

Those of Us Who Are Still Here

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## Abstract

*Those of Us Who Are Still Here* is a collection of stories that explores characters dealing with crippling mundanity and bitter loss. The stories range from a daydreamy romp of an idealized love in a world with no logic, to the realities of failed relationships and an inability to make meaningful connections. In these stories, a man recruits a sexual companion to chase his lost lover across the globe; a recent graduate remembers with bitter nostalgia his formative years; characters fail to say anything poignant or meaningful after a death in the family; a man and woman contend with their own neuroses and anxieties in trying to pick each other up. It is a book of characters trying vainly to escape the mundanity of their lives with dreams and vices as they travel a road that seems hopelessly straight-and-narrow.

For my parents, Leon and Suzana Szymanski

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## **Hyde Park**

I was sitting in the dark at Hyde Park because I sucked at travelling. My intention was to arrive during the late afternoon daylight hours, lounge around in the waning sunlight. Instead, after a few unsuccessful bus rides and some meandering, I came to a bench at almost 930 PM. I was contemplating how being poor stank as bats flew in aimless horizontal ovals above my head over the edge of the water.

The water looked like a huge precipice going ever deep, some curious effect from the way the lamplight played on the water. I contemplated how it sucked to have no one, but I was not quite lonely. I had plenty of people to correspond with. Bats played in the darkness, just out of the lamplight's reach, over the edge of the water. I hunched my shoulders in case a bat got an idea to try and fly into the side of my head.

Hyde Park was not so charming at night. The day's leisure left a kind of tangible void. I pulled a can of Coke and a cheese string from my backpack. It sucked to be poor and it was worse to be lonely. I wished that I had stayed longer at the bar near Tower Bridge that sold pints for two Pounds. Truthfully, that was the primary reason for my late arrival at Hyde Park. I hadn't been ready to leave until it was dark out. The benign sunlight would have been too hostile.

So many bats. Thousands. I had no guess as to where Hyde Park's bats spent the days. Under upturned boats maybe. A whole cocoon.

Here was a couple, entering the park. I could tell that they didn't notice me. The lamplight was so weak that it barely bathed my feet in dim light. The wattage used did not encourage nighttime visitors.

This young man and young woman were the first to disrupt the quiet.

The man was walking backwards, facing the woman, just ahead of her. Though I couldn't hear their words, I could make out that they were arguing, on account of the tone of each of their voices—the man's hushed and attempting patience, and the girl's agitated. Why argue tonight? I thought. It was futile. The two would go home and get into bed together. No sense in arguing when you have someone. It could not be so important to argue.

I imagined the justification. I imagined the woman had had a dream in which the boyfriend betrayed her with her best friend as she sat watching from an opposite couch. She has not told him but has been unpleasant all day. She was unappreciative at dinner, made jabbing comments about undercooked noodles and mushy vegetables. Now there was tension from both directions. He had betrayed her in her dreams, and she had made the day unpleasant for him. She could not come outright and blame him for his actions, but she resented that fact, and it agitated her all the more. The argument had to be about insignificant things because it could not be about bigger things like the fact that she had dreamed of him betraying her cruelly. Although she can't decide if he betrayed her or if her dreams did, she is resentful and needs to direct her resentment.

I imagined this as the argument became more audible. The man was prying, demanding to know what he did to deserve the cold silent treatment he was getting, still walking backwards. The woman felt that the man was exercising some type of power walking backwards like that, and she didn't like his confrontational posture. She pushed the man firmly in the chest and by an awkward movement of the man, to try and turn around and save a fall by landing on his feet, he fell to the ground, tripping over his own leg. The man fell on his side but rolled onto his back and lay flat with his arms



outstretched in a hyperbolic, defeated gesture. He raised his chin to his chest, but the woman was now walking back the way they had come into the park. She was obviously unsympathetic.

Three of us now in this park, all alone now. I imagined myself the happiest because I came alone. The two of them fighting. For what? A dream. It was so absurd, I thought. The man still lying on the ground reached into his pocket and pulled out a cellphone. I saw him press a few buttons and put the phone to his ear. The woman was receding from my view but I perceived that she had stopped, as her figure continued to obscure the same amount of darkness. The man spoke in whispers on the phone. The woman turned and appeared to look at the man still lying on the ground. She still did not walk. She saw her lover lying there defeated like a fallen angel.

She walked slowly over to where he laid, talking on the phone. Once she came within reasonable speaking distance, the man and the woman put their phones away. She peeled him off the cement where she had left him broken.

He rose simply, lightly. The two walked off, in the direction from which they'd appeared, arms around each other like lovers, both facing straight ahead of them. I watched their figures until they receded completely from my view. I sat with the bats, as darkness closed over the two of them. I was not poor. I was not lonely. Others would appear and recede in the darkness. I'd walk back to where I slept alone in a bed. Surrounded by the enveloping darkness, I would miss no one.

**Naked**

I am naked with one of my best friends. We've been having sex for about a month now. The third member of our threesome isn't here. The threesome is not sexual, just friendly. Normally, to find one of us is to find at least two. Often it's us two now, me and Indigo, that come as a packaged pair. I mean, since we started having sex. Bike, our third, we've been slow to confide in. Indigo and I have to acknowledge the fact in a real way, maybe verbally, that we are having sex before we can tell anybody else.

The room gets heavy and awkward after she comes, about eight minutes after I come. It's time to talk. Only the fact that I'm naked distracts me from the awkwardness. Self-consciousness fights the clumsy silence for priority in my mind. My penis deflates into a week-old oblong helium balloon. I straighten my back to smooth out the folds made by my stomach and lie resting the side of my head on my hand, elbow on bed, facing Indigo, trying to fool her into thinking that I should be spread out in a magazine. I don't know whether we've reached the point where I can look at her naked body. I consider asking her this, but it would be absurd.

Indigo initiates the conversation. Like she had our sexual relationship. She stuck her hand down my pants when we were riding home drunk on a crowded late-night bus.

"What is this?" Indigo asks.

I lie on my back, not responding. I look up at her shelves—her stereo, her CDs, her books, pictures of her family and friends looking on in unbelieving disappointment. I read a few of the book spines even though I know what they say, and I think about drinking the little airplane bottles of crème de cacao and banana liqueur, despite the fact that their continued existence there on the shelves is a testament to how unappealing they are to me.

I still haven't responded as I'm analyzing the tone of her question, and I'm getting the sense that she expected me to start this conversation, like we had made a tacit agreement when she put her hand down my pants. *I'll do this for you, for the first time, in a crowded public place, but when it comes time to address all this, it's on you*, she thought. At least, I figure.

"I don't know."

I don't look at her and hope that she doesn't look at me. We stay horizontal and unmoving for a long minute.

"Did we fuck it up?" she asks.

"What?"

"I mean with Bike. Bike, you, and me."

"I don't know."

I didn't need her to clarify but I thought it might buy me a few seconds. If anyone gets it, it's me. We were like a three-legged table. And I always felt somehow like the load-bearingest leg, so you see why if anyone would get it, it'd be me. Naturally I am concerned about how we might fend on our own. Two didn't seem sturdy.

See, Bike and I both love Indigo. We have never discussed this but it's plain as day, clear as water. Bike is sharp and discerning and he knows this. I'm sharp enough, close enough, attuned enough, to know that Bike knows this. And Bike knows I'm sharp enough to know this, too. He also knows that I'm having sex with Indigo. I have not told him but it's apparent to me that he knows, just as it would be apparent to me if he was sleeping with Indigo, and apparent to him in that circumstance that *I understood* that he was sleeping with Indigo. I should say that I can read Indigo quite well and she is

unaware of Bike's knowledge of this. I should also say that Bike is aware of Indigo's obliviousness on this front, too—he understands that she doesn't know that he knows.

Indigo stops asking me questions, to my relief. It strikes me as curious though, that she should stop like this so suddenly, so I look over for the first time since we started talking, to see that she's asleep. I'm not particularly tired but I'm grateful. I wonder how much, if any, touching of her naked sleeping body is admissible. I'd just make it seem like incidental contact if she stirred. But I can't decide what to do with, or where to put, this incipient hard-on.

A couple nights later, Bike and I are at Indigo's, eating Wheat Thins from her cupboard and Black Diamond cheese from her fridge, sitting on stools in the middle of the kitchen. Indigo lives alone and centrally, she's clean, she has a nice leather L-couch and cable TV. Since neither Bike nor I nor our respective places meet any of those criteria, we tend to meet at Indigo's.

I pour myself a whiskey and ginger ale and suggest we go into the living room. Indigo brings her bottle of red wine and her glass, and Bike his gin and 1L bottle of Canada Dry tonic. I light a cigarette while Bike fiddles with the remote control, eventually leaving the TV tuned to a Spanish station with the sound on low.

“What the fuck is this?” I ask.

“Educate yourself.”

“I know Spanish better than you do.”

“Oh, please.”

“I know Spanish better than either of you,” Indigo says.

“Yeah, what are they saying?”

Indigo makes as if she’s straining to hear.

“The volume’s too low. I can’t hear it.”

“You’re so full of shit,” I say.

She gives me a look that communicates an inoffensive and light-hearted *fuck off*.

“We’re smoking inside now?” Bike asks.

“I guess so.”

Bike grabs a Belmont from my pack and lights it, settling the lighter back down next to the pack.

“I hate it when you guys smoke inside.”

“Well, you should’ve never set a precedent,” I say.

Indigo too reaches for my cigarettes now, pulls one out of the pack and puts it between her teeth before closing her lips around it. The gesture seems affected and I assume she’s seen some sexy or in-some-way-admirable actress do it.

As we sit around smoking and drinking, I feel good, whole. The TV’s hum becomes less as we drink more and speak louder. We’re talking candidly about people that we know. Right now, it’s Leila, a classmate and sometimes-friend.

“Leila’s awesome,” Indigo says. “I was talking to her about maybe sharing an apartment next year.”

“Yeah, she’s alright,” I say. “I like her.”

“You should go out with her!” Indigo says to Bike.

“I hardly know her,” he says. “What am I supposed to do?”

“I think she likes you. You should ask her out.”

“Yeah, I don’t know if I see that happening.”

“You don’t find her attractive?”

“It’s not that I don’t find her attractive.”

“Well then, what’s the problem?”

“Nothing, I guess.”

I think about saying, *Yeah, Bike, you should totally ask her if you can eat her pussy*, but I don’t. And I can’t decide for whose benefit I don’t say it.

As we get nearer the bottom of our bottles, Bike makes to leave, saying that he has class in the morning. Bike and I usually walk the first half of our walk home together when we leave Indigo’s. We’ve done it a hundred times—through an apartment building’s parking lot, down some loud metal stairs, past a mall with a Loblaws where on Fridays there are four men with lawn chairs gathered around a pick-up truck with a 2-4 of beer in the cab... I understand the position I’m in. I know what it means to stay. But I also know that I will.

“Can I have a cigarette for the walk home?” Bike asks.

“Take as many as you want.”

“I just want one.”

Bike leaves, appearing defeated, after taking a single cigarette and some matches from Indigo’s apartment, and Indigo and I fall into the clumsy silence that precedes and follows sex. I sit, dumb. The TV is still on the Spanish station. Neither Indigo nor I reach for the remote. I for one am happy that there is at least something I can pretend to be distracted with. The show that comes on reminds me of a daytime soap opera like I used to see on sick days when I was younger, a Spanish *As the World Turns*. But, as one

of the characters is speaking on the phone, the man with her who I thought was her brother creeps toward her and runs his hand up the back of her skirt. The woman hangs up the phone and unbuttons the man-who-isn't-her-brother's pants. I start laughing.

“What the hell are we watching?” Indigo asks.

“Porn, I think.”

Indigo laughs and reaches for the remote and says, “Gross.”

She changes the channel and Letterman comes on. Very inoffensive and neutral, I think. Perhaps Indigo has the same thought, because she returns the remote to the coffee table and moves closer to me on the couch. In the past month, more often than not, this is how we end up having sex. After the first time on the bus, which wasn't really sex at all, I supposed it wouldn't happen again. But it continued to happen, and still continues to happen, more or less the same way every time. Indigo and I sit on the couch, and then, our movements deliberate and stealthy, like there is a slowly strobing strobe light, the space between us diminishes.

I feel lousy for boxing out Bike. I imagine myself saying facetiously to Bike that I am like a magician with women, that I seduced Indigo by sleight of hand. The situation, however, feels too heavy to be totally disingenuous. I could give Bike a more sincere explanation, tell him that I feel like a thief, that through my cunning and stealth, I slipped into Indigo and put one over on him, that I did not mean to fence him out or make him a third wheel. Not even that felt altogether truthful though.

The next time I see Bike, I am resolved to tell him. We are with some of our other friends, friends we see only casually, in a schoolyard with a quarter-ounce of weed.



Our friends and acquaintances think that the relationship that Bike, Indigo and I have is mysterious. I know they speculate as to who is having sex with whom. There are only so many combinations, four total, and I think between their beliefs, the whole spectrum is covered. All three of us together is the popular conjecture, I hear. All of this I know because Solle, one of my friends from this group, with whom I was close for a time, told me when we were getting drunk in his father's basement.

We smoke several joints and cigarettes sitting at a wooden picnic table. Between joints, we play a surprisingly involved and spirited game of 3-on-3 basketball on the park's basketball net, which has a metal mesh because the nylon ones always get stolen. When we return sweatily to the picnic table to roll and smoke more joints, I remember intermittently when I glance at him that tonight I am to tell Bike about how I'm fucking our best friend. It seems unreal though, and I keep losing grip on the thought.

We do leave together, Bike and I. On the walk, I think alternately of telling Bike about the whole affair, of stopping at the McDonald's drive-thru where they've added a kind of doorbell so that you no longer need to be with-car in order to make a late-night take-out order, and of how, despite being very high and continually scanning my surroundings for sinister people and specters, I would like to be with Indigo somehow. I convince myself that the time is not right tonight to come clean to Bike, reasoning that Indigo and I haven't reached a decision re: whether we are friends or lovers.

Bike and I part where we always do, at a Shell station across the street from a shitty Chinese food place. We make plans to hang out again the next day.

I walk the rest of the way home in a somewhat paranoid state. I make myself a turkey sandwich with amazing concentration and deliberation, chug several glasses of

water at the sink, and then disrobe and get in bed in my underwear. I try to masturbate thinking about Indigo, but I get distracted by turns in meticulously imagining the location, mood and atmosphere, and by Bike's persistent presence in these fantasies. I go to sleep with the window open, thinking about things and forgetting them moments later, continually hearing the wind flapping the plastic cover that I threw over a desk like a poncho outside. My light is on but it's hardly noticeable. The dark walls, a bluish-brown, absorb all the light from the 60 W bulb hanging without a fixture.

When I wake up, I reflect on the impressions left of my dreams—one in which I'm holding a giant umbrella, much bigger than a beach umbrella, trying to shelter more people than can fit underneath its circumference, and then the next thing I know I am taking group photographs. The significance of my dreams has always eluded me.

After spending a hazy day doing some reading for school, but skipping my only class of the day, I call Bike and we meet by the Shell station and walk to Indigo's. None of us has eaten, and so we throw together dinner haphazardly—a packaged spinach and mushroom risotto and a baguette with olive oil and balsamic vinegar. Bike sat on the countertop and I sat on a stool in the middle of the kitchen while Indigo kind of flitted about, accomplishing tonight. After dinner, Bike leaves to go to a class that he frequently skips. It is not even quite seven and therefore too early to have sex with Indigo. Instead, Indigo makes tea and we sit on perpendicular sections of her L-couch in the living room, not turning on the TV.

“Well, what do you think?” Indigo says.

“I don't know.”

“We can’t keep having sex and never talk about it.”

“I know.”

“It’s either we’re friends or we keep going in this direction.”

“It’d be nice to be friends but keep on having sex.”

“That’s real romantic.”

“It kind of is, if you think about it.”

I feel that this will not be a snap decision, that the capriciousness that got us here—if you can call it that—would not get us out. I know because I spend upwards of 10 minutes deciding on which salad dressing to buy in the grocery store and because I’ve left Rogers Video with Indigo many times without a rental. I look at her face and try to guess at what she wants but it seems uncharacteristically inexpressive. It is really a pathetic scene to witness. Neither of us is domineering. It’s worse than watching two wealthy casual friends decide who will pick up the bill at a restaurant. *I’ll pay. You always pay. No I don’t. You got the last one. No I didn’t.*

“What do you want?” I ask, helming the ship for once.

“I don’t know. What do *you* want?”

“I don’t know.”

“We can’t easily go back to being friends.”

“No.”

“So we’re together then.”

“Yes. I guess we are.”

“You sound enthused.”

“I am. Really I am.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

We close the gap between us on the couch, without hesitation. We kiss with our clothes on and keep them on. This hasn't happened before. I do not know how to kiss her clothed: open-mouthed, close-mouthed, on the cheek or forehead. The fact that it feels kind of right, this kissing without sex, I attribute to something like fate or God or something. I sleep over that night and we don't have sex, and it makes me feel slightly domestic and uncomfortable, but Indigo seems fine with it.

I don't leave in the morning or the next afternoon. It's Friday and Indigo and I spend the day the way we might've two months earlier, which means friendly and comfortable, and for me, with a barely concealed hard-on.

When Bike comes over later, I offer no explanation for why I didn't walk with him and he doesn't ask for one. We are drinking bottles of red wine that Bike and I made at a wine kit place. It ranks with about the 8-dollar bottles at the LCBO. We are talking apropos of nothing of weight or currency, in particular about whether we'd board a rocket ship that never returns to Earth. Indigo keeps asking for clarifications. I let Bike set the criteria.

“Just give up all of it on Earth? What do I get to take?”

“Anything you want.”

“Do we land anywhere?”

“Sure.”

“Where would we land?”

“Anywhere you want.”

“Well, there’s really only Mars or the Moon, right?”

“Just pretend there are other places. The point is you can’t come back here.”

“Do I get to choose who comes with me?”

“No.”

Indigo thinks for a second then says, “The scenario doesn’t make any sense.”

“Just imagine it. Pretend, you know.”

“I can’t. I can’t answer it.”

“Talk about a failure of imagination.”

“No kidding,” I add.

I get up and go to the washroom. Now that I’m on my feet and seeing myself in the mirror, it occurs to me that I’m drunk. I return to the L-couch and light a cigarette. We are all sitting on the same section. Indigo sits between us. Indigo’s back is turned to me because Bike is saying something. I catch Bike’s eyes from where I’m looking over Indigo’s shoulder and I rest my burning cigarette in the ashtray.

“Bike.” I say it like he’s really far away for some reason.

“Yeah.”

“Indigo and I have been naked together.”

I hear it sounding ridiculous. I don’t mean to say it like that at all. Maybe it’s easier than *having sex* or *fucking*. Despite my regrettable choice of words, it is clear what I meant. Yet they both look at me now like they’re waiting for more. I’m either reading all types of things on Bike’s face or projecting them. It kills me.

“And I want you to kiss her.”

“That’s ridiculous. And I already know about you two.”

Indigo’s looking somewhere between her knees, wishing that either she or I wasn’t there. She turns to me to say, “We’re not going to kiss.”

“It would make me feel better.”

Neither responds. Bike looks stoic. I wonder if it was my place to offer him a piece of Indigo back. Indigo turns on the TV and we each rotate a bit so we’re not all looking at each other anymore.

“Things are weird now,” I say after a bit.

## **The Recruit (The Flower and The Bird)**

When she told me she was going to Taiwan, I had no reason to believe her. She had a big heart, and probably would be unable to tell me, but she had lots of reasons to want to be away from me. It was impossible to say where she was going. Or for how long. She said a year. A popular trip might have been a drive south through the United States to Mexico. She could have already purchased a car. I had the audacity to chase her. She knew that. It would be simple to board a plane to Taiwan and roam the night markets. But she would not be so transparent, and therefore, not so easy to find.

Why? She had lots of reasons, like I said. I was never perfect. I was jealous for one thing. I was depressed. Needy. Moody. Drunk. She was dodgy when I asked her—chalked it up to adventure and experience and ambition. We had been together for six years. Why now? Likely it had been planned all along. Monopolize the best years of my young life then disappear into oblivion, or Mexico, or some other place. I don't know what they want. They're fickle. Maybe a Mexican that can offer her the sea, or an Asian who can offer her the sun.

The six years weren't connubial bliss either. I pursued, she withdrew, she pursued, I withdrew. We found each other somewhere in the middle, fell apart, found each other again. And then apart. And then together again. Then she left. To where though?

She did call. Her telephone number matched the Taiwanese country code, but it was so easy to fake a country code with an internet phone service. I could call her from Botswana if I liked. You think it would be easy to ask her, but women never give a



straight answer. They'll utter something so plausible, so truthful-sounding, that it would be absurd to blindly believe.

I needed to recruit someone to accompany me on a search. I had not yet figured where to go. I thought perhaps Taiwan was the wisest option. I could ask around, check names that she'd dropped and businesses where she'd claimed to have been. It would be simple to at least confirm the fact that she'd been feeding me shit since even before she left. She liked to talk about Taiwanese culture, her Taiwanese apartment, the Taiwanese food and Taiwanese transportation and Taiwanese shops. So truthful-seeming, transparent-seeming, so goddamn plausible that I might have believed her if I'd ever encountered a woman who was not cunning, not duplicitous, not dubious or roundabout or evasive. My girl was all of those things. And quick-witted to boot. To research, imagine, create a "real" life in Taiwan was nothing for her. An afternoon.

While talking on the phone, I thought I detected a British inflection to her words. Maybe she was trying to dupe me into searching for her in England. She knew I had an ear for language. She was probably figuring I would go running all over fucking London like a madman searching for her. She'd like that. Anything to make me look foolish. I figured that she figured that Taiwan was so obvious that I would never bother searching for her there. Because to be so simple-minded and fly all the way to Taiwan would be idiotic. It would make me look stupid. Evidently she hadn't thought that merely to uncover her bullshit would give me as much satisfaction as to actually find her.

I was on term at university, so I had plenty of time to find a companion, a sympathizer, preferably a woman, because my flesh was getting lonely. I began showing up for classes. Women go in throngs, and the casual atmosphere of the classroom lends

itself to striking up conversations. There are certain behaviours to avoid in the classroom in order to impress women. Pretending at ineptitude or ignorance will get you nowhere. Most women in the institution want a man who can challenge them, talking at length about cripplingly boring topics. Neither did you want to appear too bright though, because then you'll end up with a particularly boring girl, on a trip that could very well prove to be a strain on a nascent relationship.

When I showed up at classes, I surveyed the empty seats. I had to decide if I wanted a lock or a challenge. I would be globetrotting with this girl, remember. Fastidiousness was a no. A loudmouth was out of the question. I required a low-maintenance variety. Independent too. I didn't want a girl who was constantly reminding me of how little maintenance she required either. No one who says *I'm a 'sweats' type of girl* or *I get ready faster than my guy friends*. That sort would not do. The more I thought about the type necessary, the more daunting the choosing became. She couldn't be a virgin, or the needy sort. I needed an independent girl who would sleep with me, but be self-controlled enough to understand that our relationship was largely for practical purposes and must end when I found my love. Aesthetically, I needed a girl with darker hair. Shorter than me. Slim. A girl with great teeth. A smiley sort too, in order to keep my hopes high on the trip. A good complexion. No craters. I could not become over-particular, but I don't think my criteria were too discriminating. Sexual compatibility was a no-brainer. Often the best approach was to speak to a few women and if I had a semi pressing against the front of my jeans, to take that for an auspicious sign.

My libido led me to different seats on different days. My classes had as few as 15 people and as many as 600. The classes with 600 were the most difficult. Sometimes I felt myself being led in many directions at once. On such occasions I would find a seat between two potential candidates, but my attention was often divided. I planted a few seeds around, sweet talked them, and waited for the right time to harvest.

Sadly, none of the candidates was proving as eager as I would have liked. They had not been my first choices. My first choice was a sweet little bird in my Holocaust class. I seated myself next to her every class, which was not always simple. There were over 100 people, and it often required some crowd scanning. One day I had a five-minute window before the lecture began. I hadn't as much time as I would have liked, but I began with the questions.

“Are you Jewish?” I asked.

“What?”

“Are you Jewish?”

“Do I look Jewish?”

“I'm not so sure I'm so good at identifying Jewish people. I would have probably had you as descended from some Eastern European country.”

“Then why'd you ask if I was Jewish?”

“It's a Holocaust class.”

I was beginning to question how bright this bird actually was. She was sweet, no doubt about that. She smelled good, but not too good. She was shorter than I was. Slim. Dark hair. Clean skin. I was worrying that she might be one of those birds whose intelligence was inversely proportional to her looks.

“Are you Jewish?” she asked.

“No.”

“You’re in a Holocaust class...”

Quite possibly not the sharpest stone on the earth. But I could not ignore my semi. And ultimately it was judge and jury in this choice I had to make. She looked at me like she was confused. I was doing my best not to condescend.

“So was I right that you’re of Eastern European descent?” I asked.

“Technically, you thought I was Jewish first.”

“No. I asked if you were Jewish. I guessed you were European.”

“I’m not sure this is an appropriate discussion to be having in a Holocaust class.”

“Lithuanian? You’re Lithuanian right?”

“...”

“You could also pass for a Scandinavian.”

“I’m Czech.”

“I was close.”

I smiled at her. The lecture began. The merciless ethnic cleansing of millions doesn’t often put girls in the mood to swoon. I had to be delicate. The situation required a great deal of tact and sensitivity on my part. I had to appear engaged, wholly attentive to the lecture. Latent guilt can make the most reluctant scholars learn. I cogitated several off-the-cuff witticisms as we were discussing *Night*, but the time was inopportune to showcase a sense of humour. I felt that my imagined comments would penetrate the steeliest exterior of a girl, would woo this little bird under any other circumstances. I required a change of venue to train this bird to drink from my hand. I thought about

waiting for some kind of divine intervention or serendipity, but then I bucked at the thought, as the classroom was a godless place. I would have to seize the day and not idly let time pass. My little flower could be speeding away in a car, further from me, by the minute.

As I was leaving class I engaged the little bird in conversation. The aisles were crowded and were emptying like a movie theatre. We were near the back, so I had time to get sufficiently into a conversation. As we left the auditorium and the building, we stepped into a light rain, and we came to a fork in one of the many paths that ran through campus. I gleaned from her body language the direction she was going in, and altered my own language so it would become evident that I was going that way too. To shield her from the rain, this little bird was holding the hood of her sweatshirt above her head with thumb and forefinger, making a beak so the rain wouldn't wet her hair. The gesture endeared her to me, as I suspected that her morning routine included straightening her hair, and to get it wet would undo her labour. She did not want her hair to go poufy on her. Perhaps she was particularly conscious of her hair because I was there. A good sign. She could be hot for me. She would not remind me how low-maintenance she was. But her moderate makeup and subtle scent placed her somewhere in the middle of the maintenance scale. I also judged her hair, a jet black, to be her natural colour. If we were travelling together, she would not need a separate bag for cosmetics, she could manage simply with one large piece of luggage. What concerned me was her small frame. She needed to be able to carry 40+ pounds on her back without annoying pleas to stop whenever we cover a substantial distance by foot.

We walked into a campus building with a Tim Horton's. I asked her if she had time for coffee. She did. This pleased me, the fact that she drank coffee. On our chase, we would be able to consult maps and do much of the thinking at coffee shops. We would outline potential locations of my flower.

I allowed her to order first and let her pay for her own coffee. A long trip would prove too costly for me to provide for both of us. I had inheritance money enough from my father dying to cover my own expenses on the trip. I could likely cover her as well, but the duration of the thing was impossible to know, and so it would have been unwise for me to give this bird the impression that she would be wined and dined. If the search went smoothly in the sense that I located my flower without too much globetrotting, I might provide the little bird with a kind of bonus, say a flight home for her efforts. That is assuming that my flower would see that I was not fully squandered just yet, that I was her own, her lovely partner, and that we would come together again, under a brand new sun.

There were no seats at the Tim Horton's, but I knew of one Tim Horton's on campus that always had empty seats. We took an underground passageway between the campus buildings so we wouldn't have to get wet. We chattered as we walked, about superficial things, and I desired to tell her about the trip and the chase and my flower and where she came into it, but it was still not time. The passageway was dim and gaudily painted, and echoed. I wondered if she knew of this subterranean passage. Maybe she thought I was knowledgeable and worldly because I knew of the tunnel. As I had presumed, the other Tim Horton's was mostly empty so we settled in by a window.

"I like your hair," I said. "Is it dyed?"

“No.”

“But you straighten it in the morning?”

“Can you tell?”

“Yes. Impressed?”

“Very.”

“So your hair is undyed but straightened...”

“That’s right.”

“Very nice.”

Though she had been only confirming my thoughts so far, all this was very important to know unambiguously.

“So, in terms of makeup, supposing you were to travel... You don’t wear much, do you?”

“Wow. You know how to make someone self-conscious.”

“I don’t mean like that. What I mean is, suppose you were going somewhere, suppose the place was overseas someplace, like in Asia, would you carry a separate bag for cosmetics?”

“Of course not. That’s ridiculous.”

“Isn’t it? That’s what I would have guessed. You’d bring a hair straightener though?”

“It depends how long I was going for...”

“Suppose you had no idea how long you were going for.”

“Well. Then I suppose I would probably bring one.”

“Right. That’s reasonable.”

We talked some more, mostly about superficial things without real weight—religion, school, work, books. I kept trying to steer the conversation towards more practical matters, but it was proving difficult. At one point however, the little bird was talking about her ennui with scholarship and work, and I took that opportunity to test the waters.

“Go to Tahiti with me,” I said. It sounded somehow better, sunnier, than Taiwan with its typhoons and monsoons, or dreary England, or wherever we might need to go. At this point, it was not necessarily an untruth. After all, we might end up having to go to Tahiti.

“That’d be nice,” she said.

“Really. Come to Tahiti. Let’s take a trip.”

She looked confoundedly at me.

“I’m in the middle of a school term. And so are you. Plus there’s the even more glaring issue of hardly knowing each other.”

“See, but you’re all hung up about time. There’s all the time in the world in Bora Bora.”

“It sounds nice. It would be amazing to get away from the cold. And school.”

“It’s easier than you think. What would you say if I said I already bought you a non-refundable ticket to Tahiti?”

“I would probably say that’s impossible on account of you not knowing me before today. I would probably also say that’s insane.”

“Right. Well I don’t have a non-refundable ticket to Tahiti. But why don’t we do it?”



“I’d love to. Really. I just can’t.”

“Sure you can,” I said. “It’s easy peasy. You just have to say ‘yes’ and I’ll take care of the rest. It’s as easy as that. You say ‘yes’ and pack a bag, that’s it. Just say ‘yes’.”

I heard myself breaking my own rules about not wining and dining and spending, but I felt like I was making some headway.

“You’re actually serious right now, aren’t you?”

“Completely serious.”

“You’re insane,” she said.

“Not really, no. Just say the word. It’s easy. I hardly know you and I already know about your shitty job at a shitty motel, how badly school sucks... I understand. You’re what? 20 years old? 21 maybe? You’re not always gonna be able to just get up and go wherever the hell you want to with some guy you just met. People will judge you and throw a straight-jacket on you. But we’ve got a chance now. Do you see this? Do you understand?”

“I don’t know... I’d be crazy to do it. I hardly know you.”

“I hardly know you either. For all I know, you have severed heads sitting in jars full of brine in your refrigerator, but I’m willing to risk it. I’d be crazy for going with you, too.”

“Well, you’re definitely nuts. I can tell that already.”

“Say it. Say yes.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. I just can’t.”

“You don’t like me.”

“No, it’s not that. I don’t know you.”

“You will. There’s time.”

“Well then, all in due time.”

She made me work for it. There were coffees and drinks and even a couple meals. She started to bend though. And one evening, after a particularly inspired speech by yours truly re: doing something totally uncharacteristic and unordinary, but something that regardless of outcome, like whether it turns out wonderful and life-changing or terrible and life-changing, it’s almost impossible to regret. I really emphasized the mundanity of the future, the everyday-ness, and how assuming I wasn’t some homicidal psycho (which she intuited that I wasn’t by this point), that it really would be a missed opportunity were she to discard the idea. Maybe it was because we had already finished a bottle of red wine and was feeling inspired or filled with spontaneity, or maybe she just felt worn out with her life, or who knows why, but she consented. I was probably as surprised as she was, but I told her I’d hold her to her word, and she didn’t retreat.

Of course, it wasn’t quite so simple as driving to the airport and hopping on a plane. There were the boring bureaucratic details of withdrawing from school, but it was still early enough in term to get my money back. Finding someone to let my apartment to was a chore as well. I littered the campus with signage. More troubling than any of these small annoyances that come with leaving someplace was the fact that I had no intention

of going to Tahiti, in fact never have. But it had a remoteness and romanticism to it that Taiwan might not have had. The little bird took the bait too. I had not yet apprised her of the purpose of the vacation either. All in due time, as she might've said. Somewhere in my mind I thought it might be prudent to simply leave her in the dark. It would come to light in time, and I should get to know her better before revealing too much and running the risk of shooting myself in the foot, so to speak.

My focus and fixity started paying off. I was able to let my place for the rest of the lease. I got my tuition money back. The little bird had set about doing the same things, all the while telling me, or herself, that she must be crazy. We saw more and more of each other through the preparatory stages. Neither of us had much on our plate since she quit her job and we were withdrawn from school, and we had about a week of leisure until the flight. She still didn't know that we were going to Taiwan, and as our departure grew nearer, telling her became no less daunting.

We hadn't slept together either. One night after we were out at the pharmacy picking up miniature shampoos and toothpastes and other miniature travel-friendly items, I suggested we try on the old glove, so to speak, to see if it fits. The little bird thought this rather unromantic, the way I approached the topic, in a practical manner, which was my M.O., but nonetheless I understood her position and told her to consider what I'd said withdrawn and then proceeded to go about it the right way.

We were in her living room watching TV and I poured us some wine. I poured hers to the edge so that she could not realistically lift the glass to her lips without spilling. Not even the steady hands of a surgeon could have. She had to sip her first few sips before it was possible. We drank two bottles of the cheap red before I got around to

broaching the topic of sex again. I was brash now. I had tiptoed the first time, and done it unromantically. I know what girls like to hear. Either sugary come-ons or vulgar honesty. Whether they admit it or not.

“You look gorgeous,” I said.

“Thanks.”

She was drunk and coy.

“I’d like to do awful things to you.”

“Like what? What do you want to do to me?”

“Enough of this pussyfooting,” I said, taking charge. “Let’s go to your bedroom.”

“See. That wasn’t so hard.”

It was kind of sloppy in the bedroom. You could tell it was unscripted and we’d been drinking. I took her sweatshirt off and she had on another shirt underneath. And if you’d believe it, she had on an-even-other one, a spaghetti-strapped wife-beater, under that. They were getting progressively tighter, and the second one was a T-shirt, which I caught on her head, and trying impatiently to get it off, grabbing at the bottom of the shirt, which I was struggling with above her head, I managed to knock her off balance into the wall. She had trouble with my belt after that, on account of she was trying to undo it with her teeth. It was this double-pronged variety that was not so easy to undo. I had a semi from the whole undressing process, and when I finally threw her on the bed naked, things unfolded much less gracelessly. She was easy to move with my hands. We rolled around, one over the other, kissing. I kissed her face, her neck, her body. When I entered her, her vagina was sopping wet. Neither of us had the foresight to discuss condoms, but when I was about to finish I told her so, and she scanned the room quickly

and told me to cum in the garbage can. The garbage can? I said. But by that time there was no time, and instead of coming on her sheets, I lunged forward and came on her torso.

“I didn’t want to get it all over your sheets,” I said.

“Thanks.” A note of sarcasm. She was kinda holding her arms out like she didn’t want to touch the ejaculate on her. She asked me to grab a dirty piece of laundry from her closet to mop it up. She cleaned up, and since she hadn’t finished, I fingered her until she came—just before my hand got so tired that I would have had to stop. When she finished, she worked her way under my arm and had her face almost in my armpit. She looked tired. I said, Listen, I know this sucks, but I couldn’t get tickets to Tahiti. What, she said sleepily, waking a little. You told me we had booked already. I did book, I said. But we’re not going to Tahiti, we’re going to Taiwan. Why Taiwan, she asked. Well, I said. Alphabetically, it was about as close as I could get. Taiwan, huh, she said. Yes, I said. I promise it’ll be good there. I’ve never been to Asia, she said, we can always go to Tahiti next time. Sure, I said. Next time.

She fell asleep. She really was a knockout. Her black hair was splayed all over my chest, and it was scratchy, but I didn’t want to disturb her, so laid still. She had a delicate little upturned nose, and white-white skin. Most women with skin that white tend to be blotchy. But hers was creamy soft. Unblemished. I did a good job picking this one out, I thought. A great choice. A bargain. Look at her: so peaceful it was making me tired. I wanted to be wherever she was right then. If only I could meet her in sleep. It consoled me to know that she’d be there again in the morning though. I fell asleep simply.

Less than a week later, my little bird and I were at the airport. We had checked our bags and were through the terminal, into the gate, waiting to board. I was having a particularly difficult time understanding the change in time.

“So it’s 12 hours ahead there,” I said. “We lose all the time we’re on the plane, plus the 12 hours changing time zones. But what if someone was perpetually flying east, only ever landing to refuel. Wouldn’t the days be going by almost twice as fast. And going west. If you just flew continually west, couldn’t time slow right down to a crawl. Like you could get an aircraft equivalent of a house boat and live up there and you’d be passing almost no time at all?”

I started drawing on a receipt, writing down the lengths of flights and the relative time in different cities at each point, attempting to make it simple, but the only conclusion I reached was that I would never understand jumping time zones perpetually in one direction.

We boarded when the speaker announced our row, and we were against the side of the plane. I sat at the window and she the aisle. There were two columns of seats, an aisle, three more columns, another aisle, then another two columns. So we sat in relative privacy. We shared a set of headphones and watched an awful movie, during which she fell asleep in the nook of my arm. She was getting comfortable there in the nook of my arm. I was learning to take extra care that my armpits were washed and deodorized to accommodate her. I kind of had to go to the bathroom, but I hadn’t the heart to wake her, or to try and extract her head from under my arm. I let her sleep, and I eventually fell off too.

When she woke I had already been awake for a bit, my urge to pee mysteriously quelled. I pressed the button for one of the stewardesses and ordered us a couple plastic cups of red wine.

“So, Taiwan?” she said, holding up her cup. “This is crazy. This whole trip is crazy.”

“Too late to second-guess now. I’ve already hooked you on, line and sinker.”

“I don’t think that’s the expression.”

We cheers’d our cups—it was unsatisfying on account of the plastic—and had a drink. I had my one arm around her still, and I felt good. I had had little touch with my flower before leaving. I mentioned nothing about dropping out of school, or letting my place, or taking a trip, or anything at all about my little bird. I hadn’t mentioned it much to anyone, as I had no one to answer to, and no one that would have really cared anyhow. Since I dropped out of school and had been planning the trip, I was sleeping more soundly. Even there on the plane, I felt right. The little bird was right. What we were doing, I decided, was the thing to do.

We had a couple more drinks on the plane, and my little bird was already a bit flushed by the time we arrived. Then, stepping out into the sunny thick humidity of Taipei, we both remarked on our heaviness. Then with the added weight of our backpacks, and the restlessness of being so long in the air, we were both pretty well floored, and decided that before we set about doing anything at all, we would need to find a room and sleep.

We caught a cab to a hostel somewhere near the heart of Taipei, and we had exchanged a fair bit of currency, and found that our NT, with the exchange rate taken into

account, would give us plenty of mileage. We got a room with a double bed, and my little bird, liking this hostel at least as much as the next one, neatly unpacked her bag, settling in for a while. I had bought a pack of cigarettes from the shop next to the hostel, and smoked one by the open window. Taipei, I said. I can't believe I'm here, we're here, she said. She finished organizing her travel stuffs and I met her in bed. We stripped down to our underwear and hopped under a thin sheet on the double. It's early to say, she said. But this might not be crazy. This might be right. She kissed me on the mouth and settled in under my arm and fell asleep. Again I must have been downwind of the melatonin she gave off—and certainly there must have been something chemical about it—for I hardly remembered seeing her peaceful puckered sleeping-face.

My little bird and I spent a few days visiting mosques, riding the MRT, and wandering night markets. Like me, she was thrilled whenever she recalled the exchange of our dollar for the NT. We didn't worry about spending a couple hundred NT on dinner. There was no need for frugality. We went to KTV places and performed karaoke. We took a two day trip to the beach in Keelung. We lay in the sun. My little bird had on this navy two-piece that drove me crazy. We fucked like animals at our hotel. I felt like royalty. Taiwanese people were coming up to us and asking if they could take our picture. I knew it was on account of my little bird who looked brilliant in her swimsuit. She was sheepish but I convinced her that no one would ever see these photos. The Taiwanese were evidently charmed by her and I couldn't blame them a bit. I had no problems showing her off. The more people that saw the better. I felt that I would be cropped out of the photos later.



We returned to Taipei one evening. I told her that I wanted to do some exploring on my own. That's fine, she said. I'm tired anyhow. I'm just gonna hang out at the hostel, she explained. I wandered off towards a night market. I began thinking of my flower, my raison-d'etre. She might be here, I thought. She could be anywhere. She could be here or she could be in England. She could be in England or just as easily in Mexico.

There were stalls set up all around the night market. A lot of fragrant food was being prepared, but I was not hungry. I browsed the stalls all around. I was looking at a stall selling jewellery when a piece with a jade gemstone caught my eye. My little flower had always loved jade. She would have liked it. If I was to find her, and show up with this necklace with the jade gemstone, everything would be absolutely fine. She would see me and the jade gemstone, and she would welcome me in, and we would be fine. She would tell me that I was her only, had always been her very own only, and we would be together. I held the necklace, and it was a fine necklace indeed. I told the owner of the merchandise to hold on to it for me, but he understood no English.

I continued browsing. I found a string of cultured golden pearls. I thought of my little bird lying down to bed in the hostel. Her white-white skin growing more tan. Her soft jet black hair splayed across my body. Her wide-eyed presence and capriciousness. It's crazy, she was always saying. And also, I can't believe I came, I can't believe I'm here, I must really be out of my mind. These pearls would look good on her, I knew. It didn't say how much they cost. But I had not yet encountered a price that seemed exorbitant. How much could it be? I wondered. And then deciding that it could not cost

too much, for nothing was too much, I handed it over to the gentleman running the counter and opened my wallet.

## **Graduation**

The lobby was a congregation of strapping, upright future-successes. I did not consider myself one of them. The girl standing in front of me looked ravishing in her shiny silver dress. I imagined that she had done interesting things and was manoeuvring her way quickly up through the lower rungs to the top of some ladder. I told her that I felt absurd wearing a too-big black rental gown that cost me twenty-five bucks. She smiled a toothy smile—too many teeth, I decided. I would not be able to sex her on account of her teeth. Also, she was about my height, and therefore much too tall. She would look into my eyes while I was sexing her. There was something slightly cock-eyed about her too.

I was right though, about the interesting things. She had lived with native Africans in a hut, working for a not-for-profit organization, building schools or feeding the famished or immunizing the at-risk. I got all this in the first two minutes of chatter. She was involved with commendable organizations that helped the derelict and the underprivileged. Her life was just ducky. She said she felt a little absurd wearing the ceremonial gown too, but I could tell that it wasn't true.

In the rows of folding chairs, I volunteered my assessment of the uninspiring commencement speech to my neighbours. The man has his name on a series of textbooks—heavy, daunting, lifeless ones that I hoped to never see again. His gown was iridescent, even more ridiculous than my rental.

After a needlessly long period of waiting, a brief and untriumphant walk across the stage where I knelt before the chancellor as he took the sash from my arm and laid it around my neck like a loose noose and I answered truly “I don't know” to his inquiry about my future plans, the ceremony ended. I spoke with the girl in the silver dress for a

few moments in the lobby. Though I didn't want to have sex with her, the ceremony had made me feel lonely and cheap, so I entertained the idea again. I returned my gown with uncalled-for immediacy and went outside into the day. I sat on the grass and smoked a cigarette. Graduates posed for photographs with their friends and families. Crowds of students who evidently knew each other laughed and smiled.

Over the course of a few beers at the on-campus bar, I made conversation with people who looked unoccupied. I spoke about my graduation to the bartender. I wondered aloud why there weren't more people celebrating. Where were the drunken revellers? I scanned the bar for these people. Finding none, I left, telling the bartender to keep my stool warm.

I strolled around campus. The only building I cared to go into was the library, but it was under construction for the summer. I smoked on a bench in front of the library where years earlier I had weepily finished reading *Frankenstein* late one night after the library had closed, as the rain soaked me through and rabbit-eared the pages of the book. I remembered looking out the ninth floor windows from the study booths. I remembered dreaming, believing in things.

By the end of the cigarette, I needed to use a washroom. After a hot beer shit, I looked at my freshly-shaved face in the mirror, washed my hands more thoroughly than necessary, and walked back outside without knowing where to go. I meandered around most of the campus with vague notions, like that I might run into some girl that I had known tangentially but not too well, and that we would exchange hardly a word but search madly for a discreet place to have sex, and that, finding none, we would strip down and fuck like animals in the bushes. I tried to believe this could happen.

I wandered back to the bar for a couple more Canadians as another ceremony dragged on. I was less talkative this time around. I slumped on the stool and imagined that the waitress with runs in her stockings would drag me into the kitchen and fuck me on the vegetable counter. I was beginning to feel drunk.

My friend finally called. I drank the rest of it in one pull and walked out to find that the sun had reached the point, or rather I had reached the point, where it was very nearly hostile. I had ditched my grey sports coat. My white shirt was untucked with the top few buttons undone. My tie hung loosely around my neck. My friend Rich and I walked north along the road circumscribing the campus, suitably dubbed Ring Road. We walked past our first-year residence building, and past Mission Hill, where we spent much of the first week of university in the shadowy pines smoking joints, and past our former residence's cafeteria, where I had put on an impressive twenty-five pounds in under eight months eating mostly club sandwiches and spicy chicken wraps, and past the on-campus Tim Horton's where I worked a brief stint before my employer and I decided I wasn't right for the position, and past the bushes where we had uncovered a beaten-down shack, and past the boards for the outdoor rink where I used to play pick-up hockey in the winter, and past the swimming pool, where the mustachioed middle-aged man ogled me in the shower, and past the field where we had played orientation games, all bright-eyed and eager to know each other.

"Thank the gods it's over," I said.

"Big wank," Rich agreed.

We found Rich's car in the congested parking lot across the street from campus. I lit a cigarette and put on some sad music. We hit the main street and gathered a little speed and I felt the whole damned city drawing up close behind us.

## **Body Language**



Jesse met Jordan at Sid's party that Sid was throwing above all else to be liked. Sid didn't really feel much one way or the other about either Jesse or Jordan, but invited them all the same, hoping that they would like him. Sid rarely thought about Jesse or Jordan, but bcc'd them the email invitation, and Jesse and Jordan showed up, perhaps an indication that Jesse and Jordan quite liked Sid, Sid thought.

Jesse and Jordan struck up a conversation around a knee-high coffee table in the living room, and it, that is to say the nascent conversation, began as they were on opposite sides of this table, and Jesse was uncertain whether or not he should walk around so that the knee-high table wouldn't impede a more intimate conversation by occupying all that physical space between them; but Jesse hesitated, because it was a bold gesture indeed to slyly walk around the table while maintaining the conversation that Jesse judged—though he was never certain about these things—was going swimmingly and progressing to a point of intimacy that might get stifled by this table occupying all this physical space between them. Jesse didn't want to unnerve Jordan, who at this point in time was trying to project her "interested" face, which indeed she was, that is to say, interested, but it was not enough to be interested, I must *convey* that interest, Jordan thought, and the only mirror for Jordan to check her interested face in was at an oblique angle to her and would necessitate a break in the conversation, thereby producing the exact opposite of the desired effect of apparent interestedness.

It appeared to Jesse that Jordan was not looking him quite in the eye, that Jordan in fact had her glance fixed just slightly above and between his eyes, and Jesse wondered if there was something unusual on his forehead, perspiration say, but Jesse had no mirror to consult without giving himself away, so bit his lip about the whole thing, but not

actually of course, because Jesse wanted nothing less than to look nervous. Jordan was silently thinking contemptuous thoughts about herself, regarding her inability to maintain eye contact, especially now with Jesse, with whom Jordan wanted so badly to meet eyes, but Jordan being bashful and all, was unable and stared rather obtusely, just above Jesse's eyes, a trick that she learned from public speaking and that she, at this moment in time, wished she had never learned.

"I think the same thing," Jesse was saying, hoping to be liked.

"I'm so glad," Jordan responded, beaming, desperate to appear sincere, which she was.

Jesse fixed his glance on Jordan—who was looking obliquely at his face still—trying to like pierce through Jordan's eyes to her mind's eye, and say but not say, convey, *I like you Jordan, boy do I, but do you like me?*, trying to collude looks of desire and inquisition just like that, and Jordan was thinking that perhaps Jesse really had to go to the bathroom, as Jesse's face kept contorting, sending really rather mixed signals. Jordan, now confused, suddenly feeling as though she had cornered Jesse into conversation, Jesse who very well might be wanting, no, *needing*, to go to the bathroom, but perhaps was too sheepish to say so, or even worse, Jesse might have just felt trapped and so was projecting this face that was communicating, *I need to go to the bathroom*, when all Jesse really wanted was to get away from Jordan, and Jordan felt just like Jesse tore her heart out and was chewing on it.

"Do you need to go to the bathroom?" Jordan asked.

"Um...No," Jesse responded, wondering if Jordan was intimating that in fact she had to go to the washroom, which sometimes, Jesse knew, people did—like ask questions

only as a guise for what they actually want/need to do, like when someone asks, *Do you want to eat that?*, they're really saying, *I want to eat that*, and Jesse suspected that Jordan maybe needed to go to the washroom.

“Do *you* need to go to the washroom?” Jesse asked.

“Um, what? Uh, no.” Jordan responded, somewhat perplexed and thinking, *Are my legs turned in imperceptibly at the knees?*, *Could I smell like urine?*, and Jordan had a strong impulse to sniff her armpits for that ammonia smell, but Jordan could tell in her lateral vision, as she stared at Jesse's forehead, that Jesse was looking at her, and so did nothing, and it seemed to Jordan as though one of them maybe should say something again.

Jesse and Jordan stood, still, with a knee-high table between them still, looking dumbly at each other's eyes and foreheads, occasionally squinting in order to better read the other person, and because of their involvement in this inquisitive stare-down, their conversation had fizzled into quietude, which contributed to an impression, to anyone aloof of the situation, that Jesse and Jordan were preparing to like draw guns from their holsters.

Jesse, feeling the weight of every silent moment, stood dumb, and it appeared to Jesse that Jordan kept opening her mouth to say something, but continually checked herself, and Jesse believed this inability to squeeze the words through her mouth was an indication that Jordan wanted to say something really difficult to say, like *I think we should mingle with other people, as right now you're monopolizing my time and inhibiting me from really getting to know these other individuals who look, each one individually, somehow more interesting than you*, and Jordan thought that Jesse's silent

contemplation was his canny attempt to devise a way to sever the conversation, and she could not help herself, but absolutely had to say:

“Was there something you wanted to say?”

Jesse wondered if once again Jordan was projecting her desire to say something by asking him what *he* wanted to say, but Jesse realized that he already repeated her washroom question and could not now repeat this same question though he would have liked to.

“Not really... Good party, isn't it?” Jesse said and immediately thought that Jordan must misconstrue this comment, through no fault of her own filtering, or percolating, thought processes, where asinine comments like his own trickle down and are exposed as pure little droplets of *intention*, because Jesse knew that Jordan knew he was not in fact talking about the party when he was talking about the party, so Jordan would have to inevitably conclude that Jesse was either a) forcefully hitting on her or b) just about the most pathetic and socially inept individual that she has ever engaged with in conversation at a party.

“Yes, it was awfully nice to get an invitation. I don't even really know Sid that well,” Jordan said.

“Me neither,” Jesse chimed, and Jordan was glad that Jesse didn't know Sid well, because she thought Sid rather a rodent, that is, sneaky and insincere, and Jesse thought much the same thing, and both Jesse and Jordan had attended the party solely because they were, individually and respectively, in fact quite lonely, in spite of the fact that their mothers, respectively, have told them, each, that they are incredibly unique and lovely

people, and both Jesse and Jordan, in their heart of hearts, are inclined to believe that their mothers are sound in judgment.

Jesse felt suddenly united with Jordan, neither of them knowing Sid very well, in his case not knowing anyone here very well (which unbeknownst to him was the case for Jordan as well), and this conversation, truth be told, was the most engaging and thrilling conversation that Jesse has had since he can remember. Jordan thought that Jesse was someone she would truly like to get to know, he seemed so *himself*, and Jordan was caught between a throbbing desire for Jesse and a longing desire *to be like* Jesse, in his himself-ness. Jordan figured that Jesse must have exponentially more conversations with the opposite gender than she has, on account of his being so *collected*, like together and himself, when she had all these feelings that defy description and suggestion running through her blood and her bones so that they just might burst right through the surface of her skin.

Jordan, feeling an urgent desire to get herself together, both figuratively and literally, needed a moment alone in the washroom, and there she would be able to do both the figurative getting-together, that is subdue and channel her fractionized energies, and really work in one direction, and be able to like, wow Jesse, which she felt she hadn't been in a position to do so far, being everywhere and nowhere at one and the same time, and also the literal getting-together, that is accentuate the desirable features on her face with a touch of makeup here and/or there (and desirable facial features, Jesse thought, Jordan had in plenitude).

“Will you excuse me?” Jordan asked. “I need to visit the little girl’s room.”

“Of course. By all means,” Jesse responded.

Jordan left to the washroom, and Jesse wondered what he had been thinking with regard to that “by all means,” as though suggesting Jordan would need all her means to go to the washroom, and Jesse thought it profoundly stupid what he had said, and he retrieved a drink and sat down on the corner cushion of the couch, steeping/stewing in his profound stupidity and ineptness. Meanwhile, Jordan expertly accentuated her high cheekbones and curled her beautiful and much-coveted long lashes in front of the mirror, thinking it was just an awful phrase to use, that “little girl’s room,” and she imagined Jesse would have fled the party by the time she got out of the washroom, and she thought that it was a clear indication of her scatterbrainedness that she had had to excuse herself when everything had been so engrossing/natural/perfect. She felt she always ruined these moments, like when she knew she was supposed to say or do something to create a *moment* in her life, like really consummate it, and knowing full well what it would take in a situation to have one of these real moments, like as in say a book, Jordan still inevitably ended up saying or doing the wrong thing.

Jesse anxiously kept one eye on the hallway, down which Jordan had disappeared, permanently perhaps, given that there might have been a window through which Jordan, with her slender figure, would wedge in order not to have to meet his sad eyes ever again. Jordan strode, *tiptoed* she felt, down the hallway and paused right before she would see the knee-high coffee table in the living room, so she could truly *gather* herself, before, she hoped, resuming a beautiful/perfect conversation with Jesse who, she prayed, would still be standing quite alone in the position where she had left him.

Turning the corner, Jordan didn’t see Jesse standing, and her heart just about exploded, no, *imploded*, tinily, as it might if she had to witness a dog getting squished by

a pickup truck or like when she sees a slim man pulling a weightier man in a rickshaw through narrow streets. Only moments later, *years*, Jordan thought, she witnessed Jesse sitting alone on the corner of the couch, and now her heart, which had imploded, exploded back to a size that was like slightly bigger than it was even before she came to the party and first engaged in conversation with Jesse.

Jesse witnessed Jordan walking as Jordan witnessed Jesse sitting, and the swelling of hearts was absolutely tangible, or *palpable*, to anyone in the vicinity. Jordan wondered why Jesse had sat down, perhaps not to be espied by her upon her return, and she did not want to immediately go and sit, so audacious and suggestive as it would have been, directly next to Jesse. Jesse saw Jordan circling around, much like, he thought, a negatively polarized magnet to another negatively polarized magnet, but in fact, as anyone aloof would notice, it was more like a moth to a flame, or a spider circling the prey caught in her web, like you knew Jordan was going to get there, but Jesse didn't.

Jordan came up nonchalantly, clumsily she thought, and sat down on the other corner cushion, leaving a middle cushion between them, and looking straight ahead, like not over at Jesse. Jesse looked over at her, and he felt that Jordan, having left the middle cushion un-sat-on, did not wish to engage in conversation any more, but sat there more out of either default, it being one of the only seats to sit in, or respect, like respecting the fact that they *had* engaged in conversation and acknowledging that she in fact knew him even if she didn't feel like speaking presently.

*Why hasn't he said anything to me?*, Jordan thought, feeling completely idiotic having dolled herself up and collected herself in the washroom for Jesse. *He thinks I'm repulsive*, Jordan thought, and she sat there, too depressed to actually move her limbs, let

alone hoist herself up with the arm of the couch and leave, so she sat for what felt to Jordan like longer than her life leading up to the moment where she sat down on the couch, until she heard Jesse's voice:

“Hey.” It was a voice of like real butterscotch.

“Oh... Hey,” Jordan said warmly, warmly enough, she hoped.

Jesse and Jordan resumed their engrossing/beautiful/perfect conversation and the dwindling crowd paid them no mind, but Jesse and Jordan were keenly aware of the fact that they must be leaving, but neither dared move a muscle, aside from the minimum usage required to move your mouth, blink, smile. *This has to end*, Jordan thought gloomily, and Jesse, feeling the pangs of time with each person exiting, thought dolefully, *this can't go on forever*.

“Well...” Jesse said, it being now beyond the level of intimacy at the party where Jesse was comfortable being there, not particularly liking, or even *knowing*, the host.

“I suppose we should get going,” Jordan said, immediately wishing she could have simply said, *Let's never leave, we'll disregard the smarmy host and live here*.

“Yes, that's what I was thinking,” Jesse said.

Jesse and Jordan grabbed their coats off the stiff coat rack, saying goodnight to their host, each pledging to call Sid, and each not really meaning it, and they walked out into the crisp night and stood on the sidewalk, silently, pretending to observe the moon and the stars, pretending to be too rapt to hail one of the empty cabs driving by, both thinking that this is where it ends.

“I'll hail you a cab,” Jesse said.



Jesse thought it would be chivalrous of him to hail Jordan a cab, and he stepped a foot into the street, got his hailing hand out, and hailed the next empty cab that drove by. The cab pulled up to the curb and Jesse and Jordan both looked at each other longingly, neither of them recognizing longing in the other, and they timorously held hands facing each other, Jesse's right with Jordan's left and Jordan's right with Jesse's left, locked like oppositely polarized magnets, and Jesse bent in, not even believing that he failed to stifle the impulse, and kissed Jordan on the cheek.

"Goodnight," Jesse said.

"It was great meeting you," Jordan said, getting into the cab now, leaving forever, to live in some beautiful and harmonious world that Jesse would never be allowed to be a part of.

"You too," Jesse said, the words squeezing in the cab door just before it closed, and Jesse watched it pull off into the night, and walked home.

Jesse got home swiftly, and he crawled into bed cursing his ineptness, his clumsiness, his reservedness. Jesse replayed his blunders like an excruciating slideshow: every social ineptitude, every impotence and incompetence, until the memories suddenly evoked Jordan's beautiful face in his mind, blanketing everything else. Jordan had arrived home and poured herself a glass of water and got in bed, thinking about Jesse. *I didn't even get his phone number, or even his last name*, Jordan thought, reproving herself and her stupidity and her ugly timidity. Jordan lay awake thinking of Jesse, how himself and beautiful and sincere he was, and the two of them, unaware for now and forever what the other is doing/thinking, touch themselves thinking of the other; as hands work, calves flex, toes point, pores flow, hearts throb.

## **Those of Us Who Are Still Here**

Jenny arrived with a marble rum cake with a crunchy walnut topping.

“Jenny. Good to see you,” my dad said. “You remember Jenny? My godmother?”

“She made your wedding cake, right? Hi, Jenny.”

“Hi. Which one is this?” Jenny asked. “Is this the hockey player?”

“Not really,” I said.

“You’re such a big boy. I have a couple grandnieces you should meet.”

“Why don’t you give me that cake,” my uncle said to Jenny. “And sit down.”

“Eat the cake,” Jenny said.

“You should stay for dinner, Jenny,” my mom said. “It’s going to be very simple, just spaghetti and meat sauce. My back’s sore or else I’d make something more elaborate.”

“Oh, no. Your back’s sore and you’re making dinner?”

“Just simple,” she said. “Just pasta.”

“No, no. I have to be home for dinner, thanks. I had a problem with my knees recently, too. I had surgery on it five times. But I started swimming again. I went swimming this morning.”

“Swimming is great for the muscles as you get older, isn’t it?” my mom said. “I go swimming at the club in Ottawa. We joined a gym recently.”

“Oh, you two are not old. I’m seventy-eight.”

“That’s great,” my mom said. “You look good.”

“Oh, you know,” Jenny said. “I have problems, but what can you expect at my age. I’m old.”

“He often talked about you Jenny,” my dad said. “He hardly ever spoke of anyone, and even less often about someone outside the family. But when he did, he always mentioned you.”

“You know, I knew your father more than 50 years,” Jenny said. “Since he moved to Canada after the war.”

“You were a good friend to him,” my uncle said.

“I knew him a long time,” she said. “A long time...”

“I called Helena about the food,” she went on. “She said they’re going to serve chicken and potatoes at the wake.”

“I thought they were going to serve Polish food,” my uncle said.

“Oh, yes. They’re going to have pierogies. Cabbage rolls. Kapusta. But they wanted to serve chicken too.”

“Your grandfather helped build that hall,” Jenny said to me.

“Oh, really.”

“Yes,” she said. “He was an active member in the community.”

“I thought they were going to serve sausage,” my dad said.

“I suggested sausage,” Jenny said. “But Helena said that sausage is poor people’s food. She wanted to make chicken. Breasts.”

“Okay.”

You know I was back in Poland 16 years ago,” Jenny said. “You can still see the effect of the War. They still hate the Polish.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay for dinner, Jenny?” my mom asked.

“No,” said Jenny. “Thanks, but I have to go home.”

Jenny got up to put on her coat.

“I will see you at the visitation.”

“Yes.”

“See you, Jenny.”

“Bye.”

Jenny left.

“Well, that was nice of Jenny to bring a cake,” my mom said.

“Yes,” my dad said. “I think she must have seen the obituary.”

“It would have made her glad to see her name mentioned,” my uncle said.

“Pop did talk about her,” my dad said.

“I talked to the priest who’s doing the service yesterday,” my uncle said. “Nice enough guy. He seemed to know Pop pretty well, he knew about his blindness and everything else. Second oldest member of the church, he said. I guess the other guy was 90. The priest made it sound like they were both waiting for the other one to croak. He said Pop would show up and ask about the guy if he wasn’t around and that the other old guy would ask after Pop when he wasn’t around. They both wanted to be the oldest.”

“He did a lot for that church,” my dad said. “The stingy old guy would always have a few bills for the collection plates.”

“Jesus. Always collecting.”

“When we were altar boys, we’d walk around with the collection plate, trying to squeeze money out of all of them.”

“Don’t remind me,” my uncle said.

“When was the last time he went?”

“Oh, I drove him up there about three weeks ago.”

“You go in?”

“Hell no. I went and grabbed a paper and sat in the diner around the corner.”

“Devout as ever.”

“Oh, yeah. You’re hacking your ball out of the woods every Sunday. God avoids the golf course when you’re out there.”

“I think I beat you last time we went out.”

“Yeah, with some help from the ol’ foot wedge.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Is the service going to be in Polish or English?” my mother asked.

“About half and half,” my uncle said. “Pop doesn’t have many friends around anymore. Most of ‘em are dead already.”

“Pop’d probably want some Polish,” my dad said.

“It won’t matter to him.”

“You never know,” my mom said. “Maybe he’s around somewhere.”

“Oh, he’ll be there, front and center, in his Sunday best. He ain’t gonna be hearing anything though. Thank God, too. Can you imagine the old guy seeing us all gathered around him crying?”

“He was sentimental sometimes too, Teddy.”

“I talked to Al. We’re gonna swing by the liquor store and pick up a few cases and some bottles of Canadian Club.”

“Pop’s favorite.”

“Why’d all the old Poles drink Canadian Club?” I asked.

“They were masochists,” my uncle said.

“I remember when that bastard Boleslaw died,” my dad said. “All the drinking buddies hung around getting pissed until all the bottles were empty.”

“They’re all of ‘em dead now, the old bastards.”

“Hard to miss ‘em.”

“No kiddin’.”

“Pop had a good run, though.”

“He did. I thought the old guy’d never go down.”

“Well, he didn’t go down easily.”

“I think Christine going so early really changed him,” my mom said.

“That’s a bum business,” my uncle said. “None of us could’ve seen it coming.”

“No parent wants to outlive their children. You hear that, Andy? Put down those cigarettes.”

“Don’t worry. I have the lung capacity of a deep sea diver.”

“I thought you quit,” my uncle said to me.

“I did. A couple times. For eight months last time.”

“Better than I’ve done in a while.”

“You should tell him, Teddy. Maybe he’d listen to you.”

“Hell, if I knew better, I wouldn’t be still smoking myself.”

“You seemed to be really huffing out there as you were mowing the lawn,” my dad said. “Maybe we should get the plot next to Pop ready.”

“Leo!” my mom said. “I swear, sometimes I don’t know where you get your sense of humour. It’s not funny to even joke.”

“Go easy on him, Mom.”

“I just don’t think it’s a healthy coping mechanism. It’s so morbid. He never wants to talk about it. But then he wakes up with nightmares.”

“Those aren’t about Pop.”

“Well, you won’t know if you don’t examine yourself. It’s been a hard couple years for this family.”

“It’s been tough on everyone,” my uncle said. “Especially Christine’s kids. Jackie’s been getting headaches and they have her undergoing all these tests because of how Christine went.”

“Geez, that’s terrible,” my mom said. “Poor kids.”

“You never know when someone’s gonna go,” my uncle said. “You’re with ‘em one day and they’re gone the next.”

“That’s the way,” my dad said.

“What a year for this family,” my mother said again. “I don’t think I can take any more deaths.”

“We could use a bit of a break,” my uncle said.

“We’ll be followin’ them soon,” my dad said. “That’s God’s mercy.”

“Amen.”



## **The Only Hope**

The water was wet, which I've never been able to stand, because everything cakes on to you afterward, and I always end up covered in soaking wet debris. I wouldn't have even gone in the wet water in the first place if it hadn't been for the insolent sun. If there's one thing I can't stand more than I can't stand wet water (and there is one thing), it's the insolent sun and the way it just never gives up, making me so hot that I forget about how distasteful it is getting wet in the water.

After getting wet in the water, I'm in the unfavorable position of having to dry myself with a towel that's covered in debris from lying on the unbearably hot sand, or to let the sun burn all the water into my pores, but then I know I wouldn't be able to sleep, because I would be able to feel the hot sun and the wet water in my pores, and I don't have to explain to you that there's no acceptable way to rid myself of that feeling, a shower being absolutely out of the question for very obvious reasons.

So I end up covered in debris lying on my towel on the unbearably hot sand, the insolent sun laughing, and everybody on the beach looks like a filthy wet rodent, and one man in particular is giving me particularly bad eye-twitches because he's wearing a disgusting teal Speedo-style bathing suit that reflects the sun into my eyes. My girlfriend is unsympathetic, lying next to me, half-asleep, as though she doesn't realize it's taking every ounce of my restraint to keep from telling Teal Speedo to shave his shoulders of the disgusting wiry pubic hairs growing there, and from purchasing a can of matte black paint and covering the disgusting teal-colored banana-shaped sun-reflective swimsuit in it. My drowsy girlfriend gathers the nerve when she wakes to kiss me on the cheek with her sun-chapped lips and I could feel the residual skin flakes mingling with my own dried-out cheek and for obvious reasons, I couldn't wash it off with the wet water.

There is nothing on earth quite so unspectacular as a beach. A bunch of wet rodents with wiry pubic hairs growing all over their disgusting teal-bathing-suited bodies, halitosis and cigarsmoke commingling to make the whole place smell like the inside of a rodent's anus, people getting all wet in the water, and all dry under the insolent sun, shedding more skin flakes than there are grains of sand (and I'm careful to wear socks and shoes on the beach for exactly that reason, because I know I'm standing on a massive collection of skinflakes). When I tell my girlfriend I'm going to get some food from the buffet, she asks me for a Cuba Libre, so I tell her we're in Mexico, but she persists with the Cuba Libre, so I tell her I'll bring her a coke and a glass of rum separately, but there's no way in hell I'm asking for a Cuba Libre from a Mexican.

The buffet has every disgusting creature in the sea, and they try to trick you by changing the names to something unfamiliar, supposed-to-be-exotic, like the way they call dolphin *mahi-mahi*, but I know better than to trust the conniving Mexican bastards running the place. I tell a young dark-haired Mexican at the omelet bar what I want, but I insist that he doesn't touch the vegetables as it looks like he's been weeding a garden with his filthy hands, and he gives me this look like I'm the one about to finger *his* vegetables with my quite-likely-disease-carrying hands. I throw the vegetables myself into a bowl, and inspect the egg mixture, wary as to whether or not the eggs came from chickens or some cheap Mexican alternative to chickens, but there's really nothing that you can trust these days, and I sure as hell wasn't about to starve myself on vacation.

Carrying my omelet, a coke and a glass of rum, I found my girlfriend lying where she's been lying all day. With hardly so much as a *thank you*, as though I'm one of her Mexican servants with nothing better to do than to wait day-and-night hat-in-hand for her

tiniest and most unreasonable requests, she poured herself a drink and lied back down. Earlier that day, I mentioned that I was thinking about booking a hotel room in the hotel by the airport and ordering room-service until the week was up, and she responded as though I was joking, but she should have learned by now that I mean what I say, because people who are insincere annoy me just as much as a man in a reflective teal Speedo with disgusting body hair.

After eating half of my omelet, with ketchup that I have reason to suspect was just rotten tomatoes smashed into a bottle with filthy fingers, I went to my room to change out of my clingy swimsuit, as my lazy girlfriend lay where she lay. If you can believe it, the air conditioner in our room can't seem to get the temperature below twenty-two degrees, so you can imagine what it's like to sleep next to your girlfriend who's been baking on the beach all day, smelling vaguely like a rat, in a room that is at once sickly hot but so heavy with water weight that it almost rains on your feet when you speak in there. Not to mention, my girlfriend, who insists on taking advantage of the fine Mexican wines (sic) is often feeling raunchy at nighttime, and I try and tell her that the last thing I need is for her to rub her leathery body against mine and make me so hot, as I might as well have the insolent sun in bed with me.

Every night that I go to bed, I try and tell myself not to wake until the insolent sun has set, but of course the blinds are made of some cheap Mexican cotton that acts more as a magnifying glass than it does a shield. My girlfriend, lazy as she is, wakes up astoundingly early so she can laze on the beach instead of in bed. I hardly blame her, considering the conditions of our lodging, but lying on the Mexican beach is hardly a day at the beach, what with the sun basically as good as lying on top of you. The least the

Mexicans could have done would have been to plant some banana trees so there could be some proper shade somewhere on the grounds, but I've come to expect very little of them.

Just when things looked as though they really couldn't get much worse, I woke up to rain rapping against the windowpanes. Here I am, however many thousand miles from home, and it rains all goddamn day. Every canopied area on the grounds is shoulder-to-shoulder with filthy rodents drinking out of plastic cups and flabby indistinct body parts hanging over too-tight waistbands on disgusting teal Speedos. It was under one of these canopies that I sat, drinking some Mexican alternative to sparkling water, when I truly rued my ever complying with my lazy-wine-drinking-leather-skinned girlfriend. I thought about the inevitable painful flight home with the disgusting chicken Kiev, and the mouth-breathing snorer who would invariably be placed beside me on the plane, and the teal-sun-reflecting-Speedo-wearing-beach-dweller, and the skin flakes and the insolent sun and the wet water, and to tell you the truth, I felt utterly hopeless as I realized that I was only one man, and there was not enough of me to fix everything that was broken in this backwards place.

## **After the Silence**

To say it wasn't going great would be to put it lightly. We hadn't been carnal in two weeks, and pretty much stopped speaking to each other about a week ago. Lily was going for beers after work every day like a Brit, which wasn't like her. A lot of effort on both sides goes into not speaking to someone you live with, especially in close quarters. The apartment is essentially one big room with a few extra turns and corners, so to refrain from speaking, you need to pretend to be occupied at all times. Even when you stare at the wall, you have to do it with purpose, as though you're waiting for the wall to open up and reveal something. There is no TV, which makes a situation like this more difficult. If someone were to view us aloofly, together in that tiny apartment, they'd think we were philosophers of some sort, gazing here and there with intent eyes, with meaning.

I was contemplating all this with a closed book in front of me as the barista brought me my espresso drink. She was the barista I liked. With things going so bad with Lily, I couldn't even think about bedding another girl. That's the way it is with me. If I'm getting mine, I can think about bedding girls who would currently disgust me. Right now I look at women and see more problems. I can only manage to place women in the same position as the woman in my life, who assumes the role of the representative of all women. Every woman appears a problem. I picture them sitting across the room from me with an idiotic glazed expression on their face, contorted in an attempt to mean deep contemplation.

I thanked the barista sarcastically, thinking about how miserable she'd probably make me if given the opportunity. I watched her serve customers and thought about her strangling cats in alleyways on her walk home. The coffee was hot but it tasted like

someone in back was grinding the beans with the soles of their boots. I left about half the coffee on the table with some change and left.

I went home, and Lily was there. I've taken to sneaking into the apartment, trying to catch Lily doing absolutely nothing, so that she would have no other out but to engage me in conversation. When I crept around the corner, Lily was there on the couch, but she was reading a magazine. Magazines, unlike a novel, make it difficult to appear engaged. I knew she wasn't reading an article, but she was careful not to turn the pages too quickly, as everyone does when they know they're being watched as they read a magazine. It's like if you sent a person into an art gallery by himself. He'd walk straight through the middle of the room, gaze about him, move on, and say, So what. But there are always other people there, so people stroke their tuft of chest hair, or remove and replace their glasses as though they were a magnifying glass or 3D glasses. So many pursed lips, skyward-cast eyes and hands behind backs at art galleries, it's enough to make you sick. I had a thought to run right to Lily's magazine and catch her stuck on a page totally without text. I left that thought alone.

I don't feel loved, Lily said.

Those were the first words she addressed to me in days.

You ain't the only one, I said.

I mean before this. Before the silence. I thought I'd at least tell you that I'm moving out now.

Where are you going? I asked.

I found a place.

Well what the fuck am I supposed to do?



You'll be fine, she said.

The first time you speak in fucking weeks, I said. Fucking fantastic.

Did you think one of us would start speaking again and everything would be on the mend? she said. It doesn't work like that.

You don't feel loved, I said. That's funny. You haven't looked at me in weeks and touched me in longer. Loved. That's funny.

It's just not the right time, she said. I didn't plan this.

That's nice to know, I said. I woulda said you did a piss-poor job if you did.

Henry, she said.

That was the end of the conversation. With it came one of those looks combining sadness and pity and frustration and pain and regret. One of those looks that makes you search for the nearest window only to struggle with whether to jump yourself or defenestrate your loved one like a piece of rotten fruit. I wish I could tell you how devastating this look was. Imagine you walk through the desert without water for a month and come upon a miraculous little pool of water, only to find as you get closer that a camel just laid a fresh coil right in its center. You might look something like Lily.

Since there was nothing else to discuss, we returned to silence and avoided eye contact. I ate a piece of baguette for dinner and sat on the couch opposite Lily drinking cheap red wine from a coffee mug. I spent the evening watching red wine spill down the neck of the bottle like spider legs. I slept on a couch and Lily in the bed. I know what you're thinking. Shouldn't I get to sleep in the bed? Probably. Maybe. Yes. I'm yellow like that though. I let people shit on me and then clean it up myself. It's a terrible thing to be spineless, but I truly didn't care where I slept.

Lily was gone when I woke up. I went to my job putting up posters for a TESOL program. That is actually a job. They don't even really monitor me. I ballpark how many hours I spend doing it and they pay me. I had been doing it for a few weeks. People just ripped the posters down and I would go back to the same spots and replace them. It was like cleaning windows and having someone follow you around and spit on them once you're finished. It was totally fruitless. I figured I wouldn't have a job though if no one went around ripping them down.

That day at work I went around taping signs on everything. I taped one to a statue of a man riding a horse. It said TESOL in big letters on the sign. I taped some onto trees in the park. I taped about twenty in the bathroom where I went to get a few afternoon pints. I usually walked around for about three and a half hours and charged five. I worked a little less this day. When I got home, Lily's clothes were gone. That was mostly all she had at our place. She must have left work early so that we wouldn't run into each other again.

The following day, I thought about quitting my job and going back to school, as I have a tendency to do when I'm feeling particularly cornered and depressed. As I was taping up posters, mostly on lampposts this time, I found a poster advertising an upcoming stand-up comedy/burlesque show. Lily was slated to perform in it. We had hardly spoken in weeks so I forgot about it till I saw her name on the sign. Lily wasn't particularly funny. At least I didn't think so. I'm not just saying that because I feel indisposed to say anything complimentary about her. She has many fine qualities. True enough, I do not feel inclined to praise her finer points, like her contagious levity or her statuesque figure or her passionate kindness and compassion, but suffice it to say that

funny was not on top of the list. Nevertheless, she moonlighted as an actress and performer. Small-time, mostly unpaid gigs. She got a kick out of it, and I suppose she wasn't terrible.

I ripped down the poster, not in some pitiful gesture but because I intended to go. One of the things Lily used to complain about was how I didn't support her and her acting. I didn't think it realistic that I would win Lily back or anything, but it seemed harmless to attend her show. I got home and mounted it on the fridge with a magnet. It was not for a couple days yet, so I'd have to trudge through the muck for a while longer before seeing her.

My lonesome life was so uneventful that there was very little to report about the intervening days. I pasted more posters during the day, and I spent the nights sitting on the couch getting drunk and hatching grandiose plans that died as quickly as they materialized. The one plan that lasted longest, for perhaps the better part of an evening, was that I'd move to a Scandinavian country and become a taxi driver. I cannot presently say why Scandinavia, but I suppose I had an idea that Scandinavia was as close to purgatory as any place on Earth. I imagined myself in some city like Oslo, driving around a road that circumscribed a canal, around and around in circles, picking up and dropping off a cast of non-descript characters until the grooves from my continual course became forged in the cement and I no longer had to even steer the car.

It was a Thursday night, the night of Lily's performance. The event was held at a bar with a stage and very high ceilings. I was a bit early and sat at the bar and ordered a beer. The place got to about three-quarters full by the time the show was set to start. The

bar was at the opposite end from the stage. I spun my chair around and watched as the performance began.

The first performer was some sort of hula-hoopist. She had one hula-hoop going that she transferred to different parts of her body while she removed pieces of her clothing. As she'd hula-hoop with her knees, she'd remove her shirt for instance. She'd hula-hoop with her neck and remove her pants. Needless to say, it was extremely bizarre and surreal, and I failed to comprehend the point of the performance.

The next few acts were equally bizarre. One guy balanced a chair on his chin as he removed his pants. He ended up in a jockstrap with his naked rear-end facing the crowd. Another performance featured a silent couple sitting at a table eating raw meat as they sat there naked. There were other performances which were equally remarkable and bizarre, but they elude me at the moment. I had drunk at least five beers by the time Lily came on stage.

Lily came out wearing a wedding dress. She stood in front of a blank white screen. There was a projector set up in front of the stage that started to whirr as they closed all the lights. Behind and *on* Lily, the video began to play. It began with a horse running through an open field. The camera zoomed out to reveal an outdoor canopy and a wedding procession. It zoomed in on the bride and groom and in the video was Lily marrying some guy I'd never seen before. On the video, Lily was smiling and laughing, and close-ups showed Lily lovingly touching the husband. On stage, Lily wore a dead stare, one I had seen before, and she began to apply scarlet lipstick on her lips. The video continued to play the scene from the wedding, as the couple is standing at the altar, and Lily was applying this lipstick on stage, and drawing big red lips on her face, like clown's

makeup. Lily started walking towards the front of the stage, pretending to be greeting people at a wedding. Hi, how are you, she says. So glad you could make it. Oh, thank you, you look wonderful too. She looks a bit creepy with her big red clown lips, paying compliments to the empty space in front of her. Then she takes up a position in the middle of the stage. She's just standing there, looking extremely serious again, as the projected wedding continues to play on and behind her. She takes the straps of the dress off of her shoulders slowly, looking morose. She bends down to grab the bottom of her wedding dress and then pulls the entire dress over her head. She now stands on the stage with her sloppy red lips wearing only panties, a bra, and white high-heeled shoes. She lets her hair down. The priest, meanwhile, is silently reading vows in the projected image. Lily, with the wedding dress already strewn at her feet, takes her shoes, her bra, and then a little startlingly, her panties off, and she stands there naked, looking sad, morose, ridiculous, while the image of her false, beautiful wedding plays on her body. Lily has a beautiful figure, she is Venus with limbs, she stands still as a statue. She doesn't cover up, simply stands there until the projector's whirr and the lights die. When they flick the lights again, Lily is gone. The show ends like that.

I make the long walk home but I don't mind. The night feels full of possibility. I cross many beautiful women. I imagine their beautiful naked bodies next to mine. I imagine them imagining me with them. They love me. They want to take me home and kiss me. They are not just lookers. They are multi-faceted. They have many excellent facets. I want to know them all. I say, I want to know all your facets. Show me, I say. Show me everything. Show me now.

## **Conversation with an Ex**

The front windows of the restaurant faced St. Viateur Street. I was looking out the window, somewhat absently, off to the right, noticing a blinking red light above the stop sign. It must have been new.

“I saw that,” my ex said.

I turned my head to look at her, and she was giving me an annoyed smirk.

“Saw what?”

“I saw you checking out that girl.”

“What girl?”

“It’s fine.”

“I really have no idea what you’re on about.”

“Sure you don’t. Hey, it’s really fine. You can look all you want. I don’t care.”

“Was she hot?”

“I think you thought she was hot.”

“I couldn’t tell you. I missed her. Shame, really. I was looking at a blinking red right.”

She turned her head.

“A blinking red light, huh? Weird. I don’t see it.”

I got up and walked around the table and put my head next to hers. The stop sign was blocking sight of the light.

“Stand up.”

“I told you, I don’t care.”

“Seems like you do.”

“I don’t.”

I walked back to my side of the table.

I had convinced Franny to stay for another beer. We had long since finished eating. I was on my fourth pint and she was on her third. She had work in the morning. I didn't. Our waitress came over and gave us the bill, saying, I get off soon so I'm going to leave this here, but no hurry. The bill was for about 75 bucks. I took 90 dollars from my wallet and placed it inside the leather case that held the bill. Franny started rooting through her purse for her wallet.

"Don't worry about it. I owe you money for the rent. Let me look like a man and pay. I have the rest that I owe you, too. I'll give it to you before we go."

We finished our pints, and most people had cleared out, so we left too. We walked down the street, in the direction of her bus on Parc Ave. and towards my place. We sat down on a bench outside a Greek restaurant, facing a Bixi stand, for a cigarette. Did she want one? She did. I didn't like to inhale the first lungful out of conditioning, since I have lit so many cigarettes backwards and pulled on them. It was dark outside, but there were still plenty of pedestrians for a Tuesday night.

"You know, I've still never ridden a Bixi," Franny said.

"No? It's fun. You get all kinds of shout-outs."

"What do you mean shout-outs?"

"Like sometimes a straightforward 'BIXI!' or sometimes something more elaborate, like 'Better get that Bixi back before they start charging you!'"

"That doesn't happen."

"It does. It's happened to me before. Downtown."

"Should we take a ride?" she asked.



“Sure,” I said.

When we finished smoking, I paid the machine with a credit card and we took out Bixis. We crossed Parc Ave. into Outremont, my neighbourhood, and rode along quiet streets with a lot of Hasidic Jews still walking around in the night. We stopped at a park with a miniature circular man-made canal. We leaned our Bixis against a bench and sat on another.

“I never took you here, but...”

“You never took me anywhere,” she interrupted.

“That’s a low blow. And it’s not true. I took you plenty of places. You always complained it was too cold in the winter. Anyways, as I was saying, I never brought you here, but in the winter, this water freezes and they clean the ice with a little zamboni, and it’s great for skating. Sometimes the shack there plays classical music, and you can get a good sweat in listening to Bach.”

“That sounds fun. You should’ve brought me.”

“I will. But we should find a Bixi stand. If we keep these bikes much longer, they’ll fuck me.”

We returned the bikes to a Bixi stand near the bus.

“Come over for one drink,” I said standing at the bus stop.

“I can’t. I have to work in the morning.”

“One drink!”

“I really can’t. When does the bus come?”

“I think it stopped running, to tell you the truth.”

“Shut up. I’m calling the number.”

Franny dialled the stop number.

“12:30!” she said. “It’s 11:35!”

“Listen. I owe you some money. Come over, have a drink, and then cab. You’ll still end up on the plus for the night.”

“I’m not happy about this.”

“Me neither. I wanted you to have a good night’s sleep.”

I grabbed her arm and started walking with her to my place. I didn’t want to waste any time lingering around the bus stop, because it seemed likely that the automated voice that gave bus times was wrong. I had never known there to be so long between intervals.

We walked along Fairmount past Figaro croissanterie and a restaurant that served ethnic foods that I had never been to, despite living only a couple blocks away. My roommates were out of town, so I brought Franny to the living room and took a couple Coronas from the fridge. The depanneur near my place sold Coronas for cheap, so I had been drinking imported beer all summer. I opened the Coronas with a lighter, cut a key lime in two, placing a half in the mouth of each bottle, and handed one of the Coronas to Franny.

“Do a shot with me.”

“No way,” she said, taking the bottle. “People are always buying shots when we go out after work. I hate shots.”

“One shot. It won’t kill you. I have some JD around here.”

“Fine.”

I grabbed two shot glasses decorated with an illustration of a Quebec flag and filled them. We clinked and I said ‘Nazdorovya!’

She gave a disgusted face as she returned her shot glass to the table. There was only about an ounce left in the quart of Jack Daniel’s, so I said, One more.

“Not a chance.”

“Look how little is left. Let’s just finish it off.”

Without waiting for a reply, I filled the shot glasses half-full. We drank them.

“There.”

“I hate you,” she said.

“No you don’t.”

“Yes. I do.”

We sat next to each other on the couch. There was no TV. I put my arm around her and massaged her shoulders a bit. She rotated to give me a better angle of her back. After a minute she laid facedown so she could relax while I continued. That’s when I knew I’d get to have her. I reached around the front of her jeans and started to undo the button and zipper.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing!”

“I’m not going to massage your legs through denim.”

She had to pretend that she didn’t know where it was headed, and I had to pretend to be the aggressor. I didn’t mind. It was all part of our dance. Sure enough, we were soon in the bedroom, soon fucking, like it was one of the first times, or as though it could be the last time. We both came. I may not have been good for a lot but I felt I was usually good for an orgasm. We lay around in bed for a minute.

“You want a smoke, don’t you?” she said. “Just lie with me for a few minutes. Spoon me.” I spooned her a bit, then got up abruptly after a few minutes, saying Smoke time! She came with me for one on the back patio. I turned on our tacky patio lanterns.

Franny left around 130 a.m. I told her she should stay. Really? You want me to stay? she said. I missed having a body around and told her so. I’m surprised, she said. But I have to get home. I don’t want to have to rush around in the morning.

I didn’t think I would be able to sleep then anyway, but I thought it would be OK to lie awake with another body there. Nevertheless, she went home. I checked my email inbox and there was nothing there. I smoked and had another beer. I tried to find something funny to watch on the Internet, but ended up on Wikipedia clicking on links for things and people that didn’t particularly interest me. Lying in bed, I thought about waking up the next day. It was getting towards 4 a.m. I liked to think of breakfast as I went to sleep. It gave me something to look forward to when I woke. I tried not to think about how I would fill my day after breakfast and a cigarette. If I could do that, not think about it, then I could almost hope to sleep.

## **Amsterdam**

I got off the train in Amsterdam and walked outside. It was an overnight train and I had hardly slept. Outside the train station there was a two-level parking garage filled entirely with road bicycles. As I looked out into the street, I saw many more bicycle commuters along with electric trains. It was an overcast morning and I hadn't made a reservation to stay anywhere. I had my approximately 60-liter, 40-pound backpacker's pack. Despite being very tired and without accomodation, I wanted to get high. I heard that the renowned coffeeshops were ubiquitous. I began walking down alleys, past little canals, and I saw a sign that said "coffeeshop." I walked down a set of stairs with a thin black metal railing into a semi-basement. It was dark, dank and dingy in the coffeeshop, and the air was thick and even damp. There was a man standing behind the counter with dark skin, a goatee and sunglasses. He didn't look like the stoners I knew. At the back of the coffeeshop, there was a group of young men with punk haircuts playing fooseball. There were a few tables of people smoking joints.

I couldn't find written anywhere anything about the sale of marijuana. It was evident from the musk and the lethargy of the place, as well as from the jars of King-Size Rizlas lining the wooden counter of the bar, that they did in fact sell. No doubt in large part because of my backpack and my confused scanning of the place, the goateed man said, Pot? I nodded. He pressed a button behind the counter that lit up a black whiteboard behind him. Various strains of marijuana, along with a description of their effects—like, "mellow, clear high"—and the prices for various quantities, were lit up in whitemarker. I picked a mid-range half-quarter and sat down at one of the slight tables along the wall, near the front of the coffeeshop.

The man behind the counter ground up enough of my weed so I could roll a joint. I never became particularly adept at rolling, despite all the attempts. I'm pretty dextrous on the whole, so I didn't understand how I never seemed to be able to roll a consistent joint. I always packed the weed too tight, or not tight enough, and the joint would need to be relit throughout, or it would burn too quickly. Franny didn't like that I smoked weed, or rather, so much of it. I managed to roll a pretty good cigarette-style joint. I pulled my lighter from my pocket and took a long haul. I left the joint burning, tip in the ashtray and ordered a coffee. There was no concern that I wasn't going to get high. They only provided the king-sized Rizlas and there was over half a gram of dope in the joint I rolled. I returned with my coffee to the table and kept smoking. I lit a cigarette to smoke in between hits of the joint. I watched the punks who were still playing fooseball. I didn't trust them. The whole dim semi-basement coffeeshop became a bit sinister-looking as I smoked. By the time I was ready to put out the joint, I didn't feel relaxed or at ease one bit. I felt distrustful of the place, and hungry besides. I left change on the table, taking into account tax and tip, and walked outside with my pack.

The previously overcast day's sunlight was unexpected, and so like a firm slap across the face. I needed to find some lodgings so I began walking around. I had a Western Europe on a Shoestring Lonely Planet guide in my backpack, but I didn't feel like digging it out. My first priority was finding something to eat. I walked by the fragrant open fronts of so many restaurants that sold foods designed to entice the stoned traveller. Everything was smothered in melted cheese. There were lots of French fries served in cones, served with mayo, hotdogs baked inside croissants covered in cheese, cheeseburgers between buns made out of donuts. I felt a tinge of inward disgust and

shame when I noticed myself salivating a little at the disgusting offerings. I decided instead to find a grocery store, not so much out of strength of will, but because to maximize my vacation time, I had decided to travel on the cheap. I walked through alleys full of people and racks of clothing, most of the clothing designed with ostentatious logos and jokes that only a very stereotypically high person would find funny/appealing—big iridescent marijuana leaves, “Take Me to Your Dealer” aliens, Bob Marley joint-in-mouth profiles and the like.

I found a supermarket as I was approaching what I learned to be Dam Square. I wandered in, looking for bread and cheese. So many things that would require proper cooking were catching my eye, but I knew I had no immediate access to a source of heat or a pan. I managed to make it out of there having purchased a tube of Pegasus dijon mustard, a fresh baguette, a wedge of soft cheese and a tomato. I found a spot with as few nearby pigeons and people as possible, and sat down on some marble steps. There were lots of people gathered around, mostly lounging, walking about, eating. I had only a little Swiss Army blade to cut the cheese, bread and tomato, and I made a bit of a mess of it. I had only eaten two “meal” bars on the overnight train and was famished. All my concentration was on eating, and I managed to close out the circus atmosphere around me. Across the street from Dam Square, there was a big Ferris Wheel and other smaller rides set up for some reason that I couldn’t ascertain. There were also little ripoff market-y booths selling deep-fried foods and gaudy clothing. I became very lethargic and heavy-lidded after eating. I was still very high, and the wave of tiredness was likely the result of a deficit of sleep and carrying around a heavy pack in the hot sun, but it felt



not unlike burning out. I decided to get out my Lonely Planet and search for a hostel. The nearest one I could find was called The Flying Pigs, a “World Famous Hostel.”

When I got there, people were laying on a raised, dais-like area covered in India-inspired pillows, shoeless and smoking joints. I went to the counter and the guy looked to be straight out of a High Times magazine—the scraggly facial hair, unwashed dreadlocks, wire-rimmed glasses that seemed to magnify his pink eyewhites, and a complicatedly patterned T-shirt that was both hard not to look at and hard to focus on. After I paid up 22 Euros, he led me to a dormitory-style hostel room with less-than-single bunkbeds and pointed to one of the top bunks. He gave me a locker key too. The man—rather the dude—explained to me that we could leave our belongings in the room, but that at sometime between 1 pm and 6 pm, cleaning staff came. He told me that I would find many comfortable spots, particularly in the hostel basement, just to “chill” or smoke or even to “catch some Zs” if I was so inclined. I thanked him and he went back to work. I packed a few things into a daypack that I brought in the larger backpack and locked the larger pack in my locker. I went down to the basement, which was thick with smoke, and reggae music played at a subtle volume. There was a large flatscreen TV with chairs and couches strewn about in a semi-circle, and many hostel-goers, presumably almost all backpackers such as myself, were watching daytime television programming. No one spoke. The atmosphere could pass for gloomy if it wasn’t so apparent that everyone was just so high that it would take great effort to speak. I spotted a relatively quiet corner, away from the TV and the bustling hostel kitchen, with a beanbag chair, and draped myself over it, throwing my daypack in the corner behind me. My body must have been waiting for the occasion, as I fell asleep immediately for several hours.

When I woke up, the basement had undergone few changes. The TV was playing a different program, and some of the people might have been different, but the ambiance was the same. I went and sat in a chair nearer the TV, and someone offered me a joint. I took a hit and passed it back to the man who offered. Conversation was scarce, and I had a renewed energy, and the sluggishness and taciturnity of everyone was getting on my nerves, so I decided to go upstairs, hoping for something a little more lively and vibrant, or at least well-lighted.

I went upstairs and ordered a beer from the hostel bar. It occurred to me that it'd be nice to have some company. I sat at a table alone. There were, in fact, some people engaged in regular conversation, which cheered me a bit. I was hoping someone might ask me to join their table, but no one approached. It was about 7 pm and still light out. There was supposed to be a singer coming to play at the hostel in an hour. I decided to stay and see the beginning of the gratis show. I retrieved the half baguette and the cheese from my pack in the room and snacked on that while drinking a 710 mL bottle of Heineken. The show came on and some guy with a guitar, who very well could have been a hostel guest, began playing songs of adulation about Buster Keaton. When he finished his second song, titled "Come Back to the Movies, Buster Keaton," I drank the rest of my beer, retrieved a map from the hostel counter that highlighted, on a map of Amsterdam, the various Red Light Districts, and stepped out into the alley. All the clothing racks had been cleared from the streets, and to my surprise, much of the bakeries of the croissant-hotdogs and donut-burgers were closed. There were few streetlights lighting the alley, and it was borderline funereal walking through the alleys. I had heard much about the infamous Red Light Districts before arriving in Amsterdam, and

surprisingly little since actually getting there. The map of Amsterdam I had taken from the hostel counter seemed a very simplified one. I followed along as best I could, mostly through narrow, poorly lit, macabre alleyways, peopled only by the occasional junky or pimp, and despite my confusion, the map led me to one of the Red Light Districts.

The stretch was lit up like Las Vegas, heavily trafficked, and full of bars with hardly an empty seat. The women, presumably the main draw of the Red Light Districts, stood behind what looked like reinforced glass, most of them in string bikinis, beckoning to potential johns with their index fingers and pouty lips. They stood behind glass and in front of lavish curtains, on the other side of which I guessed was where they conducted their business. A man, who I identified immediately as a pimp without even having known any, approached and said, You like what you see?

“Not bad,” I said, looking at a woman with big fake breasts and a tattoo of the Playboy bunny just above her bikini-line.

“How about 15 minutes with her?” the pimp asked. “She’s a popular one. Gives amazing head.”

“Yeah? How much?”

“150 Euros for a ‘suck & fuck.’”

“That’s a little steep for me.”

“You won’t regret it. Just watch the happy fuckers coming out of there.”

“I’ll think about it. I’ll find you.”

I heard him say ‘fucking pussy’ as he went to approach someone else. I walked into the bar on the opposite corner and ordered a beer. There were no seats so I stood and kept visual tabs on the patrons with beers that were mostly finished. The bar wasn’t

filled with the stoner-types I had been seeing all day, and the bar was decorated to look like the hull of a ship, despite being entirely above ground, and having nothing to do with the popular cultural notion of ‘Amsterdam.’ From my seat, sitting solo at a two-person table, I had a pretty good view out of the eastern window, which faced the Barbie-like prostitute. I could see one other prostitute’s window from where I sat, also, in fact, thin, big-breasted, Caucasian, tanned, heavily made up and in a string bikini. I also saw the pimp that approached me approach anyone who looked like they were, so to speak, window-shopping. I gathered that despite this being the infamous Red Light District of the famously immoral Amsterdam, it was somewhat taboo to do this kind of window-shopping without being prepared to pay for one of the ladies on the other side of the glass. The pimp had evidently found a john, because he was walking over with a squat, dark, hirsute, bespectacled man to a door that appeared to be the entry into the curtained-off area of the prostitute’s working quarters. The pimp and the man stood outside the door until the pimp looked at his wristwatch, which I noticed was either gold or imitation gold, and knocked on the door. A middle-aged Caucasian man, dressed very reservedly and in earth tones, walked out of the prostitute’s room and pulled on a London Fog detective-like hat and disappeared out of the brightly lit Red Light District, into the dark unlit alleys, head down. At 150 Euros for 15 minutes, doing some very simple arithmetic, I figured out the prostitute was making 10 Euros per minute, no doubt to be split with her presumably legal pimp, but still nothing to sneeze at. In a busy hour, like the one she currently appeared to be having, she could pull in an optimal 600 Euros, or approximately 1000 dollars. I pictured the prostitute waking up in a beautifully decorated, ample, architecturally interesting townhouse on the edge of Amsterdam, eating

eggs benedict for breakfast at an expensive upscale restaurant, sitting by the pool of an exclusive private country club in the afternoon, and then going to work to kneel down on shag carpeting and blow johns all night.

I hadn't had a lay in a while, but I considered myself a somehow morally/ethically superior guy, and the urge to fuck one of these Barbies was there, but I knew I could never tell anyone about it, and it was too expensive besides. Plus there was Franny, who I wasn't dating then, and I had, rather annoyingly, retained an emotional connection to her, and so when I thought of having sex with one of the hookers, I pictured Franny crying, and I imagined that if I slept with a hooker, it would haunt me, and I'd have to tell her about it, and Franny would never forget that I was the kind of guy who would fuck a prostitute, and it'd be forever a wedge between us, that is, if we got back together sometime after I returned. So I sat, again the voyeur, drinking a pint of Stella Artois and thinking that the pimp might have been right to call me a pussy. The bar was really loud, both the people and the music, and so when I took my last drink of the pint, I went back out into the alley.

I pulled out my Red Light District map from pocket. I walked past the hooker I'd been watching from the bar. We made eye contact and she pushed her breasts together and made a kissing face at me. She was good at her job. She'd never kiss me if I went in with her. Hookers don't kiss, I hear. Kissing is more intimate than fucking. Fucking is business but kissing is romance. I didn't react to her. It would feel too much like I was making faces at a mannequin. I was a big walking dollar sign. She didn't want to fuck me. But I almost believed her. I silently wished her well.

My map took me through other dark alleys before I came to another Red Light District. This one had fewer people and the hookers didn't look like barbie dolls. The selection here seemed to be uniformly BBBWs (Big Beautiful Black Women). Most of these hookers were flaunting 170 – 200 lbs. As I walked by, one of them turned to shake her big ass at my face. Confusingly, some of the areas contained several women together. They must have done less business than the barbies of the other district, for they didn't appear to have a cordoned off area for each alone. There were only a couple dingy establishments in this Red Light District, and I had no desire to go into any of them, and I had already decided I wasn't going to fuck any hookers, and I was intimidated by the big women anyway. They would have dwarfed me.

I had no watch, but I figured it was after 2 a.m. as I made my way out of the second Red Light District. By this time, I had more or less figured out the crude Red Light District map. I decided to take a bit of a roundabout way back to the hostel, in order to go through another Red Light District. The third felt much like the second district I passed through, less glamorous than the first, with fewer people and fewer establishments. This particular district seemed to be home to the skinny Asian hookers. The districts, it turned out, were organized much in the way of a grocery store. Only here the products were organized according primarily to weight, bust size and race. The petite Asian prostitutes didn't gesture at me as I walked by. I thought they looked more hardened than the other hookers I'd seen. They might have come over from poverty in Asia to sell their bodies here. They seemed more overtly unhappy. I walked nervously through dark alleys back to the hostel, occasionally looking over my shoulder. I was glad that I wasn't high because I probably would have been more paranoid than I already was.

I was happier than I thought I'd be when I returned to the hostel. No one was sitting on the dais area this time I got in. There was a lone table of a Scandinavian-looking couple finishing pints of beer, and two people sat at the pay computers writing emails. I pulled the weed from my pocket and grabbed a Rizla from the hostel counter's jar of king-sized papers. I removed my shoes and sat cross-legged on the dais, rolling a joint on an old, low wooden table there. I smoked looking into the alley, which was lifeless at this hour, and then went up to my room. I took a little Maglite from my backpack so I wouldn't wake the rest of the people in the dormitory. I shined the light on my bed. Someone was sleeping there. I shined the light quickly over all the beds, and they were all taken. No one was working at the hostel counter downstairs, and so there was no one who could set me up in a bed. I was very high and very tired, having only slept a few uncomfortable hours in a seat that reclined on the train the night before because I was too cheap to pay extra for one of the beds on the train, and I felt defeated, so I just grabbed my thin summer sleeping bag from my backpack in the locker, rolled up a sweater under my head and lay down on the floor.

Look at me, Franny. I didn't fuck any hookers. I'm not the type of guy who goes to Amsterdam and fucks prostitutes. I am too big of a man for that.

## **The Barista and I**



I was standing outside and I was smiling because it was sunny. It was delightful just to stand and smile and look at the firmament which was surely a firmament. I had no doubts that the sky opened into something altogether more spectacular and the space beyond that was a firmament too that opened into something altogether more spectacular than what lay immediately beyond the skies. I knew this because I felt it and I have never felt anything that was not right and true.

I went to a café smiling and the people inside the café were laughing and smiling and I gleamed in their direction and they shone their pearly whites back at me. The barista making my latte was smiling too and she was lovely and I smiled at her and told her that we should go smiling together sometime. We could smile on a sunny day outside together and witness the sky smiling and everything would be delightful and we would stand at the altar together under a shining moon smiling and I would put a scintillating ring on her finger and she would put a scintillating ring on mine.

The barista said she would love to continue smiling and that she would smile with me and that we would smile together forever and ever until we entered the firmament that lay beyond the visible sky. I held her hand lightly and lifted gently and she floated over the counter separating us into my arms and I held her like a baby and the patrons smiled at us as I carried my barista in my arms out of the café into the day.

The barista and I walked along grass roads and admired the fields of sunflowers reaching towards the sun because the sun is god. I told the barista that I thought it was unfair that the sunflowers, though they reach, stay rooted to the ground so that they cannot reach god, that no matter how straight they stretch their roots remain in the soil. So the barista and I walked into the field and set the sunflowers free. We pulled their

roots from the ground one by one and witnessed them floating up to the sun which was god and the sunflowers were even more erect as they floated straight towards the sun (which was god).

The barista and I walked down the grassy roads to a beach for a picnic. The fish were jumping out of the water with big smiles on their faces. The seagulls sang a tune that sounded like Mozart's symphony in G minor. Another bird sang from a tree: "Pretty girl, Pretty girl, Pretty girl." The bird sang to the barista of course and she sang back at the bird: "Pretty bird, Pretty bird, Pretty bird." I laughed and the barista laughed and the bird laughed and the fish jumped out of the water laughing. I waded out into the water with the barista and dipped my hands shaped like a cup into the water. And my hands were a cup, a wine glass more precisely, and the water was wine more precisely, and the seagulls were vegetable kebabs more precisely roasting on an open fire that I made on the beach. And the sun was actually the moon and I was actually in love and the barista said "I love you too actually" and everything was very actual and I felt good and I knew that it was good and right and true because I felt it.

We ate the kebabs that were not seagulls and fed some to the fish which were actually golden retrievers and drank the wine which was not water, and the fish that were fish and the birds that were birds smiled. I told the barista that I had a house that was really and truly a house and that it was just across the water and the barista suggested we take the canoe that I had been portaging all day as we picked sunflowers and drank wine and smiled. I laughed because the barista was such a romantic wanting to take a canoe when I had already done all the preparation for us to sail a yacht across. My barista was so imaginative and capricious and I told her and she kissed me because she is impulsive

and romantic and wanted to take the canoe and I said “Of course my sweet sweet barista.”

And so we walked across the water which was water and it soaked my feet but my trousers were rolled up and the barista was barefoot because she always wore a dress the color of a sun. As we walked I picked her petunias that were growing on the surface of the water and I asked her if she liked petunias and she said she loved them and I told her “I love you barista and if you take these petunias you have no obligation to marry me but would you marry me if I gave them to you?” And it was not a trick and it was not a tactic and it was only actual and true and the barista said “I will only accept these petunias if you will marry me tonight and put a brilliantly shining ring on my finger” and I was kneeling down, getting my knee wet in the water and it was all because I was proposing and when you are proposing it looks particularly good in a circumstance like when your knee is getting wet because it shows just how much a thing like wet knees matters compared to an eternal bond and shining rings and smiling skies.

I accepted to marry her and she accepted to marry me and we were at my house and I had set up an altar already and there was not a priest but the moon and the sun would unite us and we would sign our signatures in the water and it would be binding and true and beautiful. I stood before her and gave her a speech that was not so much extemporaneous because it was written in my heart already and I said:

“Sweetest sweet barista, I have known from the very first, even before we picked sunflowers and before we drank wine that was not water and before we ate vegetable kebabs that were not seagulls and before the birds sang to you on the beach that you were the most divine person in your dress the color of the sun and that I was born to be here

giving this speech that is not so much extemporaneous because it is written in my heart and take me to put a shining ring on your finger because we will smile and I will love you and I will walk across grass fields and water and drink wine just to be with you and I will sing to you and be my wife sweet barista?"

And the barista said "I do."

I kissed the barista and she kissed me and it was chastening and it was perfect and we were united and we signed our names on the contract that was actually water and heard the priest which was actually the sun and the moon legitimize our union and I made love sweet love to the barista on our wedding bed which was actually a sunny field and the sky smiled and the animals smiled and the barista smiled and I smiled and we both orgasmed simultaneously and then there was nothing and we ascended towards the firmament only to go beyond that to the beyond which is also a firmament to live in the beyond beyond and we have scintillating rings and I know everything will be perfect because I felt it and I thought it and my barista knows it and feels it too.

## **Some Kind of Second Coming**

Every phone and alarm and radio and TV and doorbell and car engine and megaphone and every noise-emitting device everywhere in the known world and the unknown world, went off all at once. A man in Tuvalu was struck in the head by a falling coconut. A man in Honduras heard the sound of a million guns being discharged at once. A woman in France heard the screams of a thousand orgasms. Every animal in the world, domestic and still undomesticated, tired and high-strung, endangered and overpopulated, let out the sound each makes. An elephant in the Central African Republic blew water from his trunk and made his elephant noise, as did all the other elephants in the C.A.R. and everywhere else in the world. So did all the dogs in the world bark, all the cats meow, all the bullfrogs make that throaty noise, all the flies buzz. So did all of everything do everything. The millions of people on Facebook were all nudged simultaneously by an unknown contact. Every person's status was "Liked." Google had a mysterious new Doodle of rosary beads. Beds shook, the wind blew, trees canted, a man in America could hear distantly U2's Vertigo. Everyone in the world, despite the time of day, for the first time in all the history of the world, every single living person was awake. Every electronic device awakened. Stereos not even plugged in, without batteries, came to life. Imagine your face in front of a TV without reception, and a radio between stations—now imagine your head inside the TV, inside the static, and your head inside the radio between stations, your mind a big static-y void, your eyes a blank white screen. Imagine everyone in the world feeling the exact same thing. Even a child in the unmapped jungle of Brazil, who has never seen or heard of a TV or a radio, is experiencing the exact same thing as you. People's thoughts, always obstructed and simplified by imperfect means of communication, emanated from them like a gazillion

invisible tendrils. There was no longer this inherent failure, that attempt to squeeze a thousand watermelons through a single keyhole all at once. Everywhere in the world, peoples' billions upon billions of simultaneous thoughts reaching everyone else. People, animals, trees, every living thing, and every inanimate thing too, for inanimate things are made up of atoms too—every living and every non-living thing revealed itself to be a pure source of energy. As people shucked off their bodies like corn husks, the bodies all convened in the centre of the world, making unabashed love to each other, unprejudiced, undiscerning love, with no anxieties, uninhabited even by the people, who have turned to pure energy, who are those tendrils which were thoughts and emotions and conflicting thoughts and conflicting emotions, and everyone who came close enough to experience this other person, who came within his orbit, understood everything of the other at once. All at once and instantaneously and everywhere on Earth, everyone understood everything about everyone else. The people, pure sources of energy and light, emanated messages of understanding—I understand you, it's OK, everything is OK, in fact everything is better than OK, now that I know everything about you, I can forgive you, can forgive anything. And the millions upon millions of atoms making up each of the millions upon millions of sources of energy and light all gathered in the centre of the universe, which is to say the centre of nowhere, and it could not be said that one thing was not another thing, that another thing was outside of this thing, could not be said that there were things at all—that in fact the message of so many things like religion and philosophy was true, that everything is not just everything, but everything else too.

## **People I Hardly Know**



I woke up late, at almost 2 p.m. I wanted to go to the laundromat to speak to the girl that worked there. Her shift ended at 4 p.m., so I felt I had to rush. I had been going to the laundromat for a while now, because I was enamoured of the girl.

Leila was French. I loaned her a book by an American writer a few weeks ago, because she wanted to improve her English, and she had noticed me often reading there. Leila came over to me the week before when I was reading Gravity's Rainbow and asked me what it was about, how I was liking it, and if she could borrow it after I was finished. I told her she could, but that it could prove very difficult to read for her, as her English was as poor as my French, though I didn't tell her that. What I did say was that I didn't understand it, and English is my first language. The reason she wanted to read the book was because she liked this band, much like an orchestra, composed of approximately 30 musicians playing a wide variety of instruments, who named their latest album after Pynchon's latest book, *Against the Day*.

I walked into the laundromat with a garbage bag full of dirty whites slung over my shoulder. She greeted me warmly. I asked her how she was doing, and ordered two portions of laundry soap and an allongé.

We barely knew each other, but I felt our relationship was very complex, and depending on the week, she either seemed pleased to see me or flustered and put-off, never neutral. I think she often forgot how hopeless my French was, as she spoke quickly and nervously and smilingly. I didn't know when she was finished what she was saying, as I only ever caught a few of the words.

I might not have thought about Leila much if I had many friends or conversations, but I didn't, so I did. She was delicate and smiley and kind of debonair-seeming. She

seemed a bit in her own head, but it must have been a pleasant place, for outwardly she came off so free of self-consciousness and sadness. She had wide-open eyes that were friendly but a bit distant.

I was standing at the counter and she brought me my allonge. She had topped it with milk and sprinkled chocolate on it.

“I’m sorry,” I said in my poor French. “But I can’t eat chocolate.”

She said some words much too quickly in French and dumped it in the sink, and began to make me another. I walked over to the laundry machines and filled two of them with my clothes, paid the machines and returned to the counter.

Leila gave me my new allonge, apologizing and looking dejected.

I sat at the counter, and very few customers came in, so I put my book down and talked with Leila. I wasn’t thinking about having sex with her, but I did imagine that it would be nice to find her dark hair on my pillow when I woke. She was slender and lithe. When she bent down to get something behind the counter, she bent from the waist, hardly at all at the knees.

From our conversation, what I understood was that she was in her second year of university, but her professors were on strike. She studied sociology, though she said she was not particularly interested in anything academic. Our conversation became confused and stilted after a short while, so she busied herself behind the counter and I attended to my laundry and read.

Leila was replaced at 4 p.m. by an unfriendly girl. Leila gathered her coat and backpack when the new girl arrived and walked around the counter. She stopped as she

passed me and began to speak. She looked very shy all of a sudden, and she told me that the band with the album *Against the Day* was playing on Tuesday.

“Are you inviting me?” I asked.

“If you want,” she said.

“I’ll be there.”

I asked for her phone number, saying that I would call her Tuesday evening to meet beforehand for a drink. She wrote it on a napkin for me and left.

I didn’t stay very much longer, because my laundry finished, and I suddenly had no reason to be there. I thought about Leila that night, and about all the women I had ever gone out with, which wasn’t all that many. I fell asleep late, which was okay, because I didn’t work in the morning. I worked from home editing technical documents for a company where I worked on-site for a year, doing a 9-5. Work had been slow, but I didn’t need much money to live.

When I awoke on Monday, I had to pack a bag and walk to an apartment where I had agreed to look after a cat for a few days. I arrived at her apartment and the concierge let me in. He was expecting me. His name was Pablo, and he unlocked the door to her apartment for me. The cat was waiting by the door, meowing, and the keys had been left for me on the kitchen table.

It felt strange being in this woman’s apartment. I had only met her twice, and been in the apartment once. She had got my number from a mutual acquaintance. She must have been desperate for someone to look after her cat. I leafed through her record collection and her books and fed the cat. I felt like a burglar or a voyeur. I ordered in food and listened to records and drank a pot of coffee over the course of the evening.

Tuesday came, still without work. I stayed in bed until late, and then went grocery shopping after feeding the cat. I made myself some spaghetti and had a cigarette out on the balcony. I bided my time listening to records I had never heard of, until it was an appropriate time to call Leila. I sat on the couch with the music on, and the cat sat there next to me, looking bored or tired. I retrieved the napkin that Leila had written on, and called the number. An automated voice came on that informed me that the number was not currently in use. I tried again, thinking I had mis-dialed, but got the same automated voice. I immediately thought that she must have given me a fake phone number. But then it seemed bizarre that she would go out of her way to invite me to a concert and not give me a real number. I was dumbfounded and a bit deflated. It didn't make any sense. I went to the fridge and the cat followed me, I got a beer and went back to the couch, where the cat returned to his former position, next to me, swinging his tail so it'd hit my bare forearms. I put on a new record, and continued drinking on the couch until it was time to leave for the concert.

I left my house at the time the concert was set to begin. I didn't want to arrive before Leila. When I got to the venue, the band had not yet started. There were a few chairs arranged in a semi-circle. I ordered a beer and walked the circumference of the chairs. They were all occupied, even though the band hadn't started. Leila wasn't there yet, so I went out for a cigarette, hoping to catch her on her way in. I peered in both directions as I smoked, because I didn't know which direction she would be coming from. It was 8:45 by the time I got back inside and the band still hadn't begun to play. I ordered another beer and stood at the bar, surveying the place. I was beginning to feel a bit drunk, and I just wanted the music to start. It wasn't until I was almost finished my

third beer that the band started to play. People kept showing up intermittently, usually in clumps, through the first few long songs. I felt lousy, but at least the music had begun.

I finally saw Leila come in, but I felt so confused and lousy that it took me a while to go over to her. It appeared that she came alone, which was good, but I still didn't feel great about the whole situation. We greeted each other, a bit coldly, while the band finished one of their songs. The band was decent, original, but frankly I just wanted it to end so that I could maybe get some things cleared up.

After the band finished, I asked Leila if she wanted a drink. She said no thanks. So I went to the bar and ordered myself another beer. While I was waiting for my beer at the bar, she came up to the bar and asked for a water. We sat down in some of the recently vacated chairs in the semi-circle. Leila's eyes were darting all around, and she seemed to be drifting in and out of attention in our conversation, so it was even more disjointed than usual. She said something I didn't comprehend about needing to ask someone in the crowd a question, and she got up abruptly and left.

She came back a few minutes later. I told her I had tried to call her earlier but that the number she gave me didn't exist. She said, as though it was an answer, that she moved around a lot. I wanted to ask what exactly that meant, but she didn't seem in the mood to really discuss it. Leila betrayed some interest, became animated, when we spoke about the band. She told me that she made music on strange instruments that her grandfather had invented. Our conversation dissolved after that, and Leila recognized a friend standing at the bar, and went over to talk to her.

Nothing had been explained, and I still felt confused. I got up from my seat and approached her at the bar. I told her that I was going to go see an old friend deejay at a bar nearby.

“What type of music?” she asked.

It was 50s soul music.

She said she wasn't feeling up to it. I left her with her friend and began walking alone. I didn't end up going to see my friend deejay. I went home and went to bed instead.

I got some work on Wednesday. The company that I edited documents for was attending an international conference, and they were releasing a bunch of products in the new quarter, so I was busy for the rest of the week with the editing.

The woman came back to her apartment on Saturday. She thanked me for watching the cat, making the observation that he (the cat) seemed better-adjusted than when she had left. I found it hard to believe. But I accepted her compliment and returned home.

I stayed in Saturday night drinking wine, as I had nothing to do, and returned to the Laundromat the next day. I didn't go to figure anything out, and certainly not to make Leila uncomfortable, but just to show that there was no harm done.

Leila acted a bit nervous when I ordered an allonge from her. She didn't mention the concert or the book I had loaned her. I went to a distant table in the cafe and sat down to read.

Leila called me over to the counter after about a half an hour, and she said *this is my little sister*. I looked and saw nothing, no one. I was confused. I suspected she really was off

in some way. But as I walked closer, I saw a little girl who didn't reach the counter standing in her sister's legs. Oh, I said. Hi. The little girl was shy and didn't say anything. Leila smiled at me, and then I went back to my table and I heard her asking her little sister if she wanted anything to eat.

I went out for a smoke and came back to my table. When I got back in, Leila came over and asked me if I'd mind if her friend sat with me at the table (across from me was an empty seat).

Sure, I said.

A girl came over with pages of study notes and sat down.

"Thanks," she said. "It's pretty hard to concentrate sitting at the counter."

Her English was good, much better than Leila's.

She laid out her papers and asked me if I was working too.

"No," I said. "Just reading."

"Would it be intrusive if I asked you what you were reading?"

I showed her the cover of *The Savage Detectives* by Bolano.

"I've never heard of him," she said.

I asked her what she was studying.

"Osteopathy," she said. "It's used to treat people with pain. In the body. A lot of people confuse it with homeopathy, but it is not the same thing. Osteopathy treats pain by looking at the mind and the body."

"Hmm." I said, "How long is the program?"

"It's 6 years," she said. "I am only in my second year. There are some programs that are only two years but I would not feel comfortable treating people after only two

years. This one is long, but it all depends on how you look at it. It's not so bad. I just try not to think about the next 4 years. I just try to concentrate on what I'm doing now, and it's not so bad."

"It's always that way, isn't it?" I said. "It's not so bad if you can find a good way to think about it. You can really take the pressure off that way."

She asked me if I had a cigarette, and so I went with her outside on the courtyard to have a smoke. The courtyard had wooden benches all around the interior of a wooden fence, and we sat in a corner.

"It's a nice neighbourhood here," I said.

"Yes," she said. "You live here?"

"Yes," I said. "You too?"

"Yes. I was living way east before, my old neighbourhood was poor, and people walked around slouched. I have like a melancholic disposition I think. So I'd see the people walking around, and the streets were never cleaned, and everybody started to just make me really depressed, and I had to move. I thought that the people in this neighbourhood would be snotty and phony and arrogant, but I find it hasn't been that way at all."

"No, it's really quite nice," I said.

We sat and finished our cigarettes and put them out in an old tin can next to the bench we were sitting on. We just sat a few minutes before going inside. When we did go inside, she started working again, and I kept reading. Four o'clock came, and Leila was leaving from her shift. She said goodbye to her friend and me, and then left. She came back a few minutes later to get her hat, which she had forgotten. And when she



was leaving again, she stopped, and she apologized. I thought she was apologizing to her friend for something, but then I looked up from my book and she was talking to me.

“Sorry,” she said. “Sorry about before. I wasn’t myself. I feel pretty bad about it. I was not feeling right.”

She said goodbye and left.

I stayed at the cafe, despite Leila’s departure. The presence of her friend was comfortable. I didn’t have anything to do for the rest of the day. After a while spent in silence, reading, I had finished my coffee. My laundry was dry in the machine, and I went to pack it into a garbage bag that I used to carry my laundry to and from the Laundromat. I came back to the table and sat down a minute. I felt connected to this girl whose name I did not even know. I would have liked to see her again. She was busy studying, and I was tired of reading, so I decided I’d leave. I thought it unlikely that I’d ever see this girl again, as I didn’t want to ask for her phone number, and I didn’t want to go out on a date with her. What we had was enough.

I got up to leave and asked her for her name.

“Maude,” she said.

“It was nice to meet you, Maude.”

I held out my hand, and she took it, and then placed her other hand on top of the back of my hand, as though warming it. When she released my hand I turned towards the door and waved back to her. When I got outside I felt warm and I didn’t really feel bad at all.

## **On Wanting to Look Like You Have It All Together**

The thing is, I keep telling myself, the thing is, is that it's not so bad, really, when you think about it, when you think about so many other things that are much worse, wretched squalor and public humiliation. No, things aren't so bad, you think, hauling on a cigarette, sitting in the bleachers. But you shouldn't be smoking. No, your lungs are going rotten already, already in your twenties, your lungs are rotting and becoming thick like molasses. But, you reason, but yes, I started later, you say to yourself, later than most of the other smokers I know, and so I get to smoke guilt-free for a few more years, until I find a reason to quit, like you'll quit if you get your girlfriend pregnant, you think. And you think, But I don't have a girlfriend. But, you think, sitting on the bleachers near the outdoor hockey rink, but there's no reason why I shouldn't have a girlfriend, I'm kind of starting to be a contributing member of society. Sort of, at least, you think, I'm no longer spending whole days in bed and whole nights drunk. No, I'm becoming more reasonable, you think, more disciplined and now there's probably not as many reasons for me to not have a girlfriend or not be able to have a girlfriend. But I don't know exactly, you find yourself saying, though you don't know why you *say* it, but I don't quite know lately... With all the changes you've been undergoing, you don't quite now know how to identify yourself, such as just now, you've contemplated, though perhaps unseriously, quitting smoking, and now, you think, I'm going to have to find a place to accommodate these incipient thoughts of quitting smoking into my sense of identity. But that's not so much it. That's not really it, you think. No, it's not exactly like that, it's more that I have to accommodate into my identity this new knowledge that I'm the type of person who contemplates quitting smoking. One thing at a time, you think. Yes, first you can accommodate the fact that you're the type of person who would consider quitting

smoking, and then should you ever commit to that idea that you had, that you should quit smoking, then you could further incorporate this smoking disinclination into your person. But one thing at a time.

Watching the snow-covered skating rink, lighting another cigarette sitting in the bleachers, you think, How did I come to be the person on this side of the boards. Have I become a spectator, you think, now that I'm not on the other side of the boards, that I'm not shovelling the rink and playing hockey. Am I a spectator in life now that I don't shovel the rink and play hockey, when before I was always shoveling rinks and always playing hockey. Is this worse, you wonder, sitting here, instead of smoking joints and then shoveling and playing hockey? But, no, you think, just because I'm getting myself together doesn't mean I'm a spectator, doesn't mean I'm not an actor, not a player. I'm already thinking about accommodating into my identity thoughts about quitting smoking, and even, one day down the line, you think smoking, acting on those ideas. I've already changed a lot. And all this, you think, I've thought while sitting alone in the bleachers.

And though I've come a long way, you think, already in a few minutes, have changed really quite a lot, am I ready to absorb and incorporate these changes, you wonder, exhaling smoke. Am I ready to be this type of person who can conceive of a life without smoking? But, I already am, you think, because I've already conceived it. And you sit there, wondering just who you are, just how different you are from earlier that day at work, when you were wondering if you were really the type of person who could hold down a job, who might be able to interact with others and participate as a cog in a machine, and really work. To your astonishment though, it was apparent that you had been working, had been working there quite some time already, and that made you think

about how you were being dehumanized for a pittance, and it made you envy every drunk at all the bars when you walked home along the main street. And you were just starting to incorporate into yourself the idea that you were somebody who walks now, but I used to sit there, you thought walking past the bars, I used to sit there, and there, and there, often and sometimes for long periods of time. Who was that, that would just sit there, drinking? Did he think about getting a job, you wonder? And you recall that that's how you got where you are now, walking and working. You got to walking and working because you started thinking about those things when you were sitting and drinking. But how did you get to sitting and drinking so often, sometimes for long periods of time. Before that, what was there? You had a girlfriend some time ago. It took you a long time to incorporate the reality that you were a person without a girlfriend, that you were someone who was disgusting to many women, sitting and drinking and behaving badly. Did she have anything to do with it, you think now. She almost certainly did, you think. You think, lighting a cigarette, that where you got to now almost certainly has something to do with her. It had something to do, you think, with her, but mostly with her being gone. Yes, all this, sitting here on these bleachers, you think, almost certainly has to do with her. This walking and working, she has everything to do with it. But she is not here, you think. She hasn't been around for a long time. You wonder how long it's been. You think, this is all because of her. The next time you see her, you think, smoking a cigarette after work on the bleachers in an empty park, the next time you see her, you will show her just how much you've changed.