

Smoking and Six Other Stories

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Contents

Odin Létourneau and Debbie Siskind's

Second Date *1*

Easter Weekend *3*

Emperor 'Q *31*

Conversation at Four a.m. *46*

How Much Do They Know? *48*

The Sit *54*

Smoking *74*

Abstract

Smoking and Six Other Stories

John Goldbach

Concordia University, 2006

Smoking and Six Other Stories comprises short fiction of various sorts: short shorts (“Odin Létourneau and Debbie Siskind’s Second Date” and “Conversation at Four a.m.”), longer stories (“Easter Weekend” and “The Sit”), a television cooking show transcript (“Emperor ’Q”), an interior monologue (“How Much Do They Know?”), and a story about a man reading a stop-smoking self-help book, while fighting with his partner (“Smoking”). These stories contain characters struggling with questions of faith, diet, sex, addiction, mortality, while often on the verge of—or in the midst of—cracking up. In “Emperor ’Q,” for example, a cooking show host breaks down after a guest on his show refuses to eat barbequed pork spareribs. In “How Much Do They Know?,” too, a young man starts to unravel, while drinking with friends at Christmastime, believing that they know secrets about him. Desperation, discomfort, loneliness, jealousy, and shame are some of the other themes explored in this collection. The stories are set in rural, urban, and tropical locales. Although the stories in this collection experiment with form, they return again and again to similar themes.

Odin Létourneau and Debbie Siskind's

Second Date

At eight years of age, wearing a blue and yellow winter coat with matching snow pants, Odin Létourneau clubbed his pet turkey, Ninja, with his orange Transformers lunch pail, when the hissing bird lunged at him after he'd gotten off of the school bus. Although Odin managed to contain Ninja with the pail, his attacks didn't cease. Odin told his mother about Ninja's violent behavior but she didn't seem to care or even necessarily believe him. From the day Ninja was hatched, Odin felt an unexplainable affinity towards the turkey. When he wasn't staring at the bird or coddling him in his arms, he was dreaming about him. His father took notice of Odin's fascination with the bird and said he'd let him name the petite poult if he'd agree to take care of him, which of course he did. Odin tended to the turkey daily, feeding him a prepared mixture of cracked corn, wheat and soybeans, cleaning his area, spending hours watching the turkey waddle around. Odin was proud of his proud bird; he enjoyed his charge: he was exultant. Around the time he switched from a starter to a grower feed, however, Ninja grew very big, much bigger than the other turkeys, eventually growing larger than Odin himself, and that's when the harassment began. Every day, when Odin went to feed him or was getting off the bus or just walking by, Ninja would attack, pecking at his face, going for

his eyes. During such strikes, Odin would yell and scream and flail his arms while crying. His parents didn't seem to care or notice. It wasn't till his mother witnessed Ninja bite onto Odin's genitals that she and her husband decided to slaughter the bird. "If it wasn't for the boy's snow pants," Odin heard his dad say to his mother, "he might've lost his pecker." And his dad laughed his wheezy laugh, then lit a wine-tipped Colt. The bird was almost too big for the oven and they didn't have a pan that he'd fit on. A neighbour, Mrs. Curtis, told his mother that if she dipped a T-shirt in oil, then tied the T around the bird and put it in an oven preheated to 350°F, it'd cook fine that way. So that's what she did and the Curtises came over—that is, Mrs. Curtis and Mr. Curtis and their three kids—and Aunt Sally, Odin's maternal aunt, came over, too, and even with all the guests and Odin, his dad, his mom, and his brother Kyle dining, they were still eating leftovers for a week and a half. It took eleven hours of cooking till Ninja hit the proper 180° internal temperature for eating. Odin didn't even particularly like turkey, though he derived unparalleled pleasure from gobbling down this particular bird. Shortly after devouring plate-fulls of his former antagonist, Odin slept a long, wonderful, catatonic sleep, which he believed wasn't brought upon by an amino acid known as tryptophan, nor from the bloated contentedness that follows a victory banquet, but because now he could live in peace, he could sleep in peace. Without a doubt, eating Ninja and then passing out was one of the best days of his life.

And this was one of the many reasons why Odin thought Debbie's argument for vegetarianism was really just plain stupid.

Easter Weekend

Daniel got out of bed, wiped the sleep from his eyes, turned on his computer and sat down at his desk, where he began typing out his suicide note. Although he'd no intention of taking his life on this particular day, typing out his supposed final words made him feel better: he found it a cathartic exercise that helped exorcise the demons of regret, which he often woke with after a night of drinking. He typed:

Dear Adam,

I feel that quite possibly you're the only one who will understand what I am about to do, and what I will have done by the time someone stumbles across this letter. I feel it necessary that I take my own life, for I have not been able to make it make any sense whatsoever, and I'm always sad and sick. Nothing makes me happy – I don't know why, but I have an idea. I will not depress and bore you with my selfish (?) reasons for wanting to die; but let's just say, it's because I am a fool, and always will be, and never want to subject anyone to my limitless psychotic problems again. I hurt everyone I encounter, including myself. I love you and miss you.

Your brother,

Daniel

Reading what he'd typed, he felt mildly disheartened. Yesterday's suicide note to his best friend Mark was much more sad and affecting, Daniel thought. It was his second time waking and he hadn't yet showered. Earlier in the morning, he'd woken up on a friend's couch and couldn't remember if he'd tried to sleep with his friend. Before she was up he was gone. He'd left a note on her kitchen table:

Dear Melissa,

Thanks for letting me crash at your pad; you saved a young man from dying drunk, destitute, and alone. Rest assured, you did a good thing. Take care.

The most hung-over man in NATO,
Daniel K.

He showered and thought about shaving but didn't. Wearing a towel tied around his waist, he went into his roommate Nick's room, where Nick sat staring at his computer's screen.

"What's up, man?"

"Not much."

"What time is it?"

"Twelve-oh-one."

"Shit, all right," said Daniel while pacing Nick's room: "I'm taking off in about ten minutes."

"Going back to London."

"What are you doing this weekend?"

"I don't know," Nick said.

"Well shit, man, I'll pack."

"Have a good trip."

"You know, you're welcome to come with us. My mom won't mind. There'll be more than enough food."

"Thanks, bud. But I'm just going to stay in town. Maybe check out the parade."

"All right."

"Okay."

Daniel stood out front the apartment building waiting for his lift when Jesus Christ walked by, dragging a cross, Romans were whipping him and he was bleeding. Many people watched—old, young, babies on shoulders. He'd forgotten about the parade, even though Nick had mentioned it. Daniel found a payphone and called Paul, his ride, and told him to meet a street south of College.

Paul repeatedly filled and smoked from his brass one-hitter, while driving 120km/h, listening to music and talking to Daniel. Paul's T-shirt read, DO NOT RESUSCITATE. When the conversation lulled, Daniel tried to sleep. The night before he dreamed he'd found a copy of a book about a boat going down a river in a jungle. When he woke he felt sad, not because the dream was over (he never derived much pleasure from dreams), but because he was hung-over again and sleeping on the couch of a girl he may've attempted to sloppily seduce the night before, a girl he wasn't even particularly attracted to. Or a girl he was incredibly attracted to. He couldn't decide.

“So Stephen’s marrying Jenny.”

“Uh-huh,” Daniel said.

“Fucked up, eh?”

“Kind of.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“To the wedding?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?” Daniel asked.

“It’ll depress me.”

“Why?”

“Because he shouldn’t marry her. Besides, I don’t believe in marriage.”

“Why?”

“Because she sucks. She’s cheated on every boyfriend she’s had. She cheated on me, and I’m pretty damn sure she’s fucked around on Stephen. She’s manipulative. I don’t trust her.”

“You don’t have to. Stephen’s the one marrying her.”

“I know, and I think it’s a terrible idea.”

“You were saying.”

“Daniel, don’t be an asshole. You know it’s a bad idea. Stephen’s a great guy—I wish him well—but he’s making a mistake. He’ll be happy for a while. Fuck, the marriage might last a whole five years. But then she’ll leave him and he’ll be a disgusting mess. You know this.”

“No I don’t.”

“What,” Paul said. He lit his one-hitter, inhaled, changed lanes, exhaled thick smoke, and coughed hard. Daniel coughed too.

“I’m gonna tell you exactly what’s gonna happen to Stephen and Jenny over the next five years, all right?”

“All right.”

“He’ll knock her up any minute now, if he hasn’t already,” Paul said. “Then, Jenny, being a girl who thrives on attention, will love being pregnant *so* much, she’ll love being pampered *so* much, shortly after popping out the first kid—*BAM!*—she’ll be pregnant again. Now Stephen will be working his bag off in order to support the family that appeared immediately after he tied the knot. He’ll be dazed but he’ll be happy. Or at least he’ll think he’s happy. For a while, he’ll get off on having a family, a small house, a satellite dish, whatever. But he’ll be too damn tired to fuck after work. He won’t be able to get it up and Jenny will get it somewhere else. And when Stephen finds out that Jenny’s sleeping with someone else, he’ll be ruined. And you know what?”

“What.”

“She’ll leave the poor bastard and he’ll continue to support her and the kids he never sees while some other fuck’s filling her in.”

“Jesus.”

“Daniel, this is how people live.”

Paul put the brass pipe to his lips, he lit his lighter, he inhaled. Staring at the highway, he repeated the process. “Ouch,” he said, licking his lips. They kept driving, Paul with a dull red-eyed stare, and Daniel feeling tense.

“I want to get laid this weekend,” Paul said.

“Yeah.”

“I think I might call Cynthia.”

“Are you serious?”

“No one knows, so keep it on the down-low.”

“Yeah, I will,” Daniel said. “But you realize, if James finds out, he’ll kill you. Like, you’ll be walking down the street and he’ll snipe you down from some—”

“He’s never gonna find out,” Paul said, while lighting a cigarette. “Do you have anyone to call?”

“I don’t know. Kind of.”

“Okay.”

“You remember Colleen Knight?”

“Yeah,” Paul said.

“When I was home a few months ago, visiting my mom, I saw her out. We ended up back at her place. We didn’t sleep together or anything, but we messed around for a bit.”

“Then give her call!” cried Paul.

“I will. I, I haven’t talked to her for about a month,” Daniel said, nervously eyeing a black pick-up driving close to them. “Her and I’ve been this way for a while—we see each other, have some drinks, mess around, then get on with our respective lives.”

“That’s cool. You need to take a piss or anything?”

“Sure.”

“I need smokes,” said Paul.

He pulled into the furthestmost, right-hand lane. The speed of the car decreased and they glided into the rest stop, which offered a gas bar, three different fast food restaurants, a gift shop and washrooms. Daniel went to the washroom.

Standing in front of a urinal, he unzipped his zipper; then, a voice started to speak: a commercial came on a screen in front of the urinal while he pissed and “We will rock you” played.

Paul bought a pack of cigarettes with a picture on the box of a cigarette pointing downwards like a flaccid penis, its tip flaking ash. Also, he bought a pair of aviator sunglasses. Daniel watched him stand back straight, measuring himself against the height-chart taped to the side of the threshold, when leaving the store. “Six one,” said Paul.

Daniel said, “Nice shades.”

“Thanks, man,” Paul said, admiring himself in the reflection of a car window. “Let’s go.” He offered Daniel a cigarette, which was refused, and drove to the highway. Daniel tried to sleep.

Paul pulled his car into Daniel’s mom’s lane-way, fifteen-minutes northwest of London, Ontario.

“Listen, have your dinner and do your family stuff. Later on a bunch of us are going over to Josh’s house—we’ll prime there, then hit the town. Cool?”

“Sure. Thanks for the lift.”

Daniel opened the door to his mom’s house, put his luggage down in the hallway, took his shoes off, and walked around calling out, “Hello! Hello!” No one responded.

He went downstairs, where he heard racecar noises. His eleven-year-old brother, Harrison, was sitting in front of the TV, playing a video game.

“Hey, why didn’t you answer when I was yelling?”

“I didn’t hear you.” As the racecar turned corners, Harrison leaned to the corresponding side.

“Where’s Mom?”

“Went to get eggs at the store.”

“Where’s Ted?”

“Dad’s with her.”

He went upstairs to what was formerly his room, now a room filled with exercise equipment—dumbbells, cross-country skiing simulator, rowing machine, treadmill, etc.—but his bed was still there, next to the treadmill. His mother’s voice called out:

“Hello! Harrison! Daniel! We’re home!”

His mother and Ted were in the kitchen unpacking groceries.

“Hey, Daniel, how you doin’?” Ted said.

“Good, good,” he said, nodding. “How are you?”

“Can’t complain.”

“You look thin, Daniel. Are you eating enough? You need to gain weight.”

“I wouldn’t worry, Mom. I’m sure I’ll gain weight after the feast.”

“There’s a lot of food,” Ted said.

“How was the drive down?” his mother asked.

“Good.”

“Traffic wasn’t too bad?” said Ted.

“No, it was fine.”

“Good.”

“Daniel, you look tired, honey.”

“I’ve just been busy.”

Daniel went upstairs, shut his eyes, but couldn’t sleep. Frustrated, he tried to relax by studying the large darkness created by his sealed lids. It didn’t work; after a few seconds, he’d lose concentration.

The table was elegantly laid. They’d used the nice plates and silverware, candles and linens, with a decanter of red wine in the center, between two white candles on silver holders. Dinner was nice. The food was good and plentiful. Everybody looked good. And Daniel couldn’t wait for it to be over.

“Harrison might be in the play,” their mom said.

“I don’t know yet,” said Harrison. “I don’t find out till Tuesday.”

“What’s the play?” Daniel asked.

“I forget the name. Something about someone who’s looking for ... I forget.”

“Do you want my dessert, Harrison?”

“Yeah! Thanks,” he said, reaching to take the plate.

“I think he’s had enough,” said their mother. “You have to watch your weight, little man,” she said, “or you’ll become a big fat man.” And she took the pie and ice cream away.

A car horn honked staccato beeps.

Daniel put on his shoes, said goodbye to his mom and Ted, and yelled goodbye to Harrison, who'd gone down to the basement.

"Paul, what's up?"

"Not much. Just strapped on a good size feedbag with the family," he said, and lit a cigarette.

"Can I bum a smoke?"

Save the section lit by the car's headlights, the country road was dark and empty. Paul drove fast. He put the one-hitter to his lips. "You want any of this?" he asked.

"Sure."

Josh's house stood alone, surrounded by acres of open fields. Loud muffled guitar music emanated from the home. The moon shone weakly.

All the young men celebrated their being together by drinking as much as they wanted and by smoking as much as they wanted. Daniel watched fireflies while pissing. The rest of the guys, save Mark and Daniel, were in the house. The temperature had dropped. They were drunk, their postures lax. Mark took his wallet from his left back pocket and produced a tiny, red, transparent zip-lock bag containing two grams of cocaine. "Go in the house and get a CD case," he said.

"She was beautiful when she was young. I mean, really gorgeous. I was in my basement," Mark said, "looking through old boxes, and I found a picture of her with my old man—she was probably about our age. Believe me, she was stunning." He said, "Do you remember when Adam and your dad got in the accident?"

"Of course," said Daniel.

“No, I was just wondering. I mean, you were young.”

“I remember it.”

Paul came out the back patio door.

“I’m going into town. Hit a bar. Are you guys coming?”

“Who’s all going?” Mark said.

“Just me. The rest of the guys are content to drink here all night. I say fuck that.”

“Yeah, I’m in,” Daniel said.

Mark offered to drive down because he hadn’t been drinking much.

Daniel’s forehead was pressed up against the back, right-hand window. The glass was cool. While grinding his teeth, he gnawed on his jaw.

Carol, Ashley, Sue and Cynthia sat at the bar, smoking and drinking, talking and laughing. Daniel sat down beside Ashley and ordered a whiskey and a beer.

“How’ve you been, Daniel?” she said.

“Okay, I guess.”

“How’s Toronto?”

“Good, I like it there,” he said. “It’s good, I think. I’m sorry, how are you?”

“Good. Really good.”

“Really good, eh?”

“Yes,” said Ashley, “I’m content.”

“Wow!”

“You don’t believe me?”

“How’s Eric?”

“He’s good. He didn’t feel like drinking tonight because he has a lot of work to do. Besides, tonight was kind of a girls’ night out thing.”

“I’m not ruining it, am I, the girls’ night out?”

“Well you’re sort of cramping my style.”

“I was your style for a while.”

“Fashion’s ephemeral,” she said.

Daniel finished his whiskey, ordered another, and drank beer while waiting.

“Eric and I moved in together,” she said.

“So your place’s out of the question, I guess.”

She laughed and Daniel lit a cigarette, forgetting he already had one burning.

“Can you imagine what it’d be like if you and I lived together?”

“Well,” she said.

“Have you?”

“Occasionally,” Ashley said.

“Let me get you a drink,” he said.

Ashley talked about how her parents never paid much attention to her and how most of her family ignores her, she claimed that it’s her sister they dote on—“They’re nuts about her for some Godforsaken reason”—and Daniel sat, smoking and drinking, listening intently.

Paul sat down on a stool beside Daniel. He tapped his shoulder.

“How you doin’?”

“Not bad but I’m pretty messed up. I’ve had a lot to drink.” Daniel burped under his breath. “I was doing a bit of the dummy dust with Mark and it’s kind of cracked me out a little. I’m a bit high-strung, you know. It’s stupid.”

“You’ll be fine,” said Paul. “Just don’t do any more.”

“Good advice.”

“I just wanted to let you know that I’m meeting Cynthia back at my place around three-thirty. So that’s what’s up. Don’t tell anyone, though.”

“I would never,” said Daniel.

“Yeah, I know, but don’t even tell Mark. He’ll say something to someone, I know it, so keep it quiet, all right?”

“Sure.”

His friends talked. Instead of talking, Daniel smoked. The big meal he’d eaten earlier, in conjunction with the baby laxative used to cut the cocaine, made him feel a strong desire to defecate.

“Daniel, c’mon, amigo. We’ll go back to my place,” Mark said. “You can crash there.”

“I was sort of thinking about calling this girl I know. Colleen Knight. You know her?”

“It’s a little late for that,” he said. “You don’t want to call her, man. It’s already quarter-after-three.”

“Oh.”

“C’mon, let’s go. Vámanos.”

“I’m just going to say goodbye to Ashley, okay?”

“Make it fast.”

Swiveling the stool to his right, Daniel interrupted Ashley’s friend Sue, apologized, but said he was leaving and wanted to say bye. He kissed Ashley’s cheek, said, “Take care, lady,” then stood up to go.

2

A gunshot startled Daniel out of sleep. He was in a bedroom, at Mark’s place. He knew where he was as soon as he opened his eyes. He rose from bed and did something uncharacteristic, something he only did when he had to dress up: back straight, he tucked his shirt into his trousers so as to create the illusion of composure. His stomach burned, his eyes smarted, and his teeth throbbed. With yellow and brown fingers, he massaged his hurting head. His heart felt cramped, his lungs like burnt toast. The TV was loud and electric with gunfire: a Western.

In the kitchen Mark searched cupboards.

“How was your sleep?” he asked.

“Okay,” Daniel said.

“Turn the TV down, Dad.”

“What?”

“The goddamn TV. You’ve got it blasting.”

“I’m watching John Wayne.”

“I know. You’ve been watching them all night,” Mark said. “Are we out of coffee?”

“I don’t know.”

“Fine. I’m going to get one. Would you like one?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Do you want one or not?” Mark said.

“Don’t trouble yourself.”

“I’m going there anyway. Shit Dad, I’m trying to ask you a simple question.”

“What?”

“Do you want a coffee or not?”

“No,” he said. “All right, with no cream, just sugar. But I don’t want any of that rip-off coffee—just go to Horton’s.”

“Okay,” he said. “Daniel, I’m going to get dressed and we’ll go. I’ll drive you home.”

While waiting in line, they couldn’t help but listen-in on a conversation between a woman and a man at a nearby table. The woman had a little boy with her. The little boy was wandering around, making noise. At first, the woman attempted to keep the boy quiet, but after a while she seemed to have given up. The woman said to the man, “He’s just too much. I never have a moment to myself, for God’s sake.” He didn’t say anything. “I miss work, I miss going out, I miss a lot of things. Frankly, Justin’s a twenty-four-hour-a-day job.” The little boy asked his mom if he could have another donut. Sighing, she said: “No.” As the child began to cry, the mother looked at the man with an expression that both appealed for help while iterating her confessed frustration.

When Daniel arrived back at his mother's he took a shower, then bleached his fingers. The Javex fogged and turned yellow. For a second he imagined shooting back the bleach. But first he had brunch with his family.

After brunch Daniel called Colleen Knight. No answer. He left a message telling her machine his numbers in London and Toronto. She already had both, he thought, but wanted to be sure. He wanted to sleep with her, to feel warm, to forget himself.

He called Paul. Since the weather was pleasant, the two decided to go for a drink on a bar patio. Daniel watched a television program about books while he waited for Paul to pick him up. The man on the screen was standing in front of a large bookcase talking about the knowledge he'd attained from reading and how it won't leave like, say, a lover would. His eyes were big and wet as he spoke fast about the benefits of books. Paul arrived and they set off. Paul's T-shirt read, MY GOD'S BETTER THAN YOUR GOD.

"I told Mark we'd get him on the way, okay?" Daniel said.

"Okay."

"How'd things go with Cynthia?" Daniel asked.

"Oh, good, man, good."

"Good."

"It's just odd, you know," he said. "She's still with Jamie, and he's a schmuck but an all right guy, so it's weird. I don't want to hurt this guy—I mean God, he's done nothing to me—but then again, the poor bastard's living a lie. I don't want to be the one to disillusion him, but, you know, her and I—well, shit—we fucked last night. So that's where it stands." He lit a cigarette. "I'm sick of this shit," he said.

"Maybe you should forget her."

“I know, I know,” said Paul. “All right, we’re here. This conversation’s over.”

Mark hopped in the back of Paul’s car.

They sat on a patio drinking beer.

Daniel got up from the table to go to the washroom. Above the urinal, in black magic marker, were the words, NO MATTER HOW HOT SHE IS, SOMEONE’S SICK OF HER SHIT. He made a phone call. Colleen wasn’t home but he didn’t leave a message.

“Drinking’s killing my short-term memory—I don’t remember her at all,” Paul said. “It doesn’t matter,” said Mark. “Where’s she now?” asked Daniel. “She’s at some stupid resort,” Mark began. “She’s the head of some recreation thing. It’s stupid. Anyway, she called me and she sounded all messed up and sad. She’d just broken her nose skiing.” “That sucks,” said Paul. “Yeah, I mean it was bound to happen. All she does is party and sports and— We need another round,” Mark said. “I’ll get this one. It’s my turn,” said Daniel.

“Hey, Danny boy,” Paul said. “You and Ashley looked fairly cozy together last night. Are you thinking of trying to get back with her or something?”

“She lives with Eric,” he said.

“So, it’s you she likes,” Paul said, then took a swig of beer. He continued, “I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to get back in the sack with her. She looks fantastic.”

“She did look good,” Mark said.

“She looked foxy, dude,” Paul said. While pretending to auto-asphyxiate himself with his left hand, he made a masturbatory motion in front of his crotch with his right.

“Yeah, well,” said Daniel, “I don’t think she wants anything to do with yours truly.”

“Why?” said Paul.

“I don’t know, because she’s probably mad at me.”

“Why?”

“You know why,” Daniel said.

“No, I don’t. Why?”

“I gave her a hard time. I didn’t treat her that well. I was selfish,” he said, taking a drink. “I thought I cared about her but I wouldn’t have done what I did had I cared.”

“Bullshit. You’re drunk,” said Paul. “I can’t believe this.”

“What? All I’m saying’s that I feel badly about hurting her and realize that I shouldn’t’ve behaved the way I did—and I should’ve thought a little more about her and a little less about me.”

“I know that’s what you’re saying and it’s total fucking bullshit, Dan.”

“Fuck you.”

“Settle, boys,” Mark said.

“Daniel,” Paul began, “big deal, you hurt her feelings—someone was going to. As far as I’m concerned, better you than some real asshole. She learned a valuable lesson: people aren’t always what they seem, especially the person you’re sleeping with. Simple.”

“Well I don’t want to be the one who hurts people in order for them to learn that life can be cruel or something. In a way, I want to apologize.”

“*Apologize,*” Paul shrieked. “I want to hit you. You have nothing to apologize for. Listen, she learned that guys can be assholes, and you learned that *you* can be an asshole, and that in a relationship you shouldn’t think about yourself so much—and you shouldn’t go around sleeping with other girls if you don’t want to hurt the person you’re with, right? So now you both try and make the best of the valuable knowledge you’ve gained from your brief time together and you move the fuck on. Life’s rough, get a helmet. And you don’t go back and apologize, you don’t get drunk and regretful. Do you think that right now she’s thinking about how you ruined her perception of romance? Are you that narcissistic? No way.”

“There’s more to it—”

“Right now she’s with that dork Eric, and I have no idea what she’s thinking, but it’s probably along the lines of, ‘I should find someone to fool around with behind Eric’s back because he’s not very bright and he’s too stupid to fuck me properly ...’ However, it *is* possible that you messed her up a bit, because now she’d rather be with some lifeless turd like Eric, as opposed to a guy like you, who’s albeit more interesting but capable of cheating. A guy like Eric would never cheat on a girl like Ashley because he shouldn’t even *be* with a girl like Ashley. Fortuna would never smile down upon that shit twice and he knows it, even though he’s an idiot. So you might’ve messed her up in that respect. Nevertheless, even if that’s the case, she deserves a loser like Eric. That’s her problem if she’s co-dependent, desperate, and weak. It’s her own doing.”

“All right, nice speech. Let’s get out of here,” Mark said.

“The rippers?” said Paul.

The MC’s generic voice echoed throughout the room. It was loud and he spoke fast, like a radio disc-jockey with the drive-time slot: “GENTLEMEN, GENTLEMEN, GENTLEMEN, if you like dark meat, we’ve got a woman for you! Put your hands together for the lovely Dominique, straight out of the Motor City. Oh c’mon, fellas. You can do better than that! Where’s your cocks?”

The applause grew louder.

Daniel, Paul and Mark sat drinking, silent, watching. No one in the bar seemed to be engaged in conversation, guys would elbow one another, speaking in terse, covert sentences, making crude jokes and ordering drinks, but no one was talking for extended periods of time. All eyes were transfixed on the young girl’s brown body.

The voice came back—loud, powerful, clear: “I want to hear some noise out there! And remember, gentlemen, shower shows every half an hour. And if you men are at all interested in having one of these fine looking ladies give you a private dance, then take one to our VIP lounge. Treat yourself like a king. Only fifteen-dollars a dance. Guaranteed to put a smile on your face, and possibly something hard in your pants, believe me. All right!”

Smoke hung from the rafters like big city smog. A large breasted blonde in a shear nighttie sat on Daniel’s lap. “Why so glum, cutie?” “I don’t know,” he said. “Come with me for a dance,” she whispered in his left ear, her breath warm: “I’ll make you feel good—promise. Don’t be nervous, honey. I’m Venus.”

Later, Daniel lay in his bed attempting to conjure up a naked woman. Penis in hand, he thought about Ashley but was unable to maintain an erection. He thought about some of the strippers, Venus and Dominique, the tiny tattooed one, but that didn't work, either. He resolved to sleep. Or maybe he just passed out.

3

"Hey, wake up, man! Get your shit together and let's get the fuck out of Dodge."

Daniel opened his dry eyes. Paul was looming large above him, wearing a T-shirt that read, EVOLUTION'S FOR HOMOS.

"Get me water," said Daniel. "I'm thirsty."

"I don't know about you but I'm ready to go back to T.O. I've spent way too much cash this weekend and I feel like a bag of shit. Are those cigarette burns?"

"Where?"

"On your arm."

"Shit, I don't know."

Before leaving, Daniel jotted down a quick note for his mom, Ted and Harrison, and left it on the kitchen table, saying that he'd left.

The ride from London to Toronto was similar to the ride from Toronto to London, Paul smoked and Daniel felt worried and tired.

Daniel unlocked his apartment door, dropped his bags, and fixed himself a drink. He called out to Nick: "Would you like something to drink?" Nick said yes so he made him a gin and tonic and brought it to him. He was on his computer.

"Did I miss much?"

"Not really," said Nick. "Did you have a good time?"

"No, not really."

"Yeah, nothing too exciting happened around here."

"I can't believe how much garbage is in the streets."

"From the parade."

"Yeah."

"It'll all be out of sight tomorrow," Nick said. "Oh, you've got a few messages, bud. Mr. Ang from work called, Harry called, and some girl, Colleen something."

"Colleen Knight."

"Yeah, I think so. I saved it. It's on the machine."

And it was, it was Colleen Knight. Her message said she was sorry that they didn't get together while he was in town but she said she really wanted to talk to him because they have a lot of catching up to do and she hoped that he'd call her soon and she was disappointed he'd left so early—a-and the reason she didn't call him was because her family went to her grandparents' place in Chatham for Easter.

He poured himself another drink, sat down, and dialed Colleen's number.

She greeted him enthusiastically. She said she had *big news* to share, if he had the time.

"Let's hear it," he said.

“All right, you’re most likely going to think I’ve gone completely nuts—most of my friends do—but I don’t care—you can make fun of me all you like.”

“This sounds intriguing. It comes with a disclaimer, for God’s sake.”

“I don’t know how to tell you so I’ll just say it, and please don’t be too harsh on me, but I go to church now. I found God.”

“Where was he?”

“Ha, ha, very funny. I tell you I’ve found God and that’s the best you can come up with. You’re losing it, Danny.”

“Well, this wasn’t what I was expecting.”

“And what were you expecting?” she said.

“I don’t know. I thought you might be going to teach English in Korea or something like that—you know, the kind of stuff you do. I’m sorry if I seem skeptical but you’re not the first person that comes to my mind when I think of the word *pious*. Are you serious about this?”

“Very.”

“You don’t think this is just a passing kick, like drugs, or like back-packing across Europe?”

“No, Daniel. I know it’s hard to believe, but I’m now a believer,” she said.

“Weird, eh?” And she started to laugh.

“How’d this happen?”

“About a month ago, I went to church with my mom and dad—they go every Sunday but I rarely go with—and I was just sitting there listening to what the preacher had to say, and everything he said made sense to me. *Real sense*. I found it moving and

true, touching; it was like he knew me. That's when it happened, the movement of the Spirit," she said. "I've never felt anything like it before. And I started crying. Bawling. It was too much to take."

"Jesus, you're saying you had a major religious experience."

"Yeah, it was big! This is going to sound unbearably cliché, but I see things differently now, Daniel. They're clearer."

"Wow!"

"I know," she said, laughing. "I'm the real me now. It feels wild. I have no chains anymore."

"So have you completely changed your lifestyle? Like do you still smoke and drink?" he asked.

"I don't smoke anymore. Besides, I'd almost fully quit before this. And drinking, I mean, I had wine with dinner last night but I don't feel the urge to go out and get destroyed—drugs and alcohol would mess things up. I was sick of waking up feeling like death anyway. I feel alive."

"But if you and I were to go out some time, you'd have some drinks with me, right?"

"A couple, sure," Colleen said. "Daniel, you know when you wake up after a night of partying and you feel guilty and terrible? Well that's your conscience trying to tell you something. When your conscience's banging on you, that's your ticket out. It means you've been living a sad life."

"Yeah, well ..."

“I felt I wanted out of that rut. Life isn’t about what you can’t do, it’s about what you *can* do. I have to be careful because I don’t want to sound like some Tony Robbins-type—but there’s just so much. Life’s about getting the good. If you want, there’s a new life to be had. You can rid yourself of sin, it sounds cheesy but it works, Daniel. A lot of my friends think I’ve gone off the deep end but this is where the Holy Spirit and Jesus come into the picture.”

“You know, I don’t want to sound contemptuous of your decision to, to walk with God,” Daniel began, “but you’re Colleen Knight. We’ve had a lot of fun, right? And now Jesus and the Holy Spirit have claimed you. I want to be honest with you, it does come off as a bit nuts.”

“Maybe, but I feel much better now than I did before. Salvation—I understand what the word means. And to me it’s not nuts at all because I know that this is good and real. I feel it in my bones. When you’re first new with the Lord He gives you special attention. Don’t you ever hear that voice inside your body, not your head? I was a weak person, desperate, and now I feel empowered. I used to question the existence of God all the time, but He’s always provided for you, He’s always been there—why wouldn’t you believe?”

“I can think of a few reasons,” he said and asked: “You use the word *He* when you mention God. Do you think God’s a man?”

“I don’t know. But Jesus Christ was a man.”

“Do you read the Bible now?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Do you believe it all to be true?”

“I don’t take every passage literally. But it helps you begin to live a better life, to understand life, and it helps you relate to your love for the Lord.”

“I can’t believe this. This is cracked out.”

“I know,” she said.

“Colleen, in *Catcher in the Rye*,” Daniel said, searching a bookshelf, “wait half a second ... Sorry ... I know I have it marked ... Bear with me ... Yes, okay, here it is ... Holden says, ‘What really knocks me out is a book that, when you’re all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it.’ I’ve sort of thought that that’s the sort of effect the Bible has on its readers.”

“Well, there’s no question the Bible has a profound effect on its readers, and, yes, it does make you want to *know* God—but why does that have to be a bad thing? It doesn’t have to be a sinister thing,” she said. “Most people believe in God, they’re just scared of religion, which makes sense, you know, but God wants you to make a conscious act of faith. If you do, He’ll be there for you.”

“I don’t know about this.”

“You over-think things. You have to be careful with logic. It’s a curse, after all.”

“All right,” he said, “I have to ask. Sex: Will you still partake in sexual intercourse outside the sacred bonds of marriage, or are you a born-again virgin or something?”

Colleen laughed. “No, I’m not a born-again virgin per se but I don’t think I’d just have casual sex ever again. It doesn’t interest me. I have no need for it.”

“No need for it? I’m sure the Lord wants you to enjoy the body he gave you. Sex is a way for two people to be close and feel good and—”

“I agree with you, sex is a wonderful way for two people to be close and feel good, but by that rationale, shouldn’t you really respect the person you’re making love to?”

“Just because it’s casual sex doesn’t mean you don’t respect them and want to debase them or something.”

“I know,” she said.

“Would you have sex with someone who didn’t share your belief system, then, but totally respected your decision to, you know, lead a Christian life?”

“I guess I’d have sex with someone I wasn’t married to, realistically, and I’d probably have sex with someone who didn’t share my belief system. But the truth is, I don’t think I’d be attracted to someone who didn’t believe in God. I want to share my love for God with my partner. He’s important to me. God loves you, Daniel. And He wants you to love Him back. The atmosphere’s so embracing—it’s an unseen world and I think you’d cherish it. He wants to give you everything you’ve ever wanted—love, understanding, peace of mind. It’s overwhelming. I’ve never felt such intense love before. I know God’s glad I came back to Him. My whole life I’ve had a sneaking suspicion that there was a God—is a God—and now I’m positive. You’ll never be lonely again. Think about the love, Daniel. It’s intoxicating warmth that doesn’t leave. Talk to Him. Let Him know you love Him, He’ll respond. He wants to love you, He wants to help. He wants to take you in. I love you, Daniel, and I want you to feel what I’m

feeling—I want everyone to feel what I’m feeling. I want for you and me to feel this way together. Think about all the undying warmth and love. Think about getting better.”

As he listened, he thought about how nice it’d be not to feel lonely, unsettled, and he fantasized about being in bed with Colleen: he pictured himself lying up against her warm naked body, with his face planted between her idyllic breasts, his eyelids sealed, studying the large darkness, while she talked about how much undying love there is in the universe, about getting better. He took a swig of his drink. Daniel, then, became aware of his hard-on.

Emperor 'Q

(Jeb Fraser, a.k.a. Emperor 'Q, a very heavysset and sunburned man, stands behind an outdoor aquamarine tiled bar, wearing a Hawaiian shirt and white chef's hat, with two large BBQs to his left, the viewer's right. In the background the ocean can be seen and white sand beach. To Jeb's right, the viewer's left, two people are sitting at the bar, Prof. Haddock, a slim, old, grey-goateed man in a short-sleeved orange-and-white check button-down, and Miss Carla, an attractive Mexican lounge singer in a pink bikini top and floral sarong.)

EMP: Welcome to 'Emperor 'Q,' presented to you in part by the Food TV Network in association with Señor Frog's, shot here on location at the beautiful Cancún Springs Resort and Hotel in sunny Cancún, Mexico. I'm your host Jeb Fraser, and today on 'Emperor 'Q' we'll be making my famous El Diablo barbequed pork spareribs in a Jack Daniel's sauce, which should prove to have delicious consequences. Also with me today are retired Northwestern Professor, Professor William Haddock, and the astonishingly lovely Miss Carla, a lounge singer here at our very own Cancún Springs Resort and Hotel. Are you excited to make some ribs, Miss Carla?

MC: Don't you think it's weird to eat ribs?

EMP: No. *[Chuckling.]* Why?

MC: It's weird. I mean Eve was made from Adam's rib.

Prof.: It was taken from him while he was sleeping, the poor bastard.

EMP: Yes! They're life giving, these succulent ribs.

MC: It seems kind of wrong to eat ribs. It's bárbaro, no?

EMP: Yes, let's get to the barbacoa!

MC: I don't know about ribs.

Prof.: You know Hitler was a vegetarian.

EMP: *See*—eating ribs is good!

Prof.: But I'm not saying this to discredit vegetarianism. As Peter Singer says, and I'm paraphrasing, 'Just because Hitler had a nose doesn't mean we should cut off ours.'

EMP: Well you're not a vegetarian, Professor, are you? and neither are you Miss Carla!

So let's get on with the show, shall we ...

MC: It's just I can feel my ribs. [*Carla touches her ribs, below her bikini top.*] It's gross to think of someone eating my ribs.

EMP: These aren't human ribs, Miss Carla—they're pork spareribs! We're going to barbeque them in a tasty JD sauce. You eat pork, don't you, Miss Carla?

MC: Yes, but not ribs.

EMP: Well ribs is what we're 'Q-ing today. [*Jeb wipes brow with white linen serviette.*]

Man it's a hot one!

Prof.: How's about a drink, Jeb?

EMP: The Emperor's a little hung-over today, and he's feeling a little guilty and shameful. Let's stick with the plan. Let's 'Q some ribs!

Prof.: [*The Prof. stands.*] 'All is confounded, all! / Reproach and everlasting shame / Sits mocking in our plumes.' [*He sits.*]

EMP: What's that?

MC: *Henry V*, right?

Prof.: Correct.

EMP: That's Shakespeare, kids. Still, I'm feeling lousy. Wow it's hot!

Prof.: As the ethanol from last night's booze burns off your brain, your shame receptors flood. Hair of the dog, my boy, and you'll be fine. Remember: 'Where there is yet shame, there may in time be virtue.'

EMP: What's that?

Prof.: The good Dr. Johnson. We need some cocktails, Jeb, they'll cool us down quick.

EMP: All right, Professor, you make a convincing argument—let's turn to the blender!
[*Jeb produces large blender from under the aquamarine tiled bar.*] We'll make some Captain Creamsicles. They're delicious. How's that sound? Sound good?

Prof.: Sounds good to me.

 [*Together.*]

MC: Bueno.

EMP: Okay. We need some of Captain Morgan's Original Spiced Rum—there's always rum in a good tropical blender drink [*he produces bottle of Captain Morgan® from under bar*]—and we'll need some vanilla ice cream and orange sherbet [*which he also produces*

from under bar]. Now we need about two ounces of the Captain per person, so I'll pour in approximately six ounces rum [*he pours without measuring*]. And then equal parts vanilla ice cream and orange sherbet [*he adds large scoops of both to blender*]. Now we blend. Oh, but first put on the lid. [*He secures lid.*] Professor, remember the time I forgot to put on the lid and you and I had some Barnaby's Buffalo Blizzards all over of us?

Prof.: [*Laughing.*] Indeed.

EMP: [*Laughing.*] That was a hoot. Man it's hot! [*Jeb wipes brow.*] Kids, avoid the Alien Urine and Acapulco Zombies. They give you one helluva sinister hangover! All right, let's do it. [*He begins blending.*] Look at it go!

Prof.: [*Speaking loudly.*] Come on already! Let's drink!

EMP: [*Speaking loudly.*] In due time, Professor, in due time! Carla, are you singing tonight?

MC: Yes, sí.

EMP: [*Speaking loudly.*] What?

MC: [*Speaking loudly.*] ¡Sí! ¡En la sala Aguas verdes! ¡A las diez!

EMP: [*Speaking loudly.*] That's great! She's fantastic, really something to see! For those of you folks watching this on Resort TV, be sure to check her out!

MC: [*Speaking loudly.*] ¡Gracias, Jeb!

EMP: [*Speaking loudly.*] ¡De nada! Okay the Captain Creamsicles should be ready! [*He stops blender.*] And now we just pour them in tall glasses over some ice. [*Jeb produces three glasses with ice from under bar. He pours drink from blender into said glasses.*] Here you go, Professor, and here you go, Carla [*he hands Prof. and Carla drinks*]. Cheers. [*He raises glass.*]

Prof.: Cheers.

MC: ¡Salud!

(They all touch glasses and then take big swigs.)

Prof.: That's the stuff, isn't it?

EMP: Yes, sir.

MC: It is a nice drink, Jeb.

EMP: Thank you. I need to cool down. [*Jeb downs drink. He undoes a few buttons of Hawaiian shirt, exposing large portion of hairless lobster-red chest.*] Dammit! [*He grabs head, holding tightly.*] DAMMIT!

MC: You okay, Jeb?

EMP: [*Responds with pained moans.*]

Prof.: I think he's got a bit of what's known as an ice cream headache, Miss Carla. Is that right, Jeb? Do you have an ice cream headache?

EMP: Oh, God, yes! [*Jeb throws chef's hat to the ground, then resumes clenching head.*]

Man it hurts!

Prof.: It'll go away, son, don't you worry.

MC: He's turning really red!

Prof.: He'll be fine.

(Jeb's still holding his head.)

MC: Are you okay, Jeb?

EMP: [*Responds with pained moans.*]

Prof.: It's all right. It'll be over soon.

MC: Sit, Jeb, sit.

(He sits on stool behind bar.)

Prof.: Is it getting better?

EMP: [*He nods and loosens grip on head.*] Yeah. [*He exhales deeply and looks directly into camera.*] Yeah.

MC: You okay, Jeb?

EMP: Yeah, sorry about that, folks. The ice cream really hurt my head. Let that be a lesson, kids: Don't eat ice cream too fast! It really does a number on your melon.

Prof.: After that I'm sure we could all probably use another drink, my boy.

EMP: All right, all right. But let's build these ones in glasses.

Prof.: Fine by me.

EMP: How's about a round of something simple? How's about some Beach Bums? I'm a beach bum [*he chuckles*], so why not?

Prof.: Sounds good to me.

 [*Together.*]

MC: Bueno.

EMP: [*Jeb produces three fresh ice-filled glasses from under bar, along with a bottle of Bacardi®, some orange juice, and Sprite®.*] These are easy. You just serve them in highball glasses, and you can build them in them too. It's just one part Bacardi Limon Rum [*without measuring, he pours rum in all three glasses*]; one part OJ [*without measuring, he pours juice in the three glasses*]; and then one part Sprite [*again, he pours without measuring into the three glasses*]. And then [*he picks up a red plastic stir stick*], you stir [*and he stirs drinks*]. And voilà! You've got yourself a round of Beach Bums. It's that easy. All right [*he raises glass*], cheers!

MC: ¡Salud!

Prof.: To your head!

(They all touch glasses and take big swigs from drinks.)

EMP: It's a hot one today, I tell you! I can't seem to cool down. [*He pulls back and forth at shirt, trying to create breeze.*] Wow!

MC: It's not that bad, Jeb.

EMP: I'm burnin' up here. [*Jeb downs drink, then wipes forehead.*] All right, we should get to the 'Q before we run out of time. [*Jeb starts breathing heavily, i.e., more heavily than usual. He sits back on stool.*]

MC: You don't look so good, Jeb.

EMP: I'm having ... problems ... breathing.

Prof.: He's hyperventilating. Get him a paper bag!

(Miss Carla jumps over bar and produces brown paper bag, which she tries to give to Jeb but he swats it away.)

Prof.: Come on, son, take the bag—you're hyperventilating!

MC: Please, Jeb, take it!

(Jeb is huffing and puffing, bracing himself on the bar.)

Prof.: Take the damn bag, Jeb!

(Jeb takes bag and breathes into it. Slowly, his breathing becomes less strained.)

MC: There you go. *[Miss Carla rubs Jeb's back.]* It's okay.

EMP: *[Takes bag away from mouth.]* I'm such an idiot.

MC: No!

EMP: Yes I am. I'm pathetic. Look at me!

MC: It's okay. *[She continues rubbing his back.]*

EMP: I'm a loser. Look at me, I'm a clown. Christ it's hot!

Prof.: Come now, Jeb, it's all right.

EMP: No! No, it's not all right! I'm falling apart. I should just die.

MC: ¡Ay! [*Miss Carla slaps his back.*] Don't talk stupid talk!

EMP: No, I should. I should take my life. I'm a damn embarrassment.

Prof.: Jeb, Hitler didn't kill himself till he had the blood of tens of millions on his hands and he knew he was going to lose the war. *He* had something to kill himself over! He killed his dog, Blondi, and then himself—and Eva Braun killed herself, too. *You* have no reason to kill yourself!

EMP: I feel so much shame.

Prof.: It can be limitless, really, but it'll hopefully pass.

EMP: I'm a damn fool.

Prof.: So? There's room in this world for fools like you. Besides, you're a good man.

MC: Sí. You're a good man. [*Miss Carla resumes rubbing his back.*]

EMP: No I'm not. [*Tears start streaming down his cheeks.*] I'm nobody. I don't even know who I am. I'm nothing.

Prof.: You're a great chef. And of course you don't know who you are, son—that's

because you're an artist! Remember what Keats said, an artist is 'continually informing—and filling some other Body.' You'll never know who you are, Jeb—because you're a creator!

EMP: I'm a fat fool!

Prof.: So you could stand to lose some weight. Nevertheless, you're an artist. People love Emperor 'Q!

MC: You're the Emperor, Jeb! We love you! [*Miss Carla gives Jeb a kiss on the cheek.*]

EMP: [*He blows nose into white linen serviette.*]

Prof.: What do you say you make some of your famous El Diablo ribs?

EMP: What's the point? We're out of time. Besides, Miss Carla won't eat ribs.

MC: Yes I will, Jeb. I'll eat anything you 'Q!

EMP: Really?

MC: I love your 'Q! You're so good at it.

Prof.: Come on, son, let's do it.

EMP: But we're out of time.

Prof.: Miss Carla and I don't have to be anywhere. Isn't that right, Miss Carla? Let's 'Q!

EMP: Are you sure?

Prof.: Yes!

[*Together.*]

MC: ¡Sí!

EMP: All right. [*Jeb disappears under bar and reappears wearing chef's hat.*] Well, we're out of time but Miss Carla, the Professor, and me are going to 'Q some ribs—

Prof.: Jeb [*holding up empty glass*]!

EMP: In a sec, Professor. Anyway, till next time, I'm Jeb Fraser, and you've been watching 'Emperor 'Q,' presented to you in part by the Food TV Network in association with Señor Frog's, shot here on location at the beautiful Cancún Springs Resort and Hotel in sunny Cancún, Mexico. Sorry about the crackup, folks! And for those of you watching this on RTV, don't forget to check out Miss Carla's show at the Aguas Verdes

Lounge at ten o'clock. Anyway, hasta luego, folks! And keep on 'Q-ing! [*Jeb and Miss Carla wave to camera, the Professor does not.*]

FIN

Conversation at

Four a.m.

He kisses her neck, while she sleeps, with little pressure. Staring at her, he thinks of the warmth and desire her face inspires inside of him. He feels foolish and happy loving her so much, overjoyed and sentimental. For a brief moment he entertains the possibility that she will die before him, maybe become terminally ill, or be hit by a car. His eyes tear. Feeling foolish, he wipes them. He kisses her warm cheek. She doesn't stir. Again, lightly, he kisses her, not in order to wake her, but because he can't help himself. Again, again, and again he kisses her—cheek, forehead, cheek, neck, ear, cheek.

He lays his head, eyes heavy with the weight of alcohol; they close. The bedsprings squeak as she flips herself, repositioning. She sits up. His eyes open.

"I had a terrible nightmare," she says.

"What?"

"I had a terrible nightmare."

"About what?"

"I was at some party somewhere, you were there, and I was raped in the bathroom."

"What," he says, sitting up.

"No one heard. There was a line outside but no one heard."

"It was just a dream," he says. "Don't worry."

“I don’t know how he got in the washroom.”

“Did I kick the shit out of him?”

“I didn’t get to that part,” she says.

“Did you scratch him and kick him?”

“I think I just wanted it to be over.”

“You didn’t fight him?”

“I don’t know.”

“You would, though, wouldn’t you?” he says.

“I don’t know.”

“*Really?*” he says. “I’d fucking kill him.”

“I know you’d do your best to protect me, baby.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” she says. “But I know you don’t like to fight.”

“Are you kidding me? This is different.”

In the dark room, he grits his teeth.

He says, “I’d kill him. Fuck the consequences, I’d kill him.”

“You’d still love me, wouldn’t you?”

“What?”

“You’d still love me?”

“If you were raped?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t want to talk about this. I’ll never get to sleep now,” he says, lying down.

“Listen, it didn’t really happen, okay. Let’s try and sleep.”

How Much Do They Know?

Christmastime, a time to indulge in the carnivalesque with old friends. I sit here, at the head of a long, green, wooden table. Actually, it's not one table, but three, of equal shape and size, pushed together so as to make one big table. Sitting here are some of my oldest, loudest, drunkest friends. I've known these people for much too long now. Blair and I, for instance, were in kindergarten together. Shit, Susan and I went to the same Montessori (we didn't know each other till we were teenagers—but still, we went to the same Montessori ...). Question: How many of the girls at this table have I acquired carnal knowledge of? Answer: three—Kylie, Carol, and Lauren. Sadly, Susan has never let me sleep with her. She's a great looking girl. Once, drunk one night, Susan and I played around a little, nothing major, just heavy petting and, you know, we started to touch each other's parts but, unfortunately for me, common sense kicked in, and we (she) decided we've been friends for entirely too long to mess up our friendship by having sex blah, blah, blah. I've never had sex with Paula, either. Paula and Andrew have been a couple for going on seven years now, and Andrew and I are *really* good friends, so I've never even attempted to convince Paula to fool around with me. Don't get me wrong, though, I'm not some champion of morality. Oh no, not at all. Case in point: Kylie. Kylie and Jeremy (who's sitting two seats down from me, on my right-hand side) have been an item for about three years and I've been sleeping with Kylie—on and off—all three of those years. I don't think Jeremy has any idea whatsoever.... Oh, yeah, I've never fucked Cynthia. I want to—does that count for anything? Purportedly Cynthia's a

woman who doesn't need a boyfriend for identity's sake. The truth be known, however, she's been screwing Blair on the sly for about a year. No one knows. Well, I know. But that's because Blair and I've been friends for so damn long that he'd be a real asshole not to tell such an old, trusted bud the whole truth about who he's sleeping with, right? Right. The reason Blair and Cynthia have to keep their sexual encounters secret is Mandy: i.e., Blair's girlfriend. Mandy's not here this evening. I'm willing to bet the whole kit and caboodle that Cynthia and Blair go home together tonight. It's inevitable. There's another reason that Cynthia and Blair keep their sex secret: and that's Mike. Mike and Cynthia used to be together, for about a year or so. Not anymore. But Cynthia, always the considerate one, doesn't want to cause Mike any further grief—which is why she's cool with Blair still being with Mandy. Can you believe this shit?

I look around this table and I wonder: How much do these people know about one another? I'm sure we all know a few secrets apiece; but do they know as much as I know? I know so much. I know that Stuart wants Paula so badly that it's affected almost every decision he's made since graduating high school. He could've gone away to university—it would've given him a chance to do something—but *no*—gotta follow Paula! Andrew's probably his best friend, too. Sometimes I wonder if Andrew's Stuart's best friend because he truly likes Andrew better than anyone else, or is it because it gets him closer to Paula? I'm putting the safe money on the latter. Paula: the woman who controls Stuart's destiny. She has no idea. The rest of us know—some of us know more than others—but she has no idea. She simply thinks that Stuart dotes on her because they're really *great friends*. She's so dense. Or maybe she's not that clueless. Perhaps she just enjoys having her own personal, pathetic sycophant. In any case, he's probably

good for her self-esteem. (Lord knows Andrew isn't.) Poor Stuart. Poor Andrew. Poor Paula. Unfuckinbelievable. Stuart told me everything one night, over a bottle of Jameson and a few beers, the guy spilt his guts. He confessed every last repugnant detail regarding his infatuation with Paula so that I might possibly grasp the depths of this brand of depravation. He told me that once, drunk off of his ass, he crashed at her house, 'cause he couldn't drive, and while she was sleeping, he sorted through her laundry hamper in search of a pair of her unwashed panties to sniff. He started crying while relating this story to me. He felt so ashamed. I told him he should really stop hanging around her so much. He told me that that's not an option. Is Stuart dangerous? No. He's not dangerous at all. At least as far as others are concerned. Nevertheless, he's certainly creepy. I mean, so what? maybe he did smell a pair of Paula's panties, but why would he admit this to me? Jesus. I'm no analyst. I'm not his priest.

Who else is at my table? Adam. Adam Levine. I fucking hate him with a passion. I have to drink with him, though, because it's Christmastime and all the other people at this table like that smug, sarcastic little bastard. (I wish I possessed the power to telekinetically transmogrify his beer into bleach.)

Carol, oh, Carol. Now Carol's seeing Adam. Adam that fuck. But do you know what I know that Carol doesn't? Adam and Jeremy were doing coke in the washroom about fifteen minutes ago. Carol would flip her lid if she had any goddamn idea those two shits were snorting coke under her nose (unintentional pun).

How about this piece of info: I know for a fact that Kylie sucked Adam's cock over Thanksgiving weekend. How do I know this? Because Kylie told me so. And here's the best part: she told me so after *we* finished fucking! Nice post-coital

conversation, eh? I can't believe she fellated that fuck. What the hell would Carol do if she knew? What the hell would Jeremy do if he knew his sweet precious Kylie has slept with me in the past few months *and* sucked-off that sonofabitch Adam? Oh Jesus, can you imagine?

But look at them all, drinking and laughing—to the untrained eye these people look like the best of friends. I have seen the light, though. I know. All that vile mendacity: LOOK AT IT ALL! Buddy fucks buddy's girlfriend, buddy buys buddy drink. Yes. Perfect. Girlfriend's boyfriend's out humping someone else's girlfriend, boyfriend gets home and she gives him a blowjob. Why, you might ask? Who the fuck knows. They don't. If they did, they wouldn't be able to stand the sight of one another. Or do they know? Maybe we all know and accept it because we're up to no good ourselves. Why should we be so concerned with others' lies when we're lying too? Beautiful, isn't it? I really don't understand why we tolerate each other....

I don't know for sure, but I think Blair might've raped Lauren a few years back. I repeat: I do not know this for a fact. It's just that once, when I was sort of seeing Lauren, she told me that he kind of had sex with her against her will. I'd asked her if she'd ever slept with Blair—they'd dated for a little while—and she said, "Sort of." I asked her what this *sort of* meant. She told me that one night things were getting hot and heavy and they were naked and rubbing each other and doing all that oral stuff and then she said no more tonight, Blair, and he said OK, and they decided to go to sleep, but they were still nude, and she said she woke-up and Blair was starting to insert himself inside her. He stopped after she told him to. But she told me that she's never been able to look at him the same since. I don't know if I believe Lauren. That's not really something Blair

would do. Besides, Lauren's told lies about me before. Lauren told Cynthia that her and I'd been together for a while and that we were having sex all the time and none of that was true, at the time. But then again, maybe Blair did rape her ... I had a bizarre conversation with him once when I was sort of seeing Lauren. He said, "Conor, have you slept with Lauren yet?" We just did a couple of days before (that's when she told me about Blair). "Yes, we just did a few days ago." He said, "She's really fuckin' good in the sack, eh?" I said, "Yes, she is." But I was very disturbed by what he'd said. I mean, if I'd raped a girl and thought that there was a definite possibility one of my best friends knew I'd done such a terrible thing *maybe* I'd be clever enough to say something like, "She's really fuckin' good in the sack, eh?," because what kind of deviant would rape a girl—or rather, attempt to rape a girl—and then turn around and praise her skills in the *sack*? I really don't know what to make of it. Maybe he was being sincere. Maybe he was just expressing how good a fuck he thought she was months after they fucked. If they fucked. Maybe she lied to me ... Maybe he lied to me ... Shit ... It's too much to keep track of.

How much do they know about me? If I know so much about every one of them, how much do they know about me? Do they know I still harbor feelings for Carol? Do they know that I shouldn't have smoked those joints with Stuart and Mike? Do they know that I shouldn't be drinking this much? Do they know that I propositioned Susan tonight? (I asked her if she'd like to crash at my pad. She said, "Oh, thanks, Jason. I might split a cab home with Andrew and Paula. But if I don't, that'd be great." We both knew I didn't mean it like that. Anyway, it was nice of her to humour me.) Do they all know how much I fucking loathe Adam? Do they know how badly I want to sleep with

Susan? Do they know that a month ago Kylie told me she's been in love with me for going on two years so I've been avoiding her ever since? Do they know I already vomited in the washroom twice tonight? They must know the answers to some of these questions—they must!

Fuck it. No more. I'm spilling the beans. I'm going to tell them the truth about themselves before they discover the truth about me. I'm going to tell Andrew and Paula that Stuart's in love with Paula—and he sniffs her panties. I'm going to tell Carol that Adam was doing coke in the washroom just fifteen minutes ago. I'm going to tell everybody that Blair and Cynthia are fucking (sorry, Mike, but you had to find out sooner or later). *Carol, by the way, if that turd Adam's snorting lines in the washroom wasn't bad enough, guess what ... ? Kylie sucked his dick over Thanksgiving. That's right, she gave him head.... May I have everybody's attention ... ? Please ... Ladies and Gentlemen, my name is Jason Conor, and I have something to say. And believe me, you'll wanna hear this ... All right, here it goes: Blair tried to rape Lauren ... Or at least that's what Lauren told me. Is it true? Is it? Oh, shit! I cannot wait to let these people know everything about themselves and their lies. It'll be hysterical. Ho, ho, ho, motherfuckers. Merry fuckin' Christmas, you fucks! I'm setting the record straight. I'm letting the truth be known. It's about time somebody had the guts.*

The Sit

The puddle was filled with stars. Sarah circuitously sidestepped it, not wanting to upset the image. The rain had stopped for the moment, but Sarah didn't mind either way. She never cursed the rain when it poured, though it wasn't a morbid fascination with the bleak and mundane that allowed her to appreciate rainfall; she simply liked how things looked when wet. The subdivision's streetlights had been out for five minutes. Her cheeks were cold, damp and crimson. She exhaled clouds as she walked with her head tilted skywards, wondering where all the rain went. Stars twinkled out of the dark blue nightscape. Without electricity, the neighbourhood was silent, save the sounds of water running into storm sewers.

She reached the Simmons' house, lifted the cold brass knocker, then let it drop. A beam of light was released as the door opened. Sarah stood in the flashlight's ray, beads of water gliding down her yellow rubber coat. "You got caught in the rain," Mr. Simmons said. "Yes," said Sarah, "but it's stopped." "Come in," he said. "Crazy, this power-outage shouldn't be much longer."

With candle in hand, hiking up the bottom of her long black dress, wary of her high-heeled feet, Mrs. Simmons descended the staircase, stunning yet flustered. "Sarah, right?" "Yes." "Thanks so much for coming tonight. I know it was short notice. Samantha Carlyle—maybe you know her—couldn't make it. She's off with her parents somewhere. Anyway, James and I really appreciate you coming to watch Haley. Laurie

Styles has nothing but good things to say about you,” she said, smiling, and then: “Look at you, you’re soaked! James, please take Sarah’s coat and hang it in the washroom.” “Thank you,” Sarah said, removing her raincoat. “And get her a towel, too, dear,” said Mrs. Simmons. “It’s okay, I don’t need a towel.” James took her coat. “We shouldn’t be too late,” Mrs. Simmons continued. “We’ll be home around midnight, maybe even earlier.” Sarah nodded. “Haley’s a really quiet child. I don’t imagine you’ll have any problems. But if you do, I left James’s pager number on the fridge. I doubt you’ll have any problems. She’s really wonderful.” “I’m sure,” said Sarah. “I don’t think you’ll have to do anything but check in on her once in a while—if that. She’s already asleep and probably won’t stir the entire time we’re out.”

James returned wearing a long black coat and carrying an umbrella and a similar looking black coat for Mrs. Simmons. “Darling,” he said. And he helped her into it, and Mrs. Simmons said: “Haley’s room’s the second one, on the right-hand side, at the top of the stairs. You might want to avoid the upstairs so you don’t wake her, unless you hear her milling about.” “Okay.” “Now Sarah, my son Alex is home but I doubt you’ll see him.” “Oh,” said Sarah. “He’s not well.” “Deidre, we better get going,” James said, tapping on his watch-face. “All right, Sarah, have a nice time. Hopefully the power comes back soon and you can watch TV. There’s ginger ale in the fridge, amongst other things, and you’re welcome to help yourself to anything. See you around midnight, dear. Oh, James, give her your flashlight.” He pressed it into her hands. The front door shut.

Sarah bent down and felt the cuffs of her brown corduroy pants, which were wet, even though she’d been wearing rubber boots. She sighed, touched her toes three times,

then took a deep breath while stretching her arms out into the atmosphere and her small chest swelled with air. She exhaled.

The front corridor was large, shaped like a horseshoe, with the staircase to her left. The flashlight's beam hit a crystal vase, causing it to refract and project a pattern of multi-coloured stars on the concave wall. As she manipulated her light, the stars shifted to and fro and the wall looked kaleidoscopic.

She set off on an exploration of the main floor. A black baby-grand piano sat in the corner of a white walled room, with white carpeting and white sofas. She stood in front of the piano and played random notes but quickly ceased when she recalled a sleeping child was in the house.

Straight ahead into the kitchen. Shining its bright beam on the ceiling, with an outstretched hand in front of the incandescent bulb, she made a giant shadow-hand loom large above her. She switched it off. She switched it on and made a shadow-puppet rooster. She switched it off. Switching her flashlight on, Sarah continued on into the television room.

Current surged, filaments glowed, and the house began to hum.

She switched her flashlight off.

The television was massive. She considered attempting to turn it on but didn't want to disrupt it, for fear she'd somehow break it. The room was dark in colour, with book-lined walls, a mahogany coffee table, and navy blue leather sofas. There were scattered children's toys, however, that brightened the room considerably.

Examining some of the shelved books, running an index finger along them as she walked, Sarah found photo albums. She recognized them as photo albums because they

had landscapes on their bubbled spines. She grabbed three: one with palm trees and a yellow, red, and orange sunset; another with a thick green forest; and the third had a sunny beach, with deeply tanned people tanning. The photos were from when Deirdre was still married to Mr. Hewitt. Occasionally, Mr. Hewitt used to come over and drink with Sarah's dad and every once in a while they'd play golf or squash or shoot trap. Sarah wasn't interested, though, in photos of Mr. Hewitt on his boat or golfing or playing tennis; she was much more intrigued by boyhood photos of Alex Hewitt: Alex at camp, as a boy scout, reading, with a beagle in a pile of brown crumpling leaves, playing baseball and basketball and hockey, etc. She re-shelved the photo albums and went to the kitchen for a glass of water.

While pouring from a white jug, a thud of thunder startled her and she spilt. With paper toweling she soaked it up. Lightning lit up the already lit room. A constant shower of hard rain. It was spectacular, and she was frightened.

She picked up the cordless and dialed her friend Maria's.

"Hello."

"Maria, it's me, Sarah."

"Hey, what's up?"

"I'm at the Simmons', babysitting. This storm's crazy."

"I know, it's wild."

"What're you doing?"

"Trying to watch some movie on TV. But I missed a bunch of it when the power went out."

"That sucks."

“It doesn’t matter. It’s a bad movie,” Maria said.

“I’m bored.”

“Want me to come over?”

“Yes,” Sarah said with a sigh. “But I don’t think that that’s such a good idea. It’s pouring, and there’s thunder and lightning.”

“It’s really raining.”

“Yeah,” said Sarah. “Also, besides, Alex’s home.”

“Alex’s home?”

“Yes.”

“Why are you there, then?”

“He’s sick. He’s asleep, I think.”

“I never see him anymore. My brother never hangs out with him.”

“I haven’t seen him since he graduated.”

“He’s a bit strange.”

The power went out and the phone line died. She turned on her light, put the phone back on its mount, and switched the light off. Holding her knees, she sat on the couch, watching the storm. The seconds she counted between lightning flashes and cracks of thunder were growing shorter. The windowpanes shook and rattled when the sound hit. She stretched out on the couch, flicked her flashlight on, staring at the bare ceiling, while curling and uncurling her toes. She shut off the light and lay silent and still. Something was creaking, and Sarah sat up. It was too dark to see, though she strained her eyes. “The house is settling,” she whispered in a breath. She sat still. It wasn’t the house. The noise was getting closer. She gripped her flashlight tightly,

aiming in the direction of the sounds. Her thumb sat on the switch. *A cough!* She gasped, then held her breath. She couldn't decide whether to bathe the culprit in light or remain unseen in the dark. She took small quiet shallow breaths. The house lit up with lightning, a brief flash, turning dark again fast. Sarah didn't make out anything save spastic flailing branches in the rain. Thunder struck loudly, and someone said, "Holy shit!" and Sarah screamed, then a man's voice screamed, and Sarah slid her thumb forward, bathing the screamer in light, and then he screamed again.

A young man in a blue plaid housecoat stood with an unlit candle in his right hand and shielding his eyes with his left. "Who's there?" he said.

"Are you Alex Hewitt?"

"Yes, and I live here. You are ... ?"

"Sarah. The babysitter."

"All right, Sarah-the-babysitter, would you mind not shining that in my eyes."

"Sorry," she said.

"You kind of scared me, you know."

"Sorry."

"Point that thing at yourself."

"What?"

"Point it at yourself," he said, pointing the candle.

"Why?"

"I want to see you."

Sarah slowly turned the flashlight on herself, illuminating her face, her eyes squinting from brightness.

“You look familiar.”

“I went to Paterson. I remember you. But you probably don’t know who I am. I’m younger than you.”

“What’s your name?”

“Sarah Martel.”

Alex walked into the family room. He removed a lighter from his housecoat pocket and lit the candle. “On the mantel, above the fireplace, there’re two more of these. You mind pointing your light at the fireplace.” He walked over to the fireplace, looking down at the ground so as to avoid toys, and lit the candles on the mantelpiece. “Can I borrow your flashlight?” he said.

“Um okay, but why?”

“I want to find a holder for this,” he said, holding up the lit candle. She gave him the flashlight and he said, “We’ll trade,” and gave her the burning candle.

Holding the candle with two hands, Sarah sat cross-legged and still, staring at the candlewick, watching the hot flame flicker. The flame flared up, then sank, and then flared up. Alex returned with an empty candleholder. “Here we go,” he said. He took the candle from her, jammed it into the holder, and set it down on the table. “There. That’s better, isn’t it?” He stood, arms akimbo, admiring the light. “The storm hasn’t woken Haley, has it?”

“No,” she said. “I haven’t even seen her. She’s a mystery to me.”

“Well she’s a cute kid,” Alex said. “But she has a sinister temper. You never know when she’s going to erupt. It’s good she’s asleep.” He sat down in a chair across from her.

“How are you feeling?” she said.

“Fine,” he said. “How’re you feeling?”

“Good, thanks. But ... the only reason I asked is your mother said you were feeling sick.”

“Oh, yeah, I am,” he said, coughing.

“You look all right.”

“Thanks. My illness doesn’t really affect how I look much.”

“What kind of sickness do you have?” Alex moved in his seat, turning, readjusting, and Sarah said: “I’m sorry for being so upfront. You don’t have to answer. It was rude of me to ask.”

“No, no. Don’t worry. I have no problems telling you about it,” he said. “The thing is, though, no one’s quite sure what I’ve got. I guess, for lack of a better diagnosis, I have Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. It’s unclear.”

“I think you look good,” Sarah said. “I mean you don’t look tired or anything.” She could feel her cheeks burning, though was unsure if she was blushing from the warmth radiating from the candles or nervousness. Embarrassed, she blurted out: “Crazy storm!”

He nodded.

“Maybe you don’t eat right.”

“Sorry?” he said.

“You know, like maybe you’re tired because you don’t eat the right foods. One of my cousins always felt terrible for a while—she was lethargic, totally worn down.

Anyway, it turned out it was 'cause she wasn't getting enough iron in her diet. Maybe you're not getting enough iron," she said.

"We've kind've exhausted the possibility of a food allergy or vitamin deficiency. I've had a bunch of tests done. Nutritional analyses in order to test me for immediate and delayed type food allergies. I have none, except for a bit of a milk allergy, but I knew about that—so I don't drink milk. My diet's fine." In a mild trance, he stared at a burning wick. Then: "Would you like a drink? I'll get some drinks."

"I just had some water, thanks."

"No, I mean a drink drink."

"I'm all right."

Alex began to stand but sat back down again.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine."

"Are you tired right now?"

"No, no, not really," he said, meeting her eyes. Burning candlewicks reflected in his. She looked down, for a moment, and then back up. "Did you go to university after Paterson?" she asked.

"I'm gonna grab a beer. Are you sure you don't want one?"

"I'm fine, thank you," she said. "Actually, I'll have a glass of water, please."

He successfully stood up, grabbed the flashlight from the table, and went to the kitchen. She hadn't expected this. Strange, though, in a way, she was glad for the company. Alex returned with a bottle of beer and a glass of water. He put the water

down on a coaster on the table. He held on to the beer. "Well, what should we drink to?" he said.

Sarah ponderously looked up and to the right, and then said: "To your health?" Alex's lips twisted into a grin. "Sounds good," he said. They touched glasses and took sips of their drinks. "You never answered my question," said Sarah.

"What was that?"

"If you went to university or not."

"Right. Yes, for a bit. But I dropped out before I finished my degree, when I started feeling bad." From a pocket in his blue plaid housecoat Alex produced a package of cigarettes and his lighter, "Do you smoke?" He offered the pack, with the flip-top opened.

"Sometimes when I drink," she said, "but not right now, thanks."

"Do you want a drink?"

"I'm all right."

"Do you mind if I smoke?"

"No," she said.

"I need an ashtray," he said and stood up. He walked over to the mantelpiece above the fireplace and picked up a large crystal ashtray. The whirling wind whistled in the flue. Alex placed the ashtray on the table.

"Do you usually smoke in here?"

"Sometimes. James smokes," he said, lighting his cigarette.

"Doesn't your mother mind? you know, especially with you being ill and all?"

“I don’t think she really notices. It’s not like I walk around the house with a cigarette dangling from my bottom lip. I smoke occasionally.” He dragged on his cigarette, then drank some beer.

“What was your major?”

“My major. English and History.”

“Did you want to become a teacher?”

“I don’t think so.”

“What did you want to become?”

“What’s with the questions?”

“Sorry,” she said.

Rain whipped up against the fogged windows. Sarah sucked in her lips and picked at her socks. She took a sip of water. With her arms hooked and fingers clasped around her updrawn knees, she stared at the trembling candlelight. She listened to the storm. It sounded like multiple muted rolls on a snare drum, the thunder a crash symbol. She let go of her knees, leaned forward, grabbed her glass, and took another sip of water.

Alex said, “I would’ve taught, too, but I wanted to write.”

“Wanted, as in past-tense?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you still want to write?”

“Not really, no.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how come?”

“I don’t know. ’Cause I got sick. There’re reasons.”

“You’ll get better. What else? What’s another?”

“I wasn’t very good. I confused liking to read with a passion and possible talent for writing,” he said. “Which a lot of people do I guess.” And he drank his beer and smoked his cigarette.

“So you don’t write anymore?”

“Not really, no. I think I was just playing at it,” he said, and then: “I’m gonna grab another beer, would you like one?”

“I’m fine, thanks.”

He put his cigarette down in the ashtray and walked to the kitchen to get another beer. Sarah stole a drag from his cigarette and exhaled the smoke towards the floor. He returned with another bottle of beer. “Well what did you write?” Sarah asked.

“Sorry?”

“What did you write? like poems or short stories or nonfiction or, like, novels?”

“Oh, well, I think ultimately, in my fantasy, I wanted to write novels. But I mainly wrote short stories.”

“That’s cool.”

“They weren’t very good.”

“What were they about?”

“I’m not quite sure. It’s kind of embarrassing.”

“Were they mysteries or sci-fi or erotica?”

He laughed. “They weren’t erotica.”

“Well,” she said. “You shouldn’t’ve stopped. Stuff like that takes a long time to get good at. You know, discipline.”

“That’s something I’m sorely lacking, too.”

“Like my dad always says,” she said: “‘Discipline’s a learned skill.’”

“Wise man.”

“He’s a big believer in it. We’re talking about the man who signed me up for Sparks, even though I was too young, tennis, violin, ballet, and swimming by the age of four,” she said. “You should keep at it.”

“Thanks for the encouragement.”

“No, seriously,” she said.

“Once one of the stories got me punched in the gut.”

“Really? Why?” she said, laughing. “I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t be, I understand.”

“So what happened?”

After drinking the remainder of his beer, Alex said: “Wait one sec”—he stood—“I’m gonna get another.” Gripping her glass, Sarah circled her finger around the rim. A brief shiver electrified her body. Alex entered the room changed: he was wearing jeans, white sneakers, and a blue button-down. “I thought I’d put on some clothes,” he said. “I was feeling kind of stupid in my housecoat.”

“Tell the story,” she said.

“What story?”

“When you were punched.”

“There’s not much to tell.”

“Just tell it.”

“Well,” he said. He took a swig of beer. “I was out at a bar, around the holidays, and this girl I used to date was there—”

“Who?” she said.

“It doesn’t matter. You don’t know her.”

“Who?”

“Seriously, you don’t know her. Anyway, we had a bunch of drinks together and chewed the fat and it was fun. We were having a good time. And we talked about that—about how so many people are uncomfortable around each other after they’ve split, even years later, and how we both thought that that was sad and odd, considering how intimately you get to know someone, et cetera. And we thought ourselves above that pettiness and awkwardness. But we were just drunk. And so anyway, she asked me what I’d been up to. So I told her I was going to school and how I was seeing a girl but she’d moved away. Also, I told her that I’d been writing a bit. When we dated I wrote stories but wouldn’t show them to her. So she starts complaining that I’d never let her read anything, and that naturally she was curious. What she said made some sense to me. All right, I’m giving way too much back-story.”

“Okay, anyway, keep going,” she said.

“Well, stupidly, I said I’d send her a story. And later that week, against my better judgment, I emailed her a story that was kind of weird. And maybe a little disturbing,” he said. “I’d been reading a lot of cracked-out stuff, and my story was basically an inferior regurgitation of some of that stuff. The story was like a bad covers’ band in a bar: the basic chords are there but for the most part that’s about it. So I sent her the story and didn’t hear back from her. And I found this kind of disconcerting; because if our roles were reversed and *she* was the one who’d sent *me* a story, and *I’d* been hounding her for forever for permission to read one, I would’ve read it and written back a.s.a.p.”

“So who punched you?”

“I’m getting to that,” he said and drank. “About three months later, I was out with some friends, and I bumped into the guy she was dating. She’s probably married to him by now. This guy, who’s this big, solid meathead, told me he wanted to talk in private. I knew it was about the story, but I followed him outside ...

“He grabbed me by the throat with the viselike grip of his left hand,” Alex said standing, mimicking a stranglehold, “and told me never to contact her again. He said if I did, he’d kill me. Then, he said: ‘What kind of *sick fuck* sends a *lady* that kind of trash!’” Alex was laughing, rocking back in his seat.

“What’d you say?”

“I told him to settle down and that I’d no interest in talking to him or his moronic girlfriend ever again.”

Sarah laughed, and then said: “What’d he say?”

“Nothing,” Alex said. “He sucker punched me in the stomach and then he boxed my ears.”

“*Ouch.*”

“You’re not kidding,” he said and laughed. “I think he would’ve kept going, if I hadn’t vomited on a snow bank. My ears rang for days.” He took a swig of beer. “Incidentally,” he began, wiping beer from his chin, with the back of his hand, “the angry boyfriend was training to become a cop. Now he is one. Tough guy.”

“That’s terrible,” she said.

“And I, as you can see, am tall and lanky. No match. I wasn’t quite so skinny then, though.”

“I can’t believe they got so upset about a story.”

“I know. Neither could I.”

“What was it about?”

“What?”

“The story,” she said.

“Let’s not talk about that.” He took another cigarette from his pack and lit it off of the candle. “I don’t really remember it anyway,” he said.

“Tell me what you remember. I’m not going to punch you in the gut, if that’s what’s worrying you,” she said. “I’m not an idiot.”

“All right, but it’s stupid,” he said and drank. “From what I remember it’s about this guy who thinks he’s died after drinking too much and doing too many drugs after some party. But he’s not sure if he’s dead, or if he’s imagined it all, and life just goes on like nothing’s happened, in an alternate reality, possibly, I guess, as far as he’s concerned. And this whole time, even before his supposed death, he has this crush on some girl. He’s been nuts about her forever. Anyway ...” Alex was looking down, kicking around a red, mock-chrome, and white toy fire engine.

“Keep going,” Sarah said.

“Well, he’s been into this girl for as long as he can remember,” Alex continued, “and after the party he thinks he may’ve died at, he wakes feeling horrible, from drinking, et cetera. He thinks he may’ve died but has been given a second chance. I’m not telling this right. All right, to make a long story short, he decides he’s going to let the girl know how he feels about her, because he wants to take advantage of this second chance. Make the best of it. So he starts planning what he’s going to do, what he’s going to say, with

all of his time. He walks down the street muttering, like a crazed person, but he's planning, having conversations with himself, though with her also, but by himself, and with others, too, but by himself. Sometimes these conversations are in his head, sometimes they're out loud. And in his planning, he fantasizes about her all the time. Those are the parts I think the happy couple objected to," he said and drank.

"So what happens?" Sarah said.

"The dreams, the fantasies, become very real, and they're written like they're happening," he said. "And he kind of gets trapped thinking about this girl—but he's fine with it. He believes that if he did in fact die, then everything's in his head. So, since he believes everything exists in his head anyway, he becomes satisfied with the relationships he leads in his mind. Or at least he becomes obsessed with them. And things, even though they're in his head, become very detailed, and even romantic, with fights, sex, conversations, and so on ... Every so often, though, the story leaves the realm of his imagination, and it sort of looks at him like a black and white security camera with no sound would. And he's just seen sitting there, or at times like, I don't know, masturbating, or talking to himself, or making strange faces. He's just sitting there, for the most part, not really moving. But things kind of switch back and forth between dreams in his head, you know, of having sex, and then back to him like lying there, you know, touching himself. But most of the story's told from what's going on in his head. The external reality's a little bleaker. It doesn't make much sense."

The rain was letting up. The house was quiet. Sarah listened to the storm. Thunder rumbled in the distance like a drummer thrumming on kettles. Alex was shifting in his seat. "Now that I think about it, I deserved to be punched," he said.

Sarah smiled and said, "I don't think it warranted getting beat up." She took a sip of water, and then said: "Was your ex some sort of psycho prude? Hadn't she read anything published in the past hundred years?"

"I guess not."

"It's an interesting idea," she said. "So much of life takes place in the mind anyway. It sounds like he might suffer from schizophrenia, though, like Alice from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*."

"You think she has schizophrenia?"

"Remember at the beginning, there's all that stuff about her being fond of pretending to be two people."

"That doesn't necessarily sound schizophrenic," he said.

"Yeah, but she berates herself with these other selves. She remembers trying to box her own ears for cheating herself in a game of croquet. She's got some sort of multiple personality thing going," she said. "She's always talking to herself."

"Not to mention talking animals and oversized talking playing cards," Alex added.

"Yeah," said Sarah. "Have you ever wondered that? like wondered if you were dead?"

"Enough to write a story about it," Alex said. "Probably everybody's wondered."

"Well if you're dead," said Sarah, "at least it was a smooth transition."

"But if you didn't know you'd died," he said, "fear of death would never die, either."

"What do you think happens to you after you die?" she said.

“I don’t know, but the popular belief that we just become what we were before birth seems pretty persuasive,” he said. “But there’s probably something that’s not quite dead but not quite alive, too.”

“You know,” she began, “I hope some stupid loser beating you up isn’t the reason you stopped writing—that’d make you an idiot.”

He said, “No, that’s not the reason.”

“It’s ridiculous that they got mad.”

“Yes, it is,” he said. He chugged back some beer. He put his beer down on the table and looked at her. “There’re candle flames twinkling in your eyes,” he said. And he reached for his beer but knocked it over. “Shit,” he said. Beer quickly covered the table and dripped off its edges.

“Don’t worry,” said Sarah. She ran to the kitchen, unrolled some paper toweling, and ran back to the table.

“Give me some,” Alex said. And they both wiped up the beer.

“Here,” she said, taking the damp dripping toweling from him. “I’ll throw it out.”

She threw out the soiled toweling, poured water from the jug, and returned with two glasses.

“I’m sorry about that,” said Alex.

“It’s no big deal.”

“It was stupid.”

“It was just an accident. Here,” she said, passing him a glass of water, and she proposed a toast: “To not letting others get the best of us.” They touched glasses. “How are you feeling?” she said.

“Good.”

“Good,” she said. “You’re not tired?”

“No.”

“Don’t you ever get lonely? I mean, it must be tough not going out to see your friends.”

“Yeah, well. You get used to it. You come up with ways of making it tolerable. Besides, being sick, most of the time, I don’t much feel like being around other people.”

“You know what Sartre said?”

“What’s that?”

Sarah said, “*L’enfer, c’est les autres.*”

“I’ve heard that. M. Desbois, right?”

“*C’est correct, Alex. Très bien.*”

“Well he’s got a point. My vision of Hell’s having to watch over and over all the stupid, shameful things I’ve ever said and done to other people for all of eternity,” he said. “I hope tonight doesn’t make the reel.”

“Don’t be dumb,” she said. “I like talking to you.”

The rain had stopped. The house was quiet. Alex stood up, walked over to the couch, and sat down. Current surged, filaments glowed, and the house began to hum.

Smoking

Adjusting the head of the lamp Alan reread for the sixth time Sir Philip Elgin's Top Ten Things to Remember When Quitting Smoking, An Aide-Mémoire:

1. Cigarettes DO NOTHING for you but KILL YOU!
2. Nicotine withdrawal is caused by nicotine, *ergo*, the sooner you stop ingesting nicotine, the sooner those unpleasant withdrawal pangs will disappear!
3. If you find yourself in a foul mood, instead of thinking, *I could use a ciggy to set me straight* – think: *Isn't it wonderful I'll soon be rid of this cursed affliction that makes me feel so lousy and irritable!*
4. If the urge for a cigarette becomes unbearable, say, STOP! and let your mind clear. (Life will soon be better. Do not despair.)
5. Do not be jealous of smokers – THEY ARE JEALOUS OF YOU!
6. You are quitting because you HATED smoking.
7. You will be saving money, not to mention your mental and physical health.
8. You will no longer smell noxious or feel *persona non grata* when in a nonsmoking environment.
9. You deserve this – you deserve to BREAK FREE!

10. Remember: by not smoking, *ipso facto*, YOU ARE A NONSMOKER!

It's that simple. Tell yourself – Hooray! I AM FREE!

The author's bio on the back of the book said that Sir Philip Elgin used to be a tax attorney, who smoked upwards of four packs a day, before he saw through the smoking con, only to go on and cure over six-hundred thousand Britons of the affliction—including Sir Elton John and Simon Le Bon, whose voice is featured on Elgin's HELP LINE: 1-800-NOO-SMOK—and was then knighted in 1997 by Queen Elizabeth II for his work. A friend had told Alan, the one who'd told him about Sir Philip Elgin and his revolutionary *Stop-Smoking Now!*® techniques, that there was even talk of awarding Elgin the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for his efforts to rid the world of its No. 1 killer but there was some debate as to whether or not he qualified, since Elgin was merely a tax attorney who wrote a convincing book, not a doctor who *actually* discovered *the* cure for smoking. Sir Walter Raleigh made smoking fashionable in Queen Elizabeth I's court in the late 1500s and now Sir Philip Elgin was trying his damndest to make it unfashionable for the new millennium, said his publishers, Buxton & Baxter. "King James I," Elgin writes, "despised Raleigh's politics and despised his smoking, *ergo* he decided to have him beheaded. Thereafter, he launched a tireless campaign, declaring tobacco unholy, unhealthy, and unfit for British society. The public, as we know, sadly, did not listen. Of course, I am not suggesting that you have your head cut off in order to stop smoking – JUST READ MY BOOK!"

As Alan sat waiting for May, spinning a pen in his fingers, rereading sections from Elgin's book, he couldn't help but feel some resentment towards those 17th C.

Britons who kept smoking, despite James's warnings and disapproval. He put down the book and called out to May, —Come on, let's get going!

—Hold your horses, she yelled back. —I'll be ready in a minute.

—We've got to get moving, he said.

He massaged his brow, pushing deep into his temples, making small hard circles. It'd been a little under forty-eight hours since he'd last smoked a cigarette. Thinking of a short story he'd once read, he sniffed his knuckles and his fingers, though he didn't detect the scent of smoke. Yet he couldn't stop thinking about smoking, which Elgin said was natural and to be expected for the first week or so. *Nicotine withdrawal is caused by nicotine, ergo, the sooner you stop ingesting nicotine, the sooner those unpleasant withdrawal pangs will disappear.*

Pacing, he stopped in front of his dictionary and opened it to the word tob_'cc_ n. (*pl. ~s*), where he read that tob_'cc_ pertains to plants of the genus *Nicotiana*. “As a medicine,” he read, “it is narcotic, emetic, and cathartic.” —Let's get going, he grabbed his keys, —it's getting late. He shut the dictionary.

—I'm coming, she said.

The phone rang, and Alan picked up the cordless pressing TALK: —Hello.

—What up, man?

—Not much. May and I are on our way out, he said, putting on his sport coat, —can I call you back tomorrow?

—Yeah, but I'll be out most of tomorrow. Band practice.

—Okay, I'm ready, May said. —I don't know why you're yelling, she said, putting on her coat, —you're the one who's on the phone.

—It's Jesse. *He* called me. Just one second.

—I don't care, just don't yell at me for holding us up, all right?

—Is this a bad time?

—No ... May, I'll be off in one sec, okay.

Jesse sang, —*If you're having girl problems I feel bad for you, son ...*

—I don't care if you're on the phone, Alan, but don't get mad at me taking too long.

—*I've got ninety-nine problems but a bitch ain't one. Check it ...*

—I'm getting off, he said. —Shut up, Jesse, I'm going, got to run. This actually is a bad time, man.

Jesse sang, —*What you eat don't make me shit.*

He pressed OFF, placing the phone back on its mount. —Did you just hang-up on your brother? asked May, while tying up her coat.

—Yes. He was pissing me off ... Besides, we've got to go.

—Don't put the phone back on the mount unless the battery's beeping, said May, —don't you know how rechargeable batteries work?

—Yes, he said.

—They have memories ...

—Listen, May, I know. I'm the one who told you how they work. Let's go.

—No you didn't.

—I did. Let's not fight.

—I know you're quitting smoking but you're being a bit of a dick.

—Why, because I won't credit you with something you didn't do?

—I'm not going, she said, —you can go alone. Untying her coat, she said,
—Actually, I don't think you should go, either. You're obviously not ready to go to a
party. You'll smoke, I know it, she said.

—Thanks for the support.

—You're trying to fight me so you can smoke and blame it on me. I'm not going
to let you do that, Alan. Remember what Elgin says, she said, picking up the book,
flipping to the marked page: —“If you find yourself in a foul mood, instead of thinking,
*I could use a ciggy to set me straight – think: Isn't it wonderful I'll soon be rid of this
cursed affliction that makes me feel so lousy and irritable!*”

—Shit May, I'm not irritable, all right. I'm fine, he said, sitting. May hung her
coat back up in the hall closet while Alan massaged his head. Digging through his coat's
pockets, he produced a yellow Post-It folded shut. He opened it, peeling at its sticky side,
and looked at

DON'T SMOKE

YOU DON'T NEED IT!

Yr past-self looking out

for yr future-self, A.

Coughing, he folded the note, putting it back in his pocket.

Returning to the room, May said, —So are you going to go?

—I don't know.

—Aren't you going to apologize?

Looking at her, he said, —I don't think I should have to.

—You've been insufferable for days. You should hear the tone you talk to me with. You're being a jerk, she said.

—I'm sorry you see it that way. I don't mean to be, he said, —and I don't think I'm being a *jerk*. But your yelling at me isn't helping.

—You think this is yelling? This isn't yelling.

—Okay, okay, he said, standing. —Maybe I should just go for a walk or something, he said.

—Why? she said —so you can smoke? Jesus, Alan. She shook her head but her eyes stayed still. Alan closed his eyes, taking slow deep breaths. Opening them, he saw dust motes float in the reading light's ray. He imagined a frail stalk of smoke rising, sidestepping the particles on its race upward toward oblivion. —You're not even listening to me, she said, while walking out of the room. Sitting, pressing his palms against his eyes' sockets and sealed lids, he rocked himself back and forth, relaxing his eyeballs behind the lids, watching coloured patterns appear and then disappear. Breathing in slowly through his nose, chest shallowly swelling, from his mouth he exhaled and his lungs felt hot and tight.

He stared at an electrical outlet: two petrified faces, one on top the other. He looked at his watch, then the door, then his watch, having forgotten to check the time. Again, he paced. Producing a calculator from his desk drawer, he punched in 18, x, 365, x, 13 and pushed = and the calculator read 85, 410. He barked out a cough and saw sparks. Lying down on the couch, Alan picked up his copy of the bestselling *TO STOP SMOKING, READ THIS BOOK* and read:

A very important Member of Parliament (who wishes to remain nameless so we will henceforward refer to him as Mr. M____) once said to me at our London *Stop-Smoking Now!*® clinic: ‘Philip, thanks to you smoking will go the way of the Dodo and doublet.’ I replied *sotto voce*: ‘Bet your bloody knickers on it!’ Mr. M____ smoked two packets a day, for forty-four years, before a cancer scare motivated him to look me up. *You are doing the right thing reading this book. You are doing the right thing choosing to rid your life of the nefarious weed.* Thankfully, Mr. M____’s cancer was not ineradicable; and neither is your addiction.

Pausing, Alan looked up and out the window. Soundlessly snow spun in a streetlight’s ray. He imagined himself outside, breathing out big clouds. He looked up. The ceiling seemed strange. In a mumbled monotone, he sang, —*And I curse Sir Walter Raleigh he was such a stupid git ...* Then returned to reading,

A middle-aged Literature professor (henceforward Prof. X) from Cambridge visited my clinic in the late ’90s. He had been a smoker since he was a thirteen-year-old boy. When he was young, he said, although he knew smoking was bad for his health, he would look at John Wayne and Humphrey Bogart and feel justified in his smoking. Later, he said, it was great smoking writers that helped him continue his self-deception and devotion to cigarettes. He quoted to me a line from the *Dairies* of an Austrian writer, Robert Musil, who wrote: ‘I treat life as something

unpleasant that one can get through by smoking.’ Prof. X told me that Robert Musil devoted much of his life to the writing of a long novel entitled *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (transl. into E as *The Man Without Qualities*), though never completed his masterpiece. I suggested to Prof. X that perhaps if Musil had quit smoking, he would have had the time and the energy needed to finish his life’s work. Prof. X silently nodded. Then, I posited my thesis that many writers are famous for smoking, and that many of these same writers are famous for contemplating death obsessively: Would these writers be so obsessed with death if they had not been smokers, sucking in its very toxins on a quotidian basis? I said to Prof. X, ‘I have never read Sartre but I know he smoked a great deal. Perhaps this is why those chain-smoking existentialists always spoke of death – because they were incessantly ingesting it! If breathing is death defying, then smoking is a way of breathing that invites and ensures death, a slow and painful annihilation. *Habitual alter am natural*, as King James would say.’ Prof. X nodded and then he replied: ‘Well, you might have a Ph.D. thesis there.’ And we both had a good laugh.

A noise distracted Alan. Once again, he looked up and out the window, first at the pale ghost of his image, then again at the still spinning snow. He resumed reading,

Prof. X also told me of an Italian writer, who was mates with James Joyce in Trieste, and who wrote a book about a guy writing a book,

at the suggestion of his psychoanalyst, so as to quit smoking. I said to Prof. X, 'I wouldn't know anything about that, I wrote my book *after* quitting smoking.' Again, we laughed. Prof. X's sense of humour was quite wonderful and I am happy for him that he is no longer a smoker. I am not a particularly religious man but there is a certain Psalm of which I am quite fond, namely Psalm 90:12: 'So teach us to number our days that / We may get us a heart of wisdom.' (In the same vein, there is a quotation written by a philosopher from the mediæval era, which I am also partial to: 'Days are like scrolls, write on them only what you want remembered.' In a way, I always thought that that would make a good Psalm, too.) When you smoke, you are not only wasting your days – you are significantly limiting them!

May charged into the room yelling, —I'm sick of your mood swings. We're not going out because of you. You only think of yourself. You're so goddamn selfish sometimes. You promised to quit when we moved in together and now that—

—May, he said, —stop.