couldn't blame them for avoiding me. I was a pariah.

"I can't do it, I can't work at That Job anymore," I bellowed at Allegra, who had clearly grown weary of my battle. "I can't take it! Not one more day, not one more hour, not one more minute!"

"Quit being so goddamn dramatic, Moses," Allegra said, exasperated.

"The Immovable Object is grinding me into dust. I feel as if he owns me."

"He doesn't *own* you, Moses. No one owns you."

"But what choice do I have? It's *his* game. He makes the rules. It's his ball."

"You always have a choice. You can choose to walk away. Your problem is, Moses, that you constantly look for a standard of clemency more humane than the code of the Hammurabi."

Allegra was right. What did I really want from this turnip known as Michael Oliphant? His respect? His approbation? His love? If so, there was nothing I could do about any of that. But I could make a choice. I could choose to throw myself on my doubts. I could choose to move in the opposite direction that I had been walking, it seems, alone.

The promotion I would never get – the future I would never have – went to an unwitting outsider, a "two-fer" as Gideon Shannon called her.

"A two-fer?"

"She's both a woman and a minority."

"You've got to be kidding ..."

"Don't you get it? You supplied The Immovable Object with his credible pool of candidates. That's all he needed to hire her."

To say that I was upset is to say nighttime is generally dark. My shot at a promotion was obviously gone forever, as were my chances of escaping the wrath and reach of Michael Oliphant as long as I remained at the Rancho Colima Post Telegram Picayune. Whether I'd done it to myself, whether I'd sealed my own fate with what I might or might not have said about Michael Oliphant or whether I was his unfortunate victim, was immaterial to me now. All that mattered was the choice I was about to make.

"Got a mo?" I called out across the newsroom to Michael.

"What do you want now, Moses?"

I handed him a sheet of paper on which I'd jaggedly scrawled "30," newspaper parlance for "end of story."

In the end of this story, there was no high drama, no chair-throwing outbursts or no sixty-point headlines declaring my departure. In the end of this story, I chose to quit, to walk away humbly with what was left of my dignity, to liberate myself. In the end of this story, I'm glad that that's what I did. Otherwise, for better or for worse, I'd have never changed my life.

SIX

I changed my life.

I submitted an application and manuscript to the yearlong creative writing program at Babbington College, a venerable university in the East. Several months later, much to my surprise, I received a cordial letter from the esteemed Diana Mason – author of "Rainy Day Girl," a best-selling memoir about her abusive childhood, her attempted suicide and her subsequent stay in a loony bin – congratulating me on my acceptance into the program. I was one of a lucky thirteen chosen among hundreds of candidates. I felt ecstatic, flushed with a very real sense of pure joy and excitement. Finally, I could hang out with other struggling writers in a nurturing environment that would provide me with salve and salvation. I could share stories of childhood craziness with Diana Mason over scotch and cigarettes at a blue-lit dive. Finally, I was becoming a writer.

Best of all, I could put the voices in my head to good use. The voices. They created a constant presence, both indistinct and distracting, a steady pop and fizz at once painful and, conversely, not altogether unpleasant. The more clatter and chaos I created in my life, the less I could hear them – and the less of a bother they were. The concept of signal-to-noise ratio. Now I could stop the shouting. Now I would finally be a real writer. Or so I thought. There's a joke that goes: Want to make God laugh? Make a plan. Because, as it turned out, the very day I received my acceptance into the creative writing program at Babbington College was the very day Allegra came home from the doctor with some rather startling news.

"Moses, I have some rather startling news."

Silence.

"Moses? You there?"

Silence.

"Moses, tell me this is the best startling news you've ever heard!"

Silence.

"Moses?"

"Fuck," I said, the expletive unexpectedly dislodging itself from my mouth like a tooth I didn't know was loose.

"All you can say is fuck?"

"Fuck."

What more could I say to Allegra? I went outside and raked the leaves into neat piles as an act of contrition while a dry fall wind made a mess of my efforts.

Yes, it was rather startling news. Life, as inexplicable and cruel as it is, just loves to present us with rather startling news at the worst possible moments. And what better moment than right as I was about to enter the creative writing program at Babbington, right as I finally had the opportunity to change my life for the better?

The rather startling news meant I had to grow up, to ditch my dreams and to continue working at jobs in which felt miserable and taken advantage of – basically, to carry on like the decent and dutiful George Bailey I'd always been. I had to remind myself that all I'd ever needed – all I'd ever need – was right here in Rancho Colima. I didn't need to move three thousand miles away to discover

something I already knew; I was a writer and I'd always be a writer, no matter where I lived.

Still, I could not dismiss my desire to live out my dream. I could not pretend it wouldn't mean a lot to me to live the writing life – and to be denied it would certainly fill me with the worst kind of regrets. But the fact was I had to face up to the event that came as rather startling news. I had to take it like a man, whether I wanted to or not. There was no going back, no obsessing over what might've been.

I spiraled into a despair as bleak as hell on Sunday, standing flush in the corner of my den wailing like a branch in an autumn wind, my fingers tracing the tears down the yellow plaster walls to the baseboard. I continued with my alarming and infantile behavior until Allegra, having grown weary, had had enough.

"I've had enough."

Silence.

"Moses? You there?"

Silence.

"Moses, tell me that this is the worst rather startling news you've ever heard."

Silence.

"Moses?"

"Yes. It's the worst."

A short time later we were at a clinic. The clock ticked loudly in the waiting room. A bead of sweat rolled down my back. I could hear my heart beating. A woman near us behaved so nonchalantly you

would think she was there to get her hair cut. Some filed their nails, some read magazines while others laughed at the TV. Allegra was balling her fists, occasionally squeezing out quiet tears. She made a deep sigh that seemed wrenched from the very blue flame of her heart.

"I feel like I'm entering a dark tunnel," Allegra whispered. "How can I know if this is the right thing?"

"You're doing the right thing," I said. I had no idea what I was talking about.

"You have no idea what you are talking about," Allegra said as she was led away.

The clock continued to tick loudly. The laughter from the TV sounded hollow and shrill. I stared at my shoes. They were scuffed and in need of polishing. The heels were worn. What's that little plastic part called on the tip of the lace? I couldn't recall its name. Damn. Why did I suddenly have the short-term memory of a cricket? Normally, I remember everything. Perhaps my forgetfulness was not so much clinical as tactical, a way my mind told itself, "That's it! I give up! No more information!" Then again, maybe there are just too many things to think about, a Rubik's Cube of permutations. Then again, maybe I was going mad. Maybe, just maybe I should not say things I don't mean because I won't remember what I said an hour from now but I may remember in a week a month or a year and then I'll be sorry because there's no way to take it back take it back take it back the troubles the troubles the trouble with me is Doctor Von Rauffenstein thinks I have a bad attitude and I need to be medicated to keep my unhealthy thoughts in check but if he had any real feelings he'd be the one imprisoned in the booby hatch and I'm in a curtains-drawn gloom as bleak as hell

on Sunday standing flush in the corner of my room wailing with my fingers tracing the tears down the white plaster walls to the baseboard or banging my fists on the floor until my knuckles bleed or gazing at my reflection in the mirror pulling at my skin biting my lips grinding my teeth grimacing like a little madman because the despair I feel is not fun it is not romantic and I'm not able to understand the ways of the world not able to understand why people behave like bastards when being decent isn't impossible or why the laws of physics have a tendency to remain constant or why God is so indifferent ...

An hour went by. Allegra was returned to the waiting room reeking strangely of overripe fruit. She stared blankly at me, her eyes the color of a gathering storm. I offered to hold her but she brushed right past.

Time passed.

Allegra and I pretended to tolerate one another, pretended we still loved one another, pretended everything was normal. Except for the times she recoiled from me whenever I initiated our lovemaking. Or the times when I pulled back the shower curtain and caught her crying for no apparent reason. Why she did not leave me then I still don't understand. We just carried on, wounded, bitter, broken.

More time passed.

Soon we were on our way back east, me to the creative writing program at Babbington College and Allegra to nothing in particular. Three thousand miles we traveled to a place where everything from the weather to the idioms to the architecture had an alien cast. We had migrated to what seemed to be a different country – an older, more provincial country. No purchasing of alcoholic beverages on

Sundays. No suntanned women. No prefabricated ranch-style housing tracts. The leaves on the trees were not olive drab but bright emerald green. The air was fresh, not still and powdery. And, oh yes, seasons, real seasons with actual climactic changes – the whole fall-to-spring, birth-to-death lifecycle thing. No more endless, perfect seventy-five-degree sunny days for Allegra and me. "Bring on the brutally frigid winters and the oppressively muggy summers!" Which is exactly what I got. Dirty brown snow up to your kneecaps for half the year; humidity high enough to unravel the kinkiest of dreads for the other half.

The creative writing program began, and soon thereafter I found myself having difficulty becoming a creative writer. I wanted what I wrote to be true, and I wanted myself to be in the moment, to understand exactly what I was feeling. But because the subject that occupied my thoughts foremost – the event that came as rather startling news – was too near the surface, too painful and, frankly, too impossible to write about without upsetting Allegra any more than I already had, I instead chose to concentrate on stories I did not have a profound connection with, stories of men and women having affairs, stories in which I could judge the characters as having less scruples than me. I had learned long ago that I did not live in a vacuum, that what I created could negatively affect the people closest to me. It was simply too difficult and agonizing for me to deal with the consequences of telling the whole truth. Besides, when it comes down to it, I'm a coward. Be that as it may, the first short story I wrote was about a man who has an affair. Entitled "The Other."

•

Alhambra was buttering a baguette across from Irving at Il Bocconcino, his favorite cafe. She emitted something slightly dangerous, which seemed to collect in the air around her. Her heavy blonde hair was shoved up into a huge bun, a Number Two pencil holding the entire contraption together. She wore cotton togs that concealed too much of her body – a tiny pea in a billowy double-knit pod.

"You need something?" Alhambra said, casting Irving a withering stare. She had a wry twist to her mouth when she talked.

"Nothing," he said as drops of nervous sweat rolled down his round cheeks. Irving gulped down the last of his coffee, clumsily gathered his newspaper and sailed out the door.

The next day, feeling equal parts enervated and curious, Irving returned to Il Bocconcino, and to his delicious surprise Alhambra was at the same table. He couldn't take his eyes off of her, and this time she waved him over. They both ordered black coffee and croissants with boysenberry preserves. She turned out to be an animated talker, and it was not long before she was revealing intimate details of her life, which made Irving wonder if she did this type of thing often.

"I'm on the rebound," she said, taking a heavy drag on a thin cigarette. "I lived with a guy in New York for seven years. He was a photographer, a true artist with all the issues that go along with being a true artist. He was sensitive, but also as moody as shit – and when it finally went south I decided to move out west, figuring that west seemed to be a good direction to head in."

"You moved three thousand miles just to get away from some guy?"

"I loved him, but I just couldn't take him anymore," she said in a voice as deep as vodka is alcoholic. "He suffocated me. On top of him being sensitive and moody, he was also needy and jealous. He never really trusted me. We fought all the time. He beat me up and I beat him up right back. But worst of all, he could never follow my rules. Rules are important."

"Rules? What do you mean by rules?"

"I have rules to keep things from getting out of hand. And yet," she said, lowering her voice for emphasis, "I seek chaos. I couldn't be in a relationship without it. It's what I grew up with. It's what I know."

"What do you do for a living?" Irving asked in an attempt to shift the tenor of the conversation.

"I'm a masseuse," she said, grabbing his arm. "I'm what you call a real people person. I like making contact."

With that, Alhambra stood up to leave, but not before tossing her card on the table.

"Give me a ring sometime if you have the need for a massage."

Irving felt tempted to call her, even though he did not consider himself a people person, even though he did not like making contact, even though he was wary of people persons who liked making contact. Irving decided he would call her anyway. More out of curiosity than anything else.

"Take off your clothes and lie down," Alhambra said matter-of-factly as she pulled down the blinds, lit perfumed candles and unfolded her massage table. She slathered scented oil on her hands, had him sprawl onto his stomach and began pressing her fingers into his shoulders.

"How long have you been a masseuse?" Irving asked in between grunts.

"A few years," Alhambra said. "I was an opera singer, or at least I used to be when I lived in New York. But the pressures, the stage fright and the phobia of catching a cold and losing my voice had become too much. So I left it all behind with my boyfriend.

"Then there was my father. He used to come into my bedroom at night. He laid himself on top of me and felt me up. It went on for years. Nobody in my family knew. I thought that's what fathers and daughters do.

"It wasn't until years later when I got into therapy that I discovered that my childhood was not what you'd consider normal. But unfortunately, before I could make any real revelations, my therapist began hitting on me. I ended up switching roles with him, talking him through his despair of me not being attracted to him."

"I'm glad you feel relaxed enough to speak so openly," Irving said with a nervous chuckle. He couldn't help but wonder if she told these types of things to all her clients.

Alhambra pushed harder as she moved into each successive rub and Irving felt a warm jet of air from her nose as she brought her head down close to the small of his back. He trembled as she covered him with oil. Irving thought of how exposed he was, how she must see the patches of acne, psoriasis and oddly shaped moles that covered his soft and sallow body.

"I got married right out of high school," Irving said, finally. "Beatrice and I have been together for fifteen years now. For the most part, we've had a happy relationship. But, of course, there are times when

I've fantasized about other women. It's all a matter of not turning those fantasies into reality, isn't it?"

"Right."

"I suppose I should think of myself as lucky that someone as sweet, smart and beautiful as Beatrice would put up with my shit for so long."

Irving wondered what Alhambra thought of him being married.

"Your back is like cottage cheese," she said as she pulled his shoulders apart and he stiffened as if preparing for an arctic chill. And then she added, "You feel emotionally blocked."

Alhambra continued to apply more and more pressure and Irving, growing increasingly ill at ease, tried to maintain a facade of cool while one of his arms shot up and down, then a leg, then another arm; his body had become a tent in a windstorm.

Suddenly, Irving felt something pop, like the unscrewing of a lid on an airtight jar. He rolled over and grabbed Alhambra by the wrist, then tried to kiss her. She pulled back and, when he did not let go, she slapped him on the face. After an uneasy pause Alhambra let go a noxious laugh, stepped back and lit a cigarette.

"I didn't slap you just now because you tried to kiss me," she said, her eyes glowing. "I slapped you because I didn't think I could stop."

"So tomorrow, same time," Irving said as he gently picked a shred of lint off her sweatshirt.

The next day Irving arrived on time, excited about and aroused by all that had transpired the day before. Alhambra was dressed provocatively in a black camisole and tight slacks. She looked

strangely different than he remembered. She seemed thinner, more muscular. Up close her face had a cubist bone structure that would've driven even Picasso mad.

"Wasn't certain you were coming," she said in all honesty.

"Wasn't certain I was coming, either," he said, lying.

Irving wasted no time. He grabbed the back of her neck and pulled her face up to his. They kissed. Alhambra gave him a good shove and the two of them crashed onto the massage table. Alhambra raised herself up and swirled around Irving in a fit of elbows and knees while Irving struggled to unzip his fly.

"You do this with all your clients?" he said, his face flushed, his fingers floundering.

Alhambra pinned Irving to the table. She spread his arms wide as if she were breaking off chicken wings, wrapped a sheet around his wrists in tight knots and smacked him hard on the jaw repeatedly.

"Prick," she shouted. "You think you're so goddamn tough. You think you can take advantage of me? Why don't you pick on someone your own size?"

Alhambra's eyes took on a terrifying look. Irving felt as if he were about to be devoured by a great grunting beast of flesh and perspiration. She slapped him one last time, then she froze and her face turned slack.

"Ha!" she screamed. "Scared you, didn't I?"

"What are you talking about?" Irving said. He was breathless.

"Sometimes you've just got to make a leap into the unknown."

Alhambra rolled off Irving. The two of them laid for a while in silence. Alhambra picked up an emery board. Irving, not knowing what to do exactly, fumbled for his shorts.

"My wife will be going out of town this weekend," Irving said. He paused. "What do you say we get a hotel room up the coast?"

"You really ready for that sort of thing?" she said with a meaty laugh.

"Meet me at Il Bocconcino, Saturday morning at nine," he said. "Pack light. But bring something nice. And don't be late. That way we can make it to our hotel by noon and have plenty of time to fuck ourselves blind."

"You're a deathless romantic."

Irving contemplated their getaway all week. He felt euphoric, as if on drugs. But he also felt in control. He wrote down a list of things to do: make hotel reservation, put gas in car, buy condoms, get haircut, shine shoes. He put the list in the breast pocket of his sport jacket. For some reason, he was not worried Beatrice might find it. Because even though Irving knew that Beatrice would be devastated if she found out that he was planning to have an affair, what could she really do about it? Throw a tantrum? Divorce him? Murder Alhambra? Not judicious Beatrice, loving Beatrice, trusting Beatrice.

He thought about Alhambra. He felt a warm buzz of excitement as he fantasized about her sturdy body, which always smelled of damp clay and minor exertion. Then he thought about how she encouraged him to strike her. It disturbed him and made him feel uncomfortable. It was something he had never done before. He was impressed with how willing she was to get away with him, but also

saddened by it because it made him think she had given herself over too easily to him. There was something puzzling about Alhambra that Irving could not put his finger on – loneliness perhaps?

Irving barely thought about Beatrice. At most he felt a twinge of guilt. But he knew that if he was going to go through with his plans, he couldn't allow himself to feel much more than that. Irving was more focused on the moment when Beatrice would head out the door at seven o'clock on Friday night to visit her sister three thousand miles away. Then it would be only fourteen hours until he would find himself in Alhambra's tanned and muscular arms.

Saturday arrived. Irving shaved – something he never did on weekends – showered and picked out his favorite serge suit, thinking it made him look somehow more mature and sophisticated. He raked his hair back. He put on his sunglasses, the ones that make him look like James Dean. He smiled greedily and flew out the door.

Irving arrived at Il Bocconcino early and sat at his table. He felt not unlike a spoiled child who wants to see how naughty he can be. He bought a black coffee and a newspaper. He unbuttoned his jacket and placed his sunglasses on the table. He wanted to appear normal, but he couldn't keep himself from twitching.

After a moment Irving looked up. A pair of eyes was training at him. But it was not Alhambra. It was his wife's nosey friend, Melanie.

"I thought that was you," she said.

"Hi Melanie," Irving said, his voice breaking like glass.

"What brings you here so early on a Saturday all dressed up like that?"

"I just thought it would be nice to get dressed up for no good reason for a change," he said, looking nervously past her shoulder.

"Hey," Melanie said, "isn't Beatrice away this weekend?"

"You know, Mel, I'd love to chat, but I just realized I have to make a phone call. It's a business thing."

"Business on a Saturday?" Melanie said, slightly perplexed.

"Yes, some people do work on the weekends," Irving called back as he bolted to the phone booth in the back and frantically dialed her number.

"Alhambra?" he whispered.

"What's going on, lover boy?"

"One of Beatrice's friends is here and I don't think she's leaving any time soon."

Alhambra laughed. "Scared of being found out, are we?"

Irving glared at her.

"You know Clifton's drugstore?" he said. "Drive two blocks up from Il Bocconcino, make a left, go three more blocks and it's on the right side. Got it? Meet me there in fifteen minutes. OK?"

"Sure, I got it," Alhambra said, laughing some more.

"Look," Irving said, his voice turning paternal, "just do what I say. Meet me at Clifton's in fifteen."

Irving slammed down the receiver, wiped his spritzing brow, composed himself and sauntered back to his table.

"So," Melanie said, "you take care of your business?"

"Business?" Irving asked as he put back on his sunglasses. I have to be cool, he thought.

"You said you had a business thing?"

"Oh, yes. I took care of business all right."

"Since when have you sold life insurance on weekends?"

"What does it matter?" he said, exasperated.

Melanie gave Irving a funny look, head a-tilt, and then prattled on, her voice as monotonous as a busy signal. All the while Irving was thinking he wanted to fuck Alhambra more than he had ever wanted to fuck anyone in his life. He wanted to fuck her right then, right in front of his wife's blithering idiot of a friend. He felt euphoric, liberated. He wanted to show everyone at Il Bocconcino what drab lives they all led and what an exciting turn his life had just taken.

"Melanie," Irving said, "do you ever long to break through the nonsense?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Do you ever long to find someone through physical intimacy?"

"You OK, Irv?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I've just been thinking about something Emerson once wrote: 'All persons are puzzles until at last we find in some word or act the man, the woman: straightway all their past words and actions lie in light before us.'"

It was then, from the corner of his eye, that Irving saw Alhambra waltzing through the door of Il Bocconcino, humming loudly. She

was carrying a large overnight bag. Irving had specifically told her to pack light so as not to draw undue attention. Alhambra spotted Irving and traipsed toward him wearing a sexy grin. She was the human equivalent of absinthe: sensual, addictive and very, very bad for you.

"You ready for me, big boy?" Alhambra was cloaked in a perfume that was pungent to the point of being offensive.

"Just what the hell is going on here?" Melanie said to Irving, shooting him a look.

Irving strained to keep his cool.

"Melanie," Irving said, "this is not what you think it is."

"What *should* I think?"

"You should think nothing. It's strictly a business thing."

"A business thing?" Melanie said, laughing.

"Yes, business. Speaking of which, can I talk to you outside ..."

Alhambra continued laughing as Irving yanked her by the arm and dragged her out of Il Bocconcino and into his car. Once there, without saying a word, he smacked her hard in the face – being physically abusive was what he had come to understand was their first and best method of communication. She looked stunned.

"You're not playing by my rules," Alhambra said, her voice pinched.

"You can only smack me when I'm on top."

"Rules? What is it with you and your goddamn rules?" Irving took a deep breath. "I told you to meet me at Clifton's. I told you how to get there and when. And you couldn't follow the simplest instruction.

You *had* to show up at the cafe. You *had* to make an appearance. Now I might be in real trouble. Now we might be found out."

"I thought that's what you wanted. I thought you wanted to be found out. I thought you could handle chaos."

Alhambra was laughing as they careened onto the freeway and the car picked up speed. Irving felt brash.

"Ha!" Alhambra shouted. "Adventure."

"Adventure?" Irving hollered, "I'll show you adventure." He pushed the pedal to the floor and swerved recklessly in and around traffic.

"Faster, Irving, faster," Alhambra chirped like a child on a tilt-a-whirl.

Irving went faster, increasing his speed and threading through cars crazily until a highway patrolman finally caught up with them. Alhambra laughed hard, and she continued laughing while Irving was written up.

"This is fun, isn't it?" Alhambra said as the cop pulled away.

"Fun? This is not fun. Behaving childishly is not fun. Having my wife's friend discover I might be having an affair is not fun. Getting a speeding ticket is not fun. What's next? Prison?"

"I thought you could stand a little chaos in your life, Irving."

"Get out," Irving seethed as he veered to side of the road. "Get out of my car right now."

"But we're in the middle of the freeway."

"I don't give a damn. You're fucking crazy. I never want to see you again. Ever."

Alhambra smiled and stepped out of the car, looking like a marooned astronaut in her shiny outfit. Irving pulled away fast, all the while watching in the rear-view mirror as Alhambra trudged along the lip of the highway while cars and trucks roared past.

The next morning Irving called Alhambra.

"I'm sorry for the way I acted yesterday," he said. "I don't know what came over me. I guess I got upset that things got out of control and that we might've messed up what we had."

"If you really want to apologize," she said in a mellifluous voice, "you could invite me over to your apartment for brunch. I'll fuck you for dessert."

"OK, then. How about noon?"

"Noon it is."

Irving vacuumed the apartment, did the dishes, arranged the pillows and changed the linens. Then he shaved, dressed and settled into an armchair with a book and a cigar to await Alhambra's arrival. Noon came and went. Then one, then two. Three o'clock. Nothing.

"I'll be damned if I'll call her," Irving said, waving his fist.

Four o'clock. Five. Finally, the phone rang.

"If you ever want to see me again," Alhambra said, "meet me at Il Bocconcino right now."

"But ..."

"Now or never, Irving."

Irving dropped the phone and ran over, but within the block he slowed down as if to act casual. Alhambra was nowhere to be seen. He hid in the back of the cafe in case Melanie happened by. He waited nearly an hour, and as he walked to the men's room a hand reached out from a phone booth and jerked him inside. It was Alhambra.

"I've had time to think about us," she said. "And what I think is that we shouldn't see each other anymore."

"But I thought you wanted to. I thought you wanted to be with me."

"I did. But now I don't. It's as simple as that."

Days went by. Irving crept through his routines. He began to look bedraggled and he felt depressed, suicidal even. His frustration was as palpable as a heated cloud. All he could think about was Alhambra.

He called her.

"What more do you want from me?" Alhambra said.

"I just wanted to hear your voice."

"My voice? Is that all?"

"No. I want to see you again."

"Irving, it's over between us. Can't you accept what we had?"

"What we had?"

"Yes. We had it all. We met, we had a mad affair, we fought, we made up, we nearly did everything – all in the course of a few days. How come that isn't enough for you?"

Irving was not listening.

More days went by. Then weeks. Irving was at Il Bocconcino. Alone. He recalled the first time he'd met Alhambra and how excited he was and how willing she seemed – but wasn't it maddening, he thought, that after everything they went through they never even made love? Irving stared at the table where Melanie had sat and imagined the whole embarrassing incident when Alhambra showed up. He knew that Melanie had seen everything. He also knew that there was little she ever withheld from telling Beatrice. He winced and wondered when, if ever, the other shoe would drop.

"Chaos," he whispered to himself. "Bought and paid for."

Irving read the newspaper and drank a cup of black coffee. He wrote down a list of things to do and put it in the breast pocket of his sport jacket. It was Beatrice's birthday and that night they would be going to a fancy restaurant. Irving imagined all that might transpire: They would eat until they were bloated and drink until they were smashed. Then they would drive along the coast road and Beatrice, a bit tipsy, would yawn and lean her pretty head on his shoulder, her perfume rubbing off on his coat. They would somehow find their way home, put the car in the garage and let the cat out. They would wash up. They would turn on the television. They might even make love if they had the strength.

Then, at the very last moment before turning out the lights, Irving would confess his many transgressions. And Beatrice – judicious Beatrice, loving Beatrice, trusting Beatrice – would turn to Irving, her eyes flush with tears, her lips trembling, and whisper, "There is no other."

•

Whether or not my short story would be considered awfully brilliant or brilliantly awful, I couldn't say. But I certainly wasn't prepared for the physical reaction my distinguished instructor bestowed on it: Diana Mason rose from her chair, hurled my coffee-stained manuscript into the middle of the classroom and stomped her Nazi-black jackboot on it.

"Crap," she proclaimed with all the fatuous self-assurance of a TV talk show host. "Next?"

Unfortunately, there was nothing in Diana Mason's terse critique that I could use to make my writing better. In fact, as I would come to learn, very little if anything this sebaceous cyst of a woman would say was informative, enlightening or consistent. Which was undeniably distressing, to say the least. Diana Mason wielded abuse like a drill sergeant with a hickory stick, delivering supercilious sermons from her high pulpit in a shaming voice.

"Crap," she admonished, but her judgment of my work, because it went unsupported, was of no real value. Unless she meant to be hurtful and heartless.

What was her intent? Perhaps she wanted to weed out authors whom she believed were inferior. Perhaps she derived joy out of trampling over my sensibilities like so many dahlias. Perhaps she wanted to act out yet again the unresolved power struggles within her own family. Or perhaps she hasn't been able to reconcile her frustration and despair with having written "Rainy Day Girl" twenty-two years ago and not yet having produced anything since that delivered on the promise of that first, much-loved and revered novel.

For whatever reason, in her endeavor to separate the wheat from the chaff, it was left to her and her alone to make the call on what was good and what was bad – or, in my case, what was crap. If only I could have cracked the code that Diana Mason used to divine genius from crap. If only I could have known there was no code.

"You may think I'm being a little brutal," she said with an autocratic aplomb, "but I'm the only one who'll ever tell you the truth."

Diana Mason's truth, of course.

My colleagues were a deferential bunch, each with their own story, and each story becoming increasingly apparent as the program dragged on into a grim winter of discontent. One harbored a terrible secret. One was a codeine addict. One had the look of someone possessed. One was an Elvis impersonator. One had an attachment disorder. One was married to a woman who had sacrificed something no one should have to sacrifice so that her selfish husband with pretensions of being a novelist could attend a yearlong master's writing program.

The class quickly became a swamp of obsequiousness, anxiety and fear, its would-be authors scrambling to come up with something, anything that Diana Mason wouldn't ridicule and mock. An exception to this phlegmatic conclave was Manny Klasky, whose prose displayed a fleet charm that nearly tap-danced off the page. But His keen insights and passion toward writing were quickly shot down like a clay pigeon. Manny was large, he contained multitudes. He did not make it past the third week.

What wisdom did Diana Mason have to impart about language?

"Use few, if any, adjectives," Diana Mason told us. "No adverbs. No abstract nouns with 'ness' in them. Don't ever pronounce the final 'e' in forte – it's from the French and not the Italian and I'm willing to

bet everyone's tuition that I'm correct. Get out of the habit of using the phrase, 'like I said.' Use the word blue, never azure. Never write about disease or madness or dreams or people on the verge of death. Avoid writing from subjective points of view. Limit similes and metaphors to one to a page. Tear your bread into pieces before spreading the butter. Respect your elders. Carry a handkerchief. Wipe your feet before entering a room. Don't chew gum. Sit up straight."

I quickly discovered that if I didn't go cheerily along with Diana Mason's narrowly defined aesthetic, I would be bludgeoned by it. Knowing this, I tried to be a good sport, to take my whacks with a thank-you-ma'am-may-I-have-another sense of indignity. But if I'd wanted to experience boot camp, I'd have joined the Marines. Besides, Diana Mason had invited me into the program. She should've known what she was getting. She'd read my stuff. At least, I thought she had. I began to wonder if I'd been summoned to prestigious Babbington College only to be made an example of how not to write. Was that the point Diana Mason wanted to make? It would seem so. Because I was soon relegated to the same position I once played as a kid in Little League: left out.

Who was the star pupil? That would have to be Freddy Breen. With a left-field charisma and a face a junkie rock star's dream, Freddy Breen appeared as if he owned the copyright on swagger and melancholy. But despite appearances, there was a strangely bland, erased quality about him.

Freddy Breen was glorified as an idiot savant without – as far as I could reckon – the savant. He had all the facility of a Fifth Grader. He gored the language like a bull's horn ripping a silk stocking. When with a certain high-minded diffidence he let it slip the first

night of class that he did not know the function of an adverb, I laughed along with my colleagues – until I later discovered that he was not joking. Each and every one of Freddy Breen's short stories involved tales of an abstract universe known as the Valley where lived poor stoner kids who were jealous of the rich stoner kids who lived in on the Hill – all of it written in a childish syntax in which punctuation was misused, proper nouns were jumbled and sentence structure was frequently abandoned altogether:

Her mom made her favorite sandwiches and, as they sat at the table in the kitchen. They were eating the sandwiches, and she was not really saying much to her, except that she should have known better after all. She should have known better after all than to tell her how she feels about her and to say it in the way that was so hurtful to her. Because when she asked her if she wanted to meet someone she was a friend with she was uncertain who her friends were. Then she talked to her about the last time she said to her that she was going down into the Valley to meet her friend who always, always, always got stoned or at least knew where to get stoned or at least would get stoned if they could. They always could, couldn't they? The two of them, they would always, always, always get stoned somewhere, somewhere, somewhere in the Valley and then later on up on the Hill. Because up on the Hill they would know, they would just know that she was not able to eat the sandwiches, or become the sister her mom wanted her to be. No, not ever not even ever. Ever being so very long a time. Even when it's not. At least not for her. No not. Not not ever.

The unexamined life may not but worth living, but the unedited life is likely not worth reading. Such was not the case when it came to Freddy Breen. Because despite all logic, the collected works of Freddy

Breen were celebrated by the class as groundbreaking and profound. A solicitous effort was made to encourage me to go along with the consensus. When that didn't work, when I didn't fall under the spell of the boy and his work, I was derided and ultimately regarded as pitiable, the way cult members ostracize those who have yet to be imbued with the light of wisdom.

Perhaps I could have gone along with my colleagues if only I believed, as they did, that Freddy Breen's alleged style was created by design. However, it was an accident, like when a child unintentionally says something funny. Once that became apparent to me, once I knew he was an impostor, I approached Freddy Breen's writing with trepidation and nausea. How could I effectively analyze his work? If I dared to point out that this baggy trousered emperor had no clothes, I would be ridiculed as a traditionalist, a misanthrope, a fusspot.

"Genius knows no rules," Diana Mason would say in deference to Freddy Breen's eccentric approach. Call it a case of genius envy, but to me Freddy Breen was nothing more than Chance the Gardner, his alleged talents as transparent as the cellophane on a cigarette box.

If Freddy Breen was the Second Coming, what was I to think of the critical responses regarding my own work? It didn't help that my own writing was reviled as clichéd, blithering and banal, that those few in class who at first had supported me ended up treating me as a *persona non grata* as well.

I pulled all-nighters, struggling with ever-diminishing energy to find a truth in what I was doing. What I came up with was, admittedly, in a Diana Mason word, crap. Perhaps I secretly wanted to confirm what Diana Mason had come to suspect about me: I, Moses Levy, was no Freddy Breen.

I began to drink. Whisky neat. Followed by dry gin. Followed by vodka straight. But drinking only made me more confused, depressed and irrational. I came to class sussed out of my mind, and the alcohol only gave Diana Mason the appearance of a very real giant leech that was trying to suck the life out of me.

The year inched painfully forward. I was slowly committing eighty-six proof suicide. Like any good drunkard, I was oblivious to everything around me, including Allegra, who grew increasingly distant and depressed. She had little patience or sympathy for me, and I couldn't blame her for hating me.

I rattled around like a pea in a drum, not knowing what to do, afraid of losing my creative voice. The only inner voices I could hear were grumbling, "you're crap" and "why bother" and, mostly, "just give up." The voices became incessant. So much so that I could no longer concentrate on writing. So much so that I went to a hearing specialist, who diagnosed me with what's known as tinnitus, an acute and chronic buzzing in the ears. The hearing specialist suggested I play music in the background. Or sleep near a thrumming humidifier. Something to balance the signal-to-noise ratio.

But what I believed I suffered from was not tinnitus. These were the dark, destructive voices I had once struggled to keep under control. But now the volume was cranked up all the way. I could not sleep or eat or think or write. I put on industrial-strength punk music at full volume. I took long walks near construction sites. I meditated in supermarkets. But it was no use. The voices controlled me.

I kept right on drinking. I chewed up my fingernails. I grinded my teeth and bit on my tongue. I contemplated suicide. I went so far as

to determine the means to my demise: I'd OD on antidepressants. Wouldn't that be ironic? I mean, kill yourself on a happy drug? Rich!

By the time I crawled to the end of the creative writing program, I had acquired the look of a man whose soul had been dragged through a hurricane backward. Despite being beaten and bowed, I decided to go out with a proper Viking funeral. So, I threw myself thoroughly into the work and came up with one last short story. A tawdry tale of passion and betrayal. Entitled "Love and the Improper Stranger."

•

Ulysses tried to please. Sometimes Molly wished he wouldn't try so hard. Nevertheless, Ulysses couldn't help himself. Perhaps it was his insecurity, his zeal or his need to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that he loved her as much as he claimed he did. Yes, he did love her. That was quite clear. But did he love her enough? He needed to demonstrate to her in a tangible way the depth and breadth of his love. Because love, such as it is, is indefinable. Mere words can never quite capture the feeling.

"I love you," Ulysses would say in a tone as dry as a remembered sin.

"I love you. I really, really love ... "

"Yes, you say you do," Molly would respond.

"No, I mean it. I really love you."

"Enough."

After nine years of marriage, Ulysses had said the words so many times that they had lost all significance. They were another sound he would make, like snoring or belching. Funny how the more you

say a word, the more devoid of meaning it becomes, the more alien it seems. Just sound, texture, inflection.

"In fact," Molly continued, "your constant need to prove your love has had a reverse effect: I feel completely unloved."

Because Ulysses had made it his mission to make Molly feel loved, this came as a disturbing development. The more he tried to love her, it seemed, the less love she felt. Knowing this, he could not rest until she felt loved. But what could he do? He would devise a scheme. It did not matter if the scheme was be congenial or dishonest. It was a means to an end. All that mattered was that his beloved Molly felt loved.

Ulysses thought hard about a possible scheme. He thought over breakfast. He thought on the train to work. He thought while he leaned back slowly in his chair at the office. He thought on the train home. Then an idea struck him: Ulysses would send Molly anonymous love letters. He would sign them, The Improper Stranger. He would place them in sealed envelopes and post them on the bulletin board at the cafe she frequented. Then he would wait. Perhaps the letters would intrigue Molly. Perhaps they would make Molly excited and happy. Perhaps they would make Molly feel *loved*. He began with a brief missive that was somewhat obtuse and shrouded in mystery.

Dearest One:

I have a transcendent desire to slip out of my inhibitions like a pair of tight shoes. *Et tu?*

—The Improper Stranger

Ulysses waited anxiously for Molly's reaction. Even if she did not anything, maybe she would behave differently. Indeed, she did. That night, at dinner, Molly wore a smile like a gentle wave.

"What are you so happy about?" Ulysses asked.

"Oh, nothing."

"Nothing? No one smiles for nothing."

"True."

"So it must be something."

"It must be. Would that I could tell you what it is, though."

Of course, she could not. That would end the scheme, which Ulysses had decided to proceed with. He was curious where this might go. Excited, even.

Dearest One:

I have seen you from afar. I have studied the way you walk with the sensual ease of a gazelle, the way you curl your corkscrew hair around your sensuously long index finger, the way your fleshy red mouth bursts open like a petaled flower. Who is this tall totem with the finely limned eyes, this gorgeous creature whose expressions switch from vulnerable to sullen to radiant at will?

Do not be frightened or alarmed. I am only writing to let you know that you are the most beautiful woman that I have ever seen, an elegant palace in a landscape of lean-tos.

—The Improper Stranger

The following day, Molly strutted about the apartment, a sense of excitement effervescing out of her like a well-shaken bottle of soda.

"You certainly seem chipper," Ulysses said.

"What's not to be happy about?"

"You seem to be in a great mood lately. Anything you want to tell me?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, is there any good news I should know about?"

"The good news is, I feel good. That's all."

Molly felt good. Perhaps soon, very soon, she would feel loved.

Sensing he was fulfilling his goal, Ulysses pressed forward with his scheme.

Dearest One:

I am alone – as solitary as an oyster, as Dickens would say – in a place I only vaguely know. This place doesn't affect me much. I am sitting on a couch. I am leaning against a pillow – but there is no center of gravity in my body. The weight in my toes is the same weight in my back, which is the same weight in my hands and in my shoulders. My entire body – my ears, neck, thighs – are all one weight. I am so heavy. I feel like the weight of the world is on top of me. I am going to collapse this couch, crash right through this floor. I don't know if anything can hold me. If I closed my eyes, I'm afraid I wouldn't believe anything else existed. If anything did exist, I'd be at the bottom of it.

All I can hear is a crushingly loud noise. Whatever this noise is, no human is making it. Nothing in nature is making it; but I know it's not just inside my head. It sounds like the whir of a blender, or the

clattering squeal of metal against metal, or the throbbing of cicadas. It must be everything inside of me settling, or pushing down.

When I force myself to think, I think of you. I form a picture of you in a place where I am not – but it is the same place as this. Though I can't see you, I know that if everything collapsed we would become the same person, with the mass of the entire world above us and below us the mass of everything else that doesn't exist. We would be in the middle, in a bubble, protected.

Now, I suddenly have a center of gravity. It's in my chest, and I can't feel anything else. And neither can you. We have the same heart. And our hearts hurt. Our hearts aren't together yet. They are made of the same stuff, though.

If time and space collapsed and our hearts were together, they would fit like they were meant to – and our hearts would beat as strong as anything and everything. Our hearts wouldn't even feel the slightest bit of pressure from above or below. To them, the universe would be weightless. They would twirl it around like a baton. They would throw it up and then they would catch it. Or they would toss it up and away. Then they would be on top.

But, right now, I am alone.

–The Improper Stranger

It was clear that Molly's outlook, as well as her appearance, was changing. She was spending more time grooming herself in the morning. She wore a deeper shade of blood-red lipstick. For the first time since they had first started dating, Molly was applying eye shadow and daubing herself with perfume. Molly held herself more upright, with greater ease and dignity. She seemed to be taking full advantage of the shiny pleasures that the newfound attention

afforded her. This disturbed Ulysses, because suddenly he was seized with the notion that Molly was feeling loved – the love of The Improper Stranger. What if she wanted to meet this man? Worse: What if she wanted to have an affair? Ulysses' intent was to spark Molly's passions, not enflame her libido. Ulysses needed to stop his creation, but he also needed to let Molly down gently. Perhaps a letter with a slightly insensitive dimension to it.

Dearest One:

I could not help noticing that you are suddenly wearing a good deal more makeup than you had. I prefer necklaces to accent your proud neck. And rings. Bold rings.

–The Improper Stranger

Knowing that Molly disdained jewelry of any kind, Ulysses was astonished when, the next day, he saw Molly positioning a necklace around her neck and rings on her fingers.

"What's this, then? Jewelry? Rings?"

"I've been denying myself these simple accents. For what? They look good on me, don't you think?"

"Sure, they look great. I just don't understand why you suddenly would want to wear them."

"They make me feel attractive."

"Attractive to whom?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, why is it important now to feel attractive?"

"You don't think I was attractive before?"

Ulysses was digging himself a hole.

"Yes, you were always attractive. I was just curious about the change."

"Change is important. It's as important as feeling loved."

Ulysses knew it was imperative for him to put an end to the scheme, the letters and The Improper Stranger. It was not an easy choice. After all, Molly had not seemed this full of life in years. She had lost weight, her skin glowed and she fairly brimmed with energy. He dreaded returning to the drudgery their marriage had been. Yet, he could not allow her to love this man. This man whom, paradoxically, he had become envious of. This man who was, ironically, an extension of himself.

Ulysses resolved to compose one last letter, a bittersweet farewell.

Dearest One:

This cannot go on. I should have told you that there is someone else. She is a beautiful woman who looks and behaves not unlike you.

I am sorry I led you on. I did not mean to hurt you. I did not mean to cheat on you. If I did, I am truly sorry.

In their humble way, I hope these letters inspired you. I hope they changed your life. I hope they made you feel loved. Mostly, I hope you continue to feel loved.

Always and forever,

–The Improper Stranger

The following day, Molly announced to Ulysses that she was leaving him.

"But why?" Ulysses asked. "You say you are happy. You say you feel loved."

"I do feel loved, just not by *you*."

"But I love you."

"Yes, that's what you've always said."

"Isn't that what you need?"

"What I *need*? What I need, I've discovered, is somewhere out there."

Molly handed Ulysses the letters.

"*This* is what I want," she said.

What could Ulysses say? He already knew, of course, that what was in those letters, those letters he had written, was exactly what she wanted. Moreover, it was not lost on him then, nor for quite some time, that what she wanted – this confabulation, this man he had become so jealous of, this Improper Stranger – was Ulysses himself.

•

I girded myself, as if waiting to see the dentist. Or a firing squad.

"Moses," Diana Mason began in her usual mahogany tone, "you always manage to astonish and irritate me. Your writing continues to be vague and distant and self-indulgent in a juvenile way, and not yet specific in terms of how your narrator is bothered by life."

Fuck you too.

Curiously, I once read a magazine article written about Diana Mason in which she stated, "Negative reviews and harsh criticism are enormously insulting, frustrating, painful, because you feel you've been misrepresented to the world." Perhaps she was just

saying that because the critics were misrepresenting to the world her most recent book at the time. They were unanimous in their opinions: crap.

"I wish there were something I could tell you," Diana Mason said.

"But, frankly, I have nothing to tell you."

"Nothing to tell me?" I said, a bit drunk and more than bit agitated. Would she have something to tell me I had been a William Faulkner? Or a Henry James? Or a Freddy Breen? Was this the fucking insight I've come so far for? I climbed the mountain to see the Dalai Llama – and all Her Eminence can bestow up me is: I have nothing to tell you.

"Nothing to tell me? You read the manuscript I submitted in order to join the program," I said, pressing Diana Mason for something grander, something profound. "You knew what I was about, what my writing was about. You picked me from among hundreds of other candidates. You got me to uproot my life and move three thousand miles. And for what? So you could make an example of me in class?"

"That was not my intention."

"What did you intend?"

"I intended for you to live up to my expectation," she said, flatly.

"You, Mister Levy, did not."

"I'm sorry to have been such a disappointment to you," I said through clenched teeth. "I didn't realize it was my job as a writer to live up to your expectation."

"C'mon, Moses," she said with half a laugh, "you don't really believe the stuff you showed me was any good, do you? I mean, your writing – it's trite like the ocean is big."

Who breaks a butterfly upon a fucking wheel? Diana Mason, that's fucking who.

As I wobbled out of the English Department building I was seized by the image of Diana Mason's gray face, her eyes like cracked marbles and her pale hands so perfectly folded in her lap. My mind was brimming with stuttering thoughts, thoughts that began to trip over themselves, thoughts that formed a full-forced gale of sound. Unhealthy thoughts. Thoughts that ... that ... that ... that begin nowhere and end the same place not that I know where to begin or end because my thoughts aren't linear and I should not say things I don't mean because I won't remember what I said an hour from now but I may remember in a week a month or a year and then I'll be sorry because there's no way to take it back take it back take it back to the troubles the troubles the trouble with me is I'm in a curtains-drawn gloom as bleak as hell on Sunday standing flush in the corner of my room wailing with my fingers tracing the tears down the white plaster walls to the baseboard or banging my fists on the floor until my knuckles bleed or gazing at my reflection in the mirror pulling at my skin biting my lips grinding my teeth grimacing like a little madman with fantasies of having the time and the space to write fantasies of making a rich and profound difference in the lives of everyday people fantasies of being quoted out of context of being misunderstood because the despair I feel is not fun not romantic not able to understand the ways of the world and not able to understand why people behave like bastards when being decent isn't impossible or why the laws of physics have a tendency to remain constant or why God is so indifferent to the suffering of humanity ...

Time passed.

Allegra and I returned to Rancho Colima, me with a head full of voices and Allegra with a definite sense of having been led down the garden path. Things between us were not going at all well. I continued to feel an anguished sense of anger, regret and loss I could not reconcile, as if I was a trained seal trying to grapple with the whole of human emotions. I was at odds with Allegra, who was brimming with her own anger, regret and loss. After all, things might have turned out quite differently for her had her husband with pretensions of being an author not attended a yearlong master's writing program that ultimately turned out to be, as Seymour would aptly call it, malarkey. And things might have turned out quite differently for me if I'd only felt able and competent to write about what was really on my mind: the event that came as rather startling news. That was story I needed to tell. But because I was too afraid to hurt Allegra anymore than I already had, because I'd already done enough damage, I couldn't tell it. Instead, I held back. I kept the truth – my truth – at arm's length. Even Diana Mason knew it. Yes, Diana, you were right! My writing was crap. Crap. Crap. Crap. As for Freddy Breen: I surrender. He's now become a bona fide, no-question, goddamn cult-figure celebrity.

What to do?

In short order I would have an affair that Allegra would come to discover. Soon thereafter Allegra, having endured all she could stomach, would leave me for good.

Whatever. Things could be worse.

SEVEN

That little plastic part on the tip of the shoelace? Aglet.

EIGHT

Things got worse.

It appeared one day out of nowhere as a tiny fleshy teardrop. I'd felt it as small, dead baggage that chafed against my shorts. I'd flipped it back and forth with my curious index finger. I'd held a mirror under it and stared at it with morbid curiosity. I'd also quietly denied to myself that it was there. Then one day I peed red.

"So, Moses, you've got some problems down there?" Doctor Klapisch asked. "Well, don't go worrying yourself. Maybe you've a broken blood vessel. Or maybe you've a minor infection in your urethra. Or it could be something you ate. More than likely, it's really nothing.

"After all," he said with a tsk-tsk intonation of competent doctorly authority, "we can't get too worked up about every little thing, now can we?"

After all, testicular cancer was most common between the ages of seventeen and thirty-five. And I was in my early forties.

"But if it's not an infection," Doctor Klapisch told me, "you might have what's known as a varicocele. That's a buildup of fluid as hard as a small stone in your testicle. All we need to do then is puncture it with a hypodermic needle and drain it out in a simple, five-minute procedure."

I was about to thank my lucky stars it was probably nothing serious, when Doctor Klapisch added, "I don't want to alarm you, but if it's not an infection or a varicocele there is the remote possibility it could be cancer." No stars.

"In any event, we should run you through an ultrasound," he said, ominously adding, "just to be safe."

The next thing I knew, I was spread out on an exam table, a Sargasso of specialists buzzing over me like flies around a carcass.

"Hmmm," said one lab technician while she dragged probes over my scrotum.

"Uh-huh," said another while she stared at a computer screen studying what I assumed to be the relative health of my testicles.

"Hmmm," said another.

"Uh-huh," said yet another

After a few more "hmmm's" and "uh-huh's" by several more specialists, a chief specialist presided.

"All right, then," she said, giving the readout a glance before handing it to Doctor Klapisch.

His face held the grim finality of the climax of a melodrama with all the music removed.

"Mister Levy," Doctor Klapisch proclaimed. Never a good sign when people start by calling you "mister." "I think it'd be a good idea to run a biopsy on this. Just to be safe."

A week later Doctor Klapisch called me at home.

"Mister Levy, I have some troubling news ..."

"Yes?"

"The results from your biopsy are ... positive."

"Positive?"

"Positive," he said, his voice wooden. Ironic, I thought, that something so thoroughly negative could be termed "positive."

"The truth is, Mister Levy ..."

"Yes?"

"The truth is that the results of your tests show you have an aggressive, malignant tumor in one of your testicles."

His words hung in the air like a cloud of spent gunpowder.

"Yes?"

"If we don't act right away, the probability is high that it could spread into your lymphatic system."

"Yes?"

"If we don't remove the diseased tissue, the cancer will probably manifest itself in other parts of your body."

I imagined myself trapped in a swarming wasp nest of pain, scalpels tearing my flesh, my battered body covered with weeping wounds the color of ash. I also imagined a room full of foul-weather friends, the kinds that are only there for you when things go really, really badly.

Two days later my left testicle was removed.

A few weeks after my surgery, I was started on chemotherapy. Three nights a week, four hours a night I sat in a red vinyl chair with an intravenous needle pumping a burning poison into my body, a torment more painful than having a massage with razor blades.

I shut my eyes and fantasized I was somewhere else, somewhere in the tropics drinking mai-tais and reading all the Nobokov I'd never found the time for as I lounged on a hammock under a warm velvet

sky, my brow spritzing. As long as I kept my eyes shut, as long as I could keep my fantasies alive, my pain and fear were not so harrowing and overwhelming. Strategies for survival.

Three nights a week, four hours a night. Then nausea. The meds I was given to make me feel better only made me sicker. My stomach churned in spasms, and I retched first a brown and then a lighter beige fluid. The acrid stuff oozed out my throat and a queer smell lingered in my head. I vomited until the sputum dripping from my lips turned red with blood, until there was nothing left but dry heaves, until my teeth hurt.

"Nothing can be worse than this," I said to myself as I gagged at the base of the toilet. "I wish I were dead."

But somehow I didn't die.

Three nights a week, four hours a night. Then my hair started to fall out. At first, only a little came out in my comb.

"Maybe I'll be lucky," I said, hoping against hope. "Maybe I won't go bald."

Several days later I dragged a brush across my scalp and a clump of hair came with it. Each time I combed, thousands of hairs fell off my head like pine needles from a tree.

Three nights a week, four hours a night. By which time I'd become a leaky vessel in constant need of attention. I would curl up in a turgid pool of myself, warm then cool. One arm up, one down. Then fetal. Then I would cross my legs like the numeral four. No comfort.

A thousand regrets filled my thoughts. What if I'd gone to see a doctor only a year ago? Or maybe even a few months ago when this thing was still a tiny nodule? What if I'd paid closer attention to my

body? Then all they would've had to do was remove my testicle and that would've been it. Now I'm facing problems with my lymph glands and the real possibility of the cancer spreading through me like kudzu. What's next? My kidneys, my lungs, my heart, my brain? And what if I lose my ability to reason? What if I become a vegetable, one of those pathetic creatures that ends up tethered to a life-support device like a fetus tethered to its mother? What if I'd somehow lived a cleaner life? What if I'd read only good books and hadn't wasted my time by watching so much wretched TV? What if I'd been more patient and hadn't allowed myself to yell at every stupid asshole who cut me off in traffic? What if I'd been more open and accepting and less skeptical about the existence of God? Why was the simple act of belief – rather, a suspension of disbelief – such a big problem?

"Try praying," my Christian friends told me. So, I prayed, although I was not truly comfortable with the slippery language of prayer. Then again, apart from my writing, my nightmares, my meds and the occasional call or strained visit from a friend, prayer is really all I had. I didn't know what or to whom I was praying to; that is to say, I didn't know if something or someone was listening. I didn't know if my prayers were directed outward to a god or inward to myself. And by praying, wasn't I being a hypocrite? I had never been a terribly pietistic person; the orthodoxy of organized religion with its provincialism, guilt and repression had always caused me to balk. Religion itself had only prevented me from achieving any sort of personal salvation or grace. Besides, just what is religion? A way to explain what can't be explained? Heaven versus worms? At best, you could say I was an agnostic – an ideology that provided a suitable safety net to catch me from dropping into a nihilist void.

"Trust in God," my Christian friends continued. Trust in God? They've got to be kidding. How could I trust in a God whose intents and actions seemed to be based mostly on cruelty and perversity? Was it God's will that six million Jews were slaughtered at hands of a madman or that Elvis made his final command performance from a toilet or that I had the good fortune of contracting testicular cancer? I was possessed of the notion that if God did exist that God should be righteously compelled to do the just thing. But maybe God didn't really care about humanity anymore. After all, God created the universe billions and billions of years ago. Perhaps God had moved on to something else. Or perhaps people were just an experiment that went horribly wrong and was soon abandoned. On the other hand, maybe God had become corrupted by all that supreme power. Which, in a way, made God seem more personal, less abstract. Because what I was assaying was God and self unconditionally as one.

Or maybe the issue for me wasn't whether God existed or not. Maybe God was irrelevant, a mere distraction to keep you from taking responsibility for yourself, a security blanket under which you can hide from the terrible knowledge that you are forever condemned to be free.

Enough.

Contemplate these matters too deeply for too long and, like a lettuce leaf, they begin to wither. With that in mind, I gave praying a shot. No biggie. It gave me something to do. It relieved my boredom. It lightened my spirits. It occupied my thoughts with something more than death and dying. And although it might not have meant anything profound, it seemed to work. I couldn't explain how it worked any more than I could explain how penicillin worked. But

maybe I could explain why. It worked because as I seemed to be drawing the circle of my life to a close it helped me to know that by virtue of it being a circle, there existed the possibility of a connection with the absolute. Coming from me, perhaps that's specious logic, like saying that if everyone made pizza there would be no hunger in the world. Whatever. Mostly, praying worked because I had no other choice. Because what was the alternative? That all that awaited me at the end of the long, dusty road was the beginning of yet another long, dusty road? That life's not a game that you win or lose but one that has no end and all you do is die somewhere in the middle of it?

There must be something more, something universal, something not quite fate and not quite chance, something with a comprehensive consciousness. There must be a reason people endured misery, anguish and bad hair days. There must be a truth in something as inimical, odious and harrowing as cancer – even if it did mean accepting the knowledge that I am my own disease.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this," Doctor Klapisch said after I was a month into chemotherapy, "but the cancer has metastasized. It has spread to your left kidney."

"Yes?" I said, my heart sinking like a coin dropped into an empty toy bank.

"Many people go on to live happy, productive lives on one kidney," Doctor Klapisch said, his mouth a single brief line. "It's my considered opinion we remove the diseased tissue, Mister Levy, than have the cancer spread to your heart or brain or some place where it could become really unmanageable."

"Lord knows," I said, "we wouldn't want it to become really unmanageable."

Several weeks after my kidney was removed, I was back on a chemo cycle. By then, the nurses were having trouble locating a suitable spot in which to stick the intravenous needle. When the veins in my arms had become so collapsed they could no longer sustain the needle, they began poking it in the back of my hands, my armpits, even my feet. My body had become a creaking mechanism – the wheel turns but the hamster's dead.

It was terrifying facing the cancer alone. I only wish I hadn't already destroyed my relationship with Allegra, who had always empathized with my pain, fears and uncertainties.

"When we first met," Allegra once told me, "I spent a lot of time toying with the idea that you were an actor. I've developed some standard notions and prejudices about actors: I think they call upon their talents all too often in sticky situations. One of the first things people learn is how to be in control, to be certain of what we are doing. It seems that actors that stay actors develop that one character trait to its fullest. In other words, actors can act sanely when they are most decidedly not. I wanted to make certain you weren't just acting.

"I believe that actors call upon their talents as a defense mechanism. I only say that because I've seen it. I've been the victim. And, in fact, you have too. At dinner a few nights ago I called you on your insecurities about love. You turned the conversation around very quickly and even fought me a little. You even pulled the 'I'm older' shit. You changed your tone of voice, your position in your seat – you even put your elbows on the table and scooted your chair in – a classic move. Your behavior scared me. Not because it was supposed to – that your gestures implied authority – but because it was so classic. Because I believed that you were actually trying to show

that you're older, wiser, more in control, not only of yourself, but also of me. I could tell you were acting. So I wasn't frightened of you being older and of your suddenly stern voice; I was frightened that I could get you to a point in your psyche that I would make you change. Let me restate that: I wasn't frightened that I could get you to that point, but that that point was there.

"After a while you sat back in your seat and put your hands in your lap, but I still wasn't sure if you were acting that too. I kept thinking that your acting was keeping me from revealing myself to you, from getting closer to you. Because I wasn't sure if what you were saying was true. You seemed to know too much.

"From our first date your vocabulary and attitude seemed a bit forced, a bit too cliché – too romantic when you talked about being romantic, too artistic when you talked about being artistic, too emotional, too convinced, too sure of yourself. Too much like myself sometimes. More than once I felt, 'This guy has been reading my journals,' or, 'this guy is saying all this stuff because he thinks I want to hear it.' I didn't like that feeling. I felt like I was being conned. But, as I discovered, I wasn't being conned. I just didn't know that people like me existed. I didn't believe you were how you described yourself. Because that was how I described myself – and I thought it was an extraordinary description.

"As for you being too romantic, I think you're an extremist. Period. I'm an extremist too. It's healthy, if you control it. If you know when enough is enough in terms of how much your mind and your heart can take. I mean, you laugh and then you cry and then you laugh some more. And then you cry. That's so healthy. You know how to regulate yourself. And I had to know you for a time before I realized that.

"I finally began to understand you when we started sleeping together. Because when we make love I am as close to you as I can possibly be. You cannot act in bed. Many people can, but not you, not with me. It's such an iffy place for me, why would you risk it? You couldn't. At least you convinced me you couldn't. And so, when I started sleeping with you I found out how you really are and I compared it to how you are outside the bedroom. And I discovered that you're the same person. An extremist. Period."

Yes, Allegra was good at keeping me on my toes – not the most comfortable way to walk, but at least she made me aware of the steps I took. Of course, it did not hurt that she also throbbed with a look of vitality, strength and, most of all, youth. I couldn't imagine being with anyone more beautiful, more flawless, more right.

So why did we eventually stop making love altogether? There was a time when I wanted to consume Allegra, to devour her flesh. There was a time when I wanted to lose myself inside of her. And then there was a time when it seemed I would never get an erection again.

I attributed my malfunctioning to nervous tension or to the need to pee or to the blaring stereo rumbling through the walls from the apartment next door. Who knew then that it was the beginning of cancer? At any rate, despite my technical difficulties, Allegra had boundless patience and an unerring belief in my ability to eventually come through for her. And her faith made me believe that if she could have such conviction, well, there must be something to it. Allegra used to say that some people are simply meant to be together. It's a chemical thing.

"There's a hormone called vasopressin," she'd say. "It leads to nurturing, fatherly behavior. In a study about Midwestern prairie

voles it was discovered that vasopressin has the ability to turn irresponsible males into loving and protective fathers. So you see, Moses, you have no choice but to love me with all your might."

Knowing I was incapable of loving anyone with all my might, I had an affair. Her name was Daphne, a masseuse of all things.

I wasn't sure myself why I did it. Maybe I wanted to prove Allegra's theories about monogamy and vasopressin to be incorrect. Or maybe I wanted to prove what a jerk I could be. Or maybe I wanted the prickly thrill of being with someone new. Whatever. I can always be relied on to shoot myself in the foot just when things start to go my way. Like the engagement-ring debacle, a faux pas the details of which Allegra spelled out clearly and unequivocally in a letter.

Moses:

Maybe you don't understand – and maybe I shouldn't expect you to. You see, I have high expectations. But maybe my expectations aren't valid. You have never been a woman. You've also never been a woman getting married for the first time. I am.

There is the issue of an engagement ring – for which I am being called a "nag" for wanting. I have been trying to see things from your point of view since you called me that. The only way I can fathom your lack of sensitivity about this is that you consider the ring a monetary object – another thing you must buy me to win my love forever. I don't want to wear your ring if it merely symbolizes the money you sacrificed to get me to marry you. I won't wear it. Because I won't wear an object that reminds me of the guilt I must feel for making you buy it for me.

I would wear a ring that represents our union and the love you have for me. I would wear a ring that means you want me to marry you. I would wear a ring that you would want to give me.

An engagement ring means marriage to me, to most women, and, I think, to most men. Your father saved his money to propose to your mother. My father, when he found out my mother was pregnant, went out to do some soul searching and ended up at a jewelry store, bought a ring and then asked my mother to marry him.

I told you two weeks in advance that I was visiting my father to tell him that we were about to announce our engagement. You've known for quite a while now that someday we would officially be engaged. I figured you understood that giving me an engagement ring is standard marriage procedure, and that you would show your love through that. But I figured wrong. And after the ninth "Where's the ring?" from my father, and the ninth defense of your character and monetary difficulties, I decided that I would surrender my desire for a traditional romantic engagement and I would just mention to you casually that there is a lot of pressure from my family. Beyond the chiding, I was tired of the pity. I was tired of hearing, "Well, it's OK – my fifth cousin didn't have a ring, but she still got married, and he gave her one for an anniversary." I even thought that maybe I should buy my own ring. Then someone said, "Don't buy it. You can't do that to him. It'll make him feel bad. He wants to buy it for you. He'll come through. You'll see. Be patient."

I was patient. I was more than patient. And when being more than patient proved fruitless, I decided to tell you what you should do, because obviously you didn't know that an engagement ring was so important to me. I thought I'd only need to mention it once. Now that I've had to mention it so many times, all the surprise is gone. I know

where it's being bought. How many carats it is. What you had to go through to get it. How much it costs. What it looks like. An engagement ring means so much more than you think. It's not leverage to lift up guilt. It's a gift of love you give to the woman you want to marry. It's not something you tell me about. It's something you ask me to wear.

I already said I would marry you. But that doesn't mean that romance and respect and tenderness go to shit. And yes, I think you've been heartless about this ring. I've wanted to get angry with you about it. I've wanted to kick up a fuss and scream my head off. But what I feel isn't anger. I'm hurt. I'm really, really hurt. Down to the bone.

Maybe I can't explain to you what an engagement ring is. But I can tell you what it is not. It is not an all-purpose salve to smooth things over. It is not the purple cashmere sweater you buy me when I'm mad at you. It is not the red roses you surprise me with when you think you are cleverly seducing me. Mostly, it is not what you've made it out to be. An engagement ring is something you should give me when you can understand that it's a gift, not an obligation.

I won't wear anything from you until then. I don't care if it's ready now and you're planning to pick it up on Monday. I don't want a ring with guilt-ridden connotations. I don't want a marriage like that.

I want to marry the loving person I met and love. Not someone who doesn't understand my feelings. Not someone who has hurt me. I'm hurt because I let myself have expectation – and my expectation wasn't met.

It's a sad thing because the best part of my life is sleeping next to you and smelling your neck. The best part of my life is watching TV with you from under the blanket. The best part of my life is you being there for me at the end of my day. The best part of my life is seeing you

dressed up in your gray serge suit, looking like the kind of guy I might stare at from across a room – when, in fact, you're really mine.

I'm sorry I got angry with you. Really, really, really sorry. Because I wasn't feeling angry. I wasn't feeling angry at all.

–Allegra

Daphne's life story was painted in broad, violent brush strokes, which might've explained why she often smudged the fine eyeliner between fact and fantasy. Beneath her seeming impenetrable expressions there was buried so much pain that at times she practically looked medieval.

"My father showered me with verbal and physical abuse like so much dirty rain," she told me. "He did so without giving his actions a thought. He did so simply because he could.

"I recall fantasizing that, like Persephone, I'd been abducted by Hades and held captive in the underworld, praying that my distraught mother, after years of searching, would find me and free my spirit.

"In the end, my father choked to death on a chicken bone before I had a chance to tell the bastard just how much I hated him. He died before I had a chance to tell the asshole that he'd so callously yanked me out by the roots and left me to wither."

I should have trusted my better judgment and not gotten involved. But how could I trust my better judgment when Daphne's opiate beauty aroused in me uncontrolled urges?

Allegra came home from work unexpectedly early one night, entering our bedroom like a ribbon of pure light. I was in bed having sex with Daphne – not even good sex, I might add. What could I say?

That it was an accident? That Daphne meant nothing to me? That I didn't intend my little fling with Daphne to be anything other than temporary, like a card table you bring out for a dinner party and then fold away when it's over?

Allegra's eyes quickly turned red and were rimmed with shock and sadness. She drew a deep breath, sighed quietly, and then vanished as quickly as she appeared.

The next day she called me to ask if I would meet her in the park near the house. I said I would. Allegra was waiting under a jacaranda tree, its flowers falling about her like little lavender parachutes. We sat for a time in an awkward silence. And then Allegra told me that in Dante, there was a circle of hell especially reserved for perpetrators of the most heinous sin of all: betrayal.

"I'm sorry," I offered. "I didn't intend for this to happen."

"The problem with you is that you never intend anything."

"I'm really going to miss you."

"Yes, you will."

Things change.

Allegra called me to say she was getting married again.

"Is it someone I know?" I asked.

"His name is Joshua. He's a novelist. A *successful* novelist."

"He might as well be Beelzebub come to carry you off to his underworld."

Silence.

"It's going to be in the Catholic Church. Which is why I'm calling: I want an annulment."

What could I say? She sounded as if she sincerely wanted to put the whole ugly experience of our marriage behind her and an annulment would help her to obliterate me from her memory. It's no thrill being obliterated.

A short time later, a man called identifying himself as a Father Puorro.

"I need to ask you a few questions in order to determine if, in the eyes of God, you and Allegra had had what amounted to a legitimate marriage."

Father Puorro asked how we met, about our courtship, about why we decided to wed. He asked if we'd ever consummated our marriage. He asked how often we went to church. He asked why things didn't work out in the end.

I answered him as honestly as I could. It would've felt strange for me to lie to a priest.

"My family's Jewish," I said, "but between our Sunday ham, Christmas lights and conservative politics, it's not like we were your typical kosher-keepers. Still, I don't feel good about abdicating the guilt of Judaism for the guilt of Christianity, if that makes any sense."

I told Father Puorro that I'd had an affair with a masseuse named Daphne, an affair that Allegra would come to discover. I held nothing back from the good father, even telling him about the event that came as rather startling news and all the tribulation, anguish and dissolution that followed.

To which Father Puorro said, "Oh, my."

I also told Father Puorro the real reason for our dissolution, at least what I believed the real reason to be.

"You want to know why didn't it work out in the end? I didn't deserve Allegra."

A few months later, I received a document in the mail stating that it had been determined by Father Puorro and the Archdiocese of the City of Rancho Colima that, in the eyes of God, Allegra and Moses Levy were no longer married, nor had they ever been married. They were, officially, now and forever after annulled. Amen.

Suffice it to say, I did not handle the breakup well. Even though I had long since begun to ratchet downward my estimates of just how much joy I could extract from the world, I did not cotton well to the degree of melancholy that colored everything around me. I called Allegra repeatedly, pleading with her to give me another chance. I called her so many times she finally got an unlisted number. I sent her silly love poems and weepy letters and tapes of romantic songs, all to no effect. I sent her a barrage of emails, many of which I knew I shouldn't have sent the minute I clicked "send." Finally, Allegra, obviously a much more compassionate person than I will ever hope to be, put an end to all of it – compassionately – by writing me one last letter.

Moses:

Deep down we both knew what was wrong with our marriage from beginning to end, but at this point I think it's best not to go deep down. Going deep down right now just hurts too much.

I still love you. That may never change. But over the last year, we were so dishonest with each other that now it's imperative that we are separated before we end up destroying each other. I think it's best at this point not to talk about how cruel we were. It doesn't do us any good. And we probably shouldn't talk about how nice we were at times, either.

To be honest, I'm afraid we shouldn't talk, period. Because when we talk we fight, and the fights put a horrible veil over the good memories that we should preserve.

When I married you, I wanted so much to make you happy. I tried and tried. But I couldn't. Frankly, I don't think anybody can make you happy. You are bereft of the capacity to experience real joy.

I can't fight you anymore, Moses. I want to remember us the way we were when we were happy and loving. This was an important and profound relationship for the both of us. I don't want to look back and snarl.

Maybe it's childish, but I really want to remember us like this: I met a man; we fell in love; I married him; it was wonderful but eventually it fell apart so we decided to end it, to give each other some peace. I have to think of it that way or it becomes just too depressing.

Just let me go. Let me use my own survival tactics; however adolescent they are, they are all I know.

The hardest part about being divorced now is exactly what was the hardest part about being married: It's torture to be enemies with the one you love.

–Allegra

Allegra left me, but the memories of her have not. Memories of her mad excited flourishes when her anger couldn't be expressed in any other fashion. The way we danced when there was no music, of the wheezy sound of her breathing as she slept, of the pungent smell of her vagina. The two dimples located right above her bottom where she once said the angels had kissed her when they sent her down from heaven. The shriek of a laugh that some thought annoying but I found strangely endearing. I had plenty of time to dwell on my fucking memories while cancer slowly wrenched me apart.

"This may burn a little," said the nurse, who had just jimmied a needle into my pale and mottled arm. The invariable intravenous drip of venom insinuated itself into me like a rat through a rattlesnake.

"Don't worry, Mister Levy," the nurse cajoled. Funny how the words "don't worry" mean just the opposite. I smiled weakly at the nurse as if to say, "Go easy on me. I can only take so much." Then I bit my lip hard, closed my eyes and feigned as if I were a feather drifting in a faint blue wind, as if doing so might deliver me from this scrimmage with agony.

The toxic effect of chemotherapy was cumulative, each cycle more wretched, painful and debilitating than the one before. Looking into the mirror I barely recognized myself; I'd wizened into a human scarecrow. I'd become what in French is called *mal dans sa peau*, bad in my skin – flesh, mind and spirit at sixes and sevens.

I waited for sleep. But sleep, with its elegantly embroidered haven of dreams, did not come. Instead, I remained vividly awake, propped up in front of my laptop, my fingers banging away painfully on the keys, words spewing out of me like a dandelion being blown by a high wind. My goal was not to get down the details of my life in the

way they happened but in the way I remembered them. I wrote about the people I loved and the people I hated; their quirks, foibles and habits, the cigarettes they smoked, the booze they drank, the magazines they read, the music they made love to, the side they parted their hair on, the hint of perfume on their wrists, the amulets around their necks, the wear-shine on their clothes, the madness they created, the letters they wrote and the letters they intended to write. I wrote about a once great love, that like many once great loves, was somehow rent asunder.

I wrote all day and into the night, the stories spilling out of me and onto the page in a blur. I wrote into the morning, the furious rhythm of my typing filling the sterile hospital room with an ominous clicking. I wrote on and on, not allowing my usual fears and insecurities to poison my efforts. I wrote until I finally came unwound like an old watch, my hands slowing, my imagination losing its spring. Then I bolstered myself up with all the strength I could muster, and I continued, undaunted.

NINE

Time went by.

Maybe all that praying helped. By some miracle my testicular cancer retreated slowly into remission. It was as if crossing gate had lifted after a grisly train wreck and I could proceed with my life. But my troubles, as always, were far from over. Because just as my body was healing, my mental and emotional struggles to complete my manuscript were just beginning. I became obsessed. Days and nights of endless rewrites and revisions, and what did I have to show? What once had come easy and plainly was now problematic. I was seized with doubt. Where was I going with it? Was it any good? Who the hell would publish it?

In the midst of my crazed and compulsive efforts to complete my novel, I discovered to my extreme dismay that Freddy Breen had had his first book published. Poof! My inspiration vanished like a well-lubricated ghost.

The critics and the public alike were enthralled with "The Hill and the Valley," which went on to win a prestigious honorarium that transformed Freddy Breen into a Man of Letters – a Man of Letters who did not know the difference between a subject and a predicate. A Man of Letters who could barely write his name in the dirt with a stick. Freddy Breen hit the lecture circuit and became an instant celebrity, with pretty, young groupies throwing themselves at him as if he were the David Cassidy of the prepubescent, pre-literate set. He would sleep with many of them, but despite a mountain of paternity suits Freddy Breen's stature and integrity remained unadulterated, so to speak.

"The Hill and the Valley" inspired an ultraistic movement known to the minions as Breenians. Legions of sycophants rallied around him, forming societies, meeting at conventions, quaintly calling themselves Fred Heads. I preferred to think of them as being Breen Dead. Better: No-Breeners. With concomitant worship, they embraced Freddy Breen's callow cool. Logos were designed, fan clubs were established, T-shirts were made and Web sites were put up, all with a zealot's earnestness.

The cult of Freddy Breen had elevated him to the level of deity. His interviews were glorified as the Gospel According to Saint Breen, his casual remarks often revered as "seminal" or "epic" or "way cool" and his shambolic appearance became its own sui generis fashion line trotted out on the runways of Paris.

Pockets of No-Breeners began sprouting up across the land, and they held quorums in their living rooms, which expanded into auditoriums and finally concert halls. These partisans saw themselves not as a traditional sect per se, but as part of a creed, a calling. They might have been benign if they weren't so fervent in their smug self-righteousness – that is to say, annoying. Soon, No-Breeners were everywhere, competing with Scientologists and Krishnas for the cult most likely to irritate you at airport terminals.

Temples were erected temples to accommodate the ever increasing flock, and the words of "The Hill and the Valley" became the sacred scripture tucked into the pews. Their motto? "To be touched by Him a little bit is to be a little bit touched." Seriously.

The multitudes were more than willing to fork over thousands of dollars to be anointed true Breenians, which meant undergoing coffee enemas, drinking bath water and talking for hours to inanimate objects like dolls, ashtrays and bagels. These bizarre

rituals, according to Breenian priests, would help the minions ultimately achieve everlasting happiness, a higher IQ and whiter teeth.

All this attention foisted on a man whose search for pure truth appeared to be constantly hovering over a religious epiphany, but in fact under scrutiny merely turned in on itself without illuminating anything. But the followers were not interested in having their hero evaluated critically, or were they dissuaded by revelations of anti-intellectualism, far from it.

Freddy Breen's mangling of pronouns took on the added gravity of capitalization, making the dissemination of information ever more inchoate. Men and women of the cult were to refer to each other simply as He and She, which made it nearly impossible to understand who was being referred to while unwittingly giving the entire shebang the appearance of an imprecise who's-on-first routine. Not that the need for precision or clarity was ever at issue. One disaffected stoner's blurred crusade became humanity's search for meaning. It all seemed like one cosmic joke, except no one was laughing – least of all me. The reverential attitude toward the man and his writings became fanatical, and fanatics can never be accused of having a sense of humor.

It was at a local meeting of No-Breeners – which I felt compelled to attend out of sheer curiosity – that I met Francine.

"Admittedly," Francine admitted, "I led a charmed upbringing, living in a expansive ivy-covered mansion with appointed salons, sitting rooms, living rooms, rooms with running marble fountains, rooms with vaulted ceilings, rooms that no one lived in.

"I had gone to the finest private schools, where I learned to walk with a confident sexy stride, speak languages from Algonquian to Zunian and to indulge myself in the wealth and whimsy of the unabashedly privileged."

Francine was, in a word, genteel, exuding charm, poise and intelligence. She had a childlike air about her superimposed with a finishing-school formality. Even when her mother ran off suddenly one sweaty July night with a brawny servant named Miguel, Francine was never left wanting.

"I loved my father and my father loved me," she said. "Our relationship was passionate and indissoluble. We loved to spend all our time together, to the exclusion of me having friendships with someone my own age. But that was quite all right because Daddy gave me all anyone could ever hope to want."

If Francine's colorfully cocooned childhood was like a well-thumbed storybook, then her father's eventual death years later from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis was its broken spine.

"Lord Arlington," Francine said in her own uniquely poetic cadence, "was a renowned concert pianist, which made his loss of coordination and motor control all the more poignant. His protracted and painful deterioration left me genuinely inconsolable. Of course, my dear Lord Arlington's slow collapse did not lack dignity. It was a decline that, like a fading rose, had a singular fragrance.

"My dear Lord Arlington's performances increasingly took on a frighteningly surreal quality, as his fingers touched upon unexpected notes or his arms went limp or his body shuttered or his head flailed about spasmodically – all the while audiences nervously gasped and wept.

"Eventually," Francine said, tears welling up, "father was like a psychic pearl diver whose perfectly forged music could only be heard inside his head."

Francine said that from the moment of her father's passing she was looking for some kind of synthesis of the religious and the rational.

"I yearned to relieve myself of my refined upbringing, to be feral and improper, to be able to fart in public. It wasn't until I had read 'The Hill and the Valley,' with its near empathetic depiction of the wealthy in all their languor and cruelty, that I had a revelation about what I viewed as my disgustingly idle and aimless existence."

Who could argue with that? Who could even insinuate that her New and Improved Testament was suspect? Not me – especially because all I could think of when I looked at Francine was how much I wanted to feel her firm naked body pressed up against mine.

"You were once in the same writing program as Freddy Breen?" she asked me in astonishment when I let drop that small factoid.

"Yeah, sure."

"What was he like?"

"What can I say? Genius."

Francine and I were out for a walk. It was approaching noon and the sky was an immense panorama of unflinching light. Francine's yellow dress made a soft swishing sound and she glowed from sweat while we strolled along the hot pavement. We bought sidewalk sundaes from a vendor and sat under a weeping willow. Some of the chocolate melted and splattered across her breast, and when she asked me to wipe it off with a damp tissue, I only made matters worse. The tiny spots became darkly huge and messy. Francine

looked at me in all my grunting frustration and a Mona Lisa half-smile crossed her face. That's the expression that sticks with me, the expression I still long for.

"Let me help you," she said, placing her hand on top of mine and pressing it with a slow circular motion into her clitoris. Staring at her, I could imagine the two of us floating like tiny clandestine atoms in a heavy chemical broth, finally emerging to bond into a single unbreakable element.

"You really knew Freddy Breen?" she said in a low moan. She continued helping me help her rub herself. I was more than happy to oblige.

"Yes," I said, "we were friends. Buddies and pals."

"I don't suppose you could introduce me to him?"

"Anything's possible." It really was a matter of me making up a credible story, whatever was necessary to get under Francine's ample bra.

"So, you think he's brilliant as well?"

I swallowed hard. I looked into Francine's fanatical eyes. How could I question faith when the faithful were steered by the unreliable compass of blind instinct and desperation?

"As I said, genius."

Francine's hand squeezed mine harder; the motions we made around her clitoris were growing increasingly vigorous. Soon everything around us, from the trees to the tall grass to the bench on which we had settled, seemed to be swaying in sybaritic sympathy. Did I feel the least bit embarrassed when Francine let go a completely

unselfconscious squeal? Did I feel slightly crushed when she shouted "Oh, Freddy! Freddy! I love you ... Freddy!"

Freddy? It was me she was masturbating herself with, after all. That was my hand down there, not Freddy Breen's. Nonetheless, I did begin to feel somewhat slightly manipulated when Francine insisted that we attend Freddy Breen's appearance at the opening of a shopping mall the next day.

"Maybe you could arrange it so I could meet him?"

"No doubt. It'd be a rare thrill."

Imagine our disappointment when the two of us showed up for His Breenness only to discover that we, along with several thousand other No-Breeners, would have to brave a no-show.

"Freddy Breen has been taken ill," said a representative from F. Breen Enterprises, Inc. "Freddy is very, very sorry, but his doctors told him that he couldn't make any more appearances for now."

The cult gasped and wept, because that's what disappointed cults do. Francine was especially distraught. Her one big chance to meet God and God called in sick. How could He let his disciples down?

The next day the newspapers reported that Freddy Breen was not merely ill. He had been diagnosed with, of all things, testicular cancer.

"I don't aspire to immortality through my work," Freddy Breen adroitly told the media. "No, I aspire to immortality through not dying."

The surfeit of sympathy was simply overwhelming. Many female No-Breeners were prepared to offer their husband's testicles if it

meant a chance at survival for their dear Freddy. T-shirts were printed. Tributes were written. Talk shows were booked. Tears were shed. Poor, sad Freddy's circumstance imbued him with tragic nobility. Unfortunately, the mania surrounding the public's interest shattered the delicate matrix that bound the believers together. It was as if a catch had come undone, allowing the complex springs and mechanisms to be propelled forth in all directions.

Francine herself was inconsolable. She cried for weeks. Just when it seemed she had no tears left in her, she would cry some more.

"I can't bear the thought of losing him," she'd say, tears streaming. "Losing Father was bad enough, but this, this is more than I can take."

Indeed it was.

"I started taking Haldol to keep my mood swings in check. I also took bucketloads of Xanax. When that didn't do it, I downed handfuls of Valium and Thorazine or Librium and Miltown. In addition, I also began to suffer from bruxismania, a constant grinding of the teeth. To compound that, I had TMJ, a painful jaw condition, in which I had to wear a neck brace when I slept, which was often disturbed because of my apnea. Then there were my unexpected flare-ups of psoriasis, eczema and herpes. I had become night blind, asthmatic and allergic to flat latex wall paint. I also turned anemic, I had Epstein-Barr Syndrome and sex gave me painful, throbbing headaches in which I was rendered temporarily deaf. I also chafed easily."

From lactose intolerance to Legionnaire's Disease to irritable bowel syndrome, you name it and Francine had it. Most strange of all, she was suddenly overcome with a morbid fear of failure known as

kakorrhaphiophobia, an extremely rare and devastating condition that is often compounded by the sufferer's inability to pronounce its name.

Me? I broke out in hives. After all, it was bad enough having to contend with Freddy Breen as a living and breathing human being. What could I do about Freddy Breen the icon, the talisman, the martyr?

Francine sensed my own selfish concerns.

"All you can think about is how this affects you," she said, her voice erupting like a flash pot. "It's always you, you, you."

"Not true. It's about how this affects you, and because this affects you, this affects us. Which means this affects me."

Wrong response.

"Anyone who's felt a loss understands that mourning can be paralyzing," Francine said, her eyes blood red. "You feel it from the surface of your skin to the most vulnerable regions of the heart, as if something has ripped the stuffing out of you and replaced it with an infinite emptiness. You feel it in convulsive waves that leave you both exhausted and berserk. You feel it as if it will never end. And, in a way, it never does."

Francine and I very soon lost our equilibrium. Small talk adopted a decidedly sepulchral characteristic. We stopped making love altogether. Our fights became increasingly ugly, our sparring containing all the charm of a barroom brawl.

Freddy Breen eventually died of cancer, which had metastasized from his scrotum to his brain rendering him a hapless, blithering vegetable at the end. "Head Fred Head Dead," the newspaper

headlines proclaimed. The media coverage was outrageous, as if a president had died – or at least had copulated with one of his secretaries. Conspiracy plots were bandied about. Bios written and movie rights were optioned. Commemorative plates were auctioned. Millions of mourning No-Breeners feared the apocalypse might be at hand. Billboards were erected in Freddy Breen's honor with a quote from his book:

"Suddenly he was gone and she did not know where so she told them that he was gone and they were sad for him and her. So sad, and yet, not. But still. And still he was not ..."

Meanwhile, Francine and I grew further and further apart.

"I'm struggling to be the person you want me to be," I said to Francine, knowing there was only the slenderest of threads holding us together. "Struggling, you understand?"

"You're doing a lousy job at it."

"My mission is to prove to you that I am worth loving."

Who was I kidding?

So, as is my habit with habits, I turned again to booze, transforming myself once again into a messy and blithering alcoholic. I don't make a cuddly drunk, the witty kind that amuses people at parties with his ability to balance precariously on the edge of embarrassment while making astute observations on the meanings of life and love. No, I make a loutish boozer: sodden and melancholy, punctuating all my inebriated statements with word "fuck." I went on benders, stalking dogs, buses and old ladies down the street. I was rude and obnoxious in pubs, dancing on tables and vomiting in

restrooms. I was not endearing himself to anyone, especially Francine.

When getting fried out of my mind on drink didn't do the trick, I turned to drugs. Cocaine. Quaaludes. Acetaminophen. I even convinced Francine that the two of us should take Ecstasy at the very same amusement park that Allegra and I, under the same altered state, had gone to years earlier.

It was a Sunday when Francine and I woke up, showered and ate Belgium waffles and had several cups of coffee. We wanted to be wide-awake for whatever it was we were about to experience. I put a blanket, a small bottle of apple juice, some paper and pens into my backpack. We kissed. And then after a moment's contemplation, we both swallowed a small capsule of Ecstasy.

Alas, what occurred next was neither uniquely magnificent nor happily hallucinogenic. Because the drug we took was not Ecstasy, at least not the Ecstasy I had known; this was something else, something dark, hideous and inexplicable that made us feel like ripping the tops of our heads off and scraping our brains out with a shovel. It was definitely a bad trip, man. Moreover, the amusement park, we were to discover, had been closed for years. What remained, aptly, was a ghost town – rickety, desolate and deserted. After that experience, it was all shit.

Francine, tenaciously pursuing the truth in her own foolish but sweet way, turned to a psychic. Madame Lavant said that everything wrong with Francine was my fault. I couldn't be trusted. I would betray her time and again. I couldn't commit to anyone. I am a big, stupid jerk and I delighted in taking out my big, stupid jerkiness on whomever I am closest to. I couldn't make up my mind about anything because I am a Libra, and that's just the way Libras

are. I'd be happy to go on the way things are, Madame Lavant added, content in maintaining the status quo. Or I'd be happy to be alone. Or maybe I'd be unhappy to go on with the way things are or be unhappy to be alone. Because I could go both ways. Because I am a Libra. Because, you see, Libras cannot choose. And so on.

I told Madame Lavant to take a hike. How's that for taking a stand?

Before long, Francine, having endured all she could stomach of my bullshit, dumped me. Who could blame her?

Whatever.

I think about Francine often. Undoubtedly I'll think about her for years to come. I have lots of time to speculate and reflect and ruminate here at Rancho Colima Mental. Lots and lots of time.

TEN

A new loony by the name Peter Parley joined us at Rancho Colima Mental, and word had it that he tried to gas himself to death with amyl nitrite. With his manicured nails, sharp French cologne and sternly raked-back scroll of silver hair, Peter Parley exuded cultivation with a slightly effeminate gloss. His hands were delicate and his gestures graceful, as if they were attuned to a perfectly calibrated clockwork mechanism. Still, like the rest of the nut jobs, there was something defective about him – a handsome gold wristwatch with a broken spring. I had to wonder, what pushed Peter Parley over the brink?

"I was once an alderman," Peter Parley told me in what sounded like an exaggerated Boston Brahmin accent. "No doubt you've heard about me? My story was all over the papers."

Since leaving the Post Telegram Picayune, I'd refused to read the papers.

"I was raised a Southern Baptist," Peter Parley continued, "and was taught from an early age that having sex with anyone other than your spouse was a transgression against the natural order of things that would send you straight to hell. My parents, well meaning and earnest, preached the gospel to me day and night, and spiritual verses, heavy with metaphor and consequence, filled my small head with a sound like wild applause. The queer dissonance of the Bible and Christ, of Sin and Salvation, of Good and Evil were seared into my young life with such zeal that it instilled in me a sense of mission. The fervent whispering of my father's voice in prayer added an eloquent and sweet tonality to my childhood. I sought a climax and resolution of those jangling chords. So much so, that from the time I was a young adult it was decided that I would

demonstrate my noblesse oblige by becoming a politician. Being a public servant, I would take on all that's evil, fight injustice and establish a virtuous and ethical tone that every citizen could emulate.

"It's all I wanted," he said, and added for emphasis, "it's all I ever wanted."

Project time. Doctor Von Rauffenstein commanded us to watercolor – the logic being it would allow us to create a Rorschach of our unconscious, a map of all things disturbing. Call me paranoid, but I suspected the images would be used less as an outlet of creative expression and more as a tool to divide the mildly despotic from the truly lunatic. Hence, I decided I would not be painting any pictures of me and the devil and me copulating. Instead, I painted a world in perfect harmony, all pastels and faultless symmetry. Curiously, Peter Parley painted a more arresting image: a resplendent Christ figure perched on a golden throne with a Eucharist in one hand, a beatific Peter Parley in the other.

"What should we make of this?" the good doctor asked the group.

Silence.

"Perhaps Mister Parley is feeling his way through a crisis of faith," Doctor Von Rauffenstein offered.

"I am not feeling my way through anything," Peter Parley began. "I'm feeling whatever I happen to let myself feel. Maybe I actually feel happy. I suppose I am happy. Yes. That's it. I am happy. There seems to be definite intervals of happiness. So long as I accent and modulate my feelings, I have to admit to feeling a certain sensation of ebullience. I thought about Jesus Christ and it occurred to me what a wonderful thing Jesus Christ is. I'm glad there's a Jesus

Christ. After all, Jesus Christ died for my sins. That can't help but make me happy. Then I had a cup of coffee and I thought, gee, coffee is such a wonderful beverage. It tastes so rich and smells so wonderful. It wakes me up. I'm really glad I'm living in the time of coffee."

Doctor Von Rauffenstein upped Peter Parley's lithium and Paxil.

"In keeping with my mission as arbiter of morality," Peter Parley continued with his story, "I decided that as alderman, I would clean up the wickedness and depravity in my district by shutting down clubs frequented by homosexuals. Because there was nothing on Earth more depraved than a freaking fag. And I saw it as my duty to put a stop to them. Which, of course, was bitterly ironic because I had quietly known from the first time that I saw a young boy's naked body in the showers at a Christian summer retreat that I myself was gay. I could deny it, I could dismiss or bury my urges, I could even pretend I was attracted to the women I dated. But I simply could not unknow the truth in the same way you can't unring a bell. All I could do was remove temptation. Which I tried to do with a religious ferocity.

"I thought it was only right for me to examine these clubs in person so that I could understand better their underlying turpitude," Peter Parley went on. "I should know who these people were, what they were doing, how they were doing it. But that was my first mistake. The lure was simply too strong. Soon the throbbing music, the aggression and the sweaty physicality of male pressed against male captivated me. I was excited because I knew I'd finally found something to which I truly belonged. Yet, I also was repulsed and filled with an intense self-hatred. Because I was raised to believe that homosexuality was vile, a sin, a sickness.

"One by one, I shuttered the clubs. I issued arrest warrants for pandering or drugs or fire code violations or exotic nude dancing or anything else I thought would stick. I harassed the very same men I was infatuated with, the very same men who were the very same as me. All the while, I tried to suppress my appetites and urges. But, like most appetites and urges, they refused to remain suppressed."

And that's not all.

"I learned that the things you think you are finished with come back only when you need them," Peter Parley said. "If and only if, when and only when. Like a former lover you thought you'd seen the last of. Like the silver dollar you thought you'd accidentally spent but turned up at the bottom of your pocket when you needed bus fare. Like the box of treasured letters you thought you'd lost but was under the bed waiting to be rediscovered. If a thing comes back, it comes back, if and only if, when and only when, you need it."

Project time. Doctor Von Rauffenstein commanded us to write a short story involving a personal tribulation or unresolved conflict – the logic being we would learn to surmount an ordeal through art. Admittedly, I had a few craggy stones left unturned, including the ugly episodes involving The Immovable Object. With Peter Parley's tormented, irresolute past large in mind, I wrote a short story. Entitled "Stigmatized."

•

Xander Lomax had a secret. A mystery wrapped in a riddle bound in an enigma (and so on and so forth) that required from him massive amounts of emotional energy to keep concealed. He hid it behind an impenetrable barrier of denial that he had spent a lifetime erecting. He hid it behind his urbane humor as dry as sweet champagne. He

hid it behind automatic responses and shrill doubletalk. The more deafening the signal, the more he could diminish the noise. So much effort for the sake of the secret. Ironically, Xander Lomax's secret was no secret at all. Yet, that was a secret to Xander Lomax. Which lent a slightly tragic air to him. Because guarding the secret was all Xander Lomax knew; it was all he'd ever known. It was a fire that must be stoked, a hunger that must be sated. All this effort to maintain a secret that was no secret at all.

What better way to keep the secret concealed, Xander Lomax reasoned, than by being granted a reservoir of limitless power? And what better way to administer that power than to be a boss? By being a boss, he could control the way people behaved. Control – that was the secret. He would set the tone. He would yell "conga line" and the whole room would step in file. But what about those people whose behaviors were beyond his control? What about that irksome Robert Kaeser? He was a quiet one, too quiet. He always spoke in a furtive manner, moving his body suspiciously. He had a dubious look of subterfuge plastered on his face.

"Robert, there's something I need to ask you, something personal," Xander Lomax said, his widow's peak arched precipitately over his brow giving him a frighteningly devilish expression. "Have you been discussing my personal life with anyone?"

Robert Kaeser stood before him in all sugar-dusted innocence, swallowing a hard lump of saliva.

"Your personal life? What do you mean?"

"I've heard through the grapevine that you've been spreading rumors about me."

"Grapevine? What grapevine? What are you talking about?"

"You know damn well who and what I'm talking about," he said, his features converging to a point.

What could he say?

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"That's what I thought you'd say," Xander Lomax said. "Let me make one thing clear: You're not going to say anything more to anybody about me, ever. And if I find out you have, if I find out that you've even mentioned me in passing, you're out of here. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Alas, Robert Kaeser did not, because it appeared to Xander Lomax that he was behaving surreptitiously. Robert Kaeser continued to give the impression that he was talking out of school, that he was spreading embarrassing rumors. So, Xander Lomax fired him.

Shortly thereafter, Xander Lomax fired Nancy Parker as well because he didn't approve of her insidious laugh. Over the next few months, he also let go of Max Yurt, Jimmy Dufresne and Drew Pinsky. All of who, Xander Lomax believed, had conspired, or were continuing to conspire, against him. Did Xander Lomax believe he was behaving irrationally? Maybe. Did it trouble his conscience to let so many once-dutiful employees go? Perhaps. But it troubled him more that these now duplicitous people could possibly harm both his reputation and that of the company.

On the surface, Xander Lomax thought of himself as a devout man. Raised a Southern Baptist, he committed scripture to memory and was a frequent churchgoer. But deep down he knew that the disciplines and doctrines of religion conflicted with his libidinous and self-obsessed nature. Deep down he knew he did not exactly embody

the better angels of our nature. At least not until one Sunday morning.

"Sunday morning after church," he confessed to his minister, "I was walking along the street, immersed in an absolute silence and filled with an indescribable sense of well being that obliterated everything else.

"Suddenly, my air of contentment was interrupted when a mysterious stranger appeared before me in a vision, his hands and feet dripping blood.

"The sight so startled me that I thought I was about to die! But then the apparition disappeared and my world seemed to right itself – until I became aware that my own hands and feet were dripping blood!

"Since that day I have prayed to the Lord Jesus Christ to relieve me of this wretched and torturous condition, and I won't stop imploring Him until He takes away these outward signs that cause me such unbearable pain and humiliation."

Like most stigmatics, Xander Lomax was a reluctant recipient of his wounds. Although he identified with the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ, he did not yearn for the bother and fuss that the stigmata brought into his life. In anger and frustration Xander Lomax cried out, "Why me Lord?" – until it occurred to him that having stigmata would be an effective diversion. His secret, which he had always worn like a cross, would seem negligible compared with the blood dripping from his hands and feet.

It also occurred to Xander Lomax that with all the ardent disciples already knocking down his door and accosting him on the street he could start his own religion, with him as its god. What better way to

keep the secret concealed, Xander Lomax reasoned, than by being granted a reservoir of limitless power? And what better way to administer that power than to be a god? By being a god, he could control the way people behaved. Control – that was the key.

What Xander Lomax hadn't counted on was the skepticism and inquisitiveness of the many self-righteous clergymen, many of whom accused him of being a mountebank. They did not like vying for the limited dollars and attention span of the flock. The clergymen wanted to know who this so-called stigmatic thought he was. Did he actually believe he was some sort of saint?

Then there were the annoying and nosey questions of the media, who pried into his personal life. Without even intending to, they could easily uncover his secret. They wrote editorial declaring Xander Lomax a fraud whose sole interest was seeking fame not enlightenment.

Xander Lomax fought back hard against his detractors, waging a vocal battle in the papers and on TV. His reasoning for taking his case to media being that he could silence his critics with sheer bravado. It was an ugly spectacle all around.

What a shame, because despite his often unmerciful and undeserving nature, it appeared as though Xander Lomax was the real thing. Other ignoble interests were subverting what good he might do as a true stigmatic – but Xander Lomax did the most damage himself, having secured his own radio talk show, infomercial and line of Xander Lomax action figures. All of which paid for his expensive homes, fancy automobiles and constant litigation involving allegations of fraud and malfeasance.

As for his big secret, who really cared about it, after all? There were other, perhaps worse, ways of being stigmatized.

•

"The conflict between who I was and what I pretended to be eventually became devastating for me," Peter Parley's said, continuing with his story. "I felt consumed with guilt, fear and animus. The only way out, I concluded, was to tell the truth, to admit publicly that I was a homosexual. By telling the truth, I would set myself free. But what about my colleagues and constituents? Wouldn't they see my outing of myself as an act of betrayal? And what about my family? Wouldn't my unexpected pronouncement destroy them and everything they stood for?"

"I languished hard and long over these painful and difficult questions. Which, of course, were rendered moot when an enterprising tabloid photographer captured me in a compromising position in a hotel bed with Henry Banyon, my virile and handsome young aide-de-camp.

"I was embarrassed and dishonored with allegations of sexual impropriety. Neighbors were interviewed. Charges were filed. Impeachment proceedings got underway. Book and movie rights were optioned. Thus began my long decent into despair and despondency, which eventually led me right up to the hallowed doors of Rancho Colima Mental."

Peter Parley paused, his face colorless and weary.

"Things didn't turn out quite the way I expected. Somewhere along the line I'd lost myself, my purpose, my soul. I'd searched for a higher purpose, a pure truth, the glittery anthracite of hard

knowledge. But where is it? Does it truly exist? Can I ever really know it?

"It's only when you rid yourself of the weight of dogma and the need to have everything explained that truth reveals itself to you," Peter Parley said, as if offering me a sip of powerful and complex brew. "It's only when you are close to something that's not true that you begin to embrace truth. It's only when you get out of the way of yourself that you know truth. It's like dreaming or breathing or falling in love."

ELEVEN

I've often wished I could whistle the sort of shrill, sharp whistle that only cool people whistle when they hail a cab, the sort of earsplitting, attention-grabbing *tweet* that emits an air of confidence and sangfroid and that communicates, "Yes, I know what I want and I know how to get it." I've also often wished I could carry myself with the imperturbable poise of a dancer; I never know what to do with my hands, so they just hang dumbly off the ends of my arms like bowling pins. The thing is, I've never been much good at doing much of anything particularly well. Unlike my brother Dell, I've never walked the right walk or talked the right talk. But it's not like I haven't struggled. It's just that I'm a klutz, frankly. And I'm certainly not any kind of great lover, either. Just ask Allegra.

If I had any wish to do something well, it would be to tell the tale, the tale of the event that came as rather startling news. The tragic, life-altering, black hole of an event from which no light will ever emerge. Because this tale, I honestly believe, is at the heart of my troubles. As I now I have the time, I often think about it, think about my reaction to it, think about what my life would've been like had I behaved differently. But then, if I'd behaved differently this entire account would be moot.

So, in my endeavor to tell the tale, I write yet another short story. Entitled "A Different Light."

•

Happy Kravitz went for a stroll. It was late December and the air was silvery and dry, rubbing up against him like an itchy wool sweater. Everywhere were signs of decay, from the gray hairs in his goatee to the gray clouds in the sky. Cafes had long since taken in

their chairs. Steam was rising from vents in the ground. No more languorous days in the warm sun.

Things hadn't been going well for Happy ever since he'd come down with a crippling case of writer's block. Over the years he had become a successful novelist, having won various awards and acclaim – he was even recognizable on the street. But nowadays Happy was lost a zonked-out despair. Because despite his renown and celebrity, he had stumbled from his belief that he would make a grand impression upon the world to the begrudging realization that he would leave nothing but a minor dent. It was an acknowledgment that had made it downright painful if not impossible for him to put pen to paper. So Happy went for daily walks, hoping he would have the sort of dramatic encounter that would inspire him once more to write.

As was his habit, Happy stared into strangers' eyes. He wondered what they thought of him, *if* they thought of him. He certainly thought about them. He made it a point to examine and document each person he encountered in infinite detail. Well, at least every woman. He studied their faces, their breasts and their legs. He stared at the ribbons in their hair, the glasses they wore, the color of their blouses, the way their skirts hung off their waists, the style of their shoes. Happy then raised the question every man asks himself when confronted with a woman: not will he have sex with her or should he have sex with her, but would he have sex with her.

Part of him contemplated this while another mulled the consequences if he acted on his impulses. Not that he was worried about dealing with becoming involved or the possibility of contracting a terminal disease. What would it mean to his relationship with Pleasant? It was a relationship they had gone to great effort to build, a relationship that had become stale and inert.

When did they last make love spontaneously or with anything resembling passion? When did they last kiss, really kiss, full on the mouth, not just a routine peck on the cheek? When did they last have a stimulating, intellectual discussion? Pleasant may have been an unimpeachably right-looking girl, but she was not the sharpest knife in the drawer. Life with Pleasant was not an altogether unpleasant experience – which might be tolerable, possibly idyllic for some. But for Happy, a novelist with a demand for an inspirational muse, being with Pleasant was as torturous as one of Zeno's paradoxes. Whatever sexual heat they had soon dissipated, and he became rather churlish by their fizzled ardor.

And then there were the constant questions. Pleasant wanted to know when they were going to start thinking about getting married. "Forget it." Pleasant wanted to know when they were going to start thinking about buying a house. "Forget it." Pleasant wanted to know when they were going to start thinking about having children. "Forget it." Pleasant wanted to know when they were going to start thinking about having a life like everyone else. "Forget it."

Happy had become a study in full-blooded caddishness. He bullied her. He humiliated her. He demeaned her. He argued with her. He gave Pleasant a difficult time about everything. He did everything in his power to destroy anything that was good about them. He did so much damage that their relationship developed an emotional arthritis; it hurt to the bone.

Happy did not know why he treated Pleasant so poorly. Perhaps he behaved aberrantly because he was a man on whom the mark of Cain was clear. Perhaps he behaved aberrantly because he suspected that his success as an author was failure in disguise. Or perhaps he behaved aberrantly simply because he could. Which wasn't right.

Because Pleasant had always been there for him, especially when he struggled to find his artistic voice. She had been there when he suffered through lousy jobs, listening to his horror stories at the end of each working day. She had been there through his bouts with tinnitus, so incessant and disturbing a condition that he was continually seized with and held captive by suicidal thoughts. She had also been there when he was diagnosed with testicular cancer, and later when the doctor told him it was probable that he could not have children. Pleasant lit incense, wished on stars and said prayers, all on Happy's behalf. She tried to make a deal with God that Happy would live and she would die. Pleasant even refused to leave Happy when he insisted their relationship had ended.

"We are like two soldiers in a nuclear silo," Pleasant had told Happy. "To blow things up, each of us has to turn their key."

Perhaps it was Pleasant's utter lack of selfishness that bothered Happy most of all. He knew that no matter how much money, praise and adulation he received as a best-selling author he would never be half as true, half as sincere, half as decent as Pleasant was.

Happy kept walking, putting one heavy foot in front of the other, pretending he did not know exactly where he was heading, pretending that if by chance he wound up at Bethany's front door, well, then, it's not like he intended to be there. No, it was the smell of burning leaves that beckoned him, or it was centrifugal force or it was fate. Or it was the fact that Pleasant was conveniently out of town. Whatever it was, it was out of his hands; he had no choice in the matter. He never had a choice when it came to Bethany.

Because Bethany exuded brains, invitation and unavailability – a seductiveness that pinned Happy like a hapless butterfly, controlled so easily as he was by his own delusions about romance and lust.

Happy stared at Bethany's house. It was for him a house that had gathered so many memories that it could just about fall through its foundation. Happy approached Bethany's door, debating with himself whether or not he should knock. It was a room He studied his hand and then the paneling that separated him from Bethany. If that's all there was, just a flimsy door, it made sense he should at least say that he was in the neighborhood and that he dropped by just to say hello. Yes, he would say hello and be on his way. Was it a voluntary muscle action or was it a reflex that caused his knuckles to rap against the door?

Bethany stared at Happy through the blinds. He looked on while she lit a joint and took a heavy toke. The smoke floated above her like a ghost. Bethany, like Happy, was a writer. The commercial success of her novels had kept her financially afloat. On the other hand, success had also kept her in drugs, booze and pajamas.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I was in the neighborhood and wanted to say hello. That's all."

"Want to come in?"

"No, that's all right. I just wanted to say hello, that's all."

"You said that."

"Yes, I know."

"Come in, Happy."

"No, I'm fine. I'm all set."

"Look, I don't want to stand in this draft for an hour while you work up the courage to cross the threshold."

Bethany took another hit. The pot smelled familiar. It was Bethany's special brand and Happy associated its musky odor with the fragrance of Bethany's body – one whiff and Happy was a goner.

Happy stepped through the entryway.

"Bethany knows why you're here," she said with an informed suggestiveness that covered a lot of ground.

Happy smiled nastily and put his hands around Bethany's lazy-susan hips. She had a womanly curviness about her, like in a few years she would get fat. The two of them danced to a silent soundtrack and they made their way to her bedroom. Happy sat on the bed, took off his shoes and felt the floor cold through his socks. Bethany hummed sweetly as she continued to parade slovenly yet sexily about in her flannel bathrobe, lifting it up periodically to reveal fish-belly white skin. Tattoos. Fleshy sensuality.

"If you're trying to seduce me," he said, "it's working."

"Me, seduce you? I thought we were beyond that by now."

Bethany made a hysterically passionate lover, her hands grabbing and clutching, her body radiating a swampy heat. The two of them tumbled onto her mattress like an old building collapsing from a demolition. She yanked off Happy's pants with a violent tug and rubbed his shriveled penis as if it were a magic lamp. When no genie emerged, she slathered herself over him and gnawed on his skin till it was tender and perforated.

"This is all I want," Bethany murmured. "This is all I've ever wanted."

Happy said nothing. His thoughts drifted. He recalled the time when, as a child, his baby-sitter Blanche allowed him a stick of

chewing gum, something his parents had forbidden. He chewed the piece for a time, and then took it out, wanting to save it for later. The gum got stuck between his fingers, then in his clothes and hair. Like a spearmint tar baby, the more he struggled, the bigger the mess.

The sound of Bethany's moaning created a strange adagio. She tried repeatedly to force Happy inside of her, but try as she may, there was nothing of him to force.

"No miracles today," she said, her body still quivering. They lay for a while in a fragile silence. Bethany lit a joint. An aroma of frustration filled the room.

Lacking any other topics to discuss, Bethany brought up her boyfriend David.

"He's also a writer who, like you Happy, doesn't believe in himself, though, he's brilliant. I've been meaning to break up with him because I can't handle the responsibility of being his muse. And yet, I'm still completely, helplessly in love with him.

"I feel desperate whenever I'm alone," she added, "and so I find myself gravitating back to him. I know it's not healthy. David's too overwhelming, too intense and too demanding. But I forget about all the bad stuff about him whenever I'm lonely."

Bethany brought up her therapist, with whom she's also in love.

"He's been so great for me," she said. "He impressed upon me the importance of making lists. He said I needed to get out more, to be more social. He said I needed to stop drinking and taking drugs. Everything he said made sense to me. Still, there's something sinister about him. Maybe it's because his nails are perfectly

manicured and not a hair on his head is ever out of place. Or maybe it's because he always wears coordinated outfits, even when I see him on weekends. Or maybe it's because he changed his name from Doctor Danny Andrews to Doctor Wolfgang Kohler and he wouldn't tell me why."

Bethany took another hit.

"So, why do you keep coming back to see me?" she asked.

"I have no choice."

"You have a choice, Happy."

"I have a choice, then. I chose to come here. I choose to not get it up and to make a fool of myself. I choose to betray Pleasant and be the prick that I am."

"Well, now that we have all that straight, do you think you could grab my matches? My light has gone out."

"You think I'm full of shit, don't you?"

"Look, we both know the score here, and if you're going to feel guilty to the point where it interferes with our sex, I think it's best if you don't come here anymore."

"You're right. It's over. It's been over for a long, long time."

"Yes, it's over."

That's what they always said. They would say it the next day and the day after that. Saying it gave them a sense that they were in control of the situation and that they could end it if they wanted to.

Time went by.

Bethany continued to get stoned and Happy struggled to get an erection.

"What is it that you want out of this?" Bethany asked, pulling off her pajamas in a vain attempt to seduce Happy. "Your girlfriend is so lovely and perfect. Frankly, I don't understand why you're not with her right this moment."

"Did I ever tell you that Pleasant was married before? She was married and she had a baby girl. The girl passed away. So, Pleasant had another girl, but she died too. Then she had a baby boy. He was sick most of the time. He lived for only three years. Then her husband got testicular cancer and died."

"How can you compete with that?"

"Exactly. And me with my inability to make her pregnant."

"It's too much."

"Scared to death."

"Scared to birth."

"Birth, death – the whole nine yards."

"So you come to me for solace?"

"I come to you for nothing."

Bethany took a drag with a hard swing of her arm.

"Nothing, huh?"

"That's what's so great about us."

"Yeah, great."

"We don't expect anything from each other."

"No expectations."

"And you – don't take offense – but you're not perfect."

"No, not perfect," she said, drawing a hit. "Definitely not perfect. But let's say I was six years old once. Let's say I ate cinnamon toast. Let's say I lost my first teeth when I was seven. Let's say, when I was eight, I took my friends to the skating rink for my birthday party, and each of them got a package of M&M's, which melted in their pockets by the end of the day. Let's say I had a mother, and my mother had shoeboxes filled with crayon drawings I had made of trees and smiling suns. Let's say I was once a twelve-year-old who read C. S. Lewis stories on my back porch, who played with my cat Blake under the covers with a flashlight, who got both A's and B's on my geometry finals ..."

Happy fell into a stupor and eventually drifted off to sleep while Bethany smoked yet another joint and polished off a bottle of Jim Beam. Night slipped into morning, which sifted through the window blinds in a mathematical light. Happy awoke with Bethany's arm draped across his stomach. He shook his head groggily and slowly lifted himself up. Her naked body was splayed on the bed, revealing its vivid details like debris after a flood. He leaned over to give her a small kiss, and when he pulled her face up from the pillow he noticed that she was not breathing. Her mouth was crusted with vomit. Happy shook her a little at first, and then more and more violently. Bethany did not move. He put his hand on her chest. Her heart had stopped.

"C'mon, Bethany, get up! Get up, damn you," Happy shouted as he slapped her hard. Bethany did not respond.

Happy panicked. He ran outside and then stood motionless, as if to catch himself. Snow was falling, falling on him. He stood shivering, looking like a fake Christmas tree layered with flock. Should call nine one one? But how would he explain his presence there? He'd never told anyone about his affair with Bethany. What would his family and friends say? What would the police say? What would Pleasant say? Happy ran back inside to see if perhaps he'd been mistaken. Perhaps Bethany was asleep or unconscious. Again, he shook her hard. She did not move. She did not breathe. Bethany was dead.

Happy set about tidying up her house, being thorough about wiping his fingerprints from all the surfaces. Next, he cleaned up Bethany, washing her face, her hair and her stiffening body. Then he reassembled her in her favorite blue dress so that she would at least look dignified when her body was discovered. He placed her in an armchair, a quilt over her legs and a copy of "Ariel" in her lap. As a final touch, Happy put the many bottles of gin and scotch around Bethany to make it appear as if she'd drunk herself to death. Which is, Happy figured, exactly what happened.

Should he call the authorities? What good would it do to talk to them at this point? Would it bring her back to life? It's not like Happy was responsible for Bethany's death. He wasn't even awake when she died. Why complicate matters?

Happy surveyed the house, being certain he was not leaving any clues behind. Then he collected his things, cast one final glance at Bethany – who looked strangely peaceful – and headed back out into the snow, which was pearly and untouched. The cold made him feel fully awake. The light that fell on everything seemed different. Brighter? More golden? Happy had never felt more alive.

Time went by.

The police eventually discovered Bethany's body after her neighbors complained of a hideous odor emanating from her house.

Fortuitously, investigators did not connect Happy with Bethany's death, which was attributed to asphyxiation brought on by uncontrolled vomiting. Though how she got into the chair with the quilt over her legs and the book in her lap was anyone's guess.

Quite unexpectedly, Happy found himself in the throes of a creative rapture, his writer's block seemingly taken leave, and he quickly turned out a novel. It was about a writer not unlike himself who had an affair that ended in a tragic suicide – not exactly the most exciting, compelling or original work, but it was rife with consequence and morality. It also was praised and beloved by both critics and fans.

In time, Happy thought of Bethany less and less. Her appearance, personality and peccadilloes had become subsumed into his art – a lie that is the truth, as Picasso aptly called it. Bethany became Natalia, just one more character in one of Happy's many best-selling novels. The guilt and depression eventually abated. The storm passed. His life went on. Spring arrived. Happy found himself more in love with Pleasant than he'd ever been, his feelings for her more intense than ever before.

One day, Happy and Pleasant decided to go out for a stroll. They came to a lake, which had frozen over. They stepped carefully onto the translucent ice, slipping at first but gaining balance as they crunched along. They were near the middle of the lake when Pleasant turned to Happy and whispered, "I'm pregnant."

"You're what?"

"Pregnant." Pleasant placed Happy's hand over her sugar-bowl curves. "The doctor says I'm six weeks along."

"But how can that be? The doctors said I'm not capable."

"It's a miracle."

"But ... "

"You don't question miracles."

Happy made an uncommonly wonderful and doting husband and father. He was kind, loving and generous with little Elizabeth, and she was daddy's little girl.

Happy and Pleasant made love all the time, their sex life charged with a new sense of passion and purpose, and they went on to have two more girls and one boy. Would Happy have behaved any differently if Pleasant hadn't gotten pregnant to begin with? Would it matter?

TWELVE

When I was in my early twenties, before I became a journalist, before I became a writer, before my life had yet to happen, I went on a trip to Central America, where I was to study Spanish in a very nice indigenous Spanish language school. I thought the change would do me good, especially since college had been a bust and I felt the need to do something tangible with my life. What better why to acquire a sense of mission than to hang out with missionaries? I was ready to feel each feeling to the fullest. I wanted to seek out the limit of experience.

During my third week of slow-moving classes, I met a volunteer for a Christian organization known as the Guiding Hand and I was subsequently offered a bus ride with forty-one evangelized Mayan ministers who were returning to their native Yucatan. In exchange for the ride and free meals, I was asked to lend my services as an English interpreter.

I could not believe how guilelessly the remote villagers received me, riding into their town as if I were – what else? – Moses on a pony. I could not believe how hard I worked or how much I enjoyed it. However, I also could not believe I was later able to write on my application to become a full-fledged member of the Guiding Hand that I had taken Jesus Christ into my life. I had not. As I stared at the form, I recalled how once when I was a child, I had lured Patrick and Theresa, the two kids from the devoutly Catholic family next door, into the empty lot behind their tract home to tell them that Santa Claus was a lie. I did this in an earnest attempt to prove to them, and to myself, the absurdity of the myths behind religion. I recalled the horrified looks on their innocent, chubby faces, their cries of denial and their insistence that I must be mistaken.

"There *is* a Santa," cried Theresa. "I've seen him!"

"You're a big fat liar!" Patrick exclaimed.

"The only big fat lie is Santa," I assured them, adding one other great truth that had just come to my attention: "And did you know that in order to make babies, your dad pees into mom?"

Staring at the form, I recalled how years later I would stand before a silent and indifferent God, beseeching Him to assuage the agony of the dissonant voices in my head, and ultimately coming to the realization that I might as well be praying to a lamppost.

Remembering this, I put down my pen. I knew in my heart I did not belong with the Guiding Hand. Instead, I began to travel, alone, from Guatemala to Costa Rica, along the way getting my Tarot cards read, getting all my money stolen and, finally, getting myself good and sick with a nasty disease.

I finally arrived at the obscure Rankine Islands, situated sixty miles off Nicaragua. I'd already braved a tortuous three-day journey aboard a crowded cargo ship, in which I lived among squealing pigs and yellow rice, not to mention a three-hundred-pound patchouli-oiled Caribbean woman with whom I was forced to bunk. We clanged together like saucepans in a tight space. Subsequently I lapsed into a coma after having contracted what I would come to discover was typhoid. Days later I awoke in a filthy infirmary with a temperature of a hundred and three, my skin mottled with sweat like wet blobs on wax paper. Drained and rheumy, I was hallucinating nonstop, drifting off into delirious states in which I imagined myself tied to a palm tree, pelted by hail and pricked by thousands of tiny needles.

Once I'd regained my health and became a little more lucid I began to contemplate where the hell I was and why I'd come to a sweltering and unsanitary tropical island in the middle of nowhere. What an idiot I was. I was not having fun, to say the least. How could I do something so incredibly reckless and stupid as to get myself in a situation like this? I'm no adventurer, after all. I'm just a skinny, frightened and weak suburban kid from Rancho Colima. But a few days later I'd reached a certain degree of acceptance with both my predicament and myself. Maybe it was the fever or the dysentery or the deep blue of the ocean, but I began to embrace my new and alien surroundings. And I started to truly admire my own ability to make the best of things under extreme circumstances and that I'd been able to soldier on with a stiff upper lip. Because I could travel the very day I found out I had typhoid, because I could get through night after night in San Salvador with crazed terrorists and gargantuan mosquitoes, and because I could finally manage to get myself out of there without dying, I believed I could do anything. I was indomitable.

Years pass.

Allegra and I had just broken up and, uncertain if which turn of my life was about to take, I took to the road. I was driving though the badlands, the ugly part of the desert where civilization ends and nothing begins. I had no maps. My foot was heavy on the accelerator and my hands gripped the wheel so tightly that my fingers were white. I fiddled with the radio and settled on a religious station, figuring the sheer fervor of it all would keep me awake. A hellfire evangelist was preaching about Jesus with the cadence of a rap singer, repeating over and over that only through Christ could a sinner change. He got me to thinking about the nature of change and I thought that sometimes change isn't necessarily a good thing.

With change comes the unknown. With the unknown, well, everything follows with dead uncertainty. Your life can take a sudden, strange course. If only I could find my Christ.

It was late afternoon and I'd been on the road all day, so I pulled into a motel and took a room. I took off my clothes, got into bed and fell into a deep and dreamless sleep. After what had seemed like days, I awoke and sprang from my bed. I felt refreshed and ready to continue with my journey. I packed up, checked out and got back on the highway. But somehow, for some reason I couldn't fathom, it was getting darker and darker. At first I thought it was bad weather rolling in, but then, to my amazement, I realized what was happening: I had been asleep only a few hours and had gotten up and checked out of the motel the same day I had checked in. And now night was coming on.

I drove on, passing campers filled with families obviously excited about their plans for the weekend. They had no idea I was watching them. I could only imagine what it would be like to play the alphabet game or call out license plates from all the different states. I could only imagine fighting over who would sit by the window and who would get the last of the potato chips. All these people were about to have the time of their lives at a carefully chosen destination, and here I was, driving into oblivion.

Night had arrived. Clusters of stars were smeared across the sky like something erased on a blackboard. I came to a slight rise in the highway and from the opposite direction a huge trailer truck appeared, its high beams blinding and its metallic face bearing down on me with an almost human malevolence. I swerved to the right to avoid a collision, and the car hit a muddy shoulder. The tires screeched and the car flipped and careened down a hillside.

Everything was spinning, as if I was on a roller coaster gone off its track. In the midst of this I was talking to myself lucidly, saying, "So, this is it, this is the way it happens, this is how it all ends."

My car continued to tumble downward, knifing through trees and smacking on boulders, and I could hear the crunching of metal and the crackling of glass. Everything seemed slowed down, as if I was weightless. Finally, there was a heavy thud and everything stopped. The car had come to rest upside-down in the brush. I was suspended by my seat belt for what seemed like an eternity, at least until a little voice in my head calmly but firmly said: "Get out." I yanked the seat belt off and my head slammed into the roof. I struggled for a moment and then righted myself. Something warm and wet dribbled down from my forehead and into my mouth. It tasted like iron. I touch it and then examined my finger. Blood. Gathering my strength, I kicked open the door and slid slowly out.

I stood back from the car, its spinning tires making a ghostly whirring sound and the engine clicking and fizzing. The headlights illuminated a cloud of brown dust, which cast an eerie and surreal pall over everything. I was in such a state of shock that I could've been missing a body part without knowing it, at least until a little voice in my head calmly but firmly said: "See if you're hurt." I quickly touched myself all over to see if I was all there. Except for a few minor scrapes, I was, miraculously, unharmed.

Suddenly, the car radio, as if possessed, crackled back to life, the harrowing voice of the evangelist booming through the trees. He was shouting about the nature of sin and salvation, about the sanctity of love and fidelity. "You must give yourself over! You must trust in the spirit of God! You must believe! You must before it is too

late!" Just then a spidery bolt of lightning struck nearby and, in a flash, the radio went dead.

I looked at the wreckage of my car and then looked both ways down the road. A wind blew at my back. I felt coolly alert. I decided I would choose a direction. I would choose a direction and I would follow it no matter where it might lead. And I would not look back.

Years pass.

I've checked myself into Rancho Colima Mental. And now that I can no longer function without lithium and Paxil, now that I have to be constantly supervised so I won't kill myself, now that I can no longer live anywhere but inside my head, I've long since stopped feeling indomitable. I've long since lost my direction. I've long since lacked the kind of guidance that would help me find my strength, the kind of guidance that would give me the strength to make me well again. I've long since stopped believing that I could find my Christ.

THIRTEEN

Did I mention that I dabbled for a time in photography? Did I also mention how much more trouble that got me into? Blame Allegra, who became Joan Vollmer Adams Burroughs to my William S., minus the William Tell act. Because if it weren't for damnable Allegra I would never have picked up a camera to begin with. From the start she was a natural. Better: She was game. She also had that comely little-girl-lost guise of hers that cried out to be captured by someone. And that someone would be me, because I believed in the old axiom that beauty is truth, truth beauty.

For a time, everywhere we were so was the camera. I photographed her staring in the mirror, reading a book, eating jellybeans. I photographed her reading a book, talking on the phone, popping bubble wrap. I photographed her writing in her journal, licking the batter spoon, sleeping nude in a field of warm grass while a Boy Scout troop marched by silently and in awe. Mostly, I photographed her staring at me with her avid features while I stared back at her with the camera lens.

The black and white images I would come up with were seemingly simple yet forested with subplots upon which were written Allegra's hidden tales and temperaments. These kinetic pictures, bathed in naked bright lights, burrowed past the marquee of her brilliant eyes and burrowed deep into her dark psyche, revealing vividly both her ardor and anguish.

"You've really captured the real me," Allegra purred after reflecting upon the many framed photographs that eventually found their way onto gallery walls, artsy calendars and the occasional porn Web site. Instinctively, capturing the real Allegra was all that mattered to me. "You've really turned me into a work of art."

Months after our breakup, after she'd ransacked our home of nearly every object she considered valuable, Allegra showed up with a demonstrative look on her face and a slightly less amiable tone in her voice.

"The photos belong to me," she demanded after having suddenly discovered that I was about to sell a stack of them to a Japanese stock photo agency.

"That's not the way it works," I informed her. "I'm the artist, you're the subject. They're mine."

"If it wasn't for me you'd never taken a picture."

"Who's to say?"

"I'm to say. Besides, I'm afraid of what you might do with them."

"You think I'd exploit you in some way? That's nuts."

"Strap this to your hand: I want the negatives. Now."

"Tell me which came first, the chicken or the egg?"

"What?"

"Exactly!"

"Asshole."

This type of embittered exchange went on for several weeks, at first in person, then by phone and then by email, until it appeared that Allegra had finally given up on the ridiculous notion that the art that I'd created belonged to her. If that were the case, I reasoned, then every dancing barmaid that Lautrec ever rendered on canvass would lay claim to his work. I suppose no dancing barmaid had ever considered recourse because one day I received a court injunction

instigated against me by Allegra stating that in no uncertain terms I could not use any pictures of her for any purpose whatsoever at any time.

"I don't understand why you don't trust me with the pictures," I told her.

"You're beyond trust."

Something about those words and the bitter way they spilled out of her cut right through me. Again, I had learned long ago that I did not live in a vacuum, that what I created could negatively affect the people closest to me. And so it simply became too difficult and agonizing for me to even think about taking one more picture. At least until I met Anna.

From the way she held her fork backward to her almond-shaped eyes to specific language with which she chose to cuss out other drivers in traffic, there was something eerily familiar about Anna. Was it her painfully uncanny resemblance to Allegra? Was it the way she tilted her head when she needed to make a point? Was it the way she wrapped her chenille sweaters around her waist? Was it her suggestive poetry that she swore she shared with me and me alone?

*Only the shadows know
the secrets
that I keep beneath my covers
when it is late
and the trees dance
on my walls*

Was it all of that and more? Perhaps.

We met at a photo gallery art opening at a time when I thought I'd never touch a camera again. Per usual, no one was studying the work, just each other. One look at Anna's face and I felt that it was my destiny to know it well. I studied her with eye of an architect who had just discovered a magnificent new landscape on which to build. Screwing up my courage, I approached her and I attempted in my own feeble way to say something reasonably intelligent like, "Brilliant manipulation of contrast and ambient light" or "I positively appreciate the use of depth of field in combination with contre-jour, don't you?"

Anna laughed nervously and said that I was attractive, a word that no one I can recall has ever used to describe me, and that I was also stimulating, a word I took to mean that she would be interested in sleeping with me if I continued on my present attractive and stimulating course. I remarked that I liked the way she held her plastic champagne glass with her pinkie extended, which was a stupid thing to say, and that I loved the golden highlights in her wavy brown hair, which was smart. We went on this way, shooting the shit, exchanging compliments and, at least in my case, pretending to be more urbane than was true.

"You have good taste," I told her.

"How would you know?" She caught me.

"Because," I said, fumbling, but recovered quickly with, "Because the only people who ever go to this gallery are people with good taste."

"Right," she laughed.

Then came an extended moment of awkward silence as I struggled to circumnavigate the potentially chancy request that was all but inevitable.

"I'd really like to take your picture," I blurted out. "I'm a photographer."

"You're a photographer," she repeated back to me with a more than a little skepticism on her face.

"Yes. Well, no. Well, I used to be one. But I'm thinking of taking it up again."

"What makes you think I'd be a good subject?"

"I just *know*."

"But I hate the way I look. And I hate pictures of me."

"Hate the way you look? Are you nuts?"

"I'm not nuts. I'm ... ugly."

"There's no way you're ugly."

"And you can prove that?"

Needing to prove I wasn't beyond trust I said, "Trust me."

With Anna, I resolved to undo the many transgressions I committed against Allegra. Not the best rationale for pursuing something, but not completely ignoble. And as a first step, I was determined to demonstrate to Anna that she was not ugly. How difficult could that be? From her bee-stung lips to her soft brown shoulders to her lithe and rounded figure, Anna shimmered with ripe and ample sensuality. Perhaps she'd been fat as a teenager, or she'd had acne. Or maybe her father had harped on how unremarkable she was compared with the refined and appetizing beauty of her late mother. But none of that was outwardly apparent now, only perhaps as an indelible scar on her subconscious.

"All you need to do is stand there," I instructed her as I was arranging the lights and getting my settings.

"I feel exposed."

"Don't worry, I'm not here to steal your soul. I'm here to illuminate it."

"I don't know if my soul's worth illuminating."

"Of course it is."

"That's easy for you to say standing on the other side of that stupid camera of yours."

"Just try to relax. This isn't meant to be painful."

"Painful. That's a good word for what I'm going through."

Anna fidgeted with a stray lock of hair while I fixed on her through the viewfinder. Her sepia eyes alternated between vulnerability and panic, and her body struggled to find a position of composure. She sat down on my stool and crossed one leg over the other several times and shifted back and forth in her seat. Then she stood back up and anxiously cocked her hands on her hips. I was beginning to wonder if I'd made a mistake in thinking that I could reveal some inner truth about her. Maybe Anna was right; maybe there was nothing to reveal. I stared hard at her, focusing and refocusing the camera, holding my finger above the shutter, waiting for the special moment when all the cosmic tumblers would fall into place.

"Tell me about your poetry," I said.

"My poetry?"

"Yes, your poetry. The secrets only the shadows know and all that."

"What do you want to know?"

"Why do you write?"

"I write," she said, hesitating, and then it struck her. "I write because I have no choice."

Suddenly, perhaps because of the absolute certainty that she'd recognized in herself in forming that statement, Anna corrected her posture and relaxed into herself. It was at that moment that I recognized what first attracted me to her and what made me want to photograph her. All at once Anna exhibited something quixotic and inexplicable, a mystical gestalt that poleaxed me. And all at once I fell stupidly in love with her. Sensing that it would be a breach of the sacred artist/muse pact to tell Anna how I felt, I concluded to keep it to myself. Besides, I couldn't lose the expression made up of the trustfulness of a child that Anna wore on her face right then.

"Hold that." Click. "Don't move." Click. "Perfect." Click. "Brilliant." Click. Click. Click. Click.

"Hold what?"

"Don't speak." Click. "Don't move." Click. "Hold that." Click. Click. Click.

"Is this right?"

"I said don't speak." Click. "Don't move." Click. "Hold that." Click. Click. Click.

I knew instinctively that the pictures would be great and simple and I was ecstatic to develop them right away so that Anna and I could

see them. Then I could tell her: "I was right. Here's the proof. You are beautiful."

"I'm ugly," Anna said after taking one look at the prints.

"What are you talking about? Are you nuts?"

"I'm not nuts. I thought I made that clear. I'm ugly."

"How can you look at these photos and not know that you're absolutely gorgeous?"

"I'm sorry but I just don't see it."

How could I have failed to make Anna see it? Would she have seen it if I photographed her again from different angles? Which I did. Would she have seen it if I put up images of her in a gallery and had other people ogle and then corroborate what I knew to be true? Which I also did. She was thoroughly and undeniably beautiful, as timelessly beautiful as any woman could be. Above everything else, how could I have failed to make Anna see the true reason I went to all the trouble?

"I love you," I said, finally confessing the true reason.

Anna's face turned sour. She went for my camera and thrust it in my face. "Hold that," she commanded angrily. Click. Click. "Don't move." Click. Click. Click. Click.

"I love you," I said again.

"Don't speak," she commanded. Click. Click. "Don't move." Click.

"Hold that." Click. Click. Click.

"I love you."

"I said don't speak." Click. Click. "Don't move." Click. "Hold that."
Click. Click. Click.

"I love you!"

Exasperated, Anna slammed down the camera. "What do you really want from me, Moses?"

What did I really want from Anna? What I really wanted was that exhilarating first-burst-of-love sensation I'd once experienced with Allegra. And if I wasn't going to get it from Anna, then I was convinced I'd get it from someone else. Thus I developed a pattern with all the many women I took pictures of over the years. Meeting and then photographing and then stupidly falling in love, only to be greeted with indifference or bemusement or anger that I'd breached the sacred artist/muse pact. Let's see, there was Aimee and Justine and Krista and Helen and Erin. There was also Kendra and Julie and Alison and Dana. There were boatloads of others whose names I can no longer recall but who startled within me ghosts of joy, desire and melancholia. Like carbon copies, these women resembled Allegra, but less so successively.

"A man's work is nothing," Camus wrote, "but this slow trek to rediscover through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened." For me, those two or three great and simple images are still out there.

FOURTEEN

Talk about troubles. I'm constipated as hell. I haven't taken a satisfying dump in weeks and weeks. I believe it's because I'm so far up inside myself that nothing can get out. One could say that I'm in a really bad position, as far as life-management goes. But one would not be Doctor Von Rauffenstein, who keeps insisting that if I just make my bed and take my lithium and Paxil and mind my manners I'll soon be furloughed from Rancho Colima Mental. After all, I appear for all intents to be doing just fine these days, so he says. But appearances are just that. Deep down my condition is intransigent and categorical – it just is.

I don't let myself believe the good doctor; I know his patronizing assurances about my imminent release are just a carrot on a stick. He is trying to keep me going with hope. But to paraphrase Emily Dickinson and Woody Allen, if hope is a thing with feathers, I am without feathers. Besides, I've come to embrace the sterile, regimented environs of this microcosm of madness to the confusion and tribulation of the so-called normal world. Insane is easy; sane is hard.

Behaving myself means I must engage in various group therapies, the worst of which is what's called "quality circle," but which I refer to as "quality circle jerk," or QCJ. A group of nut jobs sit facing one another looking like etiolated, drugged-up mannequins and, with the encouragement and guidance of Hardy Justice, our commandant, we discuss how badly our parents treated us or why we compulsively collect dust bunnies or why we once tried to kill ourselves by sticking our tongues in wall sockets. Before long, someone starts shouting or frothing at the mouth or slamming his or her head against a door – behaving, well, like a crazy person. Then

the rest of us get all weepy and hysterical, arms flailing, heads shaking. As if we don't already look like lunatics. God forbid we should tell jokes or talk about Mozart, bacon cheeseburgers or the last time any of us had sex. God forbid we should participate in an activity that might be cathartic or helpful. God forbid we should have fun.

Behaving myself means that I must keep my room neat and tidy. It means good personal hygiene; shaving and showering and brushing my teeth and cleaning the goop out of my eyes. It means taking all my meds on time and eating all the gray-colored chicken and blue-colored asparagus and pink-colored cobbler plopped on my tray. After all, there's nothing preventing the good doctors of Rancho Colima Mental from filling me with so much lithium and Paxil that I end up an honest-to-God lunatic. I have something large at stake by behaving myself.

I'm not crazy. I'm d-e-p-r-e-s-s-e-d. There's a colossal difference. I can take lithium and Paxil, I can talk myself to death in QCJ and I can even be zapped with electroshock until I look like charbroiled steak and I'd still be depressed. It's as much a fundamental part of my makeup as fear is to a coward. But I do not revel in it. It is no glorious thing. Depression is not noble. It is artless and resolute. It makes you lose your bearings. You fall away. You feel as if you are drowning in its space. You forget that, yes, some people are happy. Happy? What the fuck's happy? Not being miserable? How can I be expected to judge such stuff?

Another thing. I'm not depressed because I'm a booby in a booby hatch or because I make bad choices or because I worked at a lousy job or because the creative writing program was a bust or because Freddy Breen was a fucking genius or because of the event that

came as rather startling news or because I'd had cancer. I'm depressed because I don't understand my world.

Although Doctor Von Rauffenstein is predicting my imminent return to sanity, I doubt my stay at Rancho Colima Mental will have done me much good. If anything, I'll just end up back on the street, one more walking casualty. You won't know me when you see me. I won't be stuffing newspapers in my pants or smelling like pee or mumbling to myself in a slightly menacing tone. I'll be the one on the subway trying to maintain a blank expression while desperately holding back the tears. I'll be the one standing next to you at the frozen foods aisle at the corner grocer, my teeth clenched, my basket loaded with generic beer, safety razors and frozen spaghetti dinners. I'll be the one on line at the bank, humming to myself to block out the choir of voices in my head.

Like moths in a light bulb factory, my thoughts flit about, finally coming to rest on Allegra. All I have is time to contemplate the myriad ways I made our lives, as Bunny would say, unfit to live, and the various things that I would do differently if I had the chance. Because now that I'm wised-up, I would indeed act another way. I would not have cheated on her. I would not have behaved like the selfish and infantile jerk that I was. I would have faced up to the event that came as rather startling news.

I had my abortion almost five years ago. I can't believe it's been that long and it still bothers me so much. At the time I had been married two years. Children had always been an issue with us: I wanted them and my husband would say he was afraid he wouldn't be a good father, but he wouldn't come out and say he didn't want children. He had a low sperm count. We stopped using birth control and were sort of seeing what would happen. Months went by. My husband was increasingly

unhappy at his job and talked about going back to school. He applied to a graduate program at a university on the East Coast (we lived on the West Coast) and was accepted. A few weeks later, I went to the doctor because I was having a light period that would start and stop. She had me take a pregnancy test. I remember thinking it was a waste of time and was floored when the nurse said, "You're positive." "You mean I'm pregnant?" I asked. "Yes," she said and looked at my face. "That's good news, right?" As soon as she said that, I thought of my husband and how he would react. I was sent off to another nurse who figured out my due date and took several vials of blood. I went back to my doctor and she did an ultrasound and gave me the picture of my baby inside me. I was so happy. For that brief period of time, I was the only one who knew and I could fantasize about my wonderful life.

I called my husband who was about to leave for work and told him "I'm pregnant." There was a silence, then he said, "Fuck." Not the reaction of my dreams. He told me to call in sick to work and come home so we could talk. I went home, dreading what would happen. He met me outside and hugged me. Then the discussions began. He wanted to move and go to school. He didn't see how we could have a baby and do that. I had to work. We couldn't both be out of work and have a baby. He said, "You can think I'm being selfish, but I deserve it. You can get pregnant again." I thought of me staying where we lived and having the baby while he went away to school. He said we couldn't afford that. I thought I could go live with my parents until he was done with school. I called welfare to see if I could qualify if I quit my job and moved with him. Adoption was out, because I knew I would keep the baby if I had it and the whole point of having the abortion would be to not be pregnant so I could find a job in the new city. Basically it came down to having the baby and staying where we were and him not going to school, or having an abortion and the two of

us moving across the country so he could go to school. He said he would kill himself if he had to stay at his job. So I could either kill my baby or kill my husband.

I worked at a conservative place where everyone was mostly older and married. They thought it was strange I'd been married two years and didn't have kids yet. The following Sunday was Mother's Day and the next day at work, Friday, as my boss was leaving, he said "Happy Mother's Day everyone!" Then he looked at me and said "except you."

We went back to my doctor together because he wanted to talk to her about it. What a difference between the two visits. The first time she shared my happiness when I found out I was pregnant and now she tried to stay neutral. She showed us a chart of a developing fetus and where I was at that point. She gave me another ultrasound and asked if we wanted another picture. She took the picture and I thought we left it behind, but years later, I found out my husband took it and put it in his journal. He said it made it come alive for him, that it wasn't an abstract concept, but a living being. He still wanted me to have the abortion, though. My doctor had me talk to a counselor who I thought would help me decide, but she thought I wanted an abortion. It was like a comedy routine. I wanted advice on what to do and she kept trying to get me to say I wanted an abortion. Finally she realized I was genuinely conflicted and she said, "Some women have had several abortions. They use it like birth control. I'm not saying that's a good idea, but it's really not such a big deal." She told me I needed to make up my mind soon because it's much easier in the first trimester and gave me the paperwork with the referral to the clinic "just in case."

Through Planned Parenthood, I found what's called an options counselor, someone who counsels you on your options. I saw her once alone and once with my husband. I remember saying to her that I was

a vegetarian because I didn't think it was right to kill animals and here I am thinking about killing my baby. I don't think she really helped that much. Also, I confided in one friend and she was very careful not to give me advice. I guess what I was looking for was someone who wouldn't be so neutral. The options counselor mentioned a book, "The Healing Choice," that might help to heal after the abortion, and my husband went out that day and bought it. I started crying. He seems so eager to support me in an abortion and so unsupportive in trying to find ways to keep the baby. I said, "Why aren't we talking about ways to keep it?" He said, very seriously, "That's not what this book is about."

I bought lottery tickets, thinking if I we had enough money, we could have the baby and Moses could go to school.

People always talk about how they didn't realize how strong they were until they were faced with a difficulty. Well, I realized how weak I am. I went along with what my husband wanted, even though it's not what I wanted. And I have to admit that in the end it was my decision. I couldn't live with being the one to deny my husband what he wanted; I'd rather deny myself. I don't think I was being a martyr or anything like that. He said we'd go away and have an adventure, then move back home and have a baby when the timing was better. I was so sad because this would always be my first. What if I couldn't get pregnant again? A few years before this, I went with a friend to a tarot card reader and she told me I would have two children, a boy and a girl. I wondered which one this was. She had also told me that my current relationship wasn't good for me (this was before we got married). I didn't listen, of course. I was in love.

I don't remember making the actual appointment, but I remember when I was going to and my husband came in the room where I was standing with the phone and the paperwork. He left and came back a

couple times. I was still standing there. "If you can't do it, you can't do it," he said, "It's OK."

My appointment was for Saturday and the night before, I called my friend and told her I didn't want to do this. She listened and said she trusted that I was doing the right thing for me. My husband came home and I told him I didn't want to do it and he started saying how I can never make decisions, that's the problem with my life. He said, "You'll avoid making the decision until it's too late." I said, "The decision is made. Don't worry about it." He asked, "Do you want to have an abortion?" I said, "No, but people do things they don't want to do." He said, "You have to want it. Otherwise you're going to resent me and be depressed."

The next morning my husband and I drove to the clinic. We went up in the elevator with another couple. It was so unreal. He sat in the waiting room. When they called my name, he wanted to come with me, but men weren't allowed. I went in and a nurse took down my information. She asked if I had eaten anything since the night before, which I hadn't because I wanted to be put under. Then I was shown to a changing area and told to take off all my clothes and put on the gown and go into another waiting room. I sat in the waiting room and a nurse came up to me and said. "You need to take your bra off, too." I looked down and saw that I had kept my bra on. I didn't realize it. I went back to the changing area and took it off. I felt so out of it. I couldn't believe I was there, about to do what I was about to do. There were several other women waiting also. Then I was taken to the room and put up on the table, my feet in stirrups. A nurse told me to stop crying because if I was crying they couldn't put me under. She gave me some tissue and I tried to stop. The doctor came in and told me to stop crying. He said, "if you're crying, while you're unconscious, you might choke." Why couldn't I get up off that table? Why wasn't I strong

enough to do what I wanted? Everyone acted like I was getting my tooth pulled or something. If someone had asked, "Are you sure you want to do this?" I might've not done it. The nurse put the needle in my hand and said I might feel a little stinging. The next thing I knew, she was telling me to wake up. It was done. I wanted drugs that strong all the time. I wanted to be oblivious to everything. I wanted to be dead, not thinking, not feeling, not anything.

We went home. It was a beautiful day. The sun was shining. I couldn't stop crying. We went out a bit later and got some chocolate donuts and sat outside eating them. They tasted so good. I don't know why. I never tasted anything so good.

The next day my mom called. "What's new?" she asked. I said, "Oh, nothing." I wished I could tell her, but I didn't think she'd understand. She could tell something was bothering me, though, because a little while later, my sister called and asked, "Are you OK? Do you want to talk about something?" That's what I wanted. I said, "I had an abortion yesterday" and started crying again. We talked for more than an hour. She said, "You must be so sad about the loss of your baby," which I thought showed so much understanding and compassion. I felt better after talking to her and having someone in my family know and not judge me.

That day I started having pains, like cramps. I bought some Motrin because that's what they gave me at the clinic, but it didn't help. They said to expect cramping, so I thought it was normal. On Monday, I went to work and the cramps continued. Finally I called the emergency number that night. The pains were getting worse, but part of me felt like that was punishment. The nurse said I should take four Motrin every four hours and call the clinic in the morning. I said, "You mean go in?" She said "yes" in an impatient way. I took four Motrin, but it wasn't

helping. I couldn't sleep, so I went into the living room and sat on the couch and watched the clock. The cramps were coming every five minutes and lasting about 10 seconds. It was like something was squeezing my gut. I thought, "I just have to make it until two o'clock so I can take more Motrin." Then I thought "maybe on- thirty." I took four more. The pains continued and I drifted in and out of sleep. I called when the clinic opened at eight, and they said to come in. We had some oatmeal and went. I was expecting they would give me a prescription or something. The nurses were all the same from Saturday. For some reason I wasn't expecting that. The fat nurse said, "You liked it so much, you decided to come back, huh?" She did an exam and said my uterus was full of blood. She pushed down on my abdomen and it really hurt. She said, "That's tender, huh?" She explained that the blood was causing the cramping and they would have to do another aspiration, and because I ate, it would have to be a local so I'd be awake for it, or I could come back tomorrow for a general, but I would continue to have the pains. She said the night nurse should have told me not to eat anything. For a second, I thought that maybe I didn't really have the abortion and I could keep the baby now, but she said that they "took out the pregnancy" but sometimes blood and clots fill the uterus and they have to clean it out. She asked if I wanted to talk to my husband, so I got dressed and went out into the waiting room. I was in tears and didn't want to cry in front of everybody so I took him out into the hallway. I started crying and he said, "What is it?" I said, "They have to do it again!" At that moment some people came out of the elevator and were staring at me. It was so hard the first time. I had kept thinking, "I'll never have to do this again" and now I did.

The fat nurse brought me into the exam room again to give me the local. I was crying and she must have thought I was worried about the shot because she said, "It won't be nothing compared to what you've been

going through.” She took off my pad and said, “I can see clots hanging out of your cervix.” I stared at the ceiling while she explained what she was doing: the anesthesia goes on my cervix that I would feel as a pressure, although I might taste it and hear ringing in my ears – both of which I did. She left me while the anesthesia took effect.

The nice nurse came in to take me to the surgery room. She put her arm around me while we walked down the hall. She helped me onto the table and I started crying again. She said, “It’ll be OK.” I stared at the ceiling again and tried to stop crying although my lip kept trembling. I heard the nurse explain things to another nurse who must’ve been new. “You write down the times here. She got her anesthetic at ten. The doctor will be in at ten-sixteen. The procedure will be over by ten-nineteen.” I thought, “Two minutes. I can handle two minutes.” The nurse told me the doctor was very gentle and would explain everything. Then we just waited for him to come in. He introduced himself but I didn’t really look at him, although I could see he was Asian. The table tilted back so my head was pointing down and my legs spread open to God. He said, “You’ll hear the sound of the vacuum now.” It was OK because I knew it was just blood being sucked out. I don’t think I could have handled it if that were the abortion. Even though practically everything else was the same as Saturday, it wasn’t an abortion today. The nice nurse had wiped away my tears and held my hand during the procedure. Then it was over and I stopped crying. She took me to the “local” recovery room where there were beds. I was shaking and she put three blankets on me. I lay there for a long time. Other girls came and went and I wondered when they’d let me go. The fat nurse came to tell me I could go change and reported that they’d taken a lot of clots out. The black nurse came by and asked if I was ok and gave me a cracker. As I was leaving, the nice nurse said bye to me.

I walked into the lobby. Moses said, "You ready to go?" He was in a bad mood because he hadn't had coffee and it was almost noon. The freeway was all backed up and he had to go to the bathroom. He was yelling and hitting the steering wheel. I wanted to open the door and fall out. When we got home, he made coffee and calmed down. He apologized for being so brusque. I told him to go out because I wanted to take a nap, but really I just wanted to be alone. I called my sister and she suggested I have some chocolate. So I had an ice cream cone. It was amazing how much less I was bleeding and how not crampy I felt. I couldn't believe I thought all that blood and pain was normal – or deserved.

Later my husband came home and I started crying. He held me while I sobbed. I felt so sad. He sat on the couch with me and told me a story of a pretty girl and the guy she loved who was a stupid jerk sometimes and how they had a family and lived in Paris. A nice fantasy.

I still feel weak sometimes, but I'm a lot stronger than I used to be. I guess some good came from it, which is better than not. I read back through my journals and I was so in love with Moses, even though we had a lot of differences and a lot of fights. I really don't know how I feel now. I'm not in love with him the way I used to be. He hurt me. I just can't understand how he can love me and still want me to have an abortion. We've been through a lot and our relationship is better in a lot of ways, but I think part of me will never forgive him completely.

Yes, I would have faced up to the event that came as rather startling news. I would have loved Allegra with all my might. Because almost despite myself, I've learned a few things. As mawkish as it sounds, I've learned that nothing matters more than your capacity to love. Allegra taught me that. All those years I spent struggling to satisfy my desire to be someone important, to do something brilliant, to

achieve an unattainable goal, to have my needs fulfilled – when all I really needed was to hold Allegra tightly in bed at night.

Enough.

At QCJ, Hardy Justice wants us to talk about communication. I wonder if we aren't already home free on that one the second we open our mouths to speak. Maybe Hardy Justice wants us to be more articulate and less awkward. Maybe Hardy Justice just wants us to waste more time babbling the way we always do. It's not my job to make sense of any of this or even care one way or another. Besides, all that matters to me at the moment is the newest heavenly nut job, Zibby.

Zibby's a poet, a painter and a pianist – an artist. At least she was an artist until she was raped at knifepoint a year ago. Then she stopped liking art. Now, she just likes pancakes.

"I like pancakes," she tells me. OK, I like pancakes too. "With syrup, lots and lots of syrup," she adds. "I would eat only pancakes all the time," she continues, "if they'd let me. But they tell me I have to vary my diet. Which is hard because I can't eat things of a certain color. I used to think it was the food itself, but now I realize it's the color of the food that's the problem. The problem is, the only color that doesn't upset me these days is beige.

"That's why I like pancakes."

I'm not sure if I'm following her train, but I'm ready to learn.

"I like pancakes too," I say in an attempt to be connected.

"What about them?" she asks. She nervously taps her foot and sucks on her incredibly slender fingers.

"I like the way they taste."

"Taste?"

"Yes, their flavor."

"Flavor?"

This went on.

"Do you want pancakes now?"

"I am not your little pancake girl. I am not a virgin. I do not need your approbation."

Suddenly, it seemed as if all the air went out of Zibby's psychic airbag.

Hardy Justice has an impatient let's-get-to-the-bottom-of-this-fucking-bullshit-quickly approach. I'm content to go along. I'm know enough to know there's never a bottom to anything. Who cares if Zibby's phobic about going to the bathroom because she thinks the toilet might suck her into a parallel universe? Who cares if she had to be restrained one night because she tried to rip her hair out by the roots with tweezers? The details of her elliptical madness melt away when she writes or paints or composes a song. Zibby is a geode: all rough and bumpy on the outside but full of unexpected lights and colors within.

I might even be physically attracted to this spacey mistress of the high-lonesome look if my meds hadn't reduced my libido to that of a eunuch. The best I can muster is a sort of lukewarm arousal, like the tepid applause you hear during a golf tournament. I'm not so much interested in her appearance per se as I am in the way she looks when she plays the piano. She attacks the keys with such passion

and purpose that I can't help but be captivated. I would like her to teach me to play. I'd always wanted to learn. But I'm afraid to risk failing at yet one more thing. Fucking coward. Whenever opportunity knocks, I run away from the door.

At the next QCJ, Hardy Justice asks us to recall what he calls our defining moment, the turning point from which all other events in our lives, for better or worse, originate.

"If you can name it, you can claim it," he assures us.

Silence.

"When I was sixteen," I volunteer, "I was in a movie theater engrossed in the film when suddenly I felt a thin shaft of air lightly brushing the back of my head. I barely noticed it at first, thinking it might be the draft from an open door. But then I felt it again, more intensely, a warm jet that raised the bristles on my neck. Then I heard a small sigh and the air ceased. And I knew that it was not a breeze. It was the beautiful young girl sitting behind me that I'd only glanced at momentarily when I arrived. The girl was deliberately blowing on me.

"I wanted to turn around and face the girl, to find out who she was and why she was behaving like this. But instead, I just sat there, uncertain of what would be the right thing to do. In the midst of a state of indecision that would make Hamlet seem like a man of heroic action, I felt a warm, incredibly small hand plant itself gently on my shoulder. I froze. And then the hand was gone.

"The film ended and the lights came up – and I collected myself and slowly turned around. But to my surprise and dismay, the girl was gone.

"In a frenzy, I ran from the theater and into the night, stopping to look at the face of every girl on the street and wondering if she might be the one. But, of course, how could I know?"

"It's been said that when it comes to women," I conclude, "you can love them, you can suffer for them or you can turn them into literature. Which may explain why I decided to become a writer."

Silence.

"My defining moment?" Zibby blurts out when all eyes train on her. "I was watching a guy swim laps in the very same pool that I learned to swim in, the one in the back yard of my house. I was reclining in chaise lounge, feeling as comfortable as an overcoat broken into the contours of its wearer. Above me was the mighty ailanthus that grew out of the blacktop and arched out over half the pool before my stupid fucking aunt and her stupid fucking boyfriend cut it down for no apparent reason, which really pissed me off. I used to boast about the ailanthus when I lived there. 'This is my ailanthus,' I'd say. 'My wonderful, crookedly beautiful, shady ailanthus. It's mine, totally, totally mine!'"

"Anyway, I was watching a guy swim. His name was Frank George. He's the brother of Kim George, the girl I supposedly tried to deliberately murder when I accidentally broadsided her car in the parking lot of Wesley School for Girls where she was hiding out to snort coke, try on lipstick and spread gossip with her sister Kate. It was my first day of class, and Kim – who was possibly the prettiest girl on campus and was thereafter horribly disfigured – was hauled away in an ambulance while Kate chased after me in high heels with a tire iron vowing she would avenge her sister. That wasn't the end of it, either. Their mother eventually handed my mother a bill for ten thousand dollars in hospital fees. I worked it some of it off by

cleaning the Georges' house for six months, until the day it got real cold out and I decided to light a fire in their fireplace and forgot to open the flue – a mistake that ended up completely blackening the white walls of their elegantly appointed living room.

"And then, finally, later that year Kim collapsed on the soccer field one afternoon and died of a broken blood vessel in her brain that the doctor said had been initially weakened during the bash on the head she received during the accident. Missus George told some pretty nasty things to the papers about me, saying that I was half Emily Dickinson, half serial killer."

Zibby's just getting warmed up, as if she's bitten into one of Proust's madeleines.

"Back to Frank. He never struck me as anything but nice. He didn't have many friends, but he was never alone. He stood out among his family as quiet, generous and observant. As a matter of fact, he was the only member of the George family who wasn't mean to me even when it was pretty clear I had a lot to do with the death of his sister.

"So, I was watching Frank swim laps. He swam right past me several times. He had pretty good form. But he kept stopping. He swam one lap, and then rested, and then another, and then rested. He kept doing this until I had to mutter, 'I'm a better swimmer than he is. He keeps stopping. Why won't he put himself through a real workout? He's no swimmer – why, he's no swimmer at all!' I wasn't angry with him, though, if that's what it sounds like. I was simply surprised. He was on the water polo team, and I thought that he'd be, well, better than he was.

"I was excited that I was a swimmer, and Frank was decidedly not. I thought about asking him if he'd like me to teach him flip turns. But

that thought only lasted a second. I couldn't concentrate on it. I kept being distracted because he was always resting, and I thought it was so strange. He most certainly wasn't tired. It just must be a habit, to stop, and start, and then stop again. I decided that I would not offer to teach him flip turns. Why should I be the one to break his habit? It wasn't my place. My place was right where I was – in the shallow end, very comfortably watching."

Zibby goes silent, and then starts to cry. Tears smear her makeup, and the effect is like a colorful painting left out in the rain. No one in QCJ, not even Hardy Justice, says a word. Cowards all.

I'm no shrink, but it doesn't take a Freud to realize that Zibby's not right in the head. Perhaps somewhere in the limbic region of her brain, the area where thought processes take place, a short-circuiting occurred and the entire mechanism has gone haywire. Zibby casts about in a disturbing state of shock and dawning terror. She worries me because I don't have faith that the drugs or QCJ or the indifferent and witless staff at Rancho Colima Mental will give her the help she needs. It's not that the doctors don't have the best intentions. It's just that the contraindications of the mood-altering meds they dispense are often worse than the malady. Cure the disease, kill the patient.

Later, Zibby says she's time tripping.

"I am sixteen," she tells me in all seriousness. "My world is a frosted window from the third floor of a four-story New York walk up. I am waiting to go on what will be my first date. I am sixteen, I am beautiful and, with the exception of one tiny blemish, I am without a care. No worries. My date will arrive in a matter of minutes and, even though I should be without a care, I have an urge to fiddle with the blemish the way a fussy dinner hostess fusses with a canapés

platter. Donald is at the door. Dad lets Donald in and tells Donald to sit on the davenport across from the upright piano upon which rests a framed picture of me as a child, my hair curled like corkscrews. The two of them discuss lawn mowers, fish lures and ball games. I am in the adjacent room dabbing my wrist with perfume, pulling a comb through my still-kinky hair and wrapping a silver ribbon around my right index finger. I'm staring hard at my face in the mirror and picking at my zit when I experience a temporal glitch, as if I've lost my place in a book. The world comes back to me in a sudden cataclysmic burst: the perfume bottle spills, the comb snags a hunk of hair and the zit explodes. I'm staring hard at my face in the mirror and, in a flash, I'm forty with craggy lines like so many rivulets around my eyes. My clothes are industrial gray, starched and ill fitting. My closet is a cavern filled with designer outfits and shoes that I no longer have a use for, but I hang onto nonetheless. My hair is a close-cropped pageboy. I walk with a wobble, as if I'm on a ship. I am thick in the middle, but I am not unprideful of my girth, believing that each layer of flesh I acquire serves to insulate me from the world. I used to eat as much as I wanted without gaining a pound, while envious friends adhered to strict diets that in the end failed them. But one day while in the middle of a basket of extra crispy fried chicken, I happened to glance down at the napkin resting on my stomach, and I noticed how my belly seemed raised, forming a reversed bowl – now *that* had never been there before. And then there was the time I polished off a double cheeseburger with fries and six-pack of soda, and afterward I belched and felt a strange sensation beneath my right breast, near my heart, as if a bubble had popped inside my chest. Nowadays I consume more antacids than food. Abruptly I'm twenty-nine. My life is a sitcom with all the jokes deleted. My first husband left me in the morning. In the afternoon I'm fired from my job for no good reason. On the

way home I am waiting for the C train, a black rain pelting me through the hole in my umbrella. A wild wind yanks my treasured alpaca scarf from my shoulders and flings it into a puddle of mud. I bend down to retrieve it and I spill the entire contents of my purse. Just then, a man with a clammy expression laughs at my folly. 'Life can really suck sometimes, can't it?' I glare back at him as if in a blue haze, a cigarette dangling from my lips. 'It wasn't always like this,' I say. I'm tottery, and the man reaches out and props me up. It may be a gesture with little importance to him, but to me it holds great significance, shattering vast distances. I begin to cry, and the man, not knowing what to make of my seemingly disturbing behavior, disappears into the gray afternoon. Now I'm thirty-four. It's a sticky summer day and I'm at a party on the back deck of a green clapboard house, somewhat drunk, somewhat agitated, alternating between euphoria and fear like a string of Christmas lights. The food is spicy, the blackened chicken in the blazing barbecue only adding to the swampy heat. I am praying for a cloud. I do not know these people and I'm wondering why I came to this party to begin with; it's just one of those things you do because you're afraid people will gossip about you if you're a no-show. And besides, I might meet someone interesting, right? I rest my drink on a glass table. A woman gives me a grim look and places a coaster beneath my glass. 'That's what these are for,' she says. 'Who taught you your manners, girl?' Now I'm twenty. I've moved in with my boyfriend, Pierre. Pierre is compulsively neat. 'Everything has its place,' he says. Which means I can't throw a pair of underpants onto the floor without him scooping it up and placing it in the hamper. Which means I can't leave a book on the coffee table without him filing it back in alphabetical order. Which means I can't feel comfortable in my own home. Pierre is adamant about reducing clutter. He prefers an environment that's austere. He made me sell

my treasured upright piano, which he said did not fit with the bloodless post-modern décor of our apartment. He also hides my clothes or my favorite knickknacks and possessions that he's not fond of. Pierre then allows a few weeks or a month to go by, after which he returns the objects in the middle of the night, not unbeknownst to me, to their former positions for me to rediscover. Then he says: 'You haven't had a need for this in so long, why don't we just get rid of it?' I don't really believe that Pierre is in love with me. Maybe it's that we're like designer gloves and a matching handbag; we look good together. We give the impression that we're involved. I'm practiced at impressions. So is Pierre. Which may be the real reason why we are together. I suppose I could go on with Pierre. But then there are times when I wonder what Pierre would do if I became fat or I demonstrated bald-faced anger or I got really sick. That would make life messy, wouldn't it? Suddenly I'm thirty-eight. I just got married for the third time and my husband and I have moved to a new city, this time Boston. I'm feeling lonely, so I frequent a Back Bay café. I'm writing in my journal; that is to say, I'm trying to write in my journal but I'm distracted by all the clatter around me. To my left are three deaf women gesturing like pelicans flapping their wings, clucking their tongues and making a grunting noise I believe to be laughter. To my right are two young Chinese men with guitar cases at their sides. They are speaking what sounds to me like gibberish, tapping their feet and wiggling their fingers on invisible instruments. Straight ahead is a young man stomping his leg as he listens to a cassette player, and every so often he blurts out a disembodied rap. I am an outsider here. Who speaks my language? I stare out the window and I notice a young man with a noble shagginess about him. He boards a bus, finds a seat and then gazes back at me with a haunted look that resembles an abandoned cabin out in the woods. It's a look that makes me fall in love with him.

Perhaps this is the man I was always meant to be with. Perhaps this is my one and only, my soul mate. I go to the cafe every day in the hopes I will see him again. But I do not see him. And with each passing day, I feel a little more desperate and a little less hopeful. Until I realize I will never see him again. Eventually I resolve to forget about the beautiful young man and concentrate on loving, honoring and cherishing my new husband till death do us part. Time goes by, and one day I visit the cafe on a lark. I'm sitting in the same exact spot where I first saw the man with the haunting expression. I'm staring out the window when I see a figure in a white suit approach. Could it be him? He has the same look. He draws closer, and I see a familiar smile on his lips. It is my husband. Without warning I'm twenty-five. I'm a follower of a New Age guru named Harold who promotes satori through asceticism, except, of course, when it comes to spending pots of money on his books, his tapes and his courses, of which there are many. I believe I have found the answer to life, death and everything else, and I begin to annoy and alienate friends and loved ones with my newfound sense of zeal. I'm also learning to subsist on a diet of spring water and cracked wheat thins, and I've sold most of my possessions and furniture in favor of a ghohonzan, joss sticks, votive candles and grass mats. I believe that through self-denial, by ridding myself of extraneous physical things and urges I can also rid myself of my damnable depression. It's during this time that my cat Snowball is diagnosed as diabetic and I must give her insulin injections twice a day. One night I'm awakened by the terrible sound of her howling and gagging. She is in anaphylactic shock from too much insulin. Snowball writhes like a beached fish struggling to make it back to the water, and then she lets out a sad yelp, gasps and expires right in my arms. I cry for days and days. I can't be consoled. Finally, I go to my guru Harold, whom I'm certain has the antidote to my

despair. 'Only by abnegating your pain,' he says in his measured fashion, 'will you ever rise above it.' He also tells me to pick up a copy of his thirty-six-dollar book on the subject, 'Surviving the Death of a Family Member or a Pet by Abnegating Your Pain.' The time is now. I'm the person you see before you who, somewhere along the line, almost imperceptibly, allowed depression to influence and overwhelm her capacity for joy. Depression became my narcotic, my excuse."

One night, I'm drawn toward the rec room by music that sounds sticky, sensual and impressionistic. Zibby's hunched over an upright piano, her hands swimming up and down the keys like fishes in a tizzy.

"I feel safe within my music," she says. "It drowns out the ringing in my head."

"I want to feel safe too."

Zibby pauses. She places my hands on the keys and then puts her fingers over mine. Slowly, awkwardly, she presses my fingers down.

"Let me show you what to do," she says, gently, encouragingly.

"These are scales."

Notes begin to emerge. C D E F G A B. Zibby's face takes on a beatific aspect, her countenance suddenly a bright corona appearing from behind her otherwise cloudy madness. "Whole tones and semi quavers," she says, her words a foreign tongue to me. What is this? "Supertonic, mediant, dominant." My hands seem stupid, clumsy and unsure. Like they were not my hands anymore. "Harmony, concord, suspension, solution." It's an undiscovered country, hiding in plain sight. "Tonic, tremolo, flourish." This is where it all begins. "Accent, pitch, intonation." Why hadn't I done this before? "Pizzicato,

glissando, allegro." I feel it in my bones. "Treble, canto, discordance." I'm suddenly remapping a secret world, a world always present but rarely seen, a world of symbols and signals transmuted into energy and sound.

After a few minutes – or is it days, weeks? Time doesn't mean much when you're crazy – Zibby removes her fingers from mine, and I'm on my own. I don't dare look up from the keys. I am scared I'll become self-conscious, like the moment you're acutely aware you're riding a bike with no hands and you immediately fall over. I have no idea what I'm playing, what the notes mean. Pianissimo, sordo or decrescendo – who knows? Sharp, flat or accidental – none of that matters. All that matters is that I am playing scales! By myself! To me, it's as black and white as the keys themselves. It's plink, plank, plunk.

Plink, plank, plunk.

At the next QCJ, Hardy Justice gives us a choice: We can either work on arts and crafts, which means a lot of paste eating and futile attempts at self-immolation with safety scissors, or we can discuss the nature of our despair. Frightening propositions in either case. Of course, I would have no problem listening to Zibby recite from the telephone book. So, along with Zibby, I opt for despair.

"For my bar mitzvah," I volunteer, "my Torah portion was Genesis XXVII: 18, in which Jacob misrepresented himself as his brother Esau to his blind father Isaac so that Isaac would pass the birthright on to the nobler Jacob rather than the less than deserving Esau. Although Isaac had enough sense to wonder why 'the voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau,' Jacob's sneaky strategy was a success – and it's just as well, I guess. After all,

Abraham, Isaac and Esau sounds a lot like John, Paul, George and Pete. Without Ringo, it just doesn't have the right ring to it.

"It's made me wonder, what's fair and just? Is the Old Testament telling me there are times when it's OK to be dishonest? Does it mean that you must be ruthless and cunning in order for history to work itself out?

"There are so many tormenting contradictions and disappointments lurking behind rhetoric of God's own truth and wisdom. I don't understand any of it. And that is the true nature of my despair."

Silence.

"There is something awful," Zibby begins, "something awful about exhibiting the sort of sensitivity that I do in that I tend to allow myself to be dragged along, as if tied to some jalopy, mesmerized that it has the gumption to keep jaunting along without falling to bits, and I'm rolling in the dirt and feeling my limbs being scraped, because I always assume that the person whose psyche is the jalopy has it much worse emotionally than I do, and so I go along, tethered and bumped, instead of saying 'I don't like the way this is going' or 'that's not really what I had in mind' or 'LET GO OF ME!' So what sometimes ends up happening is that eventually, when I start to feel uncomfortable pressure, I have to overcompensate for my original sensitivity and put up a big fat wall that no leeches can get under. It's like feeling you have to pee. You know you've got to get outta this place and you already held it too long. Like what makes so many men think they can latch onto a woman's cosmic boobie and never let go? And if you push them off you're a bitch and a princess – and it's such an obvious, unoriginal and predictable reaction, all the while he is more worthy of your tiara than you are. Like you wrote this recipe for this great zucchini bread and he sprinkled some

powdered sugar on top and ate a piece, so that makes it just as much his recipe. And just because he was hungry it's his. Somehow. Or you painted a picture and he put it in a frame and all of a sudden he's signing his name to the bottom with a trumpet flourish. And you looked at him and thought, 'He really needs this right now. I'll let him believe it's his. It was a really nice frame. It added a lot to the picture.' Or because you're existing under the label of 'relationship' you're suddenly no longer individuals and anything that you might feel that might threaten the way he sees the 'relationship' is bad and wrong and 'if you love me you'll cut off your arm to fit in this box.' 'If you love me you'll save me.' The teat is mine. And they bring up all the times you said x, y and z and the dates and times of each and I say only manipulators and liars have to remember the exact date and time of everything that was said. Go do some work on yourself for God's sake. And blah blah blah blather blather blah. And then one day you wake up and realize your own misguided sensitivity is going to be lethal to everyone involved, because you feel sick to your stomach and need Pepto Bismal for your soul and you should have just trusted your own better formed gut right from the beginning, instead of trusting someone who 'really probably does like you' but is looking for a quick fix for his own pained soul. And now you've come down with cosmic indigestion. But you've always felt guilty about trusting your own gut because it means hurting someone's feelings and saying 'no' right from the start. Or when things started to get weird. Because you really trust in basic human logic and expect people to right themselves, like falling cats. But they've found you and have become akin to using you as a crutch or trampoline and you've not stopped them. And the moment you realize they're getting their hooks too far into your stuff and try to tell them 'this feels like bad touch' they say you're asserting your ego. And the worst part is that you really liked them a lot and felt they were good

people deep down, albeit a little troubled and it was quite a lot of pressure to hear they were almost constantly thinking about suicide and this 'is the only good thing in their] life' and you find that odd because maybe they're married or have a good job or write well and it feels wrong and like bad touch again. So you let them take too much and can't go back and rectify the situation because you can't be in any sort of relationship where you constantly have to monitor if you're setting your boundaries strongly enough and they've already decided you're a bitch if you don't let them have their bottle. So it has to end because what kind of relationship is that where you always have to put your little toe in to make sure the temperature's all right before you decide if you want to get in? I don't know about you, but I plunge headfirst into relationships whatever they may be and maybe that's how I get myself in these messes."

And then, inhibitions vanquished, Zibby turns over all her cards.

"I was thinking more the other day about the origin of my neurosis and the scene of me and my family at our house in Florida popped into my head. My sister Julia and I had painstakingly recreated our grandmother's delectable blinis, complete with applesauce and sour cream, and we were excited to share it with our father and the rest of the family. See, our mother had passed away only a month or so before, and little moments were cherished and clung to. Food and music and movies became not only a way to temporarily escape grief but also a necessary repose and a time when we felt happily connected to one another. I grabbed a whole bunch of forks from the large fork section of the usually meticulously arranged utensil tray, and placed them lovingly on the spotless glass table with cloth napkins, fold-side in, fringe right and bottom. As Julia and I served the blinis we waited to see the reaction of our father, as he tasted his mother's own recipe. 'So how are they?' I couldn't wait to ask. 'You

gave me a SMALL FORK,' my father barked back, laughing at how stupid I was, through teeth that barricaded the carefully prepared potato pancakes. I felt my face collapse and a knot formed in my solar plexus. 'Well, someone – maybe the cleaning lady? – must have put small forks in the large fork slot. I don't think any of us would.' It was true. No one in the family would ever dream of putting a small fork in the large fork area, given the constant microscope-up-the-ass reactions we had received our whole lives for committing similar travesties. As if it fucking mattered one iota what the hell kind of fork it was. Our father lived for these moments, where he could vent his spleen, as he called it. Since his wife died he had been so nasty to us, as we bowed our heads like broken horses to let him grieve his way. We would grieve on our own later. Even if it meant sitting through the same mix tape again and again on the car stereo on the drive from Jersey to Florida. A tape he had constructed for Christmas in search of catharsis, for Christmas, as a tribute to our mother, and contained songs including, and of equal heaviness, as Dean Martin's slow and melancholic version of 'Blue Christmas.' We could hardly choke down the self-medicative pastries and stared blankly out at orange fields while our father carefully tapped the ashes off of his Cohiba through the one-inch opening of the window and cursed at old ladies who cut him off."

Time passes.

It is becoming increasingly evident that Zibby's not getting better. I know that light helps, and that you have to wait it out. But no light's getting in.

I want to draw her out, to get her to talk about her life, her fears, her dreams. She tells me she used to be a perfectionist and that that was just about the worst trap anyone could be caught in.

"I could never get anything done," she says. "And it only got worse. I moved into an apartment a few years ago, and because I didn't have the correct box-cutting tool, I just couldn't allow myself to open the boxes. So, I lived there for months and months unable to get to any of my stuff."

Zibby laughs at her own apparent insanity. The laughter stops and she suddenly appears, as she does often, like Ophelia floating through a bog, her eyes fixed upward as if she is pulling in signals from the Pleiades.

"These days I seem to occupy a wicked fugue state," she says, "my memory behaving like a photograph developing with the details showing up last."

Zibby moves to the piano, and her playing is decidedly downbeat: a single note repeated endlessly, ferociously. It is music both somber and funny, a joke without a punch line.

My heart goes out to her. But what else can I do? If I could exchange places with her, I would. If only I believed in Him, I'd make a deal with God. I'd say, "Hey, God, if there's something I've got that you want – my heart, my health, my shoes – just take it, it's yours. Let me swap places with Zibby. Please." But, as always, God remains silent as a sphinx. Zibby stays crazy.

It's been said there's but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Life is only worth living if that fundamental question can be answered. Apparently, Zibby could not. I awake one morning to the news that Zibby has ended it. Lacking the appropriate tools one normally uses to off oneself – guns, pills, willfulness – Zibby had stuck a sock down her throat and choked herself to death. She left no will or no final heart-rending statement. Just a hole.

"What will we do now?" I ask Hardy Justice.

Tears cling to the corners of his eyes.

I feel wounded in a way I know will never heal. I feel deserted and angry, a million crazy voices clattering away in my head. A million voices with no beginning, no middle, no end, because my thoughts aren't linear they slosh about my head without settling I mean what do I mean what is it that should say I should not say things I don't mean because I won't remember what I said an hour from now but I may remember in a week a month or a year and then I'll be sorry because there's no way to take it back take it back take it back the troubles the troubles the trouble with me Doctor Von Rauffenstein thinks I have a bad attitude and I need to be medicated to keep my unhealthy thoughts in check but if he had any real feelings he'd be the one imprisoned in the booby hatch C D E F G A B plink plank plunk C D E F G A B signal to noise C D E F G A B I'm in a curtains-drawn gloom as bleak as hell on Sunday standing flush in the corner of my room crying my fingers tracing the tears down the white plaster walls to the baseboard or banging my fists on the floor until my knuckles bleed or gazing at my reflection in the mirror pulling at my skin biting my lips grinding my teeth grimacing like a little madman but it's all malarkey C D E F G A B look true north C D E F G A B plink plank plunk the despair I feel is not fun not romantic I do not understand the ways of the world I do not understand why people behave like bastards when being decent isn't impossible or why the laws of physics have a tendency to remain constant or why God is so indifferent to the suffering of humanity and I do not understand what brings on the seasons or what makes the clocks tick or why moocows moo I want I want I want I so desperately want to be a part of that rarefied fountainhead C D E F G A B plink plank plunk first I was born then the troubles began I just hate insincerity it

makes me want to go crazy or crazier according to Doctor Von
Rauffenstein I'm already a nut job but I'm not a nut job it's tinnitus
it's only tinnitus many people go on to live happy productive lives
on one kidney the troubles the troubles the trouble with me is
Rancho Colima was befallen by a strange amnesia plague Bunny
wants things just so Seymour ran from the theater in a panic it was
all malarkey what do shrinks know Michael Oliphant put a firm
hand on my shoulder a firm hand I look for a standard of clemency
more humane than the code of the Hammurabi something
otherworldly about Allegra I found myself guilt-ridden and
depressed mostly I found myself at odds I had fantasies of having the
time and the space to write fantasies of making a rich and profound
difference in the lives of everyday people fantasies of being quoted
out of context of being misunderstood Allegra the linchpin the
catalyst behind my predicament the cause of all my guilt grief and
woe the reason I am here the reason I am given so many drugs time
to move to throw myself on my doubts three thousand miles we
traveled to a place where everything from the weather to the idioms
to the architecture had an alien cast I'd never experienced it seems
I've been forever trying to come up with a conclusion of one kind or
another to discover what is true the voices create a milky presence
but you can't unring a bell you can't unknow unless unless I
like pancakes I'm constipated as hell I haven't taken a satisfying
dump in weeks Diana Mason says it's crap it's crap it's crap it's C D E
F G A B plink plank plunk rules what rules Freddy Breen is the
perfect hero for the new millennium C D E F G A B Mister Levy the
results from your biopsy are positive C D E F G A B treble canto
discordance Zibby removed her fingers from mine C D E F G A B I
don't know who I am anymore I spill in all directions at once crying
out in a shrill latticework of wired notes wishing to possess
something beyond myself something beyond my power to imagine

to live among obscured erasures the unsaid word the thought
uncompleted the murmur lost the letters that fly away like small
birds C D E F G A B plink plank plunk first I was born then all the
troubles began C D E F G A B plink plank plunk C D E F G A B rather
startling news C D E F G A B please C D E F G A B please C D E F G A B
please C D E F G A B please forgive me