

*Tenderness, and Other Stories*

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis takes the form of a collection of short stories titled *Tenderness, and Other Stories*. The stories represent a conscious effort to vary perspective, style, voice and character. For example, the collection includes a first-person narrative told from the point of view of a somewhat unreliable young Indian-Canadian female philosophy student, as well as a fairly straight third-person objective narrative, focalizing on a young male traveller of indeterminate origin backpacking through southern Africa. In *Tenderness*, the longest and most ambitious of the four stories in this collection, the setting and the number of characters are deliberately restricted, in order to present a controlled environment in which to experiment with perspective, and to give each of the three characters reasonably even-handed treatment.

These stories are often preoccupied with identity, contingency, and the boundary between truth and storytelling (or mythmaking). Three of the four stories use the existing canon of literature, philosophy, and even cultural anecdote—i.e. D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*; Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*; a famous remark by the British explorer David Livingstone—as echo chambers in which to amplify the story's particular thematic concerns. In writing short fiction this way, I am attempting to use stories as conduits into the broader conversations raised by existing (and often very old) cultural works, as well as reframing these works in a way that is contemporary, and hopefully meaningful.

For A, F & F, and all the many distractions

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## Angels in their flight

The young man arrived in Kasane that afternoon. He walked down the road past the hotels until he found the campgrounds, then chose a site not far from the river. While he was setting up his tent, it started to rain. He finished the tent quickly, put his pack inside, then went to the restaurant beneath the verandah and took a table by the railing near the reeds. A slim man stood behind the bar cleaning glasses. When he saw the young man enter, he hustled over.

“May I help you?” the bartender said.

“I’d like a beer.”

The bartender looked at him closely. “Excuse me sir, but are you over eighteen?”

“Of course!”

He hesitated a moment longer, but then his face lightened. “What will you have sir? Castle? Windhoek? Perhaps a St. Louis Special Light?”

“I’ll have a St. Louis.”

The bartender went behind the bar and came back with the beer and a glass.

“What’s that sound?”

“Hm, sir?”

“There, you hear it? Like somebody’s blowing through a plugged-up trumpet.”

“That’s a hippopotamus, sir.”

“Oh.”

The bartender set the beer and glass on the table and the young man thanked him. Then the young man sat quietly for a long time watching the rain. Every now and then a hippo belched. Finally the rain stopped and the river was almost still.

“Where are you coming from, sir?” the bartender asked him.

“The capital.”

“Oosh! That’s a long way.”

“I took the overnight train to Francistown last night. Then this morning I took the bus.”

“Oosh!”

“I slept on the floor of the train—I laid my groundsheet down. All night people were walking over me. I barely slept.”

“You must be very tired.”

“Yeah. But I feel okay.”

“And you took the bus from Francistown?”

“Yeah. It was jammed too.”

“Those buses are dangerous.”

“It was so full the woman beside me asked if she could put her baby on my lap.”

“The buses are especially dangerous for foreigners.”

“Then—you’re never going to believe this—I was sitting there with a baby on my lap, when the bus went around a bend, and right there on the road was this giraffe. The driver just laid on the horn and swerved around it.”

“These drivers are getting worse.”

“It sort of reared up as we were going by. It was right outside my window.”

“Oosh!”

“You ever seen a giraffe up close? They’re so tall it’s like they move in slow motion. It’s the same when they run.”

“Something should be done about these drivers—”

“It was the most incredible thing.”

“Oosh! And now you’ve come to Kasane?”

“Yeah.”

“You will do a game drive perhaps?”

“No, I don’t have the money.”

“A river cruise?”

“I don’t have the money for that either.”

“You will have another beer, then?”

“I’ll have another beer.”

The bartender brought one over, then he went back behind the bar, and the young man drank quietly alone. After a long while the young man said: “Where is the Zambezi?”

The bartender hustled over. “The Zambezi is downstream. The Chobe,” he pointed to the river, “meets the Zambezi further downstream, then they both go over the falls.”

“What are they like?”

“The falls?”

“Yes.”

“You have not been to see them?”

“No. I’m going tomorrow.”

“Well. You will not believe it when you see them.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that they are like nothing else in this world.”

“That’s a lot to say.”

“Yes.” The bartender started back for the bar, but then stopped. “Do you know who David Livingstone was?”

“No.”

“He was the first white man to see Victoria Falls. And do you know what he said about them?”

“No.”

“On sights as beautiful as this, angels in their flight must have gazed.”

The young man thought about that. “That’s good. You should be a tour guide.”

The bartender shrugged. “I do not get anything from saying that they are beautiful. It is only that I think they are.”

The bartender went back to wiping glasses, and the young man went back to watching the river. He watched the birds build nests in the reeds. They were lovely birds with bright, vibrant plumage. Pinks, blues, greens. That colour like the inside of a clamshell. He watched a stork hunting along the shoreline. Boats of white tourists in hats and blonde shirts chugged up and down the Chobe. They were facing the nearest

shoreline, and therefore the young man, and all the boats were listing slightly.

Overhead, the rain clouds slowly dissipated, across the border and into Namibia.

“It is not only that they are beautiful,” the bartender said finally. “One gets a sense of something unspeakable from them. It is best when the flow of water is high, after the rains.” He set the towel on the bar and looked at the clouds over the opposite shore. “It is a special kind of beauty that touches the soul,” he said, rather grandly.

The young man went back to looking at the reeds and the water and the sky. This bartender is a little nuts, he thought. He didn’t mind. Sometimes it’s nice to be around a-little-nuts people like him.

“What kind of thing is that to say?” the young man said finally. “Livingstone, I mean. Did it come up in conversation? Did he wait around until somebody asked, then said: ‘Well, now that you mention it, on sights as beautiful as this...’ How’s it go?”

“Angels in their flight must have gazed.”

“Right. What the heck kind of thing is that to say, anyway?”

“I believe he wrote it in his journal, sir.”

“Oh.”

The young man sat beneath that verandah for a very long time. He watched the clouds, the birds, and the river. The bartender served him several more beers. But for most of the afternoon they barely said a word.

While he drank he also watched the riverboats. They all had that funny list to the side where the tourists were crowding, facing the nearest shore. The tourists held cameras in front of them, though they didn’t snap pictures, because there was nothing

obvious to snap pictures of. Just the reeds and the birds, though these things were not exceptional. Still, the tourists had a certain expectation, like something exceptional *would* appear, and they had to be ready.

The young man wondered what this thing could be. Was it the hippos? The crocodiles? Or was it something so utterly unlike these things that neither the tourists, this crazy bartender, nor even David Livingstone could properly describe it? Nor imagine how it might look, or what form it might take when it arrived?

At last the riverboats stopped coming and the light was getting low. The bartender looked anxious. He hustled back.

“Excuse me sir, but my shift is finishing. My colleague will be arriving shortly. You are welcome to stay of course but perhaps we could settle the bill?”

The young man paid and left a very nice tip, and the bartender smiled.

“Can I bring you something else before I leave?”

“A coffee would be nice.”

“Of course.”

“And what if I did see the falls?” said the young man suddenly.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Do you think it’s worth it? Would I see something? I mean really *something?*”

“I don’t believe I understand, sir.”

“Nothing,” he said, peevish. “Oh, forget about it.”

The bartender went for the coffee and brought it to the table. “Anything else?”

“No.”

“You may settle for the coffee with my colleague.”

“Alright.”

The bartender turned to go, but hesitated. “They’re beautiful sir. You’ve never seen anything truly beautiful until you’ve seen them.”

“That’s what I meant! That’s it exactly!”

“I would go, sir. You can cross at Kazungula.”

“Alright.”

“But you must be careful. They may charge you very much for a visa to enter because you are a foreigner.”

“Okay.”

“They are very corrupt in Zimbabwe, and it is because of Mugabe. Things are corrupt, and the people are starving, and it is all because of Mugabe.”

“Yes.”

“Mugabe is an animal.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you very much, sir.”

“Thank you.”

Just then the evening bartender arrived, and the two men spoke quietly behind the bar. The young man wondered if they were talking about him. The evening bartender was much younger—not much older than the young man himself. When the older man left, the new bartender was busy wiping down the bar, restocking the fridge, and turning on all the evening lights. Finally he came to the table.

“Another coffee, sir?”

“Yes.”

The evening bartender brought him a second, then leaned against the railing by the river, and it was okay because there was no one else in the restaurant. They talked for some time and the young man thought this new bartender was very pleasant indeed.

“Do you know who David Livingstone was?” the young man said finally.

“No.”

“He was the first white man to see Victoria Falls. Do you know what he said about them?”

“No.”

“He said: ‘On *sites* as beautiful as this, angels in their *tights* must have *grazed*.’”

The evening bartender seemed startled. Then he smiled. “That’s very nice. Have you been to visit them?”

“I tried going today, but they wouldn’t let me through the border.”

“Aieesh! Why not?”

“I went to pay for the visa, but the man said: ‘For you, it will be a thousand pula.’”

“*A thousand pula?!?*”

“Yes.”

“Aieesh!”

“It was robbery, so obviously I didn’t go.”

The bartender shook his head. “Tsk. They shouldn’t do that. Zimbabwe needs people.”

“It’s true,” the young man said.

“Zimbabwe was once rich and beautiful—but people do not visit Zimbabwe anymore.”

“The problem is Mugabe.”

“Yes. With Mugabe, the people are starving, and the foreigners no longer visit.”

“Mugabe is an animal.”

“Aieesh,” the bartender said, and snorted. The young man finished his coffee, but was feeling light-headed, so he ordered a mineral water. He drank it while he watched the river again. Then paid the bill and left.

He went for a walk. There were grassy sections along the river where old boats had been pulled ashore to rot. The boats were a deep chestnut colour and the rot had a slightly sweet smell.

The hotel further down had a big log terrace that stretched far over the water. Before the hotel was a run-down mill, with a water wheel on its side.

The young man sat on the bank by the mill and threw stones into the river. An old man in a tattered purple shirt poled by in a dugout canoe. The moon was up even though it was still light, and the young man could see its faint reflection on the water.

“What now?” he said to the old man, who was too far away to hear him.

“What now?” he said to the reflection of the moon.

## *The Second Sex*

My name is Sunita Singh, and I am an existentialist. Since most people don't know what this means—to be an existentialist—I'll explain. Existence precedes essence.<sup>1</sup> What *that* means is that man simply came into existence one day, for no reason, and only once he existed did he invent the reason for his existence. Before he invented it, there was no reason for him to exist at all. This may not seem like a very profound philosophy to you, but it is, if you realize what people used to think. People have believed in all sorts of gods and other master plans for mankind. These people are what you would call essentialists. I'm an *existentialist*. I believe life means nothing beyond what we think it means. I know that sounds bleak and depressing, but it isn't really. Amber wrote her term paper in Dr. Winchester's Existentialism class on how Sartre didn't think existentialism is bleak and depressing at all. She wrote that he thought it was actually liberating. I agree, but I don't agree with the mark she got on her paper. Her mark was higher than the mark I got on my meticulously researched paper on Simone de Beauvoir. If Dr. Winchester was half the professor I intend to be, that never would've happened.

I've still got a long way to go before I'm a professor. I'm just starting my Master's now, then I have to finish a PhD. But for the time being I'm just happy I'm no longer an undergrad. Undergrads are lazy. Booze, and rubbing up against each other, are the only things they're interested in. When I become a professor, I'm going to approach my dealings with undergrads on the assumption that they're *all* lazy.

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<sup>1</sup> Those aren't my words. Those are the words of my favourite existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre. He died on April 15, 1980. That was the day I was born. I'm not saying that *means* anything—that he died on the day I was born—that would be very *unexistential* of me. It was just a big coincidence.

Then if somebody proves me wrong, I'll be pleasantly surprised. Having said that, I won't take any crap from my students. I intend to dock marks on essays for every spelling and grammatical mistake. I already know what they'll say. "What difference does it make if I can't spell 'Nietzsche'? This is Philosophy not English, so what does it matter if I can't write?" I already know what I'll say in response, too. "Kierkegaard said philosophy *is* writing." I don't intend to put up with any crap from undergrads. Not a chance in existential hell.

Booze and rubbing against each other. These are what undergrads are interested in. You have no idea how happy I am not to be one anymore.

I took Existentialism in my third year with my housemate, Amber. I loved Amber—I really did—but love is like anything else: it has no meaning on its own. It's like what Simone de Beauvoir referred to when she wrote about the One, and then the Other. In order to love somebody, you've got to hate them at the same time. What you're left with is what relationships are made of—some sort of balance between One, and the Other. That balance changes, too. Some days I loved her. Other days, I really hated her.

I grew up with Amber, but the reason she came back into my life was because of a man named Love Gun. Come to think of it, I don't actually know his real name. Just Love Gun. That's all Amber ever called him and that's all I know him by. Despite everything that happened, I only really met him once. I came home one day, locked up my bicycle, came down the basement stairs, and heard a man's voice in her room. I couldn't understand what he was saying because men's voices rumble. They

don't carry through walls like our voices do. I could hear Amber's voice perfectly fine. "But Love Gun," she said, "why would you want to go to a place like *that*?" Then Love Gun: *rumble rumble rumble*. Finally they both came out of the room that smelled like hairspray, cologne, and passion fruit shampoo. Finally I got a good look at him: the man who'd brought Amber back into my life. He was handsome, I'll admit. He had dark hair and eyes like chocolate pudding. And he was charming. He reminded me of Dr. Winchester that way, actually. I'm not the type of girl to fall for that sort of thing. Oh, he tried it on me. Men like him approach every woman on the assumption that she'll instantly fall for him. They assume first, then ask questions later. They're all the same.

That's the one time I met him. Amber would deny it, but he's the reason she came back into my life. Amber and I grew up in Port Carling. I got to know her well when we worked at a resort on Lake Rosseau together. We worked there the summer before we started university. I got hired as a maid. Amber, though—they made her a server, even though the only serving she'd ever done was scooping ice cream. She got to work in the dining room and meet Martin Short, Dennis Miller, and all sorts of other celebrities. I got to make their beds. The only reason she was hired as a server was because she's so good-looking. I'm not going to beat around the bush about it. She is good-looking, and everybody knows it.

Amber went to Toronto for university and that's where she met Love Gun. I know this because she's told me the story at least fifteen times. There's a ritual at Trinity College where they dress the freshmen in black robes before they go to dinner. There's some sort of initiation associated with the robes, and it involves the

seniors. That's when she first saw him. It was like doves flew up from his feet, the way she talked about that first time. Anyway he really laid it on thick after that. Two nights later he had her in his bedroom telling her she was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. He told her everything. Amber had had some trouble with men in the past. There was this one thing with some rich American businessman's hotshot son at the resort. I don't think I'm at liberty to give details. Let's just say she got really run-down about it.

One week after Love Gun told her she was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen, she got introduced to his girlfriend at a party. She went berserk. She ended up locking him in a closet for over four hours.

I guess I haven't even told you why his name is Love Gun. That's a nickname people gave him. Apparently it was a toss up between Love Gun and The Love Doctor, on account of the fact that his grandfather was a doctor, and his father was a doctor, and he was definitely going to be a doctor. Somehow "Love Gun" stuck, though. I guess everybody at Trinity used to call him that.

Love Gun graduated, stuck around Toronto for a year, spent a lot of his dad's money, then got accepted into med school here. That's when I got a call from Amber telling me she was transferring. She said something about how she couldn't stand living in the city anymore. She wanted to move in with me, so I found a nice little basement apartment for two, and without even coming to look at it, she signed the lease and faxed it right back. The first night we moved in together, she shut her door and all I could hear from her room was the sound of a blow drier and one of those Top 40 countdown radio shows. She came out an hour later wearing a pink boa and a

bikini top and an extremely short skirt. “Off to Beach Slam with Love Gun!” she said. “All the med students are going.” Halfway out the door, she shouted back: “You didn’t want to come, did you?”

Did I? Pounding music, flashing lights. Floozies finding every excuse to walk around in their underwear. Not my idea of a good time. Besides, I’m not exactly the type to attract much attention at a place like that. I stayed home instead and watched *Bend it Like Beckham*. It’s a movie about a modern Indian girl trying to put up with her traditional family, so I felt like I could relate. It wasn’t a terrific movie but it wasn’t bad either. Far better than Beach Slam, that’s for sure.

The first semester with Amber went by without much event. Every Saturday night Amber went out with Love Gun and the med students. I had no idea med students loved to dance so much. I never went with them, but Amber talked about them like the sun shone out of their ... well, you know. I got involved in a play: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. I played Bottom, the clown. When I auditioned I was really hoping for the part of Hermia, but at least I got something. Some first-year got Hermia. She was already in theatre anyways.

I met a boy. He was working crew. On opening night I think everyone in the whole production was surprised at how huge a hit I was with the crowd. I can really ham it up when I need to. They completely loved me, especially the part when I sing in the forest with my donkey’s head and Titania falls in love with me. After the show the boy took me to a twenty-four hour coffee shop and we talked the whole night. I didn’t even start talking about philosophy, which is what I usually do when I get

nervous. Everything went really well. He even called me a couple of days later. Then exams came and the whole thing with him got put off. Then Christmas break. When I came back I was really hoping he'd call, but I figured he must've been busy.

Something else I should mention about the first semester. Amber told me one night she was thinking about going to medical school. "You study history," I pointed out. "That doesn't matter!" she yelled. "Curtis"—he's a friend of Love Gun's—"he studied religion. All you need is one biology and one chemistry. I can do that."

So she took a first-year biology but failed it miserably. When she got her mark back—we were both home for Christmas in Port Carling—she called right away, crying on the phone.

"Listen, maybe being a doctor isn't such a bright idea," I said. "Why not stick to history? You're good at it."

She did stick to history. But the day after the break she had something new to tell me. "I'm going to study *medical* history!" she announced. Then shut her door and came out one hour later, all dolled up, and left to go dancing with Love Gun and the med students. I guess over the first semester she'd gained herself a bit of a reputation. One day at the library, I overheard two girls—med students also—whisper as she walked by, "That's her, the undergrad I'm talking about. The one the guys call Anatomy Class." What she meant was that all the male med students study her... well, you get the idea. I never told Amber. It'd completely break her heart.

The second semester, we actually took a course together. Amber had an elective so I convinced her to sign up for a course I was taking on existentialism. I

didn't think it would be such a bad idea when I suggested it. She was always interested in knowing what I found so exciting about philosophy. I never checked to see who the professor was until it was too late.

After the first class I considered trying to get her to drop the course, but I knew it wouldn't have worked. She was hooked, and not academically. Dr. Winchester, who was teaching Existentialism that semester, looks less like a professor than one of those men you see on billboards in their underwear. You know the type: so beautiful they don't even look ridiculous in their underwear. I really wished he wasn't our professor because he's not very good. For the entire introductory lecture, he didn't say a single word concerning philosophy. Instead he went through the class one-by-one and got every person to say their name and major and one interesting fact about them. It was a waste of time. Besides, he breezed right through most people. Whenever he got to one of the pretty girls—the ones with blonde ponytails, and tight sweatpants, with something written across the bottoms so that everybody will look at their butts—he took his time and concentrated like he was memorizing everything she was saying. He took the most time of all with Amber, and she absolutely radiated. When she told him that her major was medical history, he actually said: “I see. Is that like the history of broken hearts?” Almost every girl in the room sighed. When he got to me next, I said: “My name is Sunita Singh, and I am an existentialist.” He said something very witty and the whole class laughed. Men like Dr. Winchester think they can say whatever they want. I'd been in classes taught by him before, but he still didn't remember who I was.

Another thing that happened as a direct result of Amber being in Existentialism. For the first time in my life, I attended not just one, but almost *all* of those annoying “smokers” Dr. Winchester planned throughout the semester. A smoker is basically a class trip to the pub. I think the cover charge you pay at the door is supposed to go to some charity, but nobody cared what charity. It was basically an excuse for Dr. Winchester to invite all the pretty girls to go drinking with him. Of course he’d invite everybody at the end of one of the lectures. But you could tell by the way he’d look at certain people that he was really inviting the pretty girls. They were all smitten with him, you see. Every lecture was like a fashion show. At the midterm exam, one girl leaned over to Amber and said: “This is the only exam I look like *this* for.” They both smiled like they were part of some secret society. In the middle of the exam, he actually sat down beside Amber and started talking to her! I overheard: he asked her how the exam was going. “Fine,” she giggled. He whispered something else. I was so shocked I couldn’t think straight, and lost at least five minutes of exam time. Then I had to reorganize my entire writing schedule to accommodate the lost time. As a result I was only able to incorporate four direct quotations from the readings—one from Heidegger, one from Jaspers, and two from Sartre—as opposed to the five I’d planned on using. This was irritating. I was thinking of approaching the head of the department about it. I felt that the effectiveness of my argument had been seriously compromised.

Let me get back to the smokers. I attended all of them except for one, and only because Amber begged me to go with her. It was awful each time, and each time

I promised myself I wouldn't go again. But then she'd beg me and I couldn't say no. Then the same thing would happen. We'd get there, she'd drag me up to say hello to Dr. Winchester, then they'd talk to each other and basically ignore me. Then I was on my own all night. I'd hang around for a while and he would be forced to buy me a drink when he wanted to buy Amber a drink. At least I didn't have to spend money.

At one of the smokers I saw the boy: the one who'd worked crew for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He was with some other boys and they were all dressed in black. I went and sat with him, but it wasn't very nice. He was standoffish. It wasn't at all like before Christmas. Finally they all just got up and left. I wanted to find Amber, so I looked for Dr. Winchester. She wasn't with him. Instead he was talking to a boy who was in many of my classes. They were talking very hush-hush beside the bar, but still I could hear them.

"I'm telling you kiddo, take advantage," Dr. Winchester was saying. "Never again in your life will you be surrounded by so many..." He trailed off, staring into space, as though quite drunk. "Beautiful girls," he finished. Then shook his head. "Anyhow, nothing like here. Wait until you get out into the *real* world."

He shouted something at the girl behind the bar, then turned back to the boy, clapping him chummily on the shoulder. "You know what they used to call me, back when I was your age? Love Gun. On account of my last name. I think." He shrugged.

But right then Amber came back, from the bathroom probably. I told her I wanted to go home and she said: "Two minutes," so I waited at the door for like ten minutes, but she never came. I went home. That night I heard her stumble in at four

o'clock, which I remember thinking was bizarre, because as far as I knew the bars all closed at two.

All this talk of smokers isn't to say that Amber gave up her Saturday nights with the original Love Gun. She didn't. Every Saturday she went dancing—her and all the med students. It was like some sort of weekly ritual. She never asked me to go again, but I wouldn't have gone anyway.

I got cast in a new play in second semester, but the boy wasn't working crew for this show. It ended up getting cancelled near the end of term. The director had a death in the family and had to fly to Calgary so he pulled the plug on the whole thing. This was fine because I'd been assigned my term papers—including for Existentialism—and I wanted to work extra hard that semester. I decided to do my paper on Simone de Beauvoir. In particular, I was interested in her treatment of the way men have historically had a gender identity that is not relative to women, whereas women have, historically, always been identified in terms of men. For example, consider the way Eve was made from Adam's rib. This is what Simone de Beauvoir called "Woman as Other." When I wrote Dr. Winchester an email one morning to tell him what I intended to write, he wrote back one line:

Please be sure your topic has to do with the content of this course.

His concern was that my topic had more to do with feminism than existentialism. This was silly. I wrote back:

Dr. Winchester,

De Beauvoir's concept of "Woman as Other" is highly existential, because it is underpinned by the notion that there is no fundamental female reality, and that the duality of Absolute vs. Other between men and women is not founded on any Platonic essence of the sexes, but a state of insubordination for women created by men.

In her introduction to *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir writes: "What peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she - a free autonomous being like all human creatures - nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of Other."

Furthermore, in the previous paragraph, straight from the horse's mouth: "Our perspective is that of existentialist ethics."

I think I have sufficiently shown that my subject is relevant to what we have discussed in class.

Sunita Singh

I worked on my paper all afternoon. I read through several different sources, double what Dr. Winchester required. I annotated, colour-coded, and organized my facts. I planned to discuss them at length with Dr. Winchester and prove that my essay was valid. My thesis was rock solid. My arguments were supported, and my case was irrefutable. I couldn't lose.

"Aren't you coming to the smoker?"

Amber was standing in my door in a mini-skirt and a tube top that looked like it was vacuum-sealed to her body. I didn't notice her there until she talked.

"No."

"No?"

"I'm busy," I said.

"Busy?"

Amber pouted, but I was relentless. Finally, she finished getting dolled up and left. I worked through the evening into the night. I ate a can of cold tomato soup and crackers for dinner while I re-read the rest of de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. I finished all my research and even wrote my first draft. At last I stopped and was shaking from all the caffeine I'd consumed since noon.

I went for a walk to calm my nerves. It was close to spring, a warm night with a fresh breeze. I walked downtown. In one of the windows of the late-night restaurants, I saw the boy from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He was sitting with a friend at a table. A female friend. Then I recognized her: it was the first-year who'd played Hermia.

I hesitated. Then for some reason I went inside. I stayed in the little vestibule, between the sidewalk and restaurant. I could see the boy's back, the fleshy hunch in his shoulders. Hermia was stirring sugar into her coffee. He was telling her something and she gave a laugh, perfectly timed, and something like a light went off for me.

*This*, I thought, watching her. *This* is what I'm doing wrong. So I tried it right there in the vestibule. "Ha." It came out sounding rigid and unnatural, so I did it louder. "Ha ha ha!" With a panicky feeling, I realized how crazy I probably looked,

laughing halfway in and out of this restaurant. So I quickly left before anyone—particularly Hermia—could see me.

For a while, I felt bad about the whole thing, but then I tried not to feel anything at all. I walked home. When I got back Amber wasn't there so I went directly to bed. In the middle of the night I woke up to a faint knock at my door. Even in the dark, I could see she was crying. Amber. I cooed and shushed her, and tried to get something out of her, but all she would finally say was, "Oh, Sunita, it was awful!"

"What?" I said.

She pressed her face against me, nuzzling the spot just beneath my ribs.

"I got home. Then he... he..."

"He what?"

"Called."

"Who?"

"*Love Gun!*"

The story came gushing out. Love Gun—drunk on a Tuesday night—calls her after two o'clock and they talk until three-fifteen. Just as she's about to hang up, he says, "Wait, Amber. Why don't you come over—huh?"

She says she can't, or won't, but he persists. He really keeps at it. He won't let her go until finally she breaks down.

"I love you," she confesses right there on the phone. "Don't you see, Love Gun? I've *always* loved you."

But Love Gun definitely does not love in return. Amber cries and cries. He makes an impatient snorting sound, and says, “But you don’t love me, Amber. We’re just pals! Pals who happen to do stuff with each other. So why don’t you just come over here. Okay?”

She hangs up and comes crying into my room; and this was the end of her story.

“I’ll never,” she moaned, still pressing her face into me. “Never ever. Never ever ever.”

Never ever ever. She fell asleep that night on my bed, and so did I. In the morning I woke up with an awful headache, and went into the kitchen to get some Aspirin. Amber was already up, fixing a protein shake.

“I went over this morning!” she announced, sounding very bubbly. “I pounded on his door ‘til he dragged his drunk idiotic ass out of bed, and I told him: ‘If you *ever* feel the need to make a booty call again, do it to some other sucker. This one is *not* open for business!’ Then I showed him exactly what he was missing.”

She opened the long spring jacket she was wearing. Underneath, she had on a pair of very short shorts and a pink top, both made of fuzzy, towel-like material.

“Where did you get those clothes?” I said, but she smiled and refused to answer. She hit the blender button and the glass went pink. I went back to my room to start the second draft of my paper.

When the next Existentialism lecture happened, I was ready. I had all my annotated notes. I had my edited second draft. I sat through the whole class, anxious

and fidgeting. Amber was beside me, sucking on her pen. She'd been distracted for days, ever since the thing with Love Gun.

After class, every girl in the room swarmed Dr. Winchester because the term papers were due in a week, and like most undergrads, none had even started. I decided to wait until everybody left. I figured I would show him my work, and he'd have to be impressed, after listening to all that senseless babbling.

I went into the bathroom just outside the lecture hall. I used the toilet, then went to the sink to wash my hands. At the sink I looked in the mirror. A girl was at the sink beside me, sweeping her bangs across her forehead, and fussing with her layered hair. She straightened her skirt and adjusted her boobs with her hands, and after she left, I tried to do the same. But my hair was too short, and wiry, and my boobs practically non-existent. "Oh Sunita," I said, in my mother's accent, then picked up my book bag and left the bathroom.

I went into the lecture hall and was happy to see the swarm of girls had disappeared; but Amber was still there. Dr. Winchester was sitting at a desk and she was leaning over his shoulder. They were flipping through a thin sheaf of papers on the desk.

"I want to write about Sarter," she told him.

"*Sartre.*"

"Oh yes." And she giggled. "I can never pronounce it right. Sar-tre. I just don't understand certain things about him."

So he proceeded to lecture for twenty minutes about Sartre. She leaned in closer and watched his eyes. I stood in the door with my paper, waiting. My essay got wet from the sweat in my palms.

“People of bad faith,” he said, “escape the fact that, in Sartre’s words, ‘we are condemned to be free.’”

“But—”

He interrupted her by moving the desk so that she could sit beside him, which she did. They were closer. He started again.

“The fundamental starting point for Sartre is that man is nothing but what he makes himself. People can escape this by slipping into meaningless social roles. Like how I’m a university professor, and you are a university student. But those roles simply avoid our responsibility to choose who we actually are.” He paused. “Do you understand?”

“I think so.”

He moved even closer.

“Therefore, Sartre’s ethics are based on what permits and limits freedom. Many people believe this is all very gloomy, but it isn’t—it’s liberating. We can choose how we act. How we act is who we are. We can choose our own selves.”

He stopped talking and moved his hand where I couldn’t see it. Amber was nodding like she really understood something, but it had to have been obvious to him that she didn’t understand. Not what he was really saying.

“Sartre believes we can have what we want.”

After he said that, you could hear a pin drop. Neither of them actually saw me in the doorway, and that's probably for the best. It's like how sometimes you see something, and you know it's better that the people involved never notice you. That way things don't get awkward. I left with my sweaty essay. Dr. Winchester never did see the second draft until I handed it in.

The day after the term papers were due, Dr. Winchester held the last smoker of the semester to celebrate. "It's also my birthday!" he announced in class. When somebody asked how old he was, he smiled and said age shouldn't matter to an existentialist.

That night I told Amber I didn't feel like going, but it was her turn to be relentless and she managed to talk me into it. Then she spent two hours in front of her mirror getting ready. She tried on every outfit she owned, then threw them onto the floor in a mountain of skirts and blouses and tops. She coloured her eyelids, curled her eyelashes, and put lipstick on. When she'd finished, she hardly looked like Amber anymore. "Come in here," she said, and led me into her bedroom by the hand. Still, I wouldn't let her do anything more than put eyeliner on me. She picked out a skirt that was short enough to fit me, and a top, and said they went nicely together. I changed, but felt short and fat, and told her so.

"Oh Sunita," she said like my mother, but without the accent. She put her hands on her hips, but I told her I didn't care about feeling fat. We left to go to the smoker.

That night Dr. Winchester was in fine form. One of the girls from class had baked him a birthday cake, and he was tipsy. When he ate his piece he stuck his nose in the icing by mistake and there was a bit of white and blue on the tip of his nose until Amber, embarrassed, wiped it off for him.

I saw the boy from crew again. This time he was very drunk and kept hanging around me all night. He touched my side a couple of times, right in the spot where Amber had pressed her face. He kept trying to dance with me. Finally I got tired and went to leave. On the way out, I saw Love Gun waiting in line to get in the same bar. We locked eyes momentarily, but then he looked away. Like he was pretending he didn't know me, but I knew he did. I walked home, and the cold breeze blew down the street and up the skirt I was wearing. It's a wonder how anybody wears those things.

Late that night I woke up because I heard her crying in her room. There was another voice too, but it was only a rumble and I couldn't make it out. She started to cry louder, then I heard him shout. He slammed the door and I heard his boots on the steps. Then he was gone.

Ten minutes later she came into my room and she pressed her face into the usual spot. I could feel her tears soaking through my pajamas. She stopped and sputtered, like an old engine out of gas.

"Oh Amber," I said, just like my mother, but she wouldn't even look at my face.

"Who?" I said softly.

She didn't answer, but didn't need to.

*“Why?”*

“I don't... I...” She stared at the damp patch on my clothes. “Guys like him, it's not my fault. It's... the way I am.”

This is the reason I knew she never understood what Dr. Winchester was really saying. Existence precedes essence. I looked at her pretty hair.

“Oh Amber,” I said.

“Oh Sunita.”

She cried and cried and cried. We both lay down and she cried some more, and then we fell asleep.

Because of what happened that night, Amber left school—this time for good. She didn't go back to Toronto. She went home to Port Carling. Her father was the minister at the Anglican Church in town, so I guess it came as a bit of a shock to the family, her coming home in such a condition.

It's now a few years later and I'm no longer an undergrad, as I've already mentioned. I'm writing my Master's thesis on the relationship between Sartre's existentialist ethics and feminism. In particular, I'm looking closely at Simone de Beauvoir's memoirs to understand her personal relationship with Sartre. I'm interested in learning how her concept of Woman as Other influenced the relationships in her life. Interestingly, I've learned from her memoirs that she never felt like she had any influence on Jean-Paul Sartre, philosophically, whereas he had a

profound influence on her. I find the subject I'm writing about so engrossing it sometimes keeps me up at night.

Six months ago, when I was about to start my thesis, I received an email from Amber. She said she'd moved with her parents to other side of the country. She'd met a nice man with a golden retriever and a cabin on the Sunshine Coast. She said he treats her well. Finally, she said, she feels mentally ready (her words) to be starting a family of her own.

Right about the time I received the email from Amber, I met with a committee in the department to discuss my project. Dr. Winchester was on this committee. When I shook his hand he acted as though he didn't remember me, and throughout the entire meeting he looked at his lap and took notes. He asked no questions, and when the meeting was over, he left in such a rush that one of the other professors joked: "What, is his wife in labour?" The other day I passed him in the hall and he did the same thing—he walked by like he'd never seen me before in his life. Of course every time I see Love Gun at the library, he does the same thing too.

I'm not sure what else to say about all this, other than that when I eventually teach existentialism—when I become a professor—I'm not only going to teach my students that how we act is who we are. I'm also going to teach them that what we know is who we are too. In the same way that knowledge without action is not the full picture of a man, neither is action without knowledge.

The other day I read an anecdote about when a friend of Jean-Paul Sartre's came to visit him, and they had a series of conversations. When Simone tried to join the conversations, Jean-Paul excluded her and said her mind moved too slowly for

them. It is unclear to me how she felt about this, or what she could possibly say in reply. But I suspect she tried to join in the first place because she thought the same thing as I do: you can't really know a man without knowing how much he knows.

## *I got to sleep with a beautiful woman*

I fell in love once. We were working at a summer camp outside of Huntsville. I like to think I had a premonition that first night I arrived: I didn't know anybody, I was alone in my cabin, I sketched this picture of a girl naked from the waist up, the bottom half of her face showing, her hair sort of falling in front of her, a jelly roll around her midsection. I don't know where she came from, I'd barely seen a naked woman before. Maybe it was from being alone—but the act of drawing her really fired me up. I wrote "Galatea" in the top right corner, got into bed, and lay there looking at her all night. I was just a stupid kid. I don't need a real girl, I told myself. I'll always have Galatea.

I think I saw her the next day: she was sun-tanning on the dock with the other counselors. She was in a bikini. She hugged me even though it was the first time we'd met. Every time afterwards she'd come running up, surprising me, smiling, her ponytail bobbing. Years later, when everything between us had finished, I'd see young women on the street wearing their ponytails that same way, high on their heads, and I'd think they were her. Her hair like that gave her the appearance of incredible vitality. Anyway, in the beginning, she'd always catch me unaware, and I'd do something clumsy. Once when she yelled across the tennis courts, I fell going up the dining hall steps. Another time out in the boats, she waved from the diving tower, and I ran the old nine-horse up on the dock. My boss nearly killed me for that.

My break came when we were put on a canoe trip together: her and me and four campers by ourselves in the woods five days. She was hands-down the prettiest

girl on the island. I was nervous. That first morning at lunch, with the canoes rafted together on the water, she was talking about the year she'd spent in Switzerland. "Did you learn Swiss?" I said. She looked at me. "Swiss isn't a language." I shut up and ate my sandwich. That night in the tent she kept wanting to talk—she asked what to do about a guy named Adam she'd been seeing at Queen's. "There's nothing between us—but you know how it is. It's hard giving up the sex." I didn't say anything. When we finally tried to sleep she curled up close and put her arm around my stomach. "It's cold," she said.

That trip through the Park, that's when it all happened. After the trip was over—after we'd been picked up by the van and canoe trailer, and were driving back to camp—the kids, who were about sixteen, said: "We figured you two would get together, until we actually *saw* you together. Then we thought: Nah, they'd never work."

But they didn't realize we had gotten together, in a way. Sure, during the day, paddling along, we'd fight over who got to read the maps. And we hardly saw eye-to-eye, politically. She thought the Harris Conservatives were doing the province good, while I told her I'd picketed alongside my striking high school teachers. "My dad always says," she yelled between the canoes, "if you're not socialist before twenty, you're like the tinman and need a heart. If you *are* socialist after twenty, you're like the scarecrow and need a brain." I yelled back that we were both nineteen.

But it was when nobody else could see us—no audience, just her and me—that everything sort of gelled. On the portages, when I'd finished carrying my canoe across, I'd run back and find her resting her canoe in the crotch of a tree. I'd carry it

from then on, and from under the gunwales I'd watch her walking along, humming to herself with the sunlight dappling the leaves.

At night—with the kids in their tent, us in ours—we'd talk until god knows what hour, then sleep a little before morning. On the last night we camped near the border of the Park on Cauliflower Lake. At about two, with everybody asleep, we dragged our sleeping bags to the water and looked at the stars. We did the hoods of our mummy bags up tight to keep the mosquitoes out, and we lay side-by-side. I remember being terrified to breathe.

Later, after things between us had been decided, so to speak, she said: "That next morning, at the portage out of Cauliflower, when you rolled the canoe up for me, and was holding it there with your arms pinned, I kept thinking, 'Kiss him, kiss him.' But I didn't kiss you."

"I know you didn't."

"It's okay though, because I've kissed you now."

The first time we slept together—we were at a cottage on a weekend off—we were rolling around doing the sorts of things I was used to, when she suddenly put me inside her. I stopped completely.

"I've, um... never—"

"I know."

"Should I just—?"

"Yes."

On the way back to the camp we were alone together in the car when at last I said: "About the other night, when we... How did you—?"

She shrugged. “In the tent, when I said that thing about sex—when I asked what to do about Adam—you went quiet. That’s how I knew.”

Later I said: “I guess now you know what to do about Adam.”

“Yes,” she said. “I do.”

Before we’d committed ourselves in spirit to what was happening, she once said to me: “This is your first year in Toronto, and I’m in Kingston. Maybe it’s better if you don’t think about me.”

“What sort of thing is that to say?”

“It’s just I’ve done this university thing already, and I know what I’m talking about.”

One of the first weekends after classes started, she came to the city. Her parents were gone, so we stayed at her house, and I met all her friends. I was unused to seeing her in this environment. She couldn’t stop touching me. One time, sitting on my lap, and in front of everybody, she lifted her shirt and slumped over a little, until her belly had little jelly rolls. “Would you love me if I looked like this?” I was too startled to answer. It didn’t matter, because she laughed and kissed the top of my head.

That night, after the bar, and after she’d put her friends in the other rooms, she led me to the bedroom at the top of the stairs.

“Your parents’ room?” But she told me not to worry so much. We hardly slept that night, and in the middle of all that huffing and grunting, she pressed my face

against her chest. The next morning in the shower, she hummed the songs she used to hum walking in front of me on those portages, which already seemed so long ago.

That was the beginning of a very bittersweet year. Each weekend one of us would make the three-hour trip between Kingston and Toronto. I remember the anticipation of those Friday evenings, sitting at my desk by my residence window, waiting for her to arrive. I also remember the buses I took to Kingston, and that instant, just before pulling off the 401, when the bus would crest the hill, and I'd see the little city below, its lights twinkling down to the water. And I equally remember the bitter side to those many sweet moments: the Sunday afternoons trying to distract ourselves from the inevitability that one would leave the other behind.

But the Friday nights, the Saturdays, the Sunday mornings—we still had those—and when I'd get out of bed at noon and make us breakfast, I'd come back with a tray, and she'd say: "You left me alone for *that*?" Once we were on the lawn at a house party and she was standing very close. I walked to a tree and she followed. I walked to the kegs, and she followed me there too. I wove between the little crowds, and she stayed right on me, unconsciously, like a duckling on its mother; until we were pirouetting between the people; until she realized, laughed, and took my arm. "I'll follow you anywhere," she said.

What I see now is that love, or the illusion of love, or the illusion of what we mistake for love, thrives on these moments that—by the sheer volume of them—make them impossible to ignore. "We're perfect," she once told me. "We never fight, and everything between us is perfectly perfect. There's just one little thing—"

"What? What one little thing?"

“With my past boyfriends... I get bored sometimes. I don’t think I can help that.”

When it was finished, I’d sometimes think back (not without hostility) to her most vulnerable moments. Like the time she called crying at two in the morning the only weekend in months we’d planned not to see each other. “I have to stay here,” I said on the phone. “I feel like a ghost on my own campus!” “Why won’t you do this for me?” she wailed. When we hung up it was after four; I slept an hour and a half, got up, packed some things, and left. Toronto was empty and cold. I went to the bus terminal, bought a coffee at the concession stand, and caught the first bus out. I was on her doorstep by ten. She pulled back the blinds and saw me through the window. At the door her eyes were red and puffy, and when I held her I could feel her shaking.

That was perhaps the happiest and most miserable year of my life: happy because it was happy; miserable because I couldn’t shake the feeling I was failing to make a place for myself in what was supposed to be the best years of my life. I just went to my classes. I only got involved in one thing at the university: a play put on by some third years. It was Tom Stoppard’s *A Fifteen-minute Hamlet*. I played the ghost. She came to see the show: at the after-party I ignored my cast-mates, and basically spent the night with her.

After Christmas, when I was back in the city for classes, she came to stay with me. She was doing a semester abroad that year, and didn’t leave for another three weeks. In the beginning—having been apart so much—it was wonderful having her around. I’d come home from class and she’d be there. I’d finish my Latin exercises,

brush my teeth, get ready for bed—and she'd already be between the sheets. "I was waiting," she'd say, nibbling at my earlobe.

But finally, all that time together, in that cramped little dorm room—I guess we just weren't used to it. We started to fight a lot. One day I broke down.

"It's just... the thought of you leaving... It's like the biggest time bomb of all."

"You shouldn't think so much."

"This'll sound crazy. But what if I went with you? You know, took the semester off."

"You'd regret that, I think."

In the end she left and I stayed behind. To begin with, everything was okay—in our emails there was that sense of longing again—making us believe we were fighting for something worth the trouble. But finally even that changed. She stopped writing so much, and the emails, when they did come, grew less personal. Finally she just signed off: "Jenny."

I finished my year at school. I'd planned to work at the camp again that summer. The day before I drove up, I wrote her a long email that ended something like this:

Got your message about staying abroad. It'll be hard not seeing you these couple months more – but it's been so long already, and I can wait longer. Will be that much sweeter when you do come home. Love, Andy.

The next morning—the morning I was leaving—I got a call at six and it was her.

“How early is it? I always get the time difference wrong.”

“I don’t mind. You can call whenever you want.”

“I wanted to catch you before you left, because I’d never reach you otherwise—”

The reason she wanted to catch me was because she had something important to say.

“I got your email. I don’t want you to have the wrong idea when I get back.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“There’s somebody I’m here with. I don’t know, it just started up again. You know him, actually. Adam—”

After that I did just about everything—I yelled, cried, pleaded—the lot. I told her she was a despicable human being. I dragged out every tender moment we’d shared. Finally, believe it or not, I was the one apologizing to her.

Then I went quiet and neither of us said a word. It was like that for three whole minutes. I said: “Is it really over?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I always knew you’d break my heart.” I hung up the phone.

That day—and the days after, and the weeks after, and the months after—they weren’t easy. When I finally told somebody who’d known us both, he said: “What’d you expect? She left him for you.”

Thinking about this now, with some distance, it took a long time for things to get straight in my head again. I tried dating, but only managed to hurt a lot of people. I was so detached—but how could they know? I guess I wasted a lot of time.

I didn't see her again until several years later; we ran into each other in a bookstore. We exchanged numbers. She texted: "We should get together and talk. I don't come through the city much. God-knows when we'll see each other again."

We met at a bar. She worked for a consulting company that had her flying across the continent, week after week. I told her what I was up to. After we'd finished with that though... it was amazing. After everything we'd been through, we had remarkably little to say to one another.

I asked how things were with Adam.

"*God*, not good. We broke it off months ago. I just didn't feel we were falling for each other. You understand. But he said he can't see me for a very long time."

She looked suddenly, and very tenderly, at me.

"But there's hope, isn't there? It took some time. But you and I are friends, right?"

"Friends, of course."

That was a couple years before I'm writing this. I still have acquaintances that are acquaintances with her, and I get updates every once in a while. Last I heard she'd married a successful older man, and they have a house in Forest Hill, a Porsche, and a show-dog they fly around the country for competitions. By all accounts she's enormously happy.

I was in line the other night at a crowded bar on King—the place was really packed—when I saw Adam going in. He was in a suit with his tie around his head, but aside from that he looked fine. In the bar he had friends all around him, and everything looked perfectly normal. I got a drink and went up.

“You remember who I am?”

He stared. “Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

We chatted a while—I liked him, and I could tell he liked me—and I guess it was all unlucky circumstance that at one time we’d each been to the other, “the Other Guy.” I bought him a drink, and he bought me one back. And I guess he was drunk already—with the tie and everything—but it took no time at all before he brought her up.

“You know what it is with her? She’s got her own thing going on. That’s the problem.”

“She is a heartbreaker,” I said.

“Yeah. She’s got her own thing, and finally, she could never care much about the rest of us. But she was beautiful.”

“She was.”

“I got to sleep with a beautiful woman—” But then he got pulled away by his colleagues and taken to a line of shots on the bar. They were lawyers on a night out, or something.

Later as I was leaving he was alone outside.

“There you are,” he said. “I lost everybody else. But there’s this thing I’m going to, you feel like coming?”

“I don’t think so. I’m pretty beat.”

“I’m walking towards Bathurst. You walking towards Bathurst?”

“I’m taking a cab—” But right then a cab came around the corner, and I ran out to flag it. And when I turned he was already wobbling down the street in the opposite direction.

I had the cab take me about halfway home, then I told the driver to stop because I also wanted to walk. And I walked—or maybe wobbled too—the rest of the way to my apartment.

I got to admit though, that whole time, I couldn’t help thinking maybe I should’ve gone with him, at least to Bathurst. Because I had this idea like it really would’ve meant something. Like I’d let him down by not going; like I owed him at least that much.

But then I told myself I was crazy, and probably just imagining things. So I went to bed. In the morning I got up, made breakfast, and went to work. And then it felt like any other morning.

## *Tenderness*

“So,” says Greg. “What’s the secret?”

“I’m not telling,” says Anna.

“You’ll tell.”

“I won’t.”

“Eventually you will.”

“I shouldn’t have mentioned it.”

“Too late, it’s been mentioned.” He watches her, still playful. “Okay, I’ll start with what I’ve learned.”

“Which would be nothing,” says Anna.

“So you think. What matters isn’t what’s said, but what’s unsaid.”

“Okay. What’s unsaid?”

“It has to do with your past.”

“Well, I said that.”

“I’m starting with what I know. The basics.”

“What you know is certainly basic.”

Greg gets up, slowly crosses the bedroom. “It’s something you think will shock me. Obviously.”

“Sure. I said that too.”

“Sex,” he says, with emphasis.

“I never said anything about sex,” she says, pausing.

“Exactly! What’s unsaid matters more than what’s said.”

“How convenient for you.”

“A good writer infers.”

“Or invents.”

He walks over to her bookshelf, runs a finger idly across the spines. “I think you’re forgetting something, Anna. It’s me! What can possibly shock me? This is my... *métier*. A good writer never judges.” He pulls out a thick paperback at random, riffles the pages, but reads nothing. “How long has it been, anyway? Since we got together I mean?”

“Depends on how you define together, I guess.”

“Six months? You gotta admit, in six months, I know a lot about you.”

“If you say so.”

“Six months isn’t long. So of course there are things I can’t possibly know.”

“There’s plenty you don’t know,” she says.

“Look,” he says, and tosses the book absentmindedly onto the bed. “If I’m going to make a go at this writing thing I can’t be timid. I must follow each train of thought, each possibility, however uncomfortable, to its natural conclusion. What I’m saying is we can’t be prudes here.”

“Who’s being a prude?”

“Very little can possibly shock me—that’s my point,” he says. “So whatever your little secret is, trust me, I won’t be shocked.”

“I’m not worried about your being shocked or not shocked,” she says. “But you might as well forget about it, because I’m not going to tell you. Ever.”

She moves to the dresser and vanity and starts opening the wicker baskets with her makeup brushes inside. Greg walks to the window and looks down at the

busy city street. There is little noise because the windowpanes are thick. A rich, buttery afternoon sunlight pours through the glass, dribbling down his chin and chest.

“I don’t want you to tell me right away,” he says. “That’s too easy. I want a better challenge than that.” He turns. “All I’m saying is, *you* don’t understand that *I* can’t be shocked. Follow?”

“Does all this have a point?” she sighs.

“Look, it’s how detectives think,” he says. “In order to guess your secret, I must first imagine what *you* think will shock *me* about your past. After all, Anna, I write crime novels.” She throws him a look through the mirror. “Okay, I *want* to write crime novels. The point is, this kind of deductive thinking is all pretty standard stuff. A lawyer like you should know this.”

“Different kind of law,” she reminds him.

But Greg is already pacing the bedroom, from window to door, getting into his stride. “The question that needs asking is, what do you think would shock me? Drugs? Pretty tame. Anyway, you’re hardly the substance-abuse type. Fucked-up childhood? Your folks are too... wholesome. Abused by someone other than your parents? Well, that’s possible. But then you’d have issues in bed. We certainly don’t have those.”

She flashes him another look.

“But you see, I’m taking all this in the wrong direction,” he continues. “What do you think would shock me? Well, who am I?”

“I ask myself that every day.”

“I’m your boyfriend. Your sexual partner. Yet you refuse to tell me your secret. So I shouldn’t be asking, what do you think would shock me, but what do you think would *threaten* me? The obvious answer, Anna, is sex.”

She has stopped listening altogether. Instead, she tries different things with her hair, holding it up and tilting her head this way and that. Greg watches her eyes as they follow her own reflection. Her neck is pale and long and there are thin filaments of hair catching the light from the window.

“Oh, it’s sex alright,” he says, confident now. “It’s really perfectly clear.”

She lets go of her hair and checks the time on her phone. “When did you say we’re supposed to be there? How long to your parents’ house again?”

“Twenty minutes, traffic depending.”

“Well we’d better move in that case. Help me pick out something to wear?”

She crosses to her closet and begins rooting through it, but Greg barely notices.

“You don’t regret your little secret either,” he says, still thinking.

“How do you know that?”

“You said so.”

“When?”

“At lunch. You said you don’t regret it, but will still never tell a soul because they probably wouldn’t understand.”

“Well, I’ve clearly said too much already,” says Anna.

“You slept with a woman,” Greg says.

“I’d tell you that.”

“Two women at once.”

“I’d probably tell you that too.”

“Two men at once.”

“Yuck. But you know, I think I’d still admit that.”

“A room full of men. Your boss! An orgy at the office, like *Lawyers Gone Wild*, or something!”

Defeated, he flops onto the bed and feels something underneath him: the book he tossed there earlier. The cover is orange and white, with what appears to be a bird (a phoenix?) bursting out of a bowl of flame. He reads the title—*Lady Chatterley’s Lover*—in a goofy, solemn voice. Anna, on her way from closet to vanity, snatches it back from him. “Do you mind not rooting through my things?”

“Touchy,” he says. “I didn’t know you were into racy literature.”

“Like I said—there’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

“Is that the secret, that you’re into racy literature? Or that you have a *lover*?”

He says “lover” with a horrible French accent. Anna doesn’t pay him any attention. He buries his head in a pillow. “Would you please just tell me!” he groans.

“So curious!” says Anna. “Anyway, what happened to the challenge?”

“How can I *not* be curious?” says Greg. “You say you have a secret, you say it has to do with sex—”

“I never said anything about sex,” she says.

“Well obviously—”

“You’re the one who said sex. It’s not my fault you have an overactive imagination. You may want to write about detectives, but you aren’t a very good one yourself.”

She is slipping out of her jeans and into an attractive summer dress. It is pale blue with silky, slightly translucent material and a white camisole underneath. There is a braided leather belt at the waist, very thin. When she finishes she turns to Greg. “So what do you think?”

He is flicking glumly at the corner of a lacy pillow case. When he looks up at Anna his eyes widen. “Wow!”

“It’s not too...?”

“Yes! I mean, no. I mean... wow.”

“But to meet your parents in, Greg. Focus. You’re sure it isn’t too...?”

He stands, crooks an arm around her shoulder. “They’re gonna love you no matter what. And with that dress on, my dad especially.”

She picks up *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, thumps him playfully on the head. Then, remembering something, scuttles back to her closet. “Shit, the wine!” She roots under some old shoes and laundry baskets until she finds the bottle she is looking for. “Shit! I forgot to chill it.”

“So?” says Greg.

“So it’s a Chablis. You can’t drink an unchilled Chablis.”

“Unchilled Chablis?” He takes the bottle from her, reads the label. “*Chablis Grand Crus, les Clos, 2012...*”

“We’ll pick up some ice,” she says. “Think they got a decent ice bucket?”

“I don’t know. Probably. My Dad *is* a bit of a wine snob.” He looks at her.

“Since when do you know about fancy French wines?”

“My secret,” says Anna, sashaying a little as she walks out the door. Bottle in hand, Greg follows, shaking his head and smiling.

## II.

Bob waited in the hotel room for about fifteen minutes. Initially he had difficulty with the key card. He tried it a couple times until he felt quite confident he could not lock himself out. He did not want to have to call reception over such a silly matter.

Upon entering, he hung his coat behind the door, then sat on the bed but felt creepy doing this. He settled instead for the uncomfortable armchair. But now he felt oddly formal, folded up and facing the door.

When the knock came, Bob was quick on his feet and rushing over and pulling the door open. “Hello!” he boomed before he could even see Anna. She was standing in the hallway, in a sweater, jeans and dark brown jacket. She was startled at first. Then said “Hello” at normal volume and asked if she could come in.

“Of course of course,” said Bob, who had frozen. He asked to take her jacket, but she had already thrown it onto the armchair.

“So you’re here for the—?” Bob said quickly, and Anna said, “Yep that’s me.” Bob laughed and said, “Okay. Well... Please don’t take this the wrong way. I just really didn’t expect...” But he didn’t know how to finish the sentence, so he offered Anna a glass of wine instead.

“At ten o’clock in the morning?”

“Right,” said Bob. “Actually, that just came out. I don’t even know if there is wine. Probably, there’s a mini-bar someplace...”

Another silence.

“Please,” Bob said, “have a seat.”

Anna was already sitting on the bed.

“You’re a student,” he said.

“What makes you say that?”

He pointed at her sweater, which had a university logo.

“Shit,” she said, “I was in such a rush this morning, I didn’t even do my make-up. Or change into something more...” She rooted through her purse. “I have some make-up with me though! If you prefer, I could just...”

“No, you misunderstand,” Bob said. “You’re just not what I expected. But that’s a good thing! Trust me, I was terrified they’d send some...” Again, he was not sure how to finish the thought.

He stuck out his hand instead.

“I’m Bob.”

Amused, Anna took it. “Hi Bob.”

“Actually, Bob isn’t my real name.”

“You don’t need to tell me that.”

“No, I guess not. I know your name of course.”

“Yes you do.”

“That’s probably not your real name either, huh?”

She was rooting through her purse once more. “Actually, if you don’t mind, I need to make a quick call. They wait out front. You know. In case it’s something dangerous.”

“Prudent,” he said. “Look, if you want some privacy, the bathroom’s just...”

She slipped quietly into the bathroom, closed the door, and Bob remained standing. He could hear soft whispers but only occasional words. “Sure,” he heard once. “Uh-huh. Fine.” There was a silence then the tap running then Anna came out again.

“Sorry, just this thing we gotta do.”

“Like I said, prudent.”

Pause.

“I have a wife,” he said, though he had not expected to say this so quickly.

“You don’t need to tell me that,” said Anna.

“What if I want to?”

She shrugged. “You can tell me anything you like.”

“Is that strange?” he said. “I mean, for me to say I have a wife? Look, I’m just... this is all new to me. I need certain things to be understood...”

But she’d already crossed to him, and sitting him on the bed, began massaging the base of his neck and shoulders.

“Oh,” said Bob. “Well that’s nice. That’s really very nice.”

“You’re tense,” she said.

“I don’t do this every day!”

Then remembering something, he leapt to his feet, crossed quickly to his jacket behind the door. In the inside pocket was an envelope he'd prepared in advance, though kept unsealed. He walked back holding it out in front of him, but did not feel right handing it to her, so he placed it on the bedside table instead.

Both stared like it had arrived there somehow on its own.

"The woman on the phone said to deal with the 'business' side of things right away," he said. "Anyway, you can count it. Go ahead."

"That's okay," said Anna, and slipped the envelope discretely into her purse.

"No, please, count it," he said. "The woman said it's perfectly normal that you count it."

"I trust you."

"Sure, but you barely know me."

"Let's just say I'm a good judge of character," she said.

Before he could reply, she got up and guided him once more to the edge of the bed. She worked at his neck and shoulders again and he submitted very easily.

"Mm," he moaned softly. "Look, I know I'm repeating myself here. But you're really not what I expected at all. In a good way! I looked at the profiles—all that lingerie and false lighting. Most men probably go in for that kind of thing, but..."

He made a face.

"Yeah, I don't do profiles," she said, "pretty much for that same reason."

"It took me months to make the call," he continued, as though she had not spoken. "I didn't even want to go back to the website. You know, search histories, and all that. I called from my office, but had this irrational fear, like someone would

barge in and know everything instantly. Which is silly because nobody would ever just barge into my office. And it was on my personal cell.”

He laughed, but Anna said nothing, still massaging.

“The woman I spoke to must be a good judge of character too, because almost right away she said, ‘Look, I’ve got just the right girl.’ What was that phrase she used? She said that you were a “warm and pretty woman who likes to talk and laugh.’ I liked that. ‘Likes to talk and laugh.’ I thought, this can’t be so bad.”

He half-turned, like he was trying to face her. “Still, I never expected such ... well, I bet you hear this all the time, don’t you? You’re probably a keener judge of character than me, but I do think there is something to a first—”

He was clearly babbling so Anna stopped him. Everything from that moment onwards proceeded quickly, with her in charge. First she removed her own shirt—slowly, so he could watch her—then his. He flinched when she touched his naked torso, but only a little.

At some point, in her underwear, looking tall and arrow-straight, Anna got out of bed and crossed to the window to pull the blinds and cut out all that harsh morning city sunlight. They were high up in a downtown hotel room and there was nothing on the outside of the building to prevent the light from pouring in. But when the blinds were pulled, which were very heavy, the hotel room was plunged into near-complete darkness.

Time passed. Finally Bob flicked on the bedside lamp. He had already tugged on his boxer shorts and now padded across the carpet to the bathroom. He ran the tap until the water was hot then splashed his face, though the heat on his skin surprised

him. He looked in the mirror at his tired eyes and the water dribbling off his beard, then splashed his face again.

When he came out Anna had not stirred and Bob watched from the bathroom door. He could see the outline of her body, the duvet bunched at her hips. He admired this. Though she was turned away, she sensed him watching and admiring, and rolled over and said rather hoarsely, “Come. Come back to bed,” like they were already very familiar with each other. Something about this familiarity rattled him.

He lingered instead by the door.

“I’m sorry,” he said, finally.

“Oh god,” she said. “Don’t say sorry. Really, don’t be sorry.”

“Isn’t it just perfect? I try and have an affair. And *this* happens.” He looked down at the front of his boxer shorts. “Or doesn’t happen.”

She was propped up on an elbow. “An affair?” she said, smiling.

He moved quickly to the bed and ran his hand under the duvet. When he found the condom wrapper he held it up to the light. It was metallic blue with a corner torn.

“You know what I blame?” he said. “These damn things. The last time I had to use one of these, I was probably your age.”

“Look, it’s really not a big deal,” said Anna. “Seriously, it happens all the time.”

“I doubt that. I doubt a girl like you is used to—”

“You’d be surprised,” she interrupted.

He regarded her. Then, feeling bold, he leaned across the mattress like he wanted to kiss her, but she instantly pulled away. “Ah ah, no kissing,” she scolded. “You were told that over the phone. You’re supposed to know that already.”

Bob slumped on the edge of the mattress, looking glum. “How depressing am I!” he said. “Renting a room, making all these covert phone calls. The least I could do is—you know—follow through.” He lifted the front of his boxer shorts into a tent, watched it fall flat again.

“Oh quit worrying, there’s always next time,” she said.

“You know, I meant what I said earlier,” Bob continued. “I really wasn’t expecting someone like you. This would’ve been an even greater disaster if it’d been anyone else, believe me.”

Pause.

“I hope I’m not being out of line. But these men you see—you know, professionally. Don’t they ever fall for you? I bet they do all the time.”

“Occupational hazard,” she said quickly.

“I bet. What do you do?”

“I stop seeing them.”

“Just like that?”

“They’re not keeping up their end of the deal.”

“Look, I’m not trying to frighten you. But there’s something about you that makes a man want to... unburden?”

She slid her legs to the floor, the duvet wrapped modestly around her upper torso. Peering at the carpet, she wondered what on earth she’d done with her jeans.

“So do they?” he persisted.

“What?”

“Unburden?”

“Occupational hazard,” she said once more.

Then gave a quick, bark-like laugh, and stared at the window drapes. Where they came together a thin white line of sunlight was leaking through after all.

“You know, there are times I feel like a psychologist?” she said. “You wouldn’t believe the kinds of things I get told. I swear, you get a man’s clothes off—especially the older ones—and they’re just like little boys. They’ll tell you pretty much anything.”

She found her jeans, which had slipped beneath the bed, and began to dress, though not in any particular rush.

“Such as?” said Bob from the far side of the mattress.

“Why so curious?”

“No particular reason.”

She stood to wriggle the jeans onto her hips but kept the duvet over her torso. “I guess there was this one guy once... suicidal, he told me—his word, not mine. But just the way he explained it all to me. Like it was always on in the background, like department store music, or something. And you wanna hear the really messed up part? He said I was the only person he ever told. Pretty sure the guy was married.”

“Don’t you still see him?” said Bob.

“He stopped coming.”

“How do you know he hasn’t... well, done it.”

“He won’t.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do.”

“But aren’t *you* curious?” Bob said. “About him, I mean.”

She did up the button on her jeans. “Not really. Does that sound awful? I bet that makes me sound like an awful person.”

She found her top and sweater, finished dressing.

“I want to tell you why I’m doing this,” said Bob.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” said Anna.

“I’m not cheating on my wife. Well I guess I am. Or tried to.” He gave a weak laugh. “My wife and I... it’ll be twenty-five years this August. We have a son. I love my family. My wife is probably my best friend. At the same time, I don’t see any contradiction between this and what we are doing here.”

Her phone pinged just then and she checked it. “Looks like time’s up anyhow,” she said.

“I’m sure you must agree,” Bob went on. “This business of love and sex always being lumped together is, well, kind of mystifying, isn’t it? But I think what a young woman like you might *not* understand is how for my wife—and for many people her and my age—the sex part can just be finished one day. I hardly resent her for that. I doubt it’s so unusual at all.”

She took her purse off the bedside table.

“I want to pleasure you,” said Bob. “I want to give you pleasure.”

“That’s sweet.”

“I also want to know something about you.”

“I think we better stop right there,” she said.

“Don’t misunderstand,” he said quickly. “I don’t want to know your real name. Look, if this is going to work for me, even as a lie, I’ll need some kind of...”

She gathered her coat from where she’d flung it onto the armchair. Clutching her purse, she strode towards the door. “Best if you ask for another girl next time,” she said.

“Look, I didn’t mean...”

She had difficulty with the door, but managed to get it open finally.

“I’m not going to fall in love,” said Bob. “I already love my wife.”

“Goodbye,” said Anna, and slipped into the hallway. Bob lay in bed for some time, hardly moving.

### III.

“I’m shocked,” says Greg.

They have just re-entered Anna’s bedroom, later in the evening. There is no longer sunlight streaming through the window, just the white wash of a single city street light, and a coloured lamp that was left on beside the bed.

Greg sits heavily on the edge of the mattress while Anna hangs by the entrance, watching him closely.

“Shocked,” he continues, “but still... open-minded! I mean, it is quite funny, isn’t it? Though funny might not be the right word here. Unorthodox? Yes. That’s probably better.” Pause. “*This* is your secret?”

“Well there’s more,” says Anna, slowly edging towards him.

“How much more? And why are you only telling me now? Before we went to my parents’ for dinner, you said you’d never...” Pause. “You know I think I need to understand this better? Otherwise it’ll drive me completely nuts!” He gets up before she reaches him, crosses the bedroom. “Okay,” he says, “why don’t you go ahead and run through everything for me. The whole thing, from start to finish.”

“What do you mean, run through everything?”

“How it works, you know. Start to finish!”

There is something jaunty yet brutal in his voice, and Anna hesitates.

“What in particular would you like to hear?” she says.

He waves a hand, shrugging. So cautiously, she begins, “Well, I guess first there’d be a phone call. Telling me where to go. What hotel, I mean—”

“Hotel,” he interrupts her. “So you’re saying it always happens in hotel rooms?”

“Happened,” says Anna, “yes, typically.”

“You know, I never really thought of that? About the hotel rooms I mean. Does that make me naïve? I bet now you think I’m totally naïve!” He flashes her an earnest, almost desperate look. “And who books the hotel room, you or him?”

“Booked,” she says. “And always him, of course.”

“Go on.”

“Well... I guess I’d go and meet him. At the hotel. Then call down if everything was okay. You see, if they didn’t hear from me in a certain amount of time, they’d send up somebody.”

“Who?”

“Somebody from the agency.”

“You work for an agency?”

“*Worked*,” she says, with emphasis, but still Greg doesn’t seem to clue in.

“And there are just agencies that do this?” he continues. “Is all this even legal? How do you find these agencies? Online?”

“That’s the usual way.”

“Show me.”

She regards him a moment, then reaches for her laptop on the desk. Greg saunters over and sits, though seems to keep his distance.

As Anna types he can’t help leaning over her shoulder to get a better look at the screen. “You’re joking,” he says, as she scrolls through the website. “*Please* tell me that you’re joking. Here, this, click on this. ‘Our Ladies. Cassandra. Illiana. Selena.’ Tell me you’re friggin’ joking!”

“They’re fake names,” she says, “obviously.”

“I should *hope* so. Luna? Laetitia?” He is smiling, and Anna, noticing this, smiles too, though without much commitment.

“Click on one,” Greg tells her, so Anna does. “Wait, there’s no picture!”

“You don’t have to have a picture,” she says. “You don’t even have to have a profile if you don’t want to. I never did.”

“How do your customers know what they’re getting?” She does not know how to respond to this. But Greg is already jabbing away at the screen again. “Here, click here. On Luna’s profile,” he says.

The pictures take a moment to load, and as they gradually appear, Anna frowns. “Ah—see?—that’s not good at all,” she says. “See the way that picture is taken? You can see her chin, and lower lip, and, well, basically everything!”

“So?” says Greg.

“So it’s way too much. Someone might recognize her. You *do* understand the point of a fake name, right?”

He juts his own chin at the pictures. “You say you know this one? This Luna I mean.”

“I didn’t say I know her. I doubt I know any of them, anymore. It’s been five years.”

“Where’s your profile?” he says.

“Jesus, Greg, I just told you, it’s been five years. And I never had a profile to begin with!”

Still, this does not seem to sink in. “Here, what’s written right here,” he says, pointing at something else. “Beneath Luna’s name. What the hell’s all this supposed to mean? Couples? Bi?”

“You can probably figure that out for yourself,” she says.

“Alright, what about this one, GFE?”

“Girlfriend Experience,” says Anna. “Means she’s willing to be a bit more... I don’t know. Intimate.”

“Intimate?”

“Kissing, that kind of thing.”

“You don’t normally kiss?”

“Not normally.”

“And all these girls,” he says, flinging a hand at the screen, “these ones whose faces we aren’t allowed to see. Are they pretty?”

“I told you, I don’t know them.”

“In your day—were they pretty then?”

She shrugs, closes the laptop. He rises, and giving a knowing grunt, begins wandering aimlessly around the bedroom.

When he stops and sees the concerned way she is watching him, his whole demeanour seems to change at once. “Anna, *babe*,” he says in a soft, syrupy voice, taking her hand and anxiously stroking it. “No need to freak out, right? We can work

through this. We can work through pretty much anything! Didn't I say I have an open mind?"

There is a slightly disturbed gleam in his eye as he says, "Actually, I find the whole thing kind of... fascinating! I bet there are things you could teach me. After all, crime novels are *full* of these kinds of girls—these Lunas and Laetitias. It's pretty obvious I don't know anything about them. So let's think of this like... research!"

Something on the vanity catches his attention. He crosses and snatches it up—the book from earlier on. "On second thought," he says, "who gives a damn about crime fiction? I'll be the next D.H. Lawrence. I'll write the updated sequel. *Lady Chatterley's Customer!*"

Satisfied, he moves back to her, tosses the book between her pillows.

"Anyhow, these girls. So they've each got their fake corny names. What's yours?"

She doesn't answer. Greg snorts. "Don't feel like sharing? Fine. How about your tricks of the trade then? You can tell me those. What're you known for, Anna? GFE? Do *you* kiss?"

"Greg," she softly warns him.

But he is beyond warning. He rushes over now, scoops up her hand, and begins stroking it once more. "Okay, that silly stuff I said about research. I was just kidding around! Surely you can understand *that*. Surely you can understand that you

need to be honest with me, right? Otherwise I'll imagine the worst." He drops her hand. "So, kissing. Would you do it?"

"Not initially."

"Not initially?"

Anna looks a little bewildered. "I guess a few came regularly enough, in a way, they were almost like..."

"Regulars?" he pounces. "What is this anyhow—a Starbucks?"

He flops down onto the mattress, stares at the plaster ceiling. He's never really looked at it closely before. In the corners is white crown moulding, very fine. Directly above his head is a large plaster swirl—very ornate and full of flowery detailing. The kind of thing you might see supporting a chandelier, but there is no chandelier. Still, he has no difficulty imagining one. He looks around the rest of the bedroom. Yes, it really *is* the kind of room to have a chandelier in it.

"The *money*," he says, almost solemnly now. "Gosh, we haven't even talked about that, Anna. Like... how much did you actually get *paid*? It was obviously pretty lucrative. I always wondered how you afford an apartment like this. I know lawyers aren't exactly hard-up. But still..."

Rolling to his feet, he crosses to the window. He is noticing everything now: the beautiful textured curtain rod, and the floor-to-ceiling drapes, a wine-coloured velvet.

He pulls them shut with an airy *whoosh*. There is no light to speak of, just the glow from her bedside lamp. This too looks expensive, paneled in cut, coloured glass.

“Alright, Anna, you win!” he declares suddenly. “You’ve thoroughly shocked me. But you know, I think I’m also pretty exhausted? That’s just about enough shock for one night.”

He begins shucking off his shirt and jeans, pulling back the duvet on the bed, but hesitates.

“You weren’t planning on charging me?” he says, with a nasty wink.

Then gives the pillows a fluff, settles down into them. But he feels something under his neck (the book again) and tugs it free.

Eyeing its worn-out orange-and-white cover, he also surveys the contents of the bedroom. Fine wooden furniture. Brass-framed paintings. Whorls of moulding around the closet and door. It’s all secretive, and extravagant, and despite himself, Greg is dazzled.

“*Lady Chatterley’s Paying Customer!*” he shouts.

IV.

In an altogether different hotel, a bottle of fine white wine chilled in a classy-looking ice bucket. Beside it, oysters in the half-shell, on ice. Edith Piaf’s *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien* played tinnily from small portable speakers attached to Bob’s cellphone.

Bob entered from the bathroom, singing along, clearly in a very good mood. He danced over to his jacket, took out an envelope, still unsealed, and placed it on the bedside table, as was his custom.

He picked a duffel bag off the floor. From it, he began pulling various sex toys—some straightforward, others more elaborate—and tossed them onto the mattress. He paused, reconsidered, then began to arrange the toys more artfully.

A knock. At first, Bob didn't hear. Another, louder. The raps were close together, mildly pressed.

He ran over, yanked the door open. "Hello, Beautiful!" he boomed. Anna stood in the hallway in her usual costume: jeans, sweater, dark brown jacket. Taking her in his arms, Bob danced her inside. "*Ni le bien... ni le mal...*" he sang along with Piaf. Laughing, Anna pushed him away though he continued waltzing with an imaginary partner. She removed her jacket, and was about to toss it on the bed, when she noticed the arrangement of sex toys.

"Now how did *those* get there?" Bob shouted over the music. "You know, I bet it was the previous occupants. The standards at this hotel are really slipping. Should we change again?"

She gestured that he turn the music down, and he did.

"Okay, okay—I visited that shop I was telling you all about," he said. "I got chatting with the girl. Such ideas. And experience! At her age..."

"Girl?" said Anna, lifting an eyebrow. She walked to the bed and picked up an absurdly large and bright purple dildo, pointing it directly at Bob.

"So I got a little carried away!" he shrugged.

There was another more complicated apparatus, with tubes and a cylindrical chamber, like a large needleless syringe. Anna eyed it skeptically. “This one looks almost medical.”

“You said you wanted to be a doctor.”

“Lawyer...” she corrected him, but Bob didn’t seem to hear her.

Another French song came on: Brigitte Bardot’s *Harley Davidson*. Bob continued his partner-less waltz, but the new music hardly suited the dance, so he waltzed over and thumbed the music off again.

By now, she’d noticed the wine and oysters, and crossed to the table. “And what’s all this?”

“Oh, just a little celebration,” said Bob.

She inspected the oysters closely. The half-shells were pearly with small purple discolourations. The oysters themselves were cappuccino-coloured, and liquidy. There was a half-lemon in the centre of the ice, and a towel for the wine, all laid out on a fancy silver hotel platter.

The wine was already uncorked and Anna could not read the label because it was partially turned away, though she could see it was French. Expertly, Bob flipped up two glasses, removed the bottle from the icy water and towelled it dry. The wine as he poured looked pale, almost clear, and there was soft, dewy condensation on the outside of the glasses.

“Huh,” said Anna, visibly impressed. “So what exactly are we celebrating?”

Bob shrugged. “I suppose if we need a reason, we could say it’s our first evening appointment.”

“That’s true. You usually book mornings.”

“Sometimes afternoons.”

“*I* like afternoons.”

“But evenings,” said Bob. “The promise of an evening!” He did a neat little spin on his toe, handed Anna a glass and they clinked and drank.

“Wow,” she said, twisting the bottle so she could read it. “This is really good stuff. Expensive? French? Pronounce it for me, would you?”

“*Chablis.*”

“Shab-lee,” Anna tried. “I bet it is expensive, isn’t it? It certainly *sounds* expensive.”

“Try an oyster?” Bob said.

But she’d never eaten oysters so Bob had to demonstrate. He placed the wide edge of one of the shells against his lips, and slurped the oyster back. When Anna copied him, she made an unpleasant face, but then her expression relaxed a little.

“I can’t say they’re horrible,” she said.

“I hope they’re better than *that!*” he exclaimed.

She regarded him skeptically again. “Fancy French wines. Oysters. You’re sure we’re not celebrating something more... I dunno... specific?”

“Well, I *did* get a chapter of my book published.”

“Congratulations!”

“Just a chapter. In some journal nobody’s heard of...”

“Will you finally tell me about it then?”

He waved a hand. “I’d probably just bore you.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I already tried out some of the material on my students. D. H. Lawrence—that’s the writer I’m writing about. It turns out he’s not so fashionable, with your generation.”

She bristled slightly at the way he said “your generation.” But already, he’d crossed to his jacket, reaching into an inside pocket. “Anyway, I have far more interesting plans,” he said, and fished out a fingersized plastic bottle. When she saw what it contained, she immediately flashed an alarmed look at the sex toys on the bed.

“Oh, don’t worry, the plans don’t involve *these*,” he laughed, and shoved the toys to the far side of the mattress. “Actually, I need you to lie on your belly. And get rid of those socks and shoes!”

She hesitated but did as he asked. “Now close your eyes,” he said.

He lay her right foot on his lap, squeezed some massage oil into his palm. His cold hands made her tense at first, but he quickly, and expertly, kneaded the oil into her arch, and in between her toes, until her whole body seemed to go limp.

“*Ohmygosh*, you’re really good at this,” she exhaled. “What’s the big deal anyway? Oysters, foot massages. Who’s paying who, exactly?”

She twisted around to face him. “*Why* are you so good at this?”

“All married men are good foot-massagers,” he shrugged. “We have to be, if we want to stay married for long.”

“Well, you’re practically making me drool,” she said. “Look, I’m drooling all over these fancy hotel sheets!”

“Long day?”

She gave a snort. “You wouldn’t believe it if I told you. These friggin LSATs. And do you know how much they’re costing me? All I gotta say is, thank god for *your* business. And my other regulars...”

This seemed to genuinely shock him. “How many other regulars do you have?”

“*Tsk*. I’m not answering that question, Bob.”

“Am I your favourite?”

“Not answering!”

“Fine,” he said, and resumed his massaging. “But you really have no right to complain, you know. One day you’ll be a very rich doctor. Richer than an underpaid old prof like me.”

“Lawyer,” she corrected him again. “One day I’ll be a very rich *lawyer*. LSATs are to get into law school. Right?”

Neither said another word for the remainder of the massage. When it was over, the atmosphere in the room had already shifted.

Slinking towards Bob now, Anna ran her tongue along his ear, taking his fleshy lobe between her teeth. The sex toys, forgotten, tumbled off the mattress. Undressing herself with one hand, she fingered at Bob’s belt with the other. As always, she took the initiative; he’d come to expect this. She expected it also, which had long since stopped surprising her.

At one point, leaping up, and running half-naked around the hotel room, she pulled the drapes closed and killed all the lights—again, just the way he liked it. As

she moved back towards him, and before his eyes could fully adjust, he could make out the dimmest outline of her figure.

Desire—late-coming, yet electric—jolted through his entire body.

Time passed. Then from somewhere in the mass of bunched pillows, and hotel sheets, came familiar, tense expressions of frustration, outrage.

“Fuck fuck fuck!” said Bob’s voice.

He flicked on the bedside lamp. In its cone of orange light, he began searching desperately through the sex toys scattered on the carpet. “Fuckity fuck!” When he found the purple dildo, he held it promisingly in front of him. He nearly dove head-first under the sheets but Anna stopped him before he could get very far.

“Whoa!” she exclaimed. “And where, exactly, do you think you’re going with *that?*”

“Dunno,” Bob said, blinking. “I guess I just figured—”

“Well figure again, cowboy.” She took it gently from him, so he snatched up the medical-looking toy instead.

“Fine, how about this one? I know—it looks awful. But the girl from the store was saying, it might be just the thing. You know. To help with my troubles!”

“*Probably* not our ideal solution,” she said, taking it from him also.

Bob threw up his hands, in defeat. “Christ, what the hell’s my big problem? How about a prescription? Should I try one of those?”

She scootched up behind him, tangled him up in her arms and legs. “Quit stressing so much, would you? We’re supposed to be having fun here—remember?”

“Fun,” Bob said with a grunt. “You still have no idea, do you? Without making my life sound *totally* depressing. This, you. Each week, it’s like my...”

But she wasn’t listening. Now with her pelvis pressing into him, her legs around his hips, that familiar urgency she often felt with Bob began mounting inside her. What he called his “troubles” weren’t even the real problem (they weren’t as frequent as he liked to think). No. The difficulty in Anna’s opinion was all the talking they seemed to get themselves into. It mystified her; how each week he’d dutifully book his appointments, stuffing his envelopes with more cash than he was supposed to give her! And then with just that precious hour together, he’d fritter away the time with talk.

At least Anna knew what she wanted. With her arms still draped around him, she let her fingers piano-key down his stomach. They rummaged through his trail of belly hair, slipping under the waistband of his boxer shorts...

All at once though he leapt from the bed, and began pacing the room with a nervous energy unusual even for him.

“Fine—so you wanna know the *real* problem,” he nearly shouted, striding back and forth across the carpet. “What’s really got me tied up in knots these days? My son...”

“I beg your pardon?” said Anna, bewildered.

“Okay—look—you’re young,” he said, and turned to face her. “So listen to this. A week or so ago, he tells us—his mother and myself—that he’s dropping out of school. Just like that!”

“High school?” she said, blinking.

“University,” he grumbled, then began pacing once more.

*This* took her by surprise. Not the business of his son dropping out, but the fact that he was that old. If she’d ever bothered to picture the son at all, it was probably as a small boy (though of course this was silly; Bob couldn’t possibly have small children).

At last he stopped pacing, flopped down onto the mattress beside her. The nearness of his body, the give of the springs and foam, it all made that urgent feeling well up inside her again.

Her phone alarm. A pair of riffing Spanish guitars. This time it was Bob who plucked the phone off the bedside table, laying it softly on her belly.

“Time,” he said, though this was unnecessary.

One of the things that still surprised Anna was how quickly an hour could pass! Tonight though there wasn’t any time to linger. She had an LSAT prep course at the university, and could still make it if she hurried.

Dressing, she quickly gathered her things, and remembering the envelope on the bedside table, slipped it into her purse.

“One last thing?” said Bob, as she rushed towards the door.

She stopped, dizzy with impatience. But he seemed in no particular hurry. Grandly, he swept his arm around the hotel room.

“What we do here,” he began slowly, “what you and your other regulars do. I know you explained this to me already. How it’s not just a matter of money for you. How it’s—”

She let out a testy sigh.

“Hear me out,” he said. “I also know you’ll be starting med—I mean *law* school soon—and that won’t be cheap. So I want you to know, if money becomes an issue. With tuition and everything. Well, you can always come to me. Maybe I can help you.”

Long pause. “Thanks, underpaid prof,” she said, with a smirk.

She yanked the door open, rushed into the hallway. The lights were brighter than inside the room, and for a moment she was blinded.

“About next week,” she half-shouted back, oblivious to who else might be listening. “Was there a particular time or day? Can’t you give a girl some advanced notice? These last minute calls of yours, they’re really getting to be...”

She let her voice trail off, rushing towards the elevators.

V.

Later that night, or rather early the next morning, Anna stirs in her sleep. She reaches across to find Greg but there are only empty sheets.

She fumbles for the lamp. He is by the door, leaning against the frame. Dressed in the same jeans from earlier, he also wears a dark hoodie that Anna has never seen before.

“Greg?” she says, her voice dry and groggy. “How long have you been standing there? What time is it?” She checks her phone. “Jesus, five. What are you doing up so early?”

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“Where have you been?”

“A walk.”

“Where?”

He shrugs.

“Come to bed,” she says, carefully.

“Goin’ nuts over here, Anna. Can’t stop thinking. Clients, customers.

Whatever you call them. *Regulars...*”

He sidles over to the bookshelf, begins pulling books down. He is not angry. If anything, he feels a lurid thrill, like it is someone else making the mess.

Some books slap flatly onto the hardwood while others tent with their spines exposed. A few picture frames tumble down (he does not see the photos). There are also scented white candles, in smoky glass bowls, though miraculously nothing breaks.

He continues down the first row then a third of the way down the second before stopping. Surveying the damage, he says, “Makes you wonder. How a person can care so little?”

This gets a response. Something reddish, and unattractive, sweeps across her face. Is she crying? Anna’s hardly the type to cry, he thinks. His contempt only deepens. Then again, he thinks, of course she *would* cry. When he glances once more, however, he sees he is mistaken; she is not crying after all. Merely blinking her eyes rapidly, like dust from the books has disturbed her, though there doesn’t appear to be any dust.

Why isn’t she crying, he thinks? Hasn’t he given her a good enough reason to cry?

Fiercely now, he marches across the book pile. His toe catches one and it skitters under the bed.

This seems to deflate him.

“You’re going to tell me I have no right to be angry,” he says. “That it’s your body. Your life...”

“Actually, you can be angry all you want,” she says. “I’d be surprised if—”

“Well I am.”

He gives the pile another kick, though it is even less convincing.

“So, you wanna hear what I did all night?” he says, after a pause. “I walked all over the city. Downtown, where all the fancy hotels are. I saw the Lincolns, and black sedans, in the little crescent driveways. I saw the doormen with their gold tassles and... what do you call them? Like boards on their shoulders. *Epauettes*? I waited a long time for the girls to come and go—I wanted to get a really good look at them. These Lunas and Laetitias. I knew they’d come; it was just a matter of time. But in the end maybe I was too late, or too early, or...”

He is creeping towards her, but rather than stopping, brushes past and towards the window. The velvet drapes are still drawn so he sticks a thumb in the crack. A needle of light pokes through. Dawn is nearly breaking and the streetlamp outside looks dimmer.

He spreads the drapes open further.

“So I went home instead and fetched *this*,” he says, and throws the hood up on his sweater. “Okay—maybe not so fancy. Maybe not like the slick customers *you’re*

used to. But it should do the trick, hm? Like role-playing! Well, should we try it or not, Anna? What do you say? Pretend I'm some stranger off the street?"

He fishes his wallet from his back pocket, with the intention (only just then formulated) of throwing his cash violently onto the mattress, or better yet onto Anna herself.

But when he flips the wallet open there is nothing in the bill-fold but some loose scraps of paper. What are these? Then he remembers. Notes he is in the habit of making, and storing in his wallet. *Writer's notes*, as he prefers to think of them. Snatches of old dialogue, and gestures (usually Anna's) that have delighted him.

Now he wonders why he bothered writing them in the first place. Do they even concern her? Can he read them now given all that he knows?

Distracted, he barely notices her rise and cross soberly to her closet. She tugs an old sleeping bag down from the top shelf. There is a strange finality to the way she moves. She gathers what appears to be her office clothes—grey pants, a white blouse, fresh underwear and white bra—and tucks them under her free arm, the one not already holding the bag.

She crosses to the door, but on the threshold, hesitates. "I'd stay to try and work this out," she says gently. "I would, if I thought we might actually accomplish something. But Greg, there's so much you don't even know. It's *far* too late for all that..."

The first shreds of dawn glimmer through the drapes. Noticing, she snatches up her phone again.

“But look, the sun’s coming up. I work in the morning! I’m afraid I can’t waste any more time.”

Then shrugging, she drags her bag down the hallway, for an hour yet of sleep on the living room couch.

VI.

Five years earlier, in the very same bedroom, Anna was on the bed, leafing through a paperback novel. The room was more or less identical except the drapes and furniture and even pictures on the walls had a fresher look.

The book she was holding was already well-used by that time, with the spine and covers creased and the edges fraying white. There were bits of binder paper marking certain pages. Even these were very old, Anna could see, because the notes scribbled on them were faded and illegible, and the paper itself yellow and sharply brittle.

At last, Bob swept into the bedroom with a towel circling his waist, having just stepped out of Anna’s shower. The book belonged to Bob, and because he didn’t know she was reading from it, she hid it quickly under a pillow. He didn’t seem to notice. Still, she watched him as though he had, trying to look innocent.

“What?” he said finally.

“Oh, nothing.”

“What is it? Why do you keep smiling at me like that?”

She shrugged. “You’re in my apartment, that’s all.”

“Mm-hm.”

“Dunno. Guess it just hit me now.”

“It’s hardly the first time…”

“I was just thinking, what they used to tell us at the agency. ‘Never bring a man home.’ It was like their number one rule.”

“You want to go back to hotels?” he said. “Is that what you’re trying to say? We can if you like. But remember that one time, when they totally screwed up our reservation—?”

She waved a hand. “I don’t want to go back to hotels. I just haven’t given the whole thing much thought, I guess.” Pause. “Whatever. Let’s just forget about it, alright?”

He went on looking perplexed, but exited to the bathroom anyway. When he came back, he had his jeans on but still no shirt. He sat on the bed and dried his hair with the towel, while Anna slinked across the mattress towards him, looking sultry.

“How do you feel?” she whispered.

“Should I be feeling some way in particular?” he said, puzzled again.

“I get the sense you like it here. In my apartment, I mean.”

He glanced around the bedroom as though to say, “It’s nice.”

“I mean ‘like it’ in the sense of…” Her eyes trailed to the front of his jeans and finally he caught on to what she was actually saying.

“Yes!” he said excitedly. “I do!”

“You find it kinda hot, don’t you?”

“It *is* hot!”

“Forbidden. *Naughty*. We never seem to have our troubles here…”

He flopped boyishly onto the mattress beside her. “So you wanna know what I think about?” he said. “To avoid the troubles, I mean?”

“Your fantasies?” she murmured, and nibbled at his earlobe. “Go on then, tell me.”

“Alright, but promise not to laugh. I make up, you know, scenarios in my mind. Like role-playing! In one I’m the defendant in a courtroom. I rise because the judge—that’s you—is about to enter. That secret door behind the bench opens and... Wowza! Out steps pretty much the hottest judge *I’ve* ever...”

Anna gave a little snort. “Let me guess, our ‘judge’ isn’t wearing any clothing?”

“Well, you’ve got your robes on at least,” he winked.

This gave her an idea. Rising, and crossing quickly to her closet, she tugged out what appeared to be a novelty judge’s costume—or more accurately, a novelty *sexy* judge’s costume—the robes gauzy to the point of translucence, and cut high at the leg and low at the neckline. She slipped the costume over her tanktop and boxers, adjusting everything so she really *did* appear naked underneath.

Bob wolf-whistled. “Where’d you get all this?”

“Would you believe it?” she said. “Initiation. For *law school*. They acted like it was a big joke, of course, but I don’t recall the guys having to wear anything like...”

Already though he’d dropped to his knees. And clasping his hands wildly in front of her, he said, “Mercy, Your Honour. I’m guilty of wanting to sleep with my judge!”

A rubber gavel also came with the costume. Anna snatched this up, thumped it gravely on the vanity.

“The court hereby sentences the accused to—!”

Before she could finish, he buried his face in her robes, just below the belly, and she laughed.

“Ah ah, keep it above the waist, sir,” she scolded him. “Or I’ll hold you in contempt of court!”

Then shucking off the costume, she stuffed it back into her closet. Bob, on the bed now, made a big show of his disappointment. “Do we really gotta stop?” he pouted.

“You want to keep going? What’s got *you* so energetic?” She lay, languidly, across the foot of the bed now. “Oh right, the *apartment*. Well, maybe I should’ve listened to the agency. Or never left them in the first place!”

“No no, I’m happy you left the agency,” Bob said, frowning. “All that money they used to take from us—their *cut*, I suppose you could call it—you can put all that money that towards your education instead now.”

Anna just rolled her eyes at him.

“And speaking of an education, or lack thereof,” he continued. “My son... the university drop-out. Have I told you his latest scheme, about being a writer? Now I know you’re going to laugh. And say how I’m an English prof! But look, the kid barely reads. The only books I’ve ever seen him reading are cheap paperback crime...”

He trailed off though because something juttred into his back: the novel Anna had stashed under her pillows earlier.

Tugging it free, he said with a wink: “Been snooping through my book bag?”

Her face went white with embarrassment. So he gave her two quick, reassuring pats on the thigh.

“Just *teasing*,” he said.

Then rising, he exited quickly to the bathroom, to finish dressing. Still bashful, Anna picked the book up, inspected the front cover again.

It was the same faded orange-and-white, with the same cartoonish bird, rising out of a bowl of flame. A phoenix? Above it, in the same unadorned lettering, the title: *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.

She waved it briskly in Bob’s direction. “I heard this is all about sex,” she shouted after him. “No wonder you’re teaching it. Or wrote your *own* book about it!”

No answer.

Finally he came ambling back, doing up the last few buttons on his shirt.

“Oh, sure it’s about sex alright,” he said breezily, “it was even put on trial once. For obscenity!”

He moved to the mirror on the vanity, to do up his tie.

“Yet do you know what Lawrence—he’s the author—what he first wanted to call it? *Tenderness*. Now just think about that for a second. It’s about this earthy affair between an upper class woman and her husband’s gamekeeper. The sex would make even your agency blush. Yet... *Tenderness*. That was nearly the title.”

Finishing the tie, he crossed back to the bed, plucked the book gently from out of her fingers. He flipped to a marked page. “There’s a passage showing what I mean... yes, here it is. Now this is the gamekeeper. He’s reflecting on his lover, who happens to be his boss’s wife.”

Then in a slightly exaggerated voice, he started to read: “*He thought with infinite tenderness of the woman. Poor forlorn thing, she was nicer than she knew, and oh, so much too nice for the tough lot she was in contact with! Poor thing, she had some of the vulnerability of the wild hyacinth, she wasn’t all tough rubber-goods-and-platinum, like the modern girl. And they would do her in! As sure as life, they would do her in, as they do in all naturally tender life. Tender! Somewhere she was tender, tender with the tenderness of the growing hyacinths, something that has gone out of the celluloid women of today. But he would protect her with his heart for a little while...*”

He snapped the book shut. Then tossing it flippantly onto the mattress, said in an almost scoffing way, “Now I wonder what made me read you something like that? *Tenderness of the growing hyacinths?* Good god! No wonder my students dislike Lawrence so much. No wonder the young women... no wonder *they* seem to dislike him most of all!”

Bob was on-guard all of a sudden, wary. Anna watched all this closely. Was he really so afraid of his students, she wondered? Was he afraid of young women in general?

Was he afraid of *her*?

Now, *his* phone alarm went off. A high-pitched ringing. Bob had night classes that semester, and had gotten into the habit of marking the hour himself.

Still, it seemed to confuse him. “What was I just telling you?” he said, whirling on the spot, trying to locate the bleating phone. “Oh, yes, Lawrence. And that other name too. The one he originally wanted for his book. *Tenderness?*”

He spotted the phone on the vanity, thumbed it off, and swept it into his book bag. “My night class,” he was saying, in a tremendous rush now. “I’m afraid I have to get going. My night class is starting in like...”

It was only after he’d whirled out of her apartment that Anna noticed he’d forgotten the novel, still lying on her mattress. Bob never once asked about it again. After a few weeks, she forgot she even had it.

It wasn’t until years afterwards that it crossed her mind, finally. She spotted it on her bookshelf one evening: that white-and-orange spine.

She was articling that year, and already her memories of that unlikely period of her life—when she had worked for an escort agency! when she had regulars!—had a hazy, dream-like quality.

On the inside cover of the book she saw his name scribbled in, *Dr. Robert something-or-other*, the last part quite illegible

No matter. The discovery still pleased her.

Robert. *Bob*.

At least in this small way, she knew he had not lied to her.

## VII.

Earlier that evening, they pull into Greg's parents' driveway. Confidently, he strides up the stone front steps and into the house.

"Ma! Dad!" he shouts first up the stairs, then into the kitchen, then down into the basement.

"Go figure," he grunts at Anna, who is lingering in the front hall. "We rush like hell to get here. And nobody's even home!"

But she is barely listening. She fidgets instead with her dress, still fretting over what she has chosen to wear for the evening.

"Greg, look, you can see right through this top layer," she complains. "Why didn't you say something back at my apartment? I can't meet your parents dressed like this!"

"Nobody's going to care," he says.

"Well I care. Look at me! When they see what I'm wearing they'll probably think I'm some kind of..."

She trails off suddenly, like something has just occurred to her.

"Shit, the wine," she says quickly. "The Chablis! I left it in the hot car. And we totally forgot a bag of ice!"

"There's ice in the freezer," says Greg.

"Quick—an ice bucket," she says, before rushing out the door again. "You said your Dad probably has one, right? Well, you go find that. *I'll* get the wine. Jeez, Greg, you do understand, we can't *possibly* serve an unchilled Chablis, right?"

Only after she's gone, does he dare mutter after her: "Unchilled Chablis. Well, la-de-friggin-da! Big fancy deal!"

He is interrupted however by the back patio slider squeaking open. And in walks Robert, looking dozy, like he's just been napping in the sun.

"Was that you shouting?" he says, with a yawn.

Greg frowns at him. "So *there* you are. Why didn't you answer when I called you? Hey look, I need an ice bucket. For some wine. I figure *you* of all people will have one of those."

"Why, did you bring a decent bottle for once?" Robert teases him.

But Greg, deliberately ignoring the comment, shuffles to the window in the living room. He peers out onto the driveway, squinting intently at something.

"No," he says, with an air of great satisfaction. "It's for a bottle that someone *else* happens to be bringing tonight..."

Robert remembers then. Greg has a girl coming for dinner! Is this who he continues to stare at through the window?

"Yep," the boy is saying. "There she is, with her fancy bottle alright!" He gives a little snort. "Okay, you wanna see a *real* wine snob, Dad? Well, get ready to finally meet your match. Cause here she comes!"