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Does anyone know you are going this way? | [Five stories and a piece of a novel]

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The University of Montana

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Does Anyone Know You Are Going This Way?

By

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Her grandfather allowed Sara to open the truck window so that she could rest her arm on the door and let her hand jerk up and down in the rushing air. Cows stood heavily like deserted cars in the passing fields. The blue sky was smeared with thin white clouds. Occasionally she stuck her head out the window for a few seconds until her eyes watered. When she pulled her head back in, her grandfather kidded her about being sad because a boyfriend had gone off to war or maybe the moon.

At Watkins Glenn, he pulled into a gas station. He creaked the door open and he lowered himself out of the truck. He walked around front and lifted the hood. After a few seconds, he appeared on her side of the truck. He smiled at her through the windshield and gave her a two-thumbs up. She two-thumbed him up back. Still smiling, he turned his attention to the engine. He leaned in over the engine, nearly off his feet trying to get deeper. She could heard some scraping and clicking. Then he stood back up put his hand to his chin. He stared in to the engine for a few seconds and then he reached back in with his right arm. But when he did, something seemed to grab him from within the engine. He jerked forward, almost diving under the hood. His free arm latched onto the side of the car, giving him some leverage against whatever was pulling him in. He tug-a-warred back and forth with this invisible enemy, then finally pulled him self free. He then gaped at his right hand over, checking for damage at his right hand. When he seemed satisfied that it was okay, he looked back to Sara shaking his head in disbelief. Then he walked back in front of the truck, disappearing, until the hood slammed shut. He gave her another two thumbs up.
Sara didn’t know exactly what had just happened. But it made her giddy and she swung her legs back and forth. She liked that her feet couldn’t reach the dirty floor of the old truck. It was like riding in a chair lift.

He grandfather went inside the store. He bought himself a twelve pack of beer and he bought Sara a bottle of grape soda which she knew she could make last for the afternoon by sticking a fishing hook in the top and sucking it drop by drop from the pierced cap.

Eventually they arrived at the deserted boat landing down past the Speedway. Sometimes when they came here, they could hear the dim zoom of racecars and the crowd going nuts. Sara would imagine that these people were cheering for her to catch fish. But today there were no races and the absence of noise made her feel like they were trespassing.

A cool, moist air covered the still lake. In the short walk from the truck to the dock, the temperature the dropped 10 or 15 degrees. He made her put on his sweatshirt. It was warm like a towel just out of the dryer, but it reeked of paint thinner and the sleeves hung past her hands. Her whole body tingled from the colliding temperatures.

The sun on her face. The chilly lake-air slipping under the sweatshirt, around her knees. The splintery, hot planks of the dock.

At first, they just caught little pan fish—bluegills, sunnies, what have you—but toward the end of the day she caught a huge catfish. At first she thought she had hooked a log. Her line wouldn’t budge. While she was asking for his help, the line began to cut forward towards the dock.

“You hooked a beaver,” he said. “That ain’t no fish.”
She didn’t want to pull in a beaver. She wanted another sunfish. But then the line loosened and she frantically reeled it in. The catfish surfaced. It looked stunned. It bellied up, rolling in the water. The grandfather, grunting again, kneeled and scooped it with the net. As soon as it was in the net, the fish came to life. Twisting itself, arching into a C. A big muscle, like a forearm. He stepped on its head and plierred the hook from its mouth.

The catfish was almost two feet long. And fat, like a football. And ugly, an outer space ugly, a grisly awkward thing.

Sara cried. Get it away. Please get it off. She begged him to throw it back. Grandpa, please let it go, we can’t eat this.

He promised they wouldn’t have to eat it, but didn’t throw it back. This will be something that you will want to remember, he said. This is one you’ll want to show your husband.

He batted its head a few time with the Billy club, emptied the four remaining beers from the cooler, and threw it in. For the following hour or so, an occasional thump-thump could be heard emitting from the cooler.

Around 3:30, a few cumulus clouds began to inch in front of the sun, and he decided they should get going.

Her pole snapped when he tossed it in the back of the truck. He said that it was about time they got her a new one anyway if she were going to keep pulling in such trophies. This seemed reasonable to Sara. It seemed like a good thing he broke her pole.

She slept most of the way home; the sunburn and warm air from the truck and the lush earthy scent of a day at the lake left her in a black-out slumber.
Casa de Grampa, he said as he nestled the truck into the driveway.

She pulled her face from the hot black vinyl. She wiped the drool from her chin. She was unsure for a few seconds if the day had happened. She sat and gazed around, taking in the house and lawn. The algae climbing over the edge of the bird bath. The half-painted garage door. Grandpa tucking the empty beer cans into his canvas bag. The heat sneaking off the pitch-covered driveway in snaky little wisps.

Then her grandmother was at the truck. She pulled Sara’s hair from her face. She bemoaned the fact that her little honey was so dirty and sunburned. The girl’s mouth was still purple from the soda, and she smelled like fish. A grayish, buggery slime covered her hands and fingers.

Oh my little baby. What has he done to you? Who got you so dirty?

She caught a whopper, he said. Bigger than that fucking mutant I caught in April. She pulled it in all by herself.

Sara blushed. But her head was beginning to hurt from the sun and the stink. Her grandmother could feel the little girl’s sticky uncomfortableness.

Go in and shower, honey. I’ll take care of your grandpa.

After the shower, she put her sundress on, and sandals. She put her hair up in the barrette her mom had bought her just for her trip to her Grandparents. She felt pretty and grown-up and presentable as she stood, looking at herself in the mirror. And the catfish seemed a universe away until he came around the corner with it.

Sara, open up, he begged as he stumbled around after her. Dinner Sara. Yum!

Yum!
She could feel her insides shake from the shrills coming out. He wasn’t looking in her eyes while he laughed. He looked at the top of her head or at her little feet. He was ashamed, but, in his drunkenness, having a fairly good time.


Blood and fish spew splattered around the room. The cold drops hit her face and arms, sending terrifying wet stings through her body. Finally she wedged herself between the arm of the sofa and the wall. She pulled herself into a ball. He dangled the fish over her head, letting it drip into her just-cleaned hair. Yummy, Sara. Catfish. Yum! Yum! Meow.

Sara screamed gutturally, uncontrollably, nearly hyperventilating until her grandmother came in and shooed him away. She’s only a little girl George. Leave her alone. You monster. And she looked at Sara. Honey, I’m so sorry. Are you OK? Grandpa didn’t mean anything. Grandpa isn’t well. I’m so sorry.

It was a joke. Just a joke. Can’t we have a little fun around here?

Then her unwell grandpa shuffled out onto the porch and fed the catfish to their dog, Charlotte, who dragged the carcass into the garage and wrestled with it for the rest of the day.

Later, her grandfather apologized. He said sometimes grandpa does bad things. He forgets who he loves. He shouldn’t drink. Grandpa shouldn’t drink. He’s so sorry. He loves you very much.

I never meant to scare you, honey.

He was such a bigger person to her from that point on. So much more to him in such a wild mysterious way. She never let herself be alone with him again, but his name,
or even the thoughts of him, lifted her. She secretly hoped that she’d once be a monster, be unwell, be courageous enough to act on the honest, overwhelming rush, that deep spasm that makes you want to scare little girls, tell operators to fuck off, speak dirty in confessionals, on second dates.

On top of the drinking, he ended up losing what little mind he had and then dying after a slip on the early November ice when she was fifteen. At that age everything was a pain in the ass. She huffed and whined about having to attend the funeral, despite having liked him more than everyone other than the rough man she’s with now. The way he walks out of the house at night, it’s like a conductor deserting his orchestra.
Mortality Tale of Chinsee, Montana: Everybody Dies.

On the first day six died and 14 the day after that and by Sunday, when our Labor Day picnic was supposed to take place over behind firehouse, it seemed at least half the town had bit the dust.

On Tuesday, Dr. Corwin, the our town doctor died and there was a meeting. Bob Pratt, our mayor and now full owner of Bob and Sam's Ammo and Butcher Shop after Sam died, asked if anyone had gone down to the hospital in Kallispell. Tilly Loveless, the 4th through 7th grade teacher said that her sister Meg had brought the twins down yesterday.

"And what happened?"

"They got there and died."

"Jesus."

There were no symptoms. People were fine one minute, then they became short of breath, a little red in the face and died. The dead people didn't look like they were in pain as much as stunned or surprised, like they had let slip a fart in church and then God pushed their Off buttons.

Everybody had their theories. Matty, my school bus driver, said it was definitely fucking AIDS. He said Fried Egg, the homeless guy who'd buy kids beer, brought it back with him from Spokane Correctional Facility. Some people said Hollywood big shots were putting something in our water so we'd all die and then they could have our homes and not pay taxes and keep wages at next to nothing. My mom said it was because no one went to church anymore. When she
said that my dad said Jesus Christ, Molly, will you give this church crap a rest. Just for fucking once.

People were also a little suspicious, pissed off even, that none of the Indians were dying. My dad said that he thought that that is what Indians did. “Suffered. Died. That was their shtick.” He said that there was a time when you couldn’t sneeze without killing a bunch of Indians. But for some reason they seemed immune to whatever was killing the rest of us.

My Indian friend Charles, who I play hoops with was like “Boo fucking Hoo. Of course only white people are dying. Look at you. All pale and shit. You people were born dead. Plus, you can’t play basketball to save your life. You don’t have an outside shot. You can’t even play D. All you got are lay ups. If you can’t do anything but lay-ups, you should die.”

We started boiling the tap water and Mrs. Wilden opened her the grocery store giving out free juice and two-liter bottles of soda. My father drank the bottle of Jameson’s that he’d been saving for Christmas.

Only a few people died on Wednesday and we began thinking the we were going to be okay, but then 25 people died on Thursday despite the fact that Fr. Virralie got on his knees in Main St. and stayed there all day, saying the rosary over and over again before dying.

My father said that the whole town would be dead by the end of the week. And if we don’t leave soon, us with them.

"Where will we go?" my mom asked.

"I don't know? Anywhere. How about your brother's?"
"I'd rather die, thanks." She laughed at this for a second, before breaking into unearthly moans.

The team of doctors arrived on Friday and immediately most of them died. The ones that didn't said they had to go get some more equipment in Kallispell and left early Saturday morning.

After Mrs. Kelly died, Pauly her 30 year-old retarded son just roamed around the streets with his big hands cupped over his crotch like he had to pee, crying and talking loudly about his new haircut and about how Mrs. Kelly wouldn't stop playing sleep. No one could get him to calm down. The forecast called for rain, possibly snow, over the weekend so a few people tried unsuccessfully to coax him inside. As fate would have it, it did snow; snowed a shit load and he died.

Luckily this all happened during one of the months of the year when the ground isn't frozen, and we had no problem getting everybody in it. And after the zillion stupid ceremonies which my mom said were all different but the same, like snowflakes, and life started getting back to normal, Susan Foster made a sculpture for Sallow Park to commemorate all 186 people who died. It was a tall skinny iron thing that was supposed to symbolize the 'human spirit,' which they said hadn't yet died. My father said that the statue looked like an ostrich made out of dog shit. He went around calling it the dog shit ostrich until it disappeared one night in October.

After U.S.A. Today did a small article about what came to be known as the Chinsee Plague of '00, the little fishing and hunting tourism we had vanished
completely. Although people usually complained about the tourists, they seemed pretty pissed when they never showed up this year. My mother was a little excited about the article because a reporter called and interviewed her over the phone, but I guess “the Lord works in strange and mysterious ways” isn’t what he wanted to hear, because she didn’t make the article.

Many of my friends died that week, but not Kenny. But his whole family died, and he came live with us for a few months before he got sent somewhere near Seattle. But while he was staying with us, we snuck out one night and painted the names of some of our dead friends on the water tower out by the tannery. It was freezing that night and we couldn’t see very well and the spray paint ran a little. You couldn’t read a single one of the names. It looked like an art on par with the dog shit ostrich.

I got a letter from Kenny last March just before my 15th birthday, telling me about his Sega and his girlfriend, Melanie, who has tits and chews Skoal Bandits and how he now lived in the birth place of grunge and telling me to come visit anytime I want. I asked my father and he said we’ll have to see. Which basically means “No, and hopefully you’ll forget you ever asked.”

It’s weird having most of your town die. There are whole blocks of empty houses. A bunch of closed stores, and not just the dumb ones like drum shops and candle stores. Everyone talks softer now. Labor day is pretty much the same, except now people stay at home to drink. The Mr. Vollmer the varsity basketball coach let me on the team this year, since most of last year’s team died.
But I guess, since I’m just a kid, it’s not that weird. I mean, I’m sad and everything. People dead makes me sad. I don’t want to die and I wish Melissa Grosse hadn’t, so that we could go in-lining together this summer and maybe she’d let me put my hand down her pants like she did with Gary Gerst or we could make-out on the Chellburg’s trampoline. That would have been okay. But since she’s dead, I’ll probably just do all that stuff with some one else, maybe Vicki Ross or that new girl whose locker is next to mine.
The Moment Prior to Dr. Moran Becoming Generally Unimpressed With Anything His Son Lupus Did.

During the mile long drive from Dave’s to Lupus' house, Lupus comes upon a cop who has pulled over Honda Accord in front of St. Mary's Cemetery. Red and blue police lights punch the wet black sky of the spring evening. Beams of light from the pulled-over Accord shear off into the cemetery, illuminating the first few rows of graves. Lupus closes his eyes and the red and blue flashing remains. He wonders if the girl whose locker is next to his is also closing her eyes and seeing flashing, and if she is, then it is like they are in their own private telepathic rave.

When Lupus opens his eyes, he is still on the road and the cop car is still flashing its lights and he pulls over behind the cop, thinking he should give it all up now, just confess his druggyness. Graves seem to be marching out after him. Get it over with, he thinks. Gravel crackles beneath his tires and his brights illuminate the cop’s face. The cop looks confused. He looks into the Lupus’ brights and then back into at the original perpetrator, hands holding a liscence out the window of the Accord. Then he holds up a finger to this woman, Hold on a second, and begins to approach the Suburban with his right arm up, shielding his eyes.

Lupus suddenly grasps that he has pulled over by mistake and veers back onto the road. The cop signals for him not to go anywhere. Says, hey hey. Stop the car. Don’t go any further. Lupus waves. He points at his head and twirls his finger like he's a crazy guy. Like he just went loco for a second, but now he's ok. He waves again, and continues down Barner Road.
He is sweating and holding his breath and picking at a surfacing neck zit, trying to calm down. A little voice way in the back of his head says that the cop thought Lupus was just kidding and that it's just the acid fucking with him, that he'll be okay if he can just make it home. The little voice also says that Lupus needs to chill out in order to deal with the street light at the bottom of this hill. He can see it up ahead. A little electric cherry swaying in an unseen wind. Red means stop. This he knows. And begins to press lightly with his left foot, testing the brakes out. He's concentrating on the physics behind his little foot halting the few tons of engine and metal as he slowly comes to a stop about 100 yards before the light.

When he realizes that he isn't anywhere near the stop sign, he steps hard on the accelerator and shoots forward through the light just as it turns green.

As he peels out around the corner of Barner and State, he hears a thump. A thump like a refrigerator box, or a senior citizen, or something hitting the stupid Suburban. But there's nothing in the review mirror. And from the driver's seat, there doesn't appear to be anything up in the grill. And he's already gone about three blocks by now, since hearing the thump, so he might as well keep going. If it was a person, they're dead. What if it was the girl whose locker is next to his? What if she could hear his thoughts and had come out to meet him? We'll if she did, she's dead. A dead little telepathic Romanian orphan. He's pretty sure that that is the story. She got adopted by Americans. Dr. Moran, Lupus' dad, knows. She was a patient of his. And he has told Lupus to steer clear of her. Not run her over. Lupus keeps going. He can always just say he never saw or heard anything, and he can say this later, while he's not on acid.
He's extra careful as he proceeds down West Lake Street, his street. He watches
the speedometer, cautiously keeping the needle under thirty. He tells himself again and
again that it is just a drug and that a kid on acid running over Mrs. Schwartz or Mrs.
Lavery or the girl whose locker is next to his, and then driving home with them in the
grill of his stupid Suburban, isn't that big of a fucking deal in the scheme of things, in a
world that has things like Combine High School and Rawandans machete-ing other
Rawandans to pieces. He pulls into his driveway. He lets the car glide in neutral quietly
into the carport. He turns off the engine and then twists the lights and the outside goes
dark. He sits in the car, waiting for the kitchen window to illuminate. Or for his dad to
come out of the house. But neither happens and he decides to check the stupid Suburban
for hair and blood.

While he's under the Suburban, his dad asks him what he's doing.

"What." he says.

"What are you doing under there?" his dad says.

"Checking to see if this thing's moving."

"What?"

"Nothing." He starts to shimmy out from under the car.

His dad is looking though the back window of the truck. Like a cop searching for
empties.

"Hey dad."

"Hi. What were you doing? Is something wrong with the car?"

"No, why?"

"Because you were looking around under the car."
"Nope. It was just making a weird noise on the way home."

"What kind of weird noise?"

"I don't know"

"What do you mean, you don’t know?"

"I mean, I don’t know, as in something I don’t have the answer to, as in some knowledge which I presently don’t possess."

"Have you been drinking?"

"It's only eight o'clock. I got out of practice at five."

"Then why are you acting like this?"

"Why are you acting like this?" Lupus mimics, then he shrugs and yawns and starts toward the house. His dad follows.

"Lupus is something wrong with the car?"

"No! Chill the fuck out. Jesus!" His dad looks watery and haloed in a greasy ether. Lupus thinks he could put his hand through him. His watery dad will appreciate and respect him for having a spine.

As soon as they get inside, Lupus turns around. That little voice pipes up again and says that although it’s good that he didn’t drag anyone home in the grill of the car, his dad is not cool. Inside this house is everything that is wrong with the world. Inside this house is what really killed Frank Zappa. Turn around.

"I forgot something out in the car. I’ll be right back."

"Wait."

"I'll be right back, I said."

"Just hold on." his dad says. "What's wrong with you?"
"Nothing."

"Why is your face so red? Why aren’t you making any sense?"

"Why don’t you go fuck yourself?" Lupus sprints out across the lawn toward the street.

As he runs in and out of the circles of glare that the street lights emit, singing the "Jungle Song", inserting randomly the words "fuck yourself". As in "In the jungle, the mighty jungle the lion goes fuck yourself tonight." Intermittently, he remembers that he’s running toward town with the hope of catching Dave and JR before they make it to his house.

When a car finally approaches, he stops running. With the lights in his face, he can’t make out the car type. He starts to wave and then thinks, Cop!, and stops and bends over and rushes toward the big row of bushes in front of Ginnley’s house, running in a crouch like a guy in a gunfight.

The bushes are dewy and cold. There are dew-laden spider webs. Then there are spiders. Lupus wonders is the girl whose locker is next to his figure skates like that 14 year-old Romanian girl the in Olympics. Some spiders circle in on his ears and moving around at the base of his neck, trying to get down his shirt and at his neck zit. Then they aren’t there and he hears Mary King, his prom-date and girlfriend, asking him what the hell he is doing. She and her friend, Miss-Cooler-Than-You-Even-On-The-Day-You-Assisted-the-Game-Winning-Goal-Against-Marcellus, are standing next to her little red Geo, looking into the bushes at Lupus. M.C.T.Y.E.O.T.D.Y.A.T.G.W.G.A.M is smoking a clove.

“What are you doing?” Mary asks.
“Oh, hey.” He stands up, wiping himself off. “What’s up?”

“Nothing. What are you doing in there?”

“Nothing. I was just… I thought you were someone else, and I was going to play a trick on you.”

“A trick?”

“Oh you know… just kind of hide from them, scare them kind of thing.”

“What?” But Lupus ignores Mary, watching her friend who is sighing like Lupus is her little brother keeping her from some very important and interesting business. “Are you sure you’re ok?” Mary asks again.

“Oh, yeah, I’m cool. It’s cool. Why? I mean, I’ll be fine. I’ll see you guys on Monday. Or maybe in church on Sunday. Ok?”

“Ok. Bye Lupus. I’ll be here on planet Earth if you ever get back and need to speak with me.”

The Geo pulls out onto the road, and he goes back into the bushes.

Mary was on to him. Now both Mary and his dad know. He shouldn't be doing hallucinogenics as much as he is. He shouldn't be tripping on school nights. He should tell his parents that he’s been taking hallucinogenics this year, but that he is definitely finished with LSD and that he will only take mushrooms on special occasions, like the Allman Brothers concert or John Hopkins/ S.U. lacrosse game at the Dome next weekend. If they knew this, they would stop bugging him about his grades and not care that he didn't break 600 on the math section of the SAT's. They would realize that he was a man with struggles in this world and that he had done things that they hadn’t. They
would let him drive the BMW instead of the stupid Suburban. They would think of him as mature, as someone who has overcome something. Once he helped himself, he could help others, like Dave and that girl whose locker is next to his. But besides her health, there are probably other things she needs to be saved from. His dad has told him to steer clear of this girl, says she has big problems, but won't tell him exactly what big problems. Maybe his dad does weird shit to her and doesn't want Lupus to find this out? He’s embarrassed like Bill is about Monica. But maybe if Lupus admits to having a LSD problem to his dad, his dad in return will admit to doing weird shit to the telepathic Romanian orphan figure skater who’s locker is right next to his. Maybe once they are done admitting their bad habits to each other, they can hug and say that they love one another, like real fathers and sons. Like real fathers and sons, that is the point. All I want is for things to matter, for things to be real. Just to have one real, true thing in my life. Is that to much to ask? Dad and the girl whose locker is next to mine are better places to start than any.

It's decided. He will go back to his house and tell his dad that he's done with LSD and ask him why the girl who's locker is next to his is off limits. Get to the bottom of things and begin a real relationship with his dad and then tell Mary King that he and she are not going to the dumb ass prom together and then he’ll call the girl whose locker is next to his and elucidate his feelings about her to her and say that he understands and that it is alright that his dad has done weird shit to her. He doesn’t care. He can still love her. And to prove this he will rip his braces off. He is almost certain that Romanians have bad teeth. He will have bad teeth if he takes his braces off with some pliers but it will be ok as long as they will be in love and be able to trip together, which is something that he is
mostly finished with anyway. The removing of his braces will mostly be symbolic, but lovely and real. It’s settled.

He doesn’t run this time, he walks. Confidently. Repeating like a mantra, the LSD solution, I love you dad, the LSD solution, I love you dad, the LSD solution, I love you dad. Do you want to go to the prom?

The cop is writing scribbling on his note pad. His cop car is parked next to the Suburban with its lights out. Dr. Moran is on the Nokia cell phone which he illegally writes off as a tax deduction, pacing on the porch and looking out into the night. Lupus comes around from the opposite side of the house so that he will have the advantage of a surprise attack.

“I don’t know where he went. He just started running. Then that druggy kid, Dave, showed up with Charlie Russell’s kid, RJ. Neither of them were making sense either. Now John Angel is here looking for him. He says that Lupus tried to run him over with the Suburban.” Mrs. Moran is in Connecticut visiting her parents. Grandpa just had a colonoscopy and she had gone down to help with things. “If he has been drinking and driving, I will make sure of it that he doesn’t get behind the wheel of a car again until he is in his late 30’s.”

The cop was an unexpected problem, but Lupus can’t believe the luck of having phone access to his grandparents. This is beyond luck. While he still feels this full of love, he will be able to tell his grandmother what he has been doing this year as well. The cop is unfortunate, but the love that will result from him telling his family about his LSD usage will be bigger than any stupid law he may have broken. What he needs to do is get
his dad and the phone away from Officer Angel for just long enough so that he can talk
to his grandparents and his dad about the LSD and the girl who’s locker is next to his.
Like a fish rising from the darkness of a deep pond, Lupus walks out into the porch light
and grabs the phone from his dad and runs back out in the dark lawn, hoping the dad will follow. Into the phone, he asks to speak to his grandmother.

“Yes, this is Lupus. I don’t care if she is in bed, Mom. I need to talk to her.”

“What are you doing?” His dad moves after Lupus, but is still a little rattled about having the phone yanked from him.

Lupus cups his hand over his free ear and waves his father away. “Mom, can’t you just once, be cool? Just this once do me a favor and get grandma on the phone. Please.”

His dad rushes towards him and gets him by the shirt. Lupus starts to wriggle away, but slips on the dewy spring grass. “Dad just hold on, I love you and grandma. Everything will be ok, just give me a few minutes to work my magic.” He twists away and his shirt rips in his dad’s hand. The quick dramatic sound elevates the moment, injects some violence and Dr. Moran lets go. Lupus hears the cop hustling over, the handcuffs, the billy-club, the gun, the flashlight, all jangling from his waist like an elaborate, dangerous Hawaiian Hula Skirt.

“Please mom, please just put her on the phone.”

Dr. Moran stands over Lupus. He doesn’t quite know what to do, but he has Lupus trapped.

“Thank you.” Lupus puts his hand over the phone. “Do you mind?”

“Lupus, what are you doing? What is going on here? Are you drunk?”
“Could I just have a few minutes with grandma, please? Could you just back off for a few fucking minutes? Everything will be all right. I promise.”

“Lupus, give me the phone!”

“Hi, grandma! Yes, this is Lupus.”

John Angel is now there too. He has his hand on the billy club. “Do you want me to take over?” He asks Dr. Moran.

“Yes, I’m good. I miss you too. How’s grandpa? Is his colon better?”

His dad is kneeling on Lupus’s chest and has him by the bicep.

“Just give us a minute, dammit.” He tells his dad. “Grandma, life is really really good. I love you. And I’m not just saying that because of the check you sent me in March or because I’m tripping or because of my raging hormones or anything. Have you ever done acid? It’s fun in a really good way. Did they have acid when you were my age? Wouldn’t it be cool if we could tell each other everything, if we just completely knew each other. It would be so cool since you’re 89 and you know life, you know what kinds of sounds my car would be making if something was wrong with it. Wouldn’t it be cool if there was nothing between grandmoms and grandkids except the truth? If we could somehow communicate around our stupid parents, or I guess, your children. I could tell you that I will never masturbate to the Sharper Image catalogue again, never. And you could tell me that you cheat at your parish bingo games. Or that in 1962 you once blew some stranger in the men’s room of a Jersey Pike gas station as Grandpa was checking the oil. Just real stuff. Just you and me being real. Did you know that dad does weird things to the girl whose locker is next to mine?”
The phone is ripped from his hand. And dad is all over him. Smothering him. Turning him over on his chest. Pinning his arms underneath himself. The cigar-smelling sweater scratching against Lupus’ neck. Trying to push him beneath the earth. Lupus is putting everything he has into blinking. He can’t breath so well. The wet, sharp grass squeaks and burns against his cheek as he tries to move his head. Yellow pluming behind his eyelids. He feels his muscles separating from the bones in arms and neck. He feels himself liquefy. Wishing his dad to feel this too.
Adjusting to Dark.

“What is wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why are you crying?”

“I’m not.”

“Yeah you are. I’ve got ears. I can hear you.”

“I’m not crying.”

The shade on the window behind the bed is only half-drawn. Their eyes are adjusting to the darkness.

“I swear, I’m fine. You didn’t do anything. It’s nothing,” she says.

“What’s nothing?”

“This. This is nothing. I’m fine. Everything is fine. Just go to sleep.”

“Is it because I stopped?

“No. I don’t care. I told you, everything is fine. Let’s just go to sleep.”

“I’m just tired. I’m sorry. I’m tired. And it didn’t feel like you were into it either.”

“It’s got nothing to do with that, with anything.”

“What then?”

She sighs. “I don’t know, I’m just unhappy.”

“What?”

“This just doesn’t feel right. I feel stupid being with you. Like I’m being duped.”

“Come again?”
“I mean, I know you say you love me, and you probably aren’t cheating on me, but I wonder where you would be tonight if Sara lived here instead of Boston. You know? You love me out of default. It’s okay, it’s just not perfect.”

“Lisa? I haven’t talk to Sara in 3 years.”

“Also you just don’t love me like you used to.”

“People get used to each other. I take you for granted, but this is love.”

“Yeah, but you used to love me in a different way. You used to always be happy with me. You always wanted to be around me. You just don’t love me like that anymore. It’s okay. There’s nothing we can really do about it. It just makes me sad sometimes.”

“I do love you.”

“I know but not like you used to. Don’t worry about it. It’s no big deal. I’m feeling off. Probably cramps. Let’s just go to sleep.”

“Lisa, we change. I love you in a more mature way. I don’t think about it. It just is. And so I don’t always feel compelled to prove it. I had to do all that nice goofy stuff in the beginning to prove I was capable of being in love, to myself as well as you. Now I just am in love. It’s just a fact. I love you. I love you a million different ways.”

“Say one.”

“One what?”

“It doesn’t even have to be new, just repeat one of those stupid things you used to say. Tell me you love my skin, the curve of my breast. Tell me you love my lips on your eyes. Tell me that Neruda line, about wanting to do to me what spring does to the cherry trees. Or what was it? That thing about fill my heart with light? Where did all that
go? Where is that sweet boy? Please just tell me something. Tell me something so I’ll believe he’s still here in bed with me. Please. Just tell me one way you love me.”

“This is so fucking stupid,” he says. “Where did this come from? You are about to bleed, aren’t you?”

“Give me a break.”


They are silent. He slides his hand from his chest down under the elastic of his boxer shorts. “Honey?” he says.

“I said drop it.”

He turns one way and then the other, towards her.


“I don’t want you touching me. I just want to go to sleep. I’m exhausted.”

“What have I done?”

“Nothing. I told you I’ve just realized some stuff and now I’m sad. I’ll get over it.”

“Is this because it didn’t happen?”

“God, will you just shut up. Sometimes you can be such a guy, it makes me sick.”

“Well is it?”

“No. I never have them. It’s not something I think about. Drop it.”
“Well maybe you should. I don’t think I’d be entirely happy if it was always great for you and sex for me was just ‘nice’- as you put it."

“The sex is fine.”

“Fine? That’s nice. I’m glad it’s fine.”

“Well it is. It’s fine. Now go to sleep, please.”

“It isn’t. It isn’t even close to fine. It sucks. I know it, you know. We both know it sucks. I see you thinking while we’re in it. I see you thinking that it sucks. Your eyes wander. You’re not into it. You off somewhere else. I see you change when you notice I’m looking at you. You pretend. I see it. You’re always nervous. I don’t know why but you’re always nervous when I’m inside you. I can sense your body tensing up. It’s awful. It’s the worst.”

“The worst?”

“Pretty fucking bad.”

“Ok, ok,” she says. “Let’s stop this. I’m tired. We can go over the ‘awful sex’ tomorrow. Please let’s just sleep.”

He turns towards the ceiling and breaths out.

She pulls the blanket up under her chin and holds it there. “The sex really is ok,” she starts. “Its fine most of the time…. When you use your hand, its great. When you make some effort, it is usually very nice. But lately you just go right into it. You don’t wait for me. You don’t care if I’m ready. You just do what you like. It’s all about you.”

They both hold their breath, waiting for the other to exhale.

Finally, “You’re right,” David says. “I guess. I didn’t realize this. But you’re right. I’m sorry. I’ll try to think about this. I wish you had told me this
before. I’m sorry. It is my fault. We just need to talk more.”

“No we don’t,” she says. “It’s not just sex, David. It’s everything. All of it, it’s all about you. Today, I was so scared I was going to be late meeting you at the Orbit Room. I felt for sure if I was late that that was it, I would lose you. Poof. No more David. And I’m always so scared. I always feel like I’m on the verge of pissing you off. I’m always worried about what’s going to happen to you and what you think and about your job and your life. We never talk about me or my stuff, where I’m going. This whole thing is about you.”

“Honey, that’s not true. Listen to yourself. Get a grip. Where are we right now? We’re here, we’re in your bed, in your house. What did we do tonight? We went to your dumb movie with your roommates. Your roommates, who I like very much. I love your stupid roommates. What isn’t about you?”

“Don't be like this,” she says. “I want you to hold me, but instead you’re going off on my friends. And the only reason we don’t hang out with your friends is because you don’t have any. If you had any friends we would hang out with them, but you don’t. You’re a loser. You judge everything and everyone. You have to arbitrate whether everything is smart or not. You’re so lame. You’re so not-fun.”

“This is really pleasant,” he says. “Not-fun?” I didn’t know you wanted to be going out with Jerry Seinfeld. If you wanted to fucking the class clown, why don’t you go after that little friend of yours in Creative, that faggot Art Director. What’s his name Jeff? Yeah, Jeff he’s a fucking barrel of laughs.”

“Why are you doing this?” she asks. “What is happening here? You’re such an awful person. I can’t believe I let you touch me. I can’t believe I fell for your shit. My
friends could never understand what I saw in you. They always said you were a snob, a boring snob. They always said I changed around you. They said you were poison and made everybody nervous. You made everybody feel like they were in an interview. You looked down on everybody. You think you are so smart. But look at you. Look at you life. You don't do anything. You don't make anything. You just sit around and whine about everybody else. You bring everyone else down into you miserable world.”

They still and in the dull light of the moon, she stares at the door across the room and he stares at her back and at her hair, and eventually they sleep.
Zack was having a boy’s night out with Jim Parish, not his direct boss, but definite a higher up on the Bank of America totem pole than Zach, despite being nearly the same age. Jim had goaded Zach into having a few drinks together at the Lone Palm for drinks directly after work. Melinda, Zack’s fiancée had given him the go ahead. A night out with his guy friends sounded like a good idea. And, Zach had his new pager, if she needed him for anything.

After the Lone Palm, the men had dinner at the Slanted Door a new Vietnamese place on Valencia St., and then after they each recounted more than a few stories that involved being deep inside an 8 ball, they walked over to the corner of Mission and 17th and tried to buy some blow.

At the corner, they returned the prolonged stare that this guy who’s skin looked past black, a purple black, gave them. And when the guy quickly nodded upwards, Jim nodded downwards. And when Jim said blow, the guy shook his head and said smoke. And then Jim thought for a second before saying OK- without even asking Zach-, and the black guy said, I’m Glen, follow me.

As they walked behind this Glen guy, Zack told Jim that crack’s a ghetto drug.

“We’ll get blow. Chill out.”

“Ok, but I’m not smoking crack.”
“Believe me, if they have crack, they have blow. They just like selling crack because it has a higher profit margin and it’s an easy sell once you get the customer started. But if they have crack, they have coke. Just sit tight.”

“Well whatever, but I’m not smoking crack. I don’t want anything, if they don’t have coke.”

Then Zack’s pager went off. He had it set to buzz, not beep, and it quivered softly along the top of his thigh. The pager was a birthday present from Melinda. He had been on the fence about committing himself to a cell phone for over a year, and she thought a pager might be a way he could ease into it. Yuppie training wheels, she said.

Through the green glow he could read the text message: “The Injuns have us surrounded. Junior ate the dog. I only have two bullets left. Are you coming home soon?” But there was no way, he could ask Glen to hold up, while he called his fiancée. Plus his mouth near a public phone, yuckoo. She would have to wait until after they made the deal.

Glen lead them into a $15 dollar a night hotel where they were quickly buzzed through a Plexiglas cover lobby and after walking one flight of stairs they turned down the gooey red carpeted hallway. They stopped at a door halfway down the hall. Glen knocked. A little window slide open then shut, then the door opened.

A large woman wearing a kid’s sized Strawberry-shortcake nightgown was climbing back on the bed. She put her feet up on the wall and began reading an issue of Elle. There was only one chair, and Zack went for it before Jim could. He wasn’t about to get stuck sitting on the bed next to these people. Then he unbuttoned the bottom button of his blazer and crossed his legs. Jim and Glen joined the big woman on the bed and Glen
said, “Tracy, this here is Jim and this is ...” Zack hadn’t told him his name so he volunteered it.

“Zack.” He said quickly. Spazzing out a little bit. Shuddering, on hearing his own name leap from his own mouth. Why did I do that? He asked himself. These people don’t need to know that. This isn’t the beginning of any kind of friendship.

"Zack, Jim. How you doing?” she finally said. Then she looked away from the magazine at them. “Fancy suits. You guys Mormons?”

"No,” said Jim stiffly. “We work at a bank.”

"Bankers. Mormons. Brain Surgeons. Men with money. I don’t care. What do you want? You want to fall in love? You want to have the best night of your lives?"

"We are already in love," Jim said. "We just want to cook-up." What happened to ‘they have blow?’ What was this ‘we’ shit and why are ‘we’ suddenly gay. But Zack couldn’t bring himself to say anything. Jim was suddenly someone he didn’t recognize. A big ball of ill-meaning deceit.

“We can do that.” Tracy said. “We can do anything here.”

Jim wouldn’t look him in his eye, and then his pager was trembling again.

Sweet little Melinda was nothing if not persistent. She was beautiful with smoky brown eyes and a curvy athletic body, but something under all that had always said, “Terrier, a spunky little terrier”. The message read: “The Injuns have burned the barn, ate Junior, stolen your check book and bounced checks all over town even at your favorite bar. I used both bullets as they were attacking and I got one of their horses in the ear. Are
you coming home tonight?" But there was no phone in the room that he could see. And he didn’t want to ask. And yes, he would be coming home tonight. Soon, he hoped.

"Lift the bed, Glen." Tracy commanded.

For a crack whore, Zach thought she was kind of hot. She was probably 20-22. And a little big. Maybe as heavy as Zach. Most Mission Street crack heads are all malnourished and skinny, but she looked pretty healthy. A big girl full of burritos from Que Pasa Burrito on 22nd. And this Strawberry Short Cake night-gown. So sweet yet, porno-dirty. On a child, the night-gown would have gone down to their ankles, but it barely covered Tracy’s crotch. A thimble on a thumb. And her face was pretty. Her eyes were kind of oriental and she had a little puckered mouth. Her head was disportionate to her body, like a girl version of a grossly out-of-shape Tidy-Bowl man. An iceberg, someone who looked ok when you could just see her head sticking out of the water, but once you got a little closer, you noticed that her body just went out in every direction forever. But still you could tell she once had something.

When she swung her feet around to the floor and made Jim stand up, the bed quivered like mud. The room shook.

Glen lifted the mattress and Tracy bent down and peered under it. She shook her large butt at Zach. He smirked and had the urge to grab it or stand up and pretend to do her from behind. It would be like he was riffing off her silliness. But instead he just crossed and re-crossed his legs.

When she stood back up, she had a small make-up box. She carefully laid it on the bed, but before she opened it she looked at Jim. “Do you mind?” she asked.

“No, not at all. Go right ahead.”
“No, do you mind, moving back. A girl needs her space.”

Jim hopped one butt space down the bed and she clipped the little make-up box open. After some hemming and hawing and rooting around, like this was the most interesting make-up box on the planet, she delicately picked up a little plastic bag and then a glass pipe and finally a lighter. Then with equal delicacy she lightly shut the box.

“Glen?”

Glen and Jim got up. Glen lifted the mattress so that she could place the make-up box back under it.

“Okie, dokie, let’s get high,” she said.

Things Zack knew: It is customary to get the dealer high. You do that with anyone who sells you any kind of drug. Things he didn’t know: Unlike with most other drugs, if you get the dealer and his girlfriend high on crack and the dealer’s girlfriend is sitting there like Tracy is, wearing a children’s nightgown and nothing else and you can tell that at one time she was cute, it is customary to pay for a blowjob or sex or just to watch her get herself off, after you get high.

She sifted through her baggy until she found a small rock and she carefully placed it in the pipe. She handed the pipe to Jim. Jim clicked the button and a blue flame shot up. He held the pipe over the flame, rolling it back and forth, cradling the small powdered rock. The motion reminded Zack of a cradling a lacrosse ball. After the chamber filled with smoke, Jim put it to his lips and sucked. When all the smoke was gone, he handed the pipe back to Tracy and lay back on the bed. Everyone watching him, like they were waiting for the answer an incredibly difficult question. Then he lifted his hands and gave everyone the thumbs up. Then sighed and reached into his pocket and to Zach’s dismay
he pulled out a bunch of hundreds. Jim hadn’t drank that much at dinner. At work, he’s usually so on the ball, he’s uncomfortable to be around for more than a few minutes. But this was suicide. Why show these people a wad of hundred dollar bills? Why carry them around at all? Was this a company prank? A fraternal test to see how Zach handles being dealt a big pile of shit.

Jim’s expression was calm and he handed one of the bills to Tracy. She held it up to the light. She smelled it. Then she handed Jim the baggy.

“Let’s party,” she said.

Jim fixed her a pipefull and she cooked its contents until a thick white smoke filled-up the bowl. Zack liked how the smoke seemed content to staying together in one little chemically cloud. Like the smoke of a smoldering tire. After the bowl was completely full, she sucked it down. Then Jim fixed Glen one. Then himself.

After Tracey could focus, she asked why Zack wasn’t smoking.

“Zack doesn’t.” Jim answered. “Not after the accident.”

“This sweet looking young man had an accident.”

“He tried to rape his mom.”

“This one right here. This polite young man.”

“He came home all high and started beating her up. Tried to make love to her. She ended up hurt. Poor lady pressed charges. Zack just finished three years as of last month.”

“Pelican Bay?” Glenn asked Zach.

“What?”

“Where were you locked up?”
Zack’s mom had recently got him a subscription to National Geographic, and he said, “I wasn’t. Jim’s lying. I’ve never done this before. I’ve never smoked crack.”

“You a cop?” Tracy asked.

To which Glen jumped in, “Cop.” “Tracy, he ain’t a cop. These guys are cool. They just want to party.”

“No,” Zach said to Tracy. “I’ve just never done this before.”

“Never smoke crack?” she asked. “You a communist?”

“I’ve smoked speed.” He answered. But he sounded about ten when he chirped this. And instantly wished he stayed with the mother rapist story.

Tracy said, “Ok, Ok, it’s cool. I’m just fucking with you. Let’s party.” And she handed Zach the bowl. Then as if to save him the embarrassment of trying to do this in front of a bunch of pros, she started fiddling with a tiny plastic tape deck that hung by a rope from the windowsill.

Zach was wondering what you can catch from sharing a pipe, as he pulled it to his lips. Jim must have seen he’s trepidation said in a loud enough voice for everyone to hear, “The pipe is hot enough to kill all the germs. Just wait until the bowl fills with smoke and suck it down.”

He did that and was worrying if Tracy and Glen were offended by the germ phobia, when the drug hit him. Almost instantly he understood crack addiction. Freeze that instant, right before your dad tickling you begins to hurt. Grab that second and stretch it out to two, three minutes and you have smoking crack. Longer and more severe than an orgasm, plus no wet spot. Lights spurt from his chest like a roman candle. A jazzy warmth churning through him. Wave after wave of electric warmth. A mind full of
the huge confidence that he was an integral part of this beautiful world. Everything clear. His body covered with heavy wet lips. Crack was without a doubt the best thing he had ever done in his life. Sex. Those 15 minutes in front of Michelangelo’s David. Not even close. Nothing can compare. A gorgeous warm rush, no, a succession of rushes. Over and over. Beautiful. Melinda, Melinda, he thought, she has got to try this. God it is good. He had done more or less every drug on the middle-class American pharmaceutical menu. Coke, acid, mesc, snorted heroin, done all the pills worth doing, but nothing was even close to this. And it was suddenly so clear that crack addicts didn’t fuck-up the world. The world was fucked up because most people didn’t do crack. If everyone could feel what he was feeling at that second, then it would be universally understood of how good our species was capable of feeling. Why shouldn’t everyone have access to this kind of beauty? Zach was certain that a world on crack would be a better world. A world the understood its potential of feeling great. Crack could leave the fitness craze in the dust.

Other than the radio, they were still silent. Everybody, sweaty and glassy eyed. Opening and closing their mouths like guppies. The bowl peacefully circling the room. Zack proud of himself for not just grabbing it from them. And then Jim began rapping along with the music. Which tickled Tracy. She jiggled to his beat. Occasionally snapping her fingers. Until Jim started making his own up his own lyrics.

“It’s all good/ here in the hood. Pass the pipe/it’s better than tripe.”

“Tracy aint’s Bassy. She’s just spacy.”

But when Jim ran out of verses and he just burst into laughter, Zach saw Tracy’s eyes dull and her mouth tighten and he sensed that one part of the night was over and another was beginning.
“Do you respect me?” she asked them.

Jim slowly came out of his fit of giggles.

She said it again. “I asked, if you respect me. Have you forgotten who’s house you are in?”

“What?” Jim seemed pretty with it. It amazed Zach that these people could even talk. If his life depended on it, he wouldn’t have been able to throw a sentence together. All he could do was feel how great the world was. And wish this feeling on others. How right-on these people were. How much beauty is in my life. Then the pager began shimmering in his pocket again. And he felt a gush of sympathy towards poor poor Melinda who hadn’t smoked crack tonight. Who was home alone. Sober. A glass of slippery cold white wine at best. Beautiful Melinda. Her little clean body. Ironing a blouse for tomorrow. Picking up clothes from the floor, little white tee-shirts, satin blouses and flinging them across the room into the wicker basket in the corner under the tacked up finger paintings of some of her students- quick cute movements like a hummingbird’s. His chest bursting with sympathy. Gushing. Teary in his crack enhanced love for her. Messy little people seem like such bigger sinners than large slobs. I couldn’t bare it, if she was a slob. But when she is cleaning and a lush fast piano piece is playing on my old cassette player, I want to bundle around her and feel her warm mouth slip under my chin, in and around my ears, soft like nothing. Oh those moments, in our wood floored apartment, on Hill street in this pastel San Francisco, turning slowly on the earth toward the sun. We are creating something by being in love, putting a virtuous thing in to existence, unbalancing the scales of good and bad. The message, a string letters traveling through the silence of the electric night, one after another, falling into his pocket, to read

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“One of the Injuns, He-Of-Broad-Shoulders-and-Sexy-Voice has been very helpful around the house. After cooking me the yummy Italien dish, Impepata di Cozze, tonight, he re-tiled the bathroom that I’ve been asking you to do for months. ARE YOU EVER COMING HOME?” Almost honey. Almost. She will love this. I just have to get her to try it. Just once. Yes, coming home. With bounty. Just don’t let him in our bedroom. I’ll ask them before I leave. Maybe get Tracy’s number. Become a regular. Get all our friends into it. Quit the bank.

“If I invite you into my house,” Tracy said. Interrupting Zack’s future. “I expect some respect. Is that too much to ask?”

“No,” Jim said. “No way. I was just getting into this. Grooving. Having a good time. I’ve got nothing but respect for you.”

“Do you want to see me?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you want to show me some respect.” Zack was pretty sure that he wouldn’t have followed her logic even if he wasn’t high.

“I am.” Jim said cautiously. “We respect you.”

“No, you don’t. I know respect and I know disrespect and this here, what you are doing, is definitely not respect. It is disrespect with a capital D. Dumbass. This is smoking crack in my house.”

“You’re wigging. You’ve got it wrong. Me and Zack have nothing but respect for you and your lovely home. We are having a good time.”
“Then prove it. Give me some of that money. I’ll show you both a good time and you’ll respect me.”

“We respect you without that. I’m paying you for your goods. I’m getting you high. I’m respecting you.”

“No you aren’t. You’re just partying in my house while I’m trying to have a nice quiet evening. Would you do this in your mother’s house? No you wouldn’t, because you respect her. But you have no problem coming over here at three in the morning, sitting on my bed, smoking my drugs. Why? Because you absolutely, positively, don’t respect me. Not a bit. All you got for me is disrespect. Now give me another couple of those bills. I’ll show you what I can do. I’ll make your night.”

“Allrighty then, party’s over. Zack and I will just take our business else where.”

“No you won’t” and she reached under her pillow and pulled out what Zack was sure to be a gun, but –after a second- recognized as a vibrator. But not a normal vibrator. Sara, his girlfriend in college had one. A little smooth red thing, not much bigger than a lipstick case. Kind of cute. But this thing in Tracy’s had looked like an arcade joystick. It had a wide flat base with a plastic penis part attached by a tightly wound metal spring. But still it wasn’t a gun and the drug took this relief and ran with it. He was suddenly so happy that Tracy was holding a vibrator. Which if anything is a tool for pleasure. Completely different universe than gun. Guns bad. Dildos good. Tracy good.

Then she hit a switch and the penis part began to rotate in wide sweeping circle with approximately a six inch diameter. More like a stirrer than a vibrator. Something that would blend her insides. But still much closer to a toy than a gun.

“You want to see me use this? You want to really party?”
“Tracy, I don’t think that is necessary.” Jim said.

“How about I use this on you then.” she said. “How would you like that? Teach you a few things about disrespecting people.”

This was still ok, -Just two people talking. There were no guns anywhere. -but a little instinctual voice way in the back of his brain, said, “Hey Zack, let’s go. Let’s go see Melinda. Get some more crack and scadadle.“

He stood, and Glen stood. He reached for the door, and Glenn reached for the door.

“I’ve got to go.” Zack managed to say

“It’s ok,” Glenn’s teeth seemed to be multiplying as he spoke. “She’s cool. We’re all cool. Let’s just sit down.” Then he turned to Tracy. “Honey? Why don’t you shut the fuck up? They respect you. We’re all friends.”

Everyone could talk but Zack. The paranoia worm grew and began to inch through him.

“Glen, go get me a piece of pizza. Go do something. Just get the fuck out of here. You’re not a man either. A man would have these boys show me some goddamn respect. A man would be bringing this disrespecting shit into my home. Stick me with a room full of faggots.”

“It’s getting late.” Zach said. His voice seemed to be coming from a tape record behind his head. In one quick motion, he ducked under Glen’s outstretched arm. His hand reached the doorknob, but when he pulled Glen leaned into door. “Jim. He is not letting me open the door,” he said. “Please let me out. I need to go see my fiancée.” How could he feel so good towards these people, towards everyone and no one wanted to cooperate
with him. Maybe he should tell them that he’ll come back with Melinda. They would like
Melinda. She could do her Nixon imitation.

“Everybody just calm down.” Jim said. “Tracy, Glen, I think that this party is
over. We’ve had a really nice time, but now we have to be going.”

When Jim stood up, Tracy reached her arm around his neck, placing him in a head
lock. Her fat arm covered the lower half of his face so he couldn’t really talk. She pulled
the rotating dildo up to his head, like a gun, and said, “Don’t make me use this one you.
I’m not afraid. I’ll do this.” Jim eye’s squinted and Zach saw that he was laughing, like,
well, he was on crack. This is why he is my superior, Zach thought. The Glen moved
towards Jim, and Zach made it out door.

In the hall, he turned and saw that Glen was holding Jim’s hands while Tracy tried
to get into Jim’s pockets where the remaining money sat. She had taken her arm from
around his neck and was now trying to pry one hand into his pocket and was using the
other hand to poke him in the gut with the dildo. Jim still had one hand free and was
doing a pretty good job of fighting them both of them off.

Behind Zach, out in the hall, he could hear the small windows she-clicking open
as people were trying to listen or see what the racket was, but no one was coming out to
help.

Jim now begging. The laughter gone. His face pulsing a furious red. Tracy given
up on Jim’s pocket and was on his back. Her arms around his neck. Piggy back style.
Glen moved to shut the door, but Zach’s foot was there and Zach put his body into the
door and started yelling for help. They are trying to capture him and then who knows
what.
“It’s all cool.” Glen face in the partially opened door. “Just go home. This is cool.” Behind him, Tracy riding Jim, reaching around and smacking him across his chest with the dildo, screeching “give me our fucking money. Respect me you fuck.”

“Zack, help me. God dammit, help.”

But hadn’t Zack specifically told Jim that he wanted blow? He had been vocal about not wanting to hang out in a crack den. Was this his fault? Would they even be friends if we didn’t work together? If Jim wasn’t basically his boss, no fucking way would he have gone out with him? And who knows where that dildo’s been? If I go back in there, I’d be getting it all over my suit. What would I say to Melinda? Oh that stringy white slime, that’s just a crack whore’s dildo’s spunk. Wasn’t it bad enough that his new suit was drenched in sweat and smelled like burnt tires? Why should I help him? But luckily Tracy bit Jim on the shoulder before Zach had to make a decision.

It was like Jim was being stung by swarm of bees. Just freaking out. Screaming. Slapping at her. Trying to grab her hair from over his shoulder. Then he ran backwards and rammed her into the wall. Then he did it again and again. She didn’t come of the first time, but finally, with a heavy wheeze, she slumped onto the floor.

Jim and Glen stood face to face. “My father is deputy mayor,” Jim said. “I will have you and your girlfriend in jail by dawn, if we are not safely on the street immediately.”

“The deputy-mayor’s name is Ramero. You aren’t a Ramero, honkey, and you owe us money.”
“I paid for the crack and I got you high. We paid our way. I will bite your fucking cheek off, if you don’t step aside right now. I swear to fucking god.” Tears were forming. Panting. His nose running. Glen stepped aside. This is why he is my definitely superior.

Outside, the streets were wet and the evening fog had cleared. Mission Street was empty except for a bus. Jim wouldn’t slow. Zach was coming down even more. His high was morphing from a Ferrari into a duck. And he asked Jim for the crack. Just get what is left and go home and smoke with Melinda.

“Jim, please give me the rest of the crack.” he asked again.

“Today I signed 7.5 million dollar loan over to a 24 year-old,” Jim said. “The boy wants to buy a house that teeters on a cliff up in Jenner.”

“You can’t smoke any more. We have to sleep.”

“The kid is worth 27 million in some dumb stock, but other than that he doesn’t have a penny to his name. He still has the same credit cards that someone handed him in college. He has about 3 grand worth of credit with Visa and I loaned him 7.5 million dollars.”

“Give me the rest of it. You are going to hurt yourself. You were just bitten by a crack whore.”

“24 years old. A house. What if he loses it? What if he freaks out at the water cooler and gets fired or something? He’s 24. What did we do when we were 24?”

“The same things we do now, grampa.”

“What if he can’t get one of his little programs to work and he throws his computer off the roof of his office building?”
“There are no buildings over 3 stories in Palo Alto. It’s basically a flat, 2 dimensional world.”

Eventually Jim slowed and they were walking side by side.

“That woman bit me.”

“She also slapped you around with that dildo. I’d say she kicked your ass.”

“Check to see if she broke the skin?”

Jim stopped and unbuttoned his shirt, and peeled it back so that his right shoulder and some of his back was exposed. In the shadowy light of the street, Zack could see a few small bit marks along the ridge of Jim’s shoulder. He traced them with his fingers. The skin was intact.

“You’re OK, Rambo.” And Zach patted him on the back. “I’ll be sure that Karen in HR gets your nomination for the Purple Heart first thing Monday morning.”

“The 24 year-old dreams in a language called SQL,” he said. “Structured Query Language. It’s a moronically simply language you use to talk to databases. There are 5 basic commands: Select, Insert, Update, Drop, Empty. That’s it. You either select data from it, insert data into it, update data, drop data or empty data. That’s all you can do. That’s how he thinks and how he became a multimillionaire. You’ve got to see this stupid house. She was like Zorro with that thing. Wasn’t she?”

“You’re Ok, but give me the crack.”

“Dude, you acting like an addict.”

“Jim you were bitten by a crack whore. AIDS, Hepitias B. You should be dead. You don’t need any more.”
To Zack’s amazement, Jim handed it over. It felt like a little bag of feed which you buy at petting zoos. And for the first time, Zach wondered what happened to vials. Was that just on T.V. or just in LA? Maybe baggies were more environmental friendly. Wouldn’t that be so 90’s? Crack dealers who tread lightly on this good earth.

Then Zach walked up to the street about 20 yards, while Jim was buttoning up his shirt. He reached into his blazer pocket and undid the cellophane from a pack of Marlboro’s. He waited until he was sure that Jim was looking at him and he dropped the empty cellophane down a street grate.

“You didn’t just do throw that out did you?” Jim yelled.
“I did.”

“Are we on Planet Earth? Is your name Zack Sinclair. What are you thinking?”

And Jim started toward him.

“I’m thinking I want to go home. And that we shouldn’t be smoking crack. It’s a ghetto drug.”

“We shouldn’t be doing something because we are white.”

“No, because we don’t live in a ghetto.”

“You are going to be after I have you fired. “But he laughed after he said this. And the asked, “Do you want to see the house? I still have the keys from when I went over there with yesterday our insurance guy.”

“No, I should go home.”

“You can call her when we get to the house. You’ve got to see this place. It’s like a mix between the Death Star and Aztec Cliff Dwelling. Its amazing. And trust me, you aren’t going to be able to sleep. Melinda won’t want to see you like this.” Jim was still
covered in sweat and his pupils the size of dimes and Zach feeling dank at that moment, knew he was right. And thought that maybe the two of them could just smoke the rest themselves. Finished it all tonight. Just go for it.

“I have to at least call her.”

But as they walked to the four blocks to the garage where Jim kept his car, they found that their city was deplete of pay phones. Jim said it was because of the cell phone. They are the rodent mammals to the dinosaurs, pay phones, he said.

The only phone they found had its receiver ripped off. Colored wires spilling out of it like weeds.

They bought some more beer and Jim let Zach drive his Saab over the Golden Gate Bridge up through Marin to the sickeningly swervey road of it’s headlands. It was still black out. And cold. Zach could still feel the crack in his system and occasionally there would be little tremors of high-ness. A warmth, like peeing, would swell up in his body as they drove down the empty streets of Tiburon. Yellow street lights blinking rhythmically above. In these rushes, the confidence of his genius would surface. I am a great great person, as is Jim. And a sign of their greatness was that they were going to hang out in a 7.5 million dollar house whose sale Jim was directly responsible for, making it like Jim and Zach were practically owners. But the surging feeling would quickly slide into a chemically vapid paranoia. Clammy and gaseous. I will sneak into the bathroom when we get there. I’d have to share, if I pull it our now. And he’d have to start a fresh beer.

Dawn began burning through the fog as they were coming down the back side of the Headlands. Then it was just straight on Route 1 for nearly an hour. Past Bodega and
Point Reyes. Towns still hung over from the Sixties. Filled with oysters and 58 year old hippies. That Pixies' album played over and over, and they were drinking beers at that point just to keep them awake. Then the sun was up and the land getting greener and greener. A green so endless you could feel it. Your heart filling with the lushness of the damp hills. A green poured on. The ocean to their left, huge, but settled and slowly breathing.

"Over there is Japan." Jim said.

"Do they have crack there?" Zach asked.

"You are an addict."

"I'm kidding. But it really is great, isn't it. Everybody should try this. It is the best drug ever."

"Give it an hour. Have you ever eaten a box of Tide detergent? That's what it will be like. We are going to need tons of Valium to survive this day." But Zach was feeling good again with the sun rising. He couldn't wait to get Melinda high. He'd smoke some of it with Jim. Or maybe all of it and Tracy wouldn't remember about tonight, or last night, whenever and he could go back and get more. But Melinda is going to absolutely love this stuff.

The kid's driveway was a cement square in a cage. A hole in the railing which held cars to the cliff. While they were parking, Zach was conscious for the first time that he shouldn't be driving. The crack had been keeping the alcohol at bay and now all the beers were suddenly upon him. It would have been effortless to just put the Saab in
reverse when he meant first and careen off the cliff. He held his breath until the engine was dead.

The key was actually a card like in fancy hotels. They took an elevator down the cliff to get into the house. The house itself reminded Zack of a glass elevator on the side of a huge hotel, except the here hotel was a sheer cliff. The sun was up in full by the time they stood in the living room, baking the dewy windows dry. Steam rose off the wood deck. Everything was glass. Dizzying just to stand in the middle of the living room.

Zach pulled out the baggy, Jim gasped.

“You are a complete head.” he said. “A full-blown thieving crack head.”

But his happiness on seeing the crack, overrode the fact that Zach has lied and stole from him and, Jim fashioned a pipe from a beer can and they went out onto the deck which hung over a 500 foot drop down into the water and rocks.

Jim saw the first whale. Zach was facing the house, shielding the flame from the wind, when Jim let out a sighed “Fuck.” Zach turned and saw the smooth hump lick the surface about 200 yards out and release a drill of water into the air. Then there was another one. “Mother and baby gray whales heading north for the summer.” he said. “The males came through in March.”

The first time is incredible. A-not-of-this-world-moment. But the 4th, 5th, 6th and so on aren’t bad either.

“Select, Insert, Update, Drop, Empty,” Jim said while Zach was dealing with his hit. He kept repeating this. A mantra. In Zach’s heart of heart, Jim’s a schmuck who works in a bank, like Zach, but he went to Stanford – not some mediocre East Coast
liberal arts joke, like Zach, - and Jim once told Zach that the best thing about partying the
Marina District is that the depression it puts you in, sets you up for the only great sunrise
in San Francisco. He said the neighborhood sucks so badly that you can’t survive a night
there without drinking at least seven martinis. And seven martinis will eventually just
drop you where you are standing and the Marina People are so uptight over there that the
only place they let you stand after seven martinis is in that park where they walk their
dogs, and so you usually wake up in the grass under a beautiful sunrise. It is the only
place in San Francisco that faces the rising sun. But mainly Zach was listening because
he was high as fuck and desperate for anything to mean something.

“Do you get it?” Jim asked. “Select, Insert, Update, Drop, Empty. That is our life.
That is all we do: Select, Insert, Update, Drop, Empty.” He didn’t get it. But Zack felt he
was on to something. “Even the whales.” Jim said. “SIUDE. It the acronym of life.”

When Zach was 11, his father brought him to watch the flooding of the Genesee
River. On evening news helicopters were pulling cows from the water and the next
morning after Sunday mass, Zach and his dad drove to Pittsford a town which the river
was encroaching on. Dad smoked a cigar and played opera the whole way and at the end
of the two hour ride Zack was sick. But when they parked and got out on a small bluff
that stood on the high inside bank of the river, where it was safe, the nauseas subsided.
The river below was moving houses and pieces of buildings, roofs, crappy siding, and
even though the water was dark with mud, you could see boulders rolling down stream.
Big shadowy masses moving on their own volition. The housing and trees were being
pushed by the water, but the boulders took their time. That’s what his thoughts were like
as they sat on the porch of the 7.5 million dollar house. Getting there, slowly but surely, as all the crap was rushing by.

Watching for whales is like watching for shooting stars, only you actually see them. Shooting stars can land anywhere, but whales breath. They must surface for air. Mom and baby whales boiling around out there. A crisp blue water, suddenly slides away as a huge gray lump rises through. Why us? He asked himself again and again. The crack pulsing. His sweat instantly drying under the sun. Why is my life so beautiful? He thought. Crying. Jim got up and just started yelling “SU1DE, SU1DE” at the ocean. Over and over. At which point the pager went off a last time. Vibrating around in there. Like a fly thrown in a toilet. Zach took the pager out and a message coming through: “I’ve given myself to the entire SOIUX Nation. They seem to like me better than you. YOU WILL BE FAT AND BALD. YOU ALWAYS WONT KNOW EVERYTHING. THIS WAS RUDE. IT IS 8AM. I HURT. DON’T EVER COME HOME.

There were no working phone lines. And the pager reminded him of throwing an egg at Halloween in high school. There wasn’t really enough weight to it and his shoulder made a damp crack when he threw it towards a stately tail that was slapping the water just past some breaking waves. But some wind caught it and pulled it back toward the shore as it fell. The dinky black piece of plastic fell lamely into the rocks as the whales kept moving on as they’ve done and will continue doing for millions of years. A cell phone, and we will be able to tell each other everything always.

Jim, now screaming, “Select, Insert, Update, Drop, Empty, empty, empty, empty.”
Does Anyone Know You Are Gong This Way?

Part One

Hungarian Orange

That night she said hi before I sat down.

"Hi," I answered, working my way onto a stool at the end of the bar.

"Are you just coming from work?"

"I am." And she slid some matches across the black top of the bar as I fished around in my coat pocket for some.

"What are you drinking?"

"Just a beer. I guess, a pilsner. Any kind."

"I can do that. Do you need a lemon?"

"Sure." I didn’t usually and I’m pretty sure that no one puts lemons in Pilseners, but she seemed to be suggesting that I did.

She walked down to the beer taps in the middle of the bar. She pulled a frosted glass from the refrigerator and poured a beer. I was at the end of the bar and could see her whole body as she stood there. It was all great and I tried not to stare, but I noticed that she was tapping her right foot to an unheard music. This struck me an unhip thing for a hip, sexy foreigner to do.

When she returned with the beer and a coaster, she told me the beer was on her and then she told me that in Hungary they call lemons oranges.
“These things here.” She held up a slice of lemon. “They are called ‘Magyar Narancs’. It means Hungarian Orange.”

“What do they call oranges?”

“They don’t have oranges. Just lemons. I grew up thinking that lemons are what the rest of the world thought of when they said oranges. The Russians originally promised all the school children oranges and then when they couldn’t deliver, they handed out lemons.”

“Then what were your lemons?”

“I don’t remember. Limes? Maybe apples.” Then she walked away and tallied some things on a pad next to the cash register. I started on my beer and instantly felt better. I felt color rise into my cheeks and the dull ache in my lower back dissipated into nothingness. I was eyeing the pool table, thinking of that it was sort of like jogging, when she looked up from her pad and asked me what I did for a job.

I had gone to the Lone Palm directly from CNET. My plan was to sit at the clean empty bar and drink one beer in solitude. Then I would proceed directly home, eat a salad or boil some asparagus, watch Charlie Rose, sleep, and wake up early to begin my life as a jogger.

I had been hung-over at work and wanting vegetables all day. The night before I had gotten too drunk and into a near fist fight with Cookie. The argument had begun at the Unexamined Life. We were trying to decide whether or not we were in love and then somehow we moved onto whether or not I am a good person. I’m pretty sure that I was for me being a good guy, and that I didn’t say
anything offensive, but at some point she tried—but failed—to kick me in the balls with her cowboy boots. She then grabbed and ripped my shirt. Then, I guess, I pushed her and she fell. Then a bunch of shit heads came up and started telling me to chill out, calling me buddy— as in “Hey buddy, what do you and your faggety-ass leather jacket think you’re doing?—, and asking Cookie if she was ok. Like I was the bad guy, who had been drinking gin all day and tried to kick their boyfriend in the groin. She begged one of them to save her from me, to make it stop. I guess, I pushed someone else and then there was some awkward wrestling between me and a few of them. Then someone fish-hooked me in the mouth until I promised to calm down and go home quietly.

I went to the Lone Palm regularly. It was clean and dark, too dark to read your watch without hitting the glow button, and the bar was more expensive than most of the bars in the Mission. The barkeeps tended to be androgynous, beautiful and mean. Before that night Gisela had served me thousands of beers and for the most part each one was accompanied with a condescending sneer which I read as “You are a harmless, utterly unsexy, hapless dork who would chew off their right arm for the chance to sleep with me. Oh yeah, and I dare you to tip me, pencil dick.”

Someone told me that she was Hungarian. And I had heard people call her Gisela, but other than that I didn’t know her at all. She had dark straight hair tainted with henna. She had bangs and she wore blood lipstick. Her cheeks rose sharply up to brown eyes which were flecked with green. Her skin was a soft Mediterranean brown. She looked like she subsisted on Marlboroug...
Coke. Me and my faggety-ass leather jacket had no business breathing her air.

What did I do for work?

This was San Francisco in 1995. Like everyone, I worked on the Internet. I had moved there with Cookie directly after college with Beatish hopes of working in a liquor store and writing novels. Instead, I became a Producer for a .com. The job title, like much of life, was stolen from the movies, but even now I don’t know how I filled my days. I was supposed to be the organizer of the editorial and the technical people, but both parties knew their jobs better than I did and I had spent most of the time just surfing the web and trying to stay out of everyone’s way. Anyone who showed up in San Francisco during the 1990’s with any artistic aspirations was ruined. There were simply too many jobs. If you could draw a straight line in sand, you were hired on as an Interface Designer. If you had ever taken an English class in college, you were a Content Developer. Anyone who had an AOL account before 1994 could hire themselves out an Internet Consultant. There were thousands of these job titles that hadn’t existed before 1993 and none of them meant anything. People had quickly learned that if they could keep the buzzwords constantly changing, the people over 30 would be thinking that we knew something that they were too old to learn. Portal. Goofering. Netizen. Push Technology. Hypertext. Just dumb-ass fluff jargon created by 23 year-olds to make it seem like they had ideas that the people who actually had money didn’t. It wasn’t even true geek speak, just middle-brow nonsense. But nonsense that paid well. I was given stock options when they went public. On day one the price went up 600%. On day two it dropped 50%- which to
us felt like it dropped 300%. On day three it went up another 200 and it hasn’t stopped since. Unfortunately, I needed to stay with the company for at least one year in order to cash in.

"It is an ok job," I told Gisela. "My mom likes it. She likes telling her friends I work for a company that everyone has heard of. She likes telling her friends that one of our generational gaps is the difference in the meaning of the acronym V C. For her it means, Viet Cong."

"Will you quit this job that your mom likes?"

"I don’t know I don’t like the job, but I do like money."

"What if you didn’t need money?"

"But I do." Who doesn’t get used to making money?

"In Hungary you don’t." she said. "Everything is cheap there. This beer here." She pointed to my glass. "50 cents in American money. Food, apartments, everything is cheap. With five thousand dollars, you could live for a year. They even have real oranges now."

"Real oranges. Get me on the plane." And I almost pointed out that this beer here was free.

"Do not joke. You would like it there very much. Very beautiful. Cheap and the women are very beautiful."

"Are you from there?" I asked, blushing as I realized the logic train it might seem I was riding on.

"Yes, I left seven years ago." She didn’t seem fazed. "But I’m actually returning in two days for a visit."
"Why?"

"To get my son," she said blankly.

"What's he doing over there?"

"I don't know, I haven't seen him since a few days after he was born."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm not. I'm going over there to get him back."

Then she asked my name and asked if I wanted to know how she got to San Francisco. I made a quick attempt to itemize all the better things I had to do, and there were none.

"It is a very sad story, Zach," she said.

I just nodded contemplatively like I was down sadness and made some throat noises but inside my stomach flittered from hearing her say my name.

"My father was a bad man," she said. "He left my mother when we were still little children. My mother had no one. She had no money. She had no family. In order to get money, she had to do very unpleasant things. Things that would make anyone crazy."

"Like what?"

"Like sex with strangers for money"

I furrowed my brow, still nodding moronically, trying to look sincerely sympathetic, but I was beginning to wish her and her shitty life away from me.

"Anyway, my mother cracked up. And we were taken away from her after she tried to drown my youngest bother Akos in a public fountain. We went to a Catholic orphanage run by nuns. Two of them used to make me watch as they
touched one another.”

“Nuns?” Having been brought up Catholic and this was something I wanted to be true but new in my heart wasn’t.

“You don’t believe this?”

“Why would they want you to watch?”

“They were nuns. Freaks,” she said.

Who’s the freak? I thought.

“Anyway, when I was 15 a man got me pregnant. And I was forced to give my son up. Then in the 1988 I selected to go on a exchange program to Cleveland for the summer. Cultural exchange with high school students in Cleveland. As soon as we landed, I ran away. Originally to Chicago, but eventually I made it here.”

“That’s not so sad. Actually, that is sort of a happy ending.”

“I don’t know where my mother, my son, or father or any of my brothers are. I don’t know if they are alive. I was raped when I was 15.”

“Well not perfect, but you seem ok. Today you seem all right.” I took another sip of the beer, conscious not to greedily chug it, and slowly set the pint glass down on the bar. I picked up my cigarettes and offered them forward to her. She burst out laughing, a fake laugh, an in between laugh.

“Cigarettes for the traumatized,” she said. “No, thank you. I’ve already tried self-help groups.” She stood back for the bar so that she could catch her breath. “I got a letter from my brother Gyula last month,” she finally said. “It was the first I had heard of him. He is now a grown-up and didn’t say exactly what he
does, but he lives in Budapest and I am going to see him. He says that we can find my son.’’

I wished her luck and she didn’t respond. We sat in a bulky silence. She seemed to have lost her humor and get caught up in an internal emotion. Shameful of her jadedness the moment prior. It was embarrassing to witness. She started nodding and told me that I was a nice guy and then turned away.

She left me alone for the rest of the evening, but kept depositing a beer in front of me every time I was about to finish one. I thought that as long as I was just drinking beer I would still be in ok shape tomorrow morning to begin my life as a jogger. And just when I was drunk enough that I thought I had something intelligent to say about her life, I caught myself, dropped a twenty on the bar and went home.

*****

Whoopsy Daisy

Teddy’s door was closed when I walked into our apartment, but I could hear him in there with a girl. They were laughing. The girl’s voice sounded familiar, but wasted. She was shrieking, feigning attack, saying “Don’t, don’t, get off, me,” until she made a little whoa and there was a pause and then there was the sound of her hitting the floor. It sounded like she fell from Teddy’s bed. She thumped softly. It didn’t sound like it hurt. It sounded like she fell with drunken disregard for the wooden floor that she landed on. Then Teddy said, “Whoopsy Daisy” and started laughing. Then she started laughing. “You’re a jerk,” she said. Then he said, “Hey! Watch the language, cunt.”
Then he said, "Hey! Watch the language, cunt."

Teddy Lavery gets laid. He is a completely different species than me. His universe just has thousands more women in it who love to have sex than mine does. He’s handsome and kind of fun in a completely asshole-ish way, but he also has that Fucking-Me-is-a-Great-Idea Glow. That Mick Jagger thing. So the rough love going on in his bedroom didn’t really faze me.

People who know us, ask why we are friends. I don’t really have an answer other than you should have seen him when he was young. He was an exciting teenager to be around. Most of us were pimpled, poorly-dressed, graceless losers, but he was one of those kids who made a much more attractive teenager than he does an adult. He was that kid in your high school who broke the French teacher’s heart. He was that kid who got the French teacher pregnant, got her fired, got her to leave her marriage and move into a condo with him, and then took her heart and smashed it into little pieces. He’s still riding on that raw ability, fucked-up charm. The ability to say, “Ok, this is life right now. Let’s make it happen. I don’t care about tomorrow. Let’s just be huge this very minute.” Even if he uses that ability wrongly, even if he is going to end up lonely and disease-riddled, I still see him as a glowing, raging 17 year-old. Someone who could do what the rest of us couldn’t, who could make a minute this sizzling, golden thing. I appreciated him then for letting me be friends with him back then, and it seems wrong to ignore him now just because that stuff seems childish. So we are roommates and, for lack of any competition, he is my best friend.

There were no messages on the machine. I was tempted but decided
against calling Cookie and telling her about my evening of free beers with the attractive but damaged Hungarian. I took my coat off, hung it on a hook and walked slowly and quietly past his door.

The beers left me full and slightly chilly and I was exhausted from the night before, but I was still feeling generous and calm after Gisela chatted me up.

The kitchen was dark. I felt around on the cool smooth wall for the switch. I found it and flipped the light on. The kitchen looked to be in good shape. Clean and orderly. A half-empty bottle of vodka sat on the table. There were no dishes in the sink. Cabinets were closed. I went for the fridge, hoping that the beer that was in there when I left was still there. I was thinking about drinking the rest of it and watching Charlie Rose interview Sting. There were three Rolling Rocks, just where I left them. I snagged one, twisted it open and sat down at the table. The show didn’t start for another 15 minutes. While I was drinking, Teddy walked out of his room. He was naked. His dick was hanging there, still a little stretched out from sex, still wearing a light blue condom. His cheeks were flushed and his lips red and full. This is how he looks after basketball, I thought. I also noticed his big penis. I know that other guys’ dicks always look bigger, but his really is huge. It’s about the size of a baby’s arm. And he loves it. He stood in the doorway, wiggled it a little. The condom looked like blue snot. It reminded me of the Muppet’ Gonzo’s nose. He came into the kitchen and grabbed a beer from the fridge.

“Hey,” he said.

“If you’re not sure, I can’t imagine you just showed up here,” I said.

“Hey,” I said.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Pretty sure I live here.”
“But why are you home? Where’s Cookie?”

“I’m home because I’m tired and I don’t know or care where Cookie is.”

“Really?” he asked.

“Yeah, really,” I said. I had told him we broke up. I had told him that morning about Cookie not wanting to get in the cab and about ripping my shirt and the asshole putting his finger in my mouth.

“Right, I just wanted to make sure.”

“Make sure of what?”

“That you guys had broken up.”

“Yeah, we’re broken up! I don’t care if I ever see her again,” I said.

“Ok, ok. Chill out, Rambo. I was just checking.”

He took a slug from his beer and scratched himself.

“Will you put something on?” I asked.

He sat down. He picked up the sports page from the table and draped it over his groin. Then he asked for a cigarette. I pulled two out and we started smoking. I was reading the part of the paper that he wasn’t wearing and he was just sitting there. After I finished an article about O.J., I looked up and asked who was in his room.

“Cookie,” he said. “I just fucked her.”

“I did not hear that,” I said.

“Is there a problem with the acoustics? I could call Russ.” Russ was our Chinese landlord.

“Seriously?”
“Seriously,” he said. “She came over tonight looking for you and you weren’t here and we started talking and then we started drinking and then ka-boom, the thigh slapping commenced. But as you’ll notice, I wore a condom. So don’t sweat it, if you want to get back together with her.”

“This is not happening.”

“You said you dumped her. You said you don’t care about her.”

“Teddy, we broke up less than 24 hours ago.”

“Hey, it’s the 80’s.”

“No it’s not. It’s the 90’s.”

“Well, let’s pretend,” he said.

Then his door opened and Cookie walked out into the hall. She was naked too.

Cookie is no Gisela, but she has a great body, especially her ass. Her ass actually looks as good naked as it does in a mini skirt or a pair of Levi’s. Her ass makes you think that you could live off doggy style alone. But standing there in the hall she looked really pale, almost translucent. And her paleness was amplified by her lips. It looked like she had just re-applied her lipstick before coming out. For a second, her face looked stabbed, like Teddy had done something to her. Everyone was naked except me.

When she saw me, she tried to cover herself for a second, but then let her hands drop back to her sides and she started laughing. A hearty, patronizing, oh-look-who’s-here. But her laughing turned into hiccups. And she lifted her right arm in order to use the wall to hold herself up.

“Hi Cookie,” Teddy said. “How you doing, baby?”
She straightened herself and told him to shut his fat mouth. Then she continued down the hall toward us.

“You,” she was pointing at me. “You aren’t supposed to be here.”

“This isn’t happening,” I said to Teddy. “This is not going to happen.”

“Hey Cookie, you want some more vodka?” he asked her. “You want a little drink drink?” Holding up the bottle of vodka.

“You,” she started toward me again, but lost track of her thought and some spittle on her lower lip caught her attention and when she wiped it off, she smeared her new lips stick across her forearm. I had been going out with her on and off for four years and had never seen her this drunk. This was only the third time I had ever seen her out of control. The first was two years before when we had the scene in Kappa Alpha. The second was last night with the shitheads. Teddy looked at me and smiled.

“She’s a doll,” he said.

“Get her out.”

She stumbled forward into the bright lights of the kitchen.

“You aren’t supposed to be here,” she informed me.

“Get her out,” I said.

“You,” and when she moved forward, pointing at me, she slipped on some water that I had tracked in. She went down hard. Her butt squeaked on the linoleum. There was a lull while we were trying to figure if she was hurt, but then she started to cracked up. “You are an asshole,” she said looking up at me. “The hole of an ass. An asshole.” Her legs splayed across the floor. She looked like a broken manikin, but she looked really clean under the bright light and I felt a rush of pride that she wasn’t turning me on.
“This is pleasant,” I said to Teddy.

“Hi Cookie poo. Hey baby,” he said.

“Teddy are we friends? Is this happening? Get her the fuck out of here. I don’t want to see her face.”

“Hey, I bet she’d sleep with both of us. Huh, Cookie, want to double your pleasure?”

“Teddy, shut the fuck up. And get her out.”

“What?” he asked. “What is your problem?”

“My problem is that last night my girlfriend tried to have me beat up by strangers and tonight she’s naked and wasted on my kitchen floor after having sleepy with you, my best friend. She is ruining my evening and my life. I don’t want to see her. I don’t want to ever see her again.”

Then Teddy got up. The newspaper clung to the sticky condom. He crumbled and balled it up around his crotch, pulling off the prophylactic as he did so. He walked over to the kitchen sink. He opened the cabinet beneath it. He tossed the sports page-slash-condom in the wastepaper basket and pulled a brown paper grocery bag out of the pile of them which we kept for things not at all like what was about to happen. He snapped the bag open and put his arm into it and smoothed the crinkles, like the kids at Safeway. Then he walked across the kitchen and put the bag over her head. Just slipped it on. It took her a second to react- but she was soon shaking, like a dog at a Nerf football- trying to dry off. I don’t know why she didn’t try to use her hands, but after another second, she exhausted her drunk self and fell backwards. Her head bounced inside the bag. She went quiet, unconscious.
“Viola. No more Cookie,” he said.

“Take it off.” But I couldn’t help myself and I laughed a little through my nose. I guess I snickered. Or sniggered. Is there a difference?

“Fuck that dude.” he said. “Isn’t this the girl who tried to have you beat up last night and then fucked your best friend? Fuck her. You shouldn’t have to look at her.”

“Teddy, take the bag off her head.”

“First let me take a picture. If she wakes up and has any ideas about having you hurt, we can send it to her mom. Or her boss.”

Pictures of anything that you do after nine PM are generally a bad idea, but I had never done something like this before and it was beginning to register that it probably wasn’t the kind of thing that would occur regularly in my life, so why not? I could already see that I would some day, when I had out grown these kinds of people, confess this experience with heartfelt regret. Maybe to my wife. And before I knew it, he had a disposable camera that he had stolen from a wedding he had attended a few weeks before and was snapping pictures.

“Smile honey. Let’s see those pearly whites! Pretend you don’t have a bag over your head.”

We were both laughing. Not really at Cookie. We had gone to expensive colleges. I have a subscription to Harpers. We were just cracking up at everything.

“She looks pretty well-done on that side. Maybe we should flip her.” he said.

He grabbed a spatula with his free hand and held it out like a sword, trying to get it under her incredible ass. Pretending like she was a burger and he was going to flip her.
“Hey take a picture of us at the barbecue.” He handed me the camera. At that moment, it felt like Teddy had kind of left me. He was completely going for it. Dancing around with his big penis. Poking her with the spatula. “This one is going in the yearbook,” he said. It was thrilling.

I took a few pictures, but a little voice in the back of my head said, “Don’t get them both in the picture.” Then something strangled the owner of that little voice and I heard myself ask, “How is her mom going to know that it is Cookie, if she has the bag over her head?”

“Always thinking, aren’t you?” he said.

He leaned down and carefully tugged the bag off her head. She looked ok. She just looked like she was in a deep sleep. Tuckered out. I snapped a few shots.

“How do you like your meat?”

“Medium-well,” I said.

“Any condiments?”

“Nothing special. Salt. Pepper. Some ketchup, but no mustard.”

He grabbed both shakers from the top of the fridge and began to salt her. Then he loosened the top of the peppershaker and dumped the whole thing on her stomach.

“Oh fuck, who did that?” He was in hysterics. “Who loosened the top of the peppershaker? I’m going to kill someone.” He was howling. Just gone.

Then her eyes opened and she looked directly at me. I stopped laughing. She looked wide-awake. Soberish. Her eyes seemed to say, “Don’t you have a mother? I will someday be someone’s mother. What if this had been done to your mother?” But just as she was going to speak, they closed again. That was that.
“Teddy, stop,” I said. He hadn’t seemed to notice her eyes.

“I haven’t gotten to the ketchup yet. You want some ketchup, don’t you?”

“Teddy, don’t.”

The ketchup was stuck. He was slamming it with the palm of his hand.

“Slow and easy.” Then it started to glumb, glumb out of the bottle onto her belly.

He moved up and down the length of her body, slowing down for each breast and her crotch. She stirred, not opening her eyes, but her body tensed from the cold ketchup and she rolled over onto her stomach. Her terrific ass like a great big welcome mat. He poured some on that.

“She wants to get spanked.”

“I’m out of here,” I said. “We just did a bad thing. This is the kind of thing that ruins people.”

“Hasn’t she made a go at ruining you?”

“No Teddy, she hasn’t. Not like this.”

I stepped over her and walked back down the hall, out the front door.

“Dude, come back.”

******

Do you want to go to Budapest?

I needed a drink or to run into someone I respected. The Mission was quiet for a Friday night. An evening fog had rolled in. Little herds of people walked from restaurant to bar to bar. Taxis unloading Marina people who were slumming it in the Mission for the night. For a few hours every weekend, the Mission became a satellite of the Marina. The streetlights were haloed in the mist. I headed back to the Lone Palm.
It wasn’t crowded, and my seat at the end of the bar was still empty, but
everybody was smashed, and it was too late to catch-up. Gisela seemed to have her hands
full with a homeless guy who had gotten in and was telling her that the bar needs more
houseplants. But then he realized that he wasn’t in a house and started saying that the
place needed more barplants and then he went onto a riff about bars growing on trees.

All the men in the bar mildly resembled the shithead who put his finger in my
mouth the night before. I didn’t see anyone worth confiding in.

Gisela smiled when I ordered another beer, and she asked if I had missed her, but
I could tell that she was thinking that it was creepy that I came back.

As I drank the beer, my chest balled up and I came close to crying. I felt
hyperventil-ish. Leaving Cookie there with Teddy was the kind of thing that I would let
ruin me, not her sleeping with my best friend. The fucking-Your-Best-Friend thing you
can even wear like a badge. Use it for some sympathy sex. But the bag over her head
would keep me up at night. I would be thinking about it in ten years as I could hear my
children in the backyard playing in the leaves, I would be thinking about the time I left a
girl unconscious with a paper bag over her head. I would never tell this to my wife.

I ordered a shot of bourbon. Gisela again didn’t charge. Which relaxed me some,
but I couldn’t get drunk enough to deal with what was probably going on in my kitchen.
I couldn’t go back there sober, but I was embarrassed about Gisela thinking that I was
getting too friendly. I needed to drink tons or go for a long walk.

I watched her working the bar and tried to picture her with a bag over her head on
my kitchen floor and couldn’t. She was too taut. Her little black tee shirt revealed a tight,
strong tummy, and women with bellies like that don’t get drunk. They are not victims.
Then I tried to picture someone doing that to my sister, Maggie. It sounds stereotypical, but I thought I would kill that someone. I would bite their cheeks off. I would have them picking their teeth off the floor with broken fingers. Then I envisioned my Grandma Molly in the same predicament. Only in my mental black and white snapshot, she was a young girl dressed in one of those old-fashioned full-piece bathing suits that cover everything. There was a ferris wheel behind her. Coney Island. Her stance was forward. She was proud. She didn’t even seem to notice the bag. I could deal with young-Grandma more easily than with Maggie. Then for a brief instant, I tried to picture my girlfriend, but duh, dumbass, Cookie is your girlfriend.

While I was thinking all this stuff Gisela stopped filling an order and walked down the galleyway. I was gazing at her, but not really conscious of it until she was directly in front of me and then I was suddenly embarrassed.

“Will you come with me to Budapest?” she asked.

I shrugged and looked down at my beer, nodding, like I was casually thinking about it, like this was all about par for me. These were the types of things beautiful women say to me everyday.

“Why do you want me to come?” I finally said.

She thought about it and laughed. “Because none of my present boyfriends would want to come to get my son. No offense, but you look like you would do anything I asked.”

“That’s persuasive,” I said.

“I don’t mean you look stupid, you just look nice. Like a nice guy.”

“Ouch.”
“You look like a nice guy who needs a vacation.”

Then I told her I was broke—which was a gross lie since banks could loan me money fast enough—but that I really appreciated her asking. She left me alone for the rest of the night except to occasionally drop off another beer. When I was getting up to leave, she handed me a napkin that with a phone number on it and the words: “Olyan Itszu Mint ez Csirke.”

“I leave in two days,” she said. “I wish you’d come. Your mother could tell her friends you went to Hungary with a beautiful stranger.”

When I got home, they were back in Teddy’s room. There was still some pepper on the floor sprinkled around the floor like baby mouse droppings, but someone had cleaned up the ketchup. I was still pretty awake. The beer and the damp evening air left me chilly inside. I got under the covers and held my breath, shivering. I couldn’t really get my mind around what had happened. Teddy definitely overdid it. And Cookie and I would no longer be on speaking terms. But this didn’t really feel bad. It was more that my life had become kind of silly A job that my mom liked. A girlfriend that my mom liked. That wasn’t happiness. I needed to cut off some of the fat. Maybe get out of SF. Maybe write that book. I just needed some change. I didn’t need to go across the world to find some sexy bartender’s kid, but my life could do without Mr. Big Dick and his new honey, Zach’s Slutty ex-Girlfriend. These felt like thoughts that mattered, like I was getting somewhere. Suddenly it was decided: tomorrow I quit my fancy Internet job and begin apartment and girlfriend shopping, buy a typewriter, jog.
I started to and then stopped myself from setting the alarm clock. I put my hand down my boxers and rubbed, but I couldn’t get anything to happen. I tried to read but I kept getting distracted by the loneliest sound of someone rooting around in the dumpster below my window. Eventually I passed out with the book on my chest. Somewhere in the middle of the night, I woke and turned off my bedside lamp.

*****

The Freaking Swim Team and Out of Control #1

Cookie Murphy and I first started dating my sophomore year at St. Lawrence. She was my mother’s wet dream. From an Irish catholic family, the youngest of 6 kids. She was lovely. Pale without looking anemic; still she was always unnecessarily pinching her cheeks to make them flush, like an old lady. At first, it was endearing. She had clear blue eyes. A shit load of red hair that piled and spilled in every direction. And she was smart; a pre-med major with a minor in everything else. Always on little committees, always joining teams. Just miles out of my league. We all knew it, even my mother seemed a little surprised when I introduced Cookie. I could see it in my mom’s eyes: What is this classy young woman doing with my son, the twerp?

She wasn’t my first girlfriend, but she was the first girl I dated who didn’t seem to be the result of a completely random, drunken evening. We were in a Modernist’s class together. Usually she was quiet, but the few times that she did speak she demonstrated a humbling maturity. She seemed too clued into the tragic aspect of Hemmingway and Fitzgerald while the rest of us were day dreaming about how to live their lives.

The first time we ever talked was in the campus coffee shop the night before a paper was due. We got along. Nothing special. I bitched about how many pages I still
needed to write. She said kind of flatly that it was a difficult paper. It didn’t seem like anything at all, but a few days later we ran into each other in the library. The day had been nothing but hard rain stripping the colorful fall leaves from the trees and she was checking out *Casablanca* at the front desk. She asked me if I wanted to watch it with her in one of the private viewing rooms.

For most of the movie, I thinking about touching her and whether she liked Laszlo or Rick better. I figured I had a better chance if she was into Laszlo. At the time, I believed I had calm soothing eyes that hid a torrent personality. When the movie was over, I explained to her that *Casablanca* was a thinly disguised metaphor for the American White House during the beginning of World War 2. Michael Curtiz, the director, meant for the movie to be a commentary on how the US was sympathizing with the Nazis by not entering the war.

“That sounds like a thinly disguised way of saying absolutely nothing at all because you are nervous and you want to kiss me,” she said. The room was warm and dry and with the movie over, perfectly dark, a big womb. She was touching me for a few seconds before I realized it.

I guess the weird sex started because I was drinking a lot. Not like a drunk, just college stuff. I had an easy class load and went out constantly. I was into Cookie, but somehow as soon as you get a girlfriend, you need to go out relentlessly as a way confirming that you are not totally whipped. My friend Max and I closed down Al & Vic’s nearly every night. Cookie drank, but not every night. And she didn’t seem to mind that I drank. I think she liked having evenings to herself for school work. (Or at least that’s what I told myself then.) So after 18 beers at Al & Vic’s I would stumble over to
her dorm room and drop myself off on her doorstep. I would pause in the brightly lit hall, and there’d be some geeky girls herded in front of the common room TV, watching *Cheers* re-runs, and me out of the corner of their eyes. I’d knock lightly, showing some of them manners, that I was a nice, harmless drunk. Cookie would be sleeping, but she’d smile when she opened the door and give me a little hug after she letting me in, pretending like I had just gotten home from a day at the office. Then we would slip into bed and fool around. Like I said, I was drunk for most of it, but the sex did seem pretty great. She was a knock-out. She was also strong. I distinctly remember her swimmer’s thighs. I was always really surprised at how she would kind of grip me and fuck me back. Before Cookie and many times after, a girl would be looking at me the whole time, pausing, trying to look me in the eye. Somehow share the moment, which inevitable ruined the moment. It seemed dishonest. My feeling has always been that when two people are in the middle of sex, no matter who they are with, they are not thinking about anyone but themselves. Sex with Cookie was the first time that I could remember the sex feeling real. Like I was having sex with another adult who wanted to be having sex, just get off, have a great time.

Anyway, one night about a month after the *Casablanca*, she stopped me when I was trying to have sex with her because we didn’t have any condoms. I wasn’t a huge fan of babies either, so I didn’t really mind. We just kept fooling around and around. It went on for about an hour. Just as one of us was about to fall asleep, the other would start kissing and licking and what-not, until on finally, I had to have sex. I got up on top and was kind of easing it in a little at a time, until she stopped me. Then I aimed it lower and was hoping I could just get off by rubbing it up against the inside of her thigh and butt
cheek, but then suddenly I was in her ass. I swear I didn’t mean to be there. Honestly, it hadn’t even entered my mind, but there I was, right inside there. I emptied myself in about a millisecond and quickly yanked it out. Our eyes had adjusted to the dark by now, and I could see that her eyes were shut. She didn’t look to be in total pain. I held myself over her for a nearly a minute, not really sure what to do, but soon my arms got tired and I rolled over onto my side of the bed and I guess we both went to sleep.

The next night I came home even drunker and fucked her in the ass again. Pretty soon we stopped doing anything else. This went on for nearly two weeks. I stopped buying condoms all together. But oddly, not once did we actually speak about the fact that we were doing this. I thought that asking women if they enjoyed sex sounded cheesy, like if there was ever a rated R version of the Love Boat that is what Gofer would do, and Cookie never voiced an opinion one way or another. It just kind of happened. I don’t know. College? She had class early in the morning and would usually be gone by the time I woke up. We would have lunch or coffee in the afternoon at the school café and we’d just pretend like everything was hunky dory: ‘No ass fucking here. No way. Not us two.’ And then that night, I would come over and throw it in there again. What was so weird about it was that I don’t think either of us liked it. It felt ok me, obviously different, but no complaints. It was much more like masturbating than regular sex, just something I wanted to do but would feel horrifically guilty about seconds afterwards. And I’m pretty sure she wasn’t into it. For regular sex, she was loud and she moved around a lot and kind of clung to me, but when I put it in her ass, she just froze up. Like someone had grabbed her with the Vulcan death grip. She’d go rigamortis, and I’d cum instantly. The blink of an eye.
This went on and on until one night I got there and she wouldn’t let me in. I knocked on the door. I whispered for a while and then, in my daylight voice, I told her to let me in. I didn’t get a response and the geeky girls were plopped in front of the TV, so I left.

That day I skipped lunch. Then I skipped going over to her place after the bar. As a matter of fact, I went to this girl Josey’s place. Waking up in Josey’s bed, seemed like a clean break from Cookie. And once I had done that, it became very apparent to me that Cookie and I had no business going out in the first place. We weren’t even from the same planet. She never went to the bar. She was on the freaking swim team. We were just two complete strangers having anal sex.

*****

Help Group
Also while in college, I mowed my math professor’s wimpy lawn for $30 bucks a pop. He asked me if I needed a job after he failed me in calculus. I didn’t hold the F against him. I had failed solidly. I had failed the mid-term. The final. Most of the quizzes. My project on Fibonacci’s sequence. The big question that made Fibonacci famous was: *A pair of rabbits are put in a field and, if rabbits take a month to become mature and then produce a new pair every month after that, how many pairs will there be in twelve months time?* The correct answer is 257. My answer was: 79. I deserved to fail and Professor Klimmer failed me. I think he gave me the job, because he wanted to show me that it was nothing personal, that he could be friends with someone who sucked at math. I appreciated the offer and took the job. On the first day that I was supposed to mow the lawn, I arrived at 8 am sharp. Math professors sound like early risers and I thought that
this would impress him. It didn’t. Minutes after I fired up the mower, he rushed out of the house in his bathrobe. Hopping barefoot through the dewy grass. He said that he had been on this earth for over 60 years, and nothing in this world had ever happened before noon that was worth waking up for. Go home.

Now, I usually follow his advice. If I don’t have to be at my job, I don’t make it out of the sack before the Matlock re-runs at eleven. But the morning after putting Cookie’ head in a bag, I woke up pretty early even though I knew I was going to be skipping work. Probably around seven. Teddy’s door was closed and I tried to be quiet as I snuck past. I hoped that they would wake up and not know I was gone and spend the whole morning whispering for no reason at all.

Once outside, I walked over to Que Tal and got a latte and the SF Guardian. Then I walked down Valencia St. to Delores Park. A gaggle of mothers was playing with a gaggle of babies by the playground. Although it was April and we were in California, some of the moms had their kids dressed up in winter coats. Colorful little hoods and mittens. Some of the moms were trying to teach their colorful children how to walk. They were holding the children up with their arms over their heads. Walking them along mummy-style.

A few kids could walk and even run pretty well. They looked like they should have been in kindergarten. I imagined that they probably did kindergarten in the afternoon. I have always wondered if it was me or do we never meet those kids in the other kindergarten. I had gone to morning kindergarten. No one I ever meet or knew did afternoon kindergarten. I imagined a whole dual universe of afternoon kindergartners
who for some reason never intersected into my life. But here was a whole park full of them.

Then one of the children started to wobble toward me. I smiled at it, but hoped that it would head back to the pack. I couldn’t tell if it was a boy or girl. It had long hair and its clothes were really just pajamas. Purple and green with elastic binding into one single piece. None of the mothers seemed to notice that it had strayed away. I felt nervous, as it was getting closer. Little kids always make me feel pervy. I like watching them and I would never touch one, but I just feel that to their parents, I must look exactly like the kind of creep who would steal their kids and do unspeakable things to them. And once you’re suspected of something, you have to wonder if you could have possible done it. I took off my sunglasses and put my hand through my hair, parting it to the right.

It was getting closer and I started to point back to the moms.

“Hey, where you going? Go back there,” I said. But it just kept coming.

“Hey. Hey,” I kind of yelled to the moms. But it wasn’t really loud enough for them to hear.

I pointed some more and the baby took notice. It turned around to see where I was pointing, but it couldn’t imagine that I was trying to make it see the moms and looked back at me quizzically.

“Over there. Go back to your mom. Get away from me.”

Before she looked back a pigeon landed between me and the moms, and when the baby turned around again to see what I was pointing at, it saw the pigeon and let out a squeal. It turned back to me and clapped. Then it wobbled over to the bird and grabbed it with both hands by the neck. The bird started squawking and wildly flapping its wings,
but the baby had it good. It was holding the bird over its head, squealing with glee. An
impossible thing, an unfeasible thing, this isn’t happening, I said to myself. This baby
was doing something completely impossible by simply doing it, by simple going for it.

All the moms took notice at once. One ran for the baby.

“Alex, Alex, put that filthy bird down,” she screamed. “Alex let go of the bird.”
The pigeon flopped around disorientated for a second, then found itself and dashed left,
only to quickly roundabout in the other direction and soar away, lifting itself up above the
Mission High School towards Bernal Heights.

Alex waved at the pigeon with its fingers spread wide open. Laughing. Making
baby squeals. Then Cookie appeared in front of me. She came around from behind the
bench that I was sitting on. She must have seen Alex pick up the pigeon. But her
expression didn’t reveal astonishment. More like bored fury. She had all of her clothes
on. Her mouth was closed tightly. Her eyes were still full of sleep, but her hair was
combed and she didn’t look like someone who had spent a portion of the night before
passed-out cold on someone’s kitchen floor and covered in hamburger condiments.

“Hey,” I said.

“Como esta, Asswipe,” she said.

She lived in a loft in the opposite direction, down on 14th so I assumed that she
was there looking for me.

“We need to talk,” she said.

“Did you just see what that baby did?”

“Have you had breakfast?” she asked.
I held up my latte. And asked again, “Did you see that little kid pick up that pigeon?”

“Yeah, I saw it. Baby grabbed a bird. B.F.D. Let’s have breakfast. We can go to YumYum down by my place. I need to stop there to get some cash anyway.”

We walked down 18th across Delores, Guerrero, Valencia, and Mission streets. The morning was beginning to heat up. I wanted to talk about Alex, and thought I could segue into it by asking Cookie why she wasn’t at work.

“Because I stayed out a little late last night.” And she sped up. Basically broke into a march.

“Me too,” I said. She didn’t seem to want to chat, which didn’t particularly bother me, but it seemed to me that I had witnessed something big with Alex. I was going to let Cookie have her moment, maybe even sympathize, but I was looking forward to getting it all out on the table. If that baby could pluck a pigeon of the Delores Park grass, I could deal with a furious Cookie.

Beggars and wanna-be gang members stood on the corners eyeing us down. The gang kids look dangerous and sexy with their sinewy arms and muscle-bound shoulders. They would completely check out Cookie. Head to toe. And then look me straight in the eye as if they were threatening to take her from me. Vendors were selling paletas, a sweet corn on a stick, and batidos, the papaya juice that they prepare while you wait. The electric buses wheezed and hissed down Mission. Always seeming to be on the verge of collapse. Everything was dirty, and the sun was getting heavier as we marched.

One of the gang kids said something to us in Spanish, and all his friends started to cackle.

The kid stopped laughing and looked her in the eyes. He smiled like she should be getting ready for the biggest favor of her life and said, “I said that you are too good for this man. I said, you should be with me. I would treat you right.”

It wasn’t too hard to see this coming and I took over. “Fifteen dollars and she’s yours, man. I’ll give her to you for fifteen dollars.” The Cookie that I knew would have thought that this was funny.

“You take checks, hombre.” he asked. “All I’ve got are checks.”

I looked at Cookie, like I was appraising her, then I turn back to him. “Yeah, what the hell. You look good for it.”

She left the ground when she swung at me. Her fist made a clapping sound when it connected with my eye. It certainly was not a slap. Not a playful love tap, she hit me as hard as she could in the eye. Clouds of yellow plumed in my vision. My ears rang. When I could finally focus, she was half way down the block.

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An entire year went by after Cookie wouldn’t let me into her dorm room. I saw her every once in a while out on the Quad, but only from a distance. She took real classes while I was farting around in English Lit. 201: The American Sit. Com. A whole summer. A fall. We never spoke once, until I walked into the basement of this frat house, Kappa Alpha. The place was shoulder to shoulder douche bags. I didn’t see her, she saw me. She walked over and said hi. I was pretty surprised because I had never seen her at a fraternity before, but I played it cool and I said hi back and everything seemed ok.
Then one of the douche bags asked me for a drag off my cigarette. I said, “Sure,” and gave it to him. He took the cigarette and pretended like he was going to take a drag, but then dropped it on the ground and snubbed it out with his sneaker.

Cookie laughed. The douche bag laughed. A bunch of his friends laughed. I pulled out another cigarette and asked the douche bag if he had a light.

“What?” he asked.

“Do you have a light? Some douche bag just put my cigarette out.”

Cookie laughed. Some of his friends laughed. He didn’t think it was that funny and threw his beer on me. I punched him once- well it was more like an out-of-control slap- and then they were on me.

As they were dragging me outside, I was screaming for them to give me the ‘mediocre’ guy. “Let me have the asshole in the baseball hat.” Swinging wildly. Giddy in the accomplishment of being hated by a roomful of losers.

Outside, I was thrown on the ground and stepped on. I was told to never show my face in their house again.

“Dude, you are just a loser,” someone said. “Why are you always acting like such a jerk-off? When are you going to grow up?”

I didn’t have an answer. I just laid back and waited for them to sca-daddle. The grass was covered with dew. It felt cool against the back of my neck. The stars above seemed to be pushing themselves around, twinkling. The brothers were shadowy nothings. Everything was good. Being physically thrown out of a fraternity party is second only to quitting a job.

Then Cookie asked me if I was alright.
“Oh, hey,” I said. “I didn’t see your there.”

“You were too busy making friends?”

“Yeah, right, I love those guys.”

“Are you sure, you’re ok?” This seemed genuine.

“Yep. I’m just drunk. But thank you. I should just go home.” I closed my eyes and opened them. “What are you up to?” I asked.

“You’re looking at it. I go out about once a month to remind myself of what I’m not missing, but now I’m going home.”

“I could walk you?” And I pushed myself up on my elbows.

“No, it’s ok.”

“Are you sure? I don’t mind.”

“Well, whatever you want. I’m sure I’ll be fine, but if you want to walk with me while I walk home, I won’t stop you.”

“Ok then, let’s go.” The tone of my voice kind of scared me. I sounded happy and pedantic at the same time, like a gym coach or a Christian. But I scooted myself up and brushed off some of the dew and we started down Fennel St. toward her dorm. I asked her how it was going and if she had summer plans. Things were going fine, she said. She had an internship at the Library of Congress for the summer. Then for some reason, I said I was sorry about how things ended up.

“How did things end up?” she asked.

“I don’t know, just not how I planned,” I said. “Just not exactly perfect.”

“Just not exactly perfect?”

“No.”
“You forcing me to do disgusting things with you night after night after night, and then for no reason at all, you just decide to stop talking to me, you just completely ignore me. No note. No phone call. Just completely blowing me off for that Josie skank. That isn’t exactly perfect? What, Zach, what would you possible change to make it perfect?”

“I could have given you crabs?”

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” She was now officially furious.

“It was a joke. I’m just joking. God.”

She had already turned around and was walking back to Kappa Alpha.

“Hey, Beth.” I said. “Wait a second.” I don’t know why. I don’t know a single person named Beth. But out came Beth, instead of Cookie. She stopped.

“You little fucking twit. You idiot scumbag.”

I started toward her and she began running. I followed. I squelched the impulse to tell her that she ran like a girl, but the idea of this impulse existing at all, cracked me up. And I was laughing as I chased her around the back of the house into the basement door of which I had just been thrown out.

The talk and music pretty much fell off a cliff when I ran in.

She had turned around and was waiting for me. “You,” she said. “You are such an asshole.”

“Hey Cookie, where is this coming from?” I said. “Why don’t we just calm down?”

One of the brothers stepped forward and said, “Why don’t you just get out of here, buddy?”
“Why don’t you go fuck yourself?” I said. I could hear my voice crackle. I was losing it. Tears were rising. Blood rushed to my face. My lungs filled with wet tissue paper. They grabbed me again. This time with a few gut shots included and someone let go a punch in my right eye. This time they seemed serious.

“Stop,” she yelled. “Just hold it.” Then she looked at me. She looked drunk. I don’t know how I missed it before, but she looked plastered and mean. Red plumed from her cheeks. Her mouth twisted in anger.

“He is an ass fucker,” she said. “Not to be confused with an ‘ass man’. Zach is an ass fucker. We broke up, because I wouldn’t let him have anal sex with me.”

Some guys laughed. Someone asked her if she needed another drink. Most of the party was looking at me. My knees were giving. Something weird was happening under my armpits. It felt like a bunch of moths were caught in there and trying to escape. (Later, when I got home that night, I found that my armpits had burst into hives, and that there was an icky rash around the rest of my body.) But at the moment, I tried to smile. I shrugged and held out my hands. “What?” I looked at Cookie. “What?”

“Just get out,” she said. “Get away from me.”

I pointed to my head and twirled my finger, like she was crazy. I looked around hoping to see people agreeing with me. Everyone was drunk and it seemed like the main concern was that I had ruined the mood for nearly every possible couple in the building, but I’m sure that secretly the guys were hoping I had planted some seeds of possibility. I took a few steps back, still holding my hands out, then I turn and stumbled into the night.

Months later Cookie approached me at a tailgate party after a lacrosse game and said that she was sorry. I told her I was too. It was a sunny spring day and she was out for
her monthly outing. We just kept running into each other over the course of the day. There were parties all over campus. By the end of the day, we were kind of following each other. Leap-frogging from party to party. Then we were alone on the roof of some frat house together, then that night we were in bed. Although, in the morning, there was some awkwardness, I was really happy. It felt like we had lived through something. We were like old married people who had beat each other up, but we still capable of seeing the good and of caring in the other person. We were larger human beings.

I guess I was also into us getting back together because it somehow turned the rumors about me lukewarm. By noon the day after the ‘ass man’ incident the story had snowballed into something ugly. Stuff about me being queer. Stuff about me not liking regular sex. That I had once thrown-up on a girl while doing it Missionary style. Just exaggerated college shit, but exaggerated college shit that had made it onto other campuses. Friends of mine at UVM said that they had heard the story. Teddy said it was funnier than a cat’s farts, and he made me re-tell the story to his friends whenever I went to visit him. But if people started seeing me walking around with her again, those rumors would seem a little silly.

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I caught up to her on when she cut left at Folsom. She wouldn’t look at me as walked in the shade of California Electric Company. Finally we reached her building.

“Should I come up?”

“I don’t give a shit what you do.”

“I’ll come up.”
She was ahead of me as we walked up the stairs, and when she stopped abruptly about half way up, I ran into her. She turned. “I can not believe what you did to me last night. I just can’t believe it, Zach. I still don’t know what I’m going to do. You are an awful person. What I did was bad, but you are awful person, a criminal.”

Here we go, I thought. “Cookie, let’s just have something to eat. I need to eat something before dealing with you. I’m not saying it was good or bad, actually I take that back. It was bad. Very bad and stupid, but I need something in my stomach before we talk.” She turned back around and continued up.

Her roommate, Phoebe, wasn’t around. Phoebe is one of those people who makes me think I’m wrong about everything. She’s got a great body, but her face is freaky looking. Little kids stare. She basically doesn’t have a chin. It’s like mouth-straight-to-neck. And she has this big hook nose, like a misplaced knuckle. Her teeth? They look like someone just threw them in there. Teddy calls them “Summer Teeth.” Some are here, some are there. I have never seen anything like them. I mean, isn’t this America? Isn’t is illegal not to put braces on your kid?

When Cookie first introduced us last month, I pitied her instantly. I was like “Oh, here’s someone that I will like, but not want to hang around with simple because she is ugly and it bums me out. Here is someone who will always make me feel bad about myself, make me feel guilty because I happen to have a chin.” But I was wrong. Barf-face Phoebe rocks. She’s just cool. Down with everything. The minute she opens her mouth you know your dealing with a superior human being. She has been in San Francisco for about a month and already homeless people say hi to her, bus drivers on Mission St. make special stops for her. She told me my new all-time favorite joke: “Q:
How do you get a dog to stop humping your leg? A: You pick it up and suck its dick.” I don’t know how to explain it, but everything that comes out of her mouth is just right on. I love Phoebe Nettles, but then again I was glad that she wasn’t around, for as cool as she is, she probably would have had to side with Cookie about the bag-over-her-head incident.

Cookie went into her bedroom, and I heard the shower start. I helped myself to a glass of water and collapsed on the couch.

Their apartment was nice like most girls’. Real paintings on the walls which Cookie took out on loan from Four Walls, one of many small galleries that had recently begun to infiltrate the Mission. A bookcase with filled with books whose titles and authors I would try to memorize whenever we were going at it on the couch. The furniture had been repainted in crackled, water-colored pastels. On the coffee table was a remote for the stereo and TV and some coffee-table books. Laying on top of the books was a piece of paper containing a list with people’s names and phone numbers that began with the 212 area code.

When Cookie surfaced from her room, ten minutes later, I asked what the list was about.

“It’s Phoebe’s. It’s a list of people from her group.”

“What group?”

“Her help group.” The first smile I had seen from her in days moved across her mouth.

“Help for what?”

“Sex.”
“I thought she was sleeping with that waiter at the Slanted Door?”

“She is, because she’s a sex addict. That’s why she left New York. That is a list of other people in her group. She must have had the urge last night and needed to talk. People call here all the time when they are in a bind. It is sometimes scary when she isn’t around and they want to talk to me. Yuck.”

“This is a list of sex addicts? And Phoebe Nettles is on here.”

“Manhattan sex addicts.”

I looked at the list. Phoebe’s name wasn’t there. About 3/4ths of the names were male, but still. Addicted to sex. Who isn’t? How could this become a problem?

“Could I borrow this?” I was thinking that Teddy would love it. “Is there a West Coast chapter?”

“No way, Zach. This is serious. It is supposed to be anonymous. I don’t think that Phoebe gave them a real name.”

“What is her old phone number?” I was wondering which name she used.

“No way. Put it down and let’s go.”

“Could we just call one? Let’s just call Kendra Sperry.”

“No! Now come on.”

“Please, Cookie, just one.”

“Put it down!”

“Please.”

“What are you going to say?”
“That I need sex, that I’m tired of getting off by sticking my dick in a jar of warm mayonnaise.” I had heard the mayonnaise thing from Teddy and had been dying to use it out on my own.

“You’re a pig.”

“Oink, oink. Come on it will be fun.”

I dialed the first woman on the list, Martha Walsh. No one was home. Cookie pretended like she was disgusted and went into the kitchen to root around in the fridge. I dialed Kendra.

“Hello,” a woman answered.

“Hi, Kendra.”

She paused. “Yes, this is Kendra, who’s this?”

“It’s Joe. Joe Palinka.” I had taken the name Joseph Palinka from the list.

“Oh, hi Joe. Is everything all right?”

“Um, not really. How are you?”

“Ok, I’ve been really busy which has been good and bad.”

“Right, well I need to get laid right now, you know. I need it.”

“Joe?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you tried the exercises?”

“Yep, all of them. I still need it or I’m going to do something bad.”

“Have you called, Larry?”
“I don’t want to fuck Larry. I want you, Kendra.”

She hung up. I tried back and she hung up again. I felt like I had left myself. Like I was doing something fun and unreal. I was giddy with wickedness. I knew Cookie didn’t approve, hell I didn’t approve, but I had to do this. For some reason prank calling perverts felt so real, so exactly what I should be doing. It was like picking a pigeon up by its neck. I couldn’t help myself. I dialed the next girl, Laura Dart and before it even rang, she picked up.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hi.”

“I need it,” I said. “Laura, I need it so bad. I don’t know what I’m going to do if I can’t get it. Can you help? Please, I need to have sex with you or I’ll die.”

“Sounds great,” she said. “Is right now a good time?”

“Yes, immediately. I need it right now.”

But as I was saying this, I recognized the voice. Cookie had picked up in the other room. She wasn’t even trying to hide her voice.

“Zach?” she said.

“Yeah.”

“Do you understand what is wrong with you?”

“I’m just joking around,” I said.

“Nothing about this is the slightest bit funny. I don’t know what is wrong with you. I don’t know you. You are like an alien from the planet Creepifreakus.”
“Oh and you’re Miss I’m-so-together-I-can-fuck-my-boyfriend’s-best-friend-and-then-wake-up-the-very-next-morning-and-start-pointing-out-every-little-crack-in-his-personality?”

“Zach, that isn’t what I’m saying. I’m by no means perfect. Last night was miles from what I’d like to say is acceptable behavior for myself, but you were a monster and for the past week or so you have been acting like the biggest asshole in the universe. You aren’t like this. This isn’t the sweet boy who bought me flowers on Thomas Jefferson’s birthday. This isn’t the man who makes me macaroni jewelry.”

I had done this stuff. Happily. I’m not opposed to kindness and goodness. I’m a good person, but there is more to being human than being good and I have always felt that the point of life is to be human, not good. “It is.” I said. “I’m that man. But you have just become an incredible uptight, lame-o in the past few weeks.“

“Last night, was me being uptight?”

“I don’t mean uptight, I just mean lame.”

“Weren’t you an English major?”

“Ok, ok, let’s just go get that breakfast. We can continue this conversation after I’ve eaten.”

“What exactly is this conversation? That I’m uptight and you’re a psychotic rapist.”


“Zach, you poured ketchup on me. That is assault or rape or something. They might even have to invent a new law for this.”
"A: I think you are confusing me for your new boyfriend, Teddy. And B: I have some pictures that would probably change your mind, so you might as well stop thinking down that road. If anything comes of this, I will make sure that you are the most popular drunk naked lady on the Internet." I couldn’t really believe I was saying this, but there it was, and with it came a surge of power, a rush of me in command, me making that moment huge.

Which was followed by silence. “Zach...” she started, but then her voice cracked and she began crying. I could hear it both through the phone and in real life coming from the kitchen. Wailing in stereo.

“Cookie,” I said. “Cookie, just calm down. This isn’t that big of a deal. I’m just kidding about the pictures.” Now I wanted out. I wanted out of the apartment and our relationship. I wanted to go back and watch the afternoon kindergartens. “So our relationship didn’t work out. Shit happens. I bet in a week everybody will be friends. Life goes on, you’ll see.”

“I don’t particularly want to just ‘go on.’ I’d like to think that I have some control over it. I’d like to think that my friends are good people. I’d like to this that this isn’t just some sadistic lottery. I’d like to think that I’m living a life I wanted,” she said. “I think I just want this one done with so that I can start over again.”

“This is America,” I said. But I wondered if she had just flown the big suicide flag. “You can do that. You can live any life you want.”

“Is this the life that you want, Zach? Are you living the life you want?”

“I thought we were talking about you?”

“Zach, is this the life that you want? No ethics, no religion, no love, no hope.”
"I have hope."

'No, you don't.'

We sat listening to each other breathe. There wasn't a right or a wrong thing to do. There were many of both. I could have begged for forgiveness, sworn that I wasn't Teddy, that I didn't want to end up alone and full of self-loathing. Told her I understood completely how last night could have happened. I could have told her to get real, to grow the fuck up. There is only one person who matters. Yourself. You are lying or stupid if you think anything different. Last night was a good thing for her to go through, to learn.

Then the recording of a woman telling us that my call did not go through, came on. I dropped the receiver into its dish and walked out of her apartment, down the stairs into the morning sunlight. I needed a burrito and then to get back to the kindergartners.

Most of the children were gone when I got to the park, but there were some elderly Chinese people spread out across the grass, doing T'ai Chi. They were facing me as I walked up. A couple hippies were mixed in. I was tempted to join them, but hadn't I been bad enough that day? I sat on my bench and ate.

I didn't say anything to Teddy when I walked in. He was on the couch watching the Rockets whip Orlando Magic. He barely noticed me as I walked past him into my room. My passport was still in a suit coat which I had worn on the plane when I went to Bali last spring. I threw two white oxfords, a pair of Levis, a pair of kackies and my dob kit in my Grangier sack and wrote a note:

I have gone to Budapest with a bartender from the Lone Palm. Mom, I love you, et. all.
Every minute, every day,
Zach
Once I was back on Valencia, I sprinted toward the Wells Fargo on 16th and emptied my back account of its $2000. The teller didn’t ask what it was for, but I was nervous and I thought I’d engage in some reverse psychology, so while we were waiting for a signature from someone in a back office, I told her that I needed the money to buy drugs.

“It’s going to be some party,” she said.

But if she had asked me if I was withdrawing this money because I had been an accomplice to a horrific crime the night prior, I think I would have said yes.

“Hundreds?” she asked.

“Sure.”

I had never seen Gisela at the Lone Palm before six, and I knew if I went there to wait I would end up drinking. So I took the Bart downtown, booked a room for the night at the Galleria, a place I had always wanted to stay, and hit a matinee at the Plaza theaters.

“My nice guy,” Gisela said when I walked into the bar that night.

I had a ticket on Gisela’s plane to Budapest within ten minutes, six of which I spent on hold, drinking a Pilsner with a stupid lemon wedge in it. The tickets made a slight dent in my credit cards, if I still had at least 8 grand left on the. I didn’t mention to Gisela or Ken, the ticket agent, that the police might be looking for me. I just told her that I’d be at the airport the next day at noon. I would be missing Matlock again, but it was an appointment I kept.

That night I had room service bring me a bacon-cheeseburger. I ate lying across the firm mattress and watching Close Encounters of the Third Kind on pay-per-view. The
Galleria is a nice hotel. The sheets were starched and tucked in tightly. I hadn’t seen the movie since I was a little kid, or maybe I hadn’t ever seen it before at all, but because it’s images are thoroughly seared into my pop-consciousness, like Donny Osmond’s purple socks, I thought that I had seen it. I don’t know, but sitting there eating my burger in room bathed in blue light made me feel like a little kid again, like everything in the world was still possible. When I was 11, my father brought me to watch the flooding of the Genesee River. One the evening news the night before, helicopters were lifting cows from the river and the next morning, after Sunday mass, we drove to Pittsford, a town which the river was encroaching on. He smoked a cigar and played opera the whole way and at the end of the two hour ride I was sick. But when we parked and got out on a small, parking lot that stood on the high inside back of the river, where it was safe, my headache evaporated. The river below us was moving houses and pieces of building and even though the water was dark with mud, you could see boulders rolling down stream. They seemed to move on their own volition. The housing and trees were being pushed by the water, but the boulders seemed to be taking their time. I felt like those rocks as I was sitting in the Galleria, eating a cheeseburger, leaving my job and home. Getting somewhere slowly, at my own pace but surely, as everything else was rushing by.

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Gisela walked in front of me down the sloped tunnel that led out to the plane. She stood straight. Her shoulders back. Her hair was up in scrunchie, giving me a view of her thin neck. She wore tight black pants that rode high above her small black boots. Her ass was compact, but widening at the thighs a little, athletically, like a horse, but in a good way.
When we got to the bottom and started across the tarmac, she turned for an instant and caught my eye. She smiled, then turned back and continued on to the plane. I lost my breath for a second and something dropped in my stomach. This was the feeling I usually got when an attractive women smiled at me, but as we continued walking, I got the uneasy feeling that her smile was not unlike the foot tapping that she was doing two nights before. It was a nice little thing, but not something that seemed natural to her.

We climbed the stairs up to the plane and two stewardesses greeted us. The younger of the two quickly looked past Gisela to see who she was with. She took me in, but I couldn’t read what she was thinking. She just looked me in the eyes and said, “Welcome to KLM.”

We walked down the aisle. There were only two seats in our row. I was alone with her. I helped her get her bag into the overhead storage. She plunked down in the window seat and after I took my sports coat off, I sat down next to her. Man and wife, I thought. We could be a married couple. Vanna White has been married. Probably to some dorky white guy, not unlike myself. So why not? Everybody gets married.

Then I felt a big fat pang of regret. I didn’t know her. She didn’t know or particularly like me. Where is Hungary?

She was looking out the window, watching incoming planes drop out of the sky, and those leaving, as if pulled by strings, getting sucked up into the clouds. Soon we rolled out onto the runway

Part II
Baby Sale, Feeling Real

It was April, but the Frihegy Airport was dusty and hot, dull and sickly in the hangover of Russian socialism. I had heard comparisons of Eastern Europe with Paris of the 1920’s. That you couldn’t throw a rock without hitting a poet or former political prisoner. Frank Zappa had an honorary citizenship to the Czech Republic. Gisela herself proclaimed it was beautiful and overflowing with cheap beer and beautiful women. But the sad walls of the airport were covered with carved murals of healthy farmers and factory workers staring off into a radiant future that never arrived. The broad-shouldered men and women in mural were surrounded by a bounty of wheat and grapes that didn’t exist. Below the beaming stone faces, soldiers sauntered, swinging their toy-like rifles and smoking hand-rolled cigarettes. Everybody was smoking or preparing to. Old women in drab frocks, wearing flip-flops on their fat, dry feet, leaned on their brooms. Young women in tight skirts too bored to breathe. A gift shop selling flags, poppy seed cookies, stings of dried paprika, Tokai desert wines, and little plastic accordions, sat embarrassingly off to the side.

After an hour in customs, we changed some money and got a Mercedes cab into Budapest. Watching Gisela laugh and speak so quickly with the cab driver weighted me with dread. I hadn’t really thought about the fact that she would be talking in her native tongue and she suddenly seemed like even more of a stranger. In San Francisco, her accent was barely audible.

We drove into the city on a major highway. The sky and landscape were a heavy and gray with pollution. Fields were cowless. Telephone wires rode poles along side the road. Small abandoned cement houses with red clay roof tiles sat deserted. Occasionally
there would be a stadium or factory and Gisela would erupt into Hungarian. The driver would chuckle and nod and fire something equally witty and brilliant back at her and they would both have a good laugh.

Once we got inside the city, I began to relax. People bustled across streets. They filled the out-door tables of cafés. Sausages and cheeses hung in shop windows. Century old churches sat in the shadows of newer skyscrapers. The scenery was more like the Europe that I remembered from my junior year semester abroad in France. A Europe that let you sit eating a McDonald’s cheeseburger in a building that is older than the United States.

We got off the highway in Pest, which is the eastern side of the city that has been historically Muslim with centuries of Turkish occupation. The sun was setting and rays of light sheared from between the silhouetted cityscape across the river in Buda. I had the $2000 dollars and the credit cards. The car was filled with the light of the warm dusk. Everything looked like I was seeing it through Super-8 film. Her hair sat in messy bed-head clumps from having slept on the plane. Her skin was damp. In the light she looked completely at home, lovely. It was my first minute of comfort since leaving.

“That’s Gellért Hill and the Castle District,” she pointed out at the tallest hill. “The tower on top of the hill used to be a monument. It was the last place in the city to fall to the Nazis. Now I think it is a disco run by the Mafia.” The driver’s faced slackened he realized that she was speaking English. “And the Castle is now an art museum. They don’t really have anything. Mostly Hungarian artists from the 19th century. Nothing you would recognize. A few ceramic plates by Picasso. Not unlike the de Young.”
The driver turned down a narrow street in Pest and the car thumped to a stop in front of an ornate concrete building. (I would later find out that most of Budapest is made out of concrete. The communists had tried to rebuild it after the WWII, but they substituted concrete for marble and now the city has the feeling of a Hollywood set and the buildings all look much older than they really are.) Gisela walked away from the Mercedes and put her hands on her hips and looked up the front of the building. The driver turned to me for payment.

“Gisela? How much should I pay him?” But she was up on the sidewalk with her arms pulled up over her head and her hands locked together like she was stretching. She could have been alone on a mountaintop, taking in the view. “Gisela. What should I pay him?” She continued to not say anything. ”Gisela.”

“Don’t pay him anything. Get out of the car and unload the bags and walk through these doors.” She started through the doors. ”Tell him that I was supposed to pay you.” The large wooden door shut behind her.

I handed him about 2,000 Forints, which I thought was equivalent to about $20 dollars.

“Hallo,” he said, counting the money.

“Hello?” I answered but he was done with me. I would later find out that this was Hungarian for “Good-bye.” Initially, kind of fun, but soon to be a pain in the ass, like how the Bulgarians nodded for “no” and shook their heads for “yes.” Try being in a hurry in that country.

She was inside the courtyard looking up. The air was cooler inside and there was no wind. Plants spilled over the terraces. She hit a button on a panel next to a small cage-
like elevator. Almost instantly a man burst from a door four stories up. He started clapping and yelling in Hungarian. He was calling Gisela, Gessy. Greasy without the “R” We squeezed into a tiny elevator and with a clunk began the ascension.

Gyula was waiting for us at the elevator landing. He was wearing a tight purple sweat suit, some gold chains and his hair was thickly greased. I thought of a Jim Crumely line, never trust a man who wears jewelry before sundown. As we got out of the elevator, he threw his arms around Gisela and plopped his hand directly on her ass. She jumped a bit and quickly squirmed, trying to get her butt away from his hand. When she turned around, she looked into my eyes trying to see if I had seen this.

After a few seconds of them talking in Hungarian, she introduced me. I held out my hand to shake, but he ignored this and gave me a big hug. He smelled like cigarettes, after shave, and sausage. It was kind of nice.

He led us inside. This was my first Hungarian apartment. It was small, but everything in it was small as well, which kept things in proportion and from feeling cramped. All the fixtures were tiny. The door handle was like that on a standing filing cabinet. The bathtub was in the kitchen. The walls were newly painted white. Like many European apartments, it was kind of cheap but clean and smart.

We walked into a small living room and Gisela dropped her stuff on a divan. Then he nodded for me to put my bags down as well. I was thinking about sleeping arrangements, but neither of them would look me in the eye.

“Zach, this is not good,” he said. “Tomorrow you can stay at my good friend’s house. But for tonight you will sleep on the floor.”
“I could get us a hotel room somewhere. Gisela told me that everything was cheap in Hungary.”

“No, no. Hungarian hotels are too much money. They are thieves to Americans. You don’t want to go.”

“Just for one night. I think I can afford it.”

“No. You don’t want to do that,” he said with an unexpected urgency.

Later in the small basement restaurant across the street, Gyula ordered me Cordon Bleu.

“A Hungarian specialty,” he said,

The dish was entirely deep-fried, a piece of cheese wrapped in ham wrapped in chicken and deep-fried in lard.

Then he ordered us wine and palinka, and began to a vigorous round of toasts. His thick arm high, spilling the drinks, after a few toasts so happy that tears rolled down his fat cheeks.

He told me Tokai was the favorite wine of Louis 14th, the Sun King. It was a sickly sweet desert wine. It tasted like a hangover. He bought me my own bottle. He told me that his name, Gyula, in English was Julius, like the basketball star, Julius Erving.

At some point a Gypsy band piled in the door and the room erupted into song. The waiters got involved. Big old men with bulbous noses who turned purple in their efforts to out sing their friends. A karaoke machine was rolled in from the streets, and being the titular American, they had me get up and sing every Elvis song on the machine. I was a little shy at first, but after the palinka started to set in, I didn’t want to stop. Shaking my hips. Wobbling my leg around, letting it go off on its own. I couldn’t have
sang without the words careening across the screen, but I once read a biography, “The Last Train to Memphis.” and remember that Elvis’s favorite food was peanut butter and banana sandwiches. Gyula loved this. He made me promise to make him one. I also remember Elvis being quoted saying, “Some performers snap their fingers, some shake their hips, others move their legs and swing their arms, I’m no different. I just do them all at once”.

Gisela wasn’t drinking despite Gyula’s multiple toasts in her honor. She seemed much more laid back then when she was behind the bar at the Lone Palm. She didn’t seem at all like she was being reunited with her long lost brother. This crossed my mind repeated. Especially when they began to dance. But I was having a great time. People were on tables. Hands on hips, kicking their feet out like Cossacks. There was an accordionist in the room. An accordionist and plum brandy. I had no worries. The plump owner of the restaurant had made a public toast to me, his American friend. People were raging. This wasn’t the drab Hungary of the airport. Everybody was real. Dot Com crap and Marina Fratboys seemed a universe away. I even thought how nice it would be if Cookie was with me. I felt joyous and good, for the first time in a while. A warmth was blooming in my chest. Unlike San Francisco where jaded dickheads just stand around waiting for the world to entertain them, these people were making their world great. They were taking responsibility for the night. Making it joyous. What little I noticed of Gisela’s reticence, I took as jet lag.

We lurched home that night. Gyula’s arm over my shoulder and he had stopped speaking English to me at all. He was talking to me in fast Hungarian like we were old
friends. I laughed and nodded at everything thing he said, like he was whipping off old and impossibly hilarious jokes.

But in the morning, Gyula was gone. Gisela was in the kitchen. She had already bathed and made some coffee. It seemed nearly impossible since we hadn’t yet sleep together, but as I looked at her as she stood in front of an open window looking out across the Danube at the Parliament building, I was thinking that her beauty was waning. Compared to the evening before in the taxi, her face looked bloodless in the harsh morning sunlight. Her peach fuzz seemed to be sturdier than before, crossing over into real hair. The drapes shifted lazily in the slow breeze. We weren’t arguing; we were being indifferent to each other. I don’t know what she was thinking about, in retrospect, probably how to get my money, but I was being consumed by the fact that I didn’t find her attractive. I even found her slightly repulsive. I guess some of it had to do with the fact that half of her attractiveness back at the Lone Palm was her foreignness and in the past evening she had become familiar.

“You want to bathe?” she asked after I had poured some of the thick coffee into an espresso cup.

“Yeah.”

“Ok. There is only so much hot water, so get in the tub while it is filling. Ok?”

Then she left.

Any American who says they flew into Paris, went straight to their hotel room to and took a nap, is full of shit. The first thing you do is masturbate. Maybe it is the fact that you are suddenly in a new place, a place tingling with possibility. Or maybe having
been locked up for 10 hours in a warm dark place with another 150 human being turns you into some kind of slaphappy horn-dog.

My skin squeaked against the porcelain as I lowered myself into the large bathtub. The water slowly filled in around me. My belly puddle around my midsection and I wondered if Hungarians jog. My penis floated in a seaweed of hair. The water hadn’t filled enough for me to do any actual cleaning so I began to get friendly with myself.

As usual I was envisioning a random one-night stand I had at a Head of the Charles where the girl let me fuck her from behind, Gisela walked back into the kitchen. When I realized that she was on the other side of the thin curtain that surrounded the tub, I quickly stopped, but the violent motion of pulling my arm away so quickly made a telltale splash.

“It will fall off if you do that too much,” she said.

“I wasn’t doing anything.”

“In Hungarian it is called, “nemi önkielégítést végez”,” she laughed. “It means to ‘not be nice to yourself.'”

The water suddenly felt cool and greasy. My shlanky was stupidly sticking up out of the water. The huge canyon of differences that runs between masturbating and getting caught. I hugged myself and asked her, “What do you want?”

“I just wanted to talk about what we are doing today.”

“I’m up for anything.”

“How about a few orphanages?”

“Or that,” I said. “That sounds good.” Her baby had completely slipped my mind.

“But I have a favor to ask for while we are there.”
“Shoot.”

“You must act as my husband when we talk to the people.”

“And you will be acting like my wife?”

“Hungary is sexist. The people who run orphanages will not be much help to a single women who also is a traitor to her nation.”

“Wanna-be Parents with a Cause,” I said. It didn’t make a whole lot of sense to me, but I thought that it would be fun to play husband and wife, to continue the vision I had as we boarded the plane. Plus I was willing to agree to anything if it would get her out of the room.

Then she walked over and pulled back the curtain. My dick was still a little hard. My gut seemed to have grown. My expression of mixed terror and glee.

“Thanks Zach. This means a lot to me.” She let the curtain fall back, and she turned and walked out of the room.

We stood in front of a wall, which surrounded a large sandstone building. A damp spring wind was blowing. When it would pick up, I couldn’t hear a sound and seconds later, it would cease and the shrills of children playing would fill in around us, as if we were in the middle of their games. Occasionally a soccer ball would arc into view for a brief second, then drop back down behind the wall.

“Gyula has done some research and thinks that my son grew up here.”

“It sounds like they are having a pretty good time in there.”

We rang a bell on the gate. A woman wearing a frock answered the door and after a brief exchange with Gisela, led us down the hall and asked us to wait. There were
children everywhere. My idea of an orphanage was basically Oliver Twist, gruel and burlap shirts, but these kids seemed like they were having a blast. Doors were opening and slamming shut. Children chasing each other would erupt from closed doors into the hall. A baby would begin to cry, setting off a string of other crying babies until they seemed to tire themselves out and then the lead baby would start again. Like geese flying. Kids were singing. Out in the courtyard, they were still playing soccer. Gisela lit up a cigarette.

“Aren’t we trying to make a good impression?”

“You should probably smoke too. You’ll seem more Hungarian.”

“How is this is going to work?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why can’t we just look them up? Why aren’t you sure of where he is?”

“It is illegal. They cannot tell the birth mother, ever. That is the law.”

“So what is the plan?”

“We are going to be American’s looking to adopt a son. We shop around until we find my son. I’m sure I will recognize him.”

“How do you know he hasn’t already been adopted? How will you recognize him?”

“I’m his mother.”

“This doesn’t seem like the best way to go about this.”

“ It will work. Just be a nice guy. Everything will be fine.”

An older woman opened an office door and invited us in, speaking in English.

“So you are looking for a child? You are Americans?”
“He is. I was born in Hungary. But we are married.”

“Come in.”

It was right about here when I began to feel with a dead certainty that Gisela was a few slices short of a pizza.

The woman and Gisela bantered back in Hungarian for about 20 minutes, occasionally stopping to explain when something was said which they both thought was funny, but in the end the woman pulled out a few forms, some in English, and asked me to fill out and sign each one. Two of the forms wanted more than my signature. They wanted my employer’s name and address, a current bank account number and my passport number.

“Honey,” I said. “Can I talk to you in private for a second?”

“What?”

“I just need to talk to you before I finish these.”

She followed me out of the building and into the courtyard where the children were playing. At a closer look, these kids weren’t doing so well. They were scrawny and wild-eyed. The majority of them looked Gypsy.

‘What is this?’

“A state orphanage?”

“No what is happening here? Why am I giving a complete stranger my bank account number?”

“So I can find my son.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can do this.”

“Give them fake ones. Make some stuff up.”
So I did. Well kind of. I put Teddy’s name and address on all of it and just made up a bank number.

***

That night she brought me to a place called Picasso Point. Gyula had told us that it was a foreigner’s bar. Which is like a college bar only more expensive. The people called themselves ex-pats. I thought this was a term only used in Hemmingway novels, but I kind of liked it. The bar felt like a cave. Two huge bouncers guarded the door, but once you were in the ceilings were low with dim lighting leaking out of the corners and from behind plants. Many small rooms lead away from the center room. A lily pad shaped bar jutting out in the middle of the main room. At this bar, you could order drinks and langos which are crepes which you can fill with anything, chicken livers, chocolate sauce, ketchup, literally anything. The tables were filled with groups of intimidating foreigners. Everyone in leather and looking hipper-than-thou. Smoke hung heavily. The music was all over the place. Coltrane one song. MC5 the next. Then on to a Hungarian folk song. Despite the name, I saw no signs of Picasso.

We ordered some beers and crepes and carried them over to some stools at a bar that was attached to a wall. Our backs were to a large loud table. It was headed by a British kid. I had watched him as we crossed the bar. He was young, maybe 20. He had flaring pinkish red cheeks under dark excited eyes. His eyes were basically all pupil. The rest of his face was pale and glittering with sweat. But this didn’t seem bothered by it. As if sweating was his natural state. His hairline didn’t start until the middle of his skull, and his thin blonde hair was swept back. He was wearing a leather coat and a red velvet scarf.
Dapper and freakish. Gisela got up to take a wiz and I tried to eavesdrop as I started on my crepe.

“...supply the Serbs with arms so that they can just finish what they started. It is a war and the sooner someone wins the sooner it will be over. What are we doing now? We send in Dutch teenagers in little blue hats and guns they aren’t allowed to use. We tell them to feed the Muslims but detain them from fighting or protecting themselves. Just make sure that they have a belly full of potatoes before Slobadon puts a bullet through their head or has their wives raped. All I’m saying is that unless we are going to stop him ourselves, we should let him do what he’s going to do. As it is we are just dragging out the inevitable.”

“Just let it be a free-for-all?” someone asked.

“Definitely. And certainly stop the arms embargo. As it is now, we allow bandages and potatoes but no arms. How are the Muslims supposed to protect themselves? If we just armed the place to the gills and let them fight it out or get in a stalemate. The thinking here isn’t too much different than the cold war. We have just passed through a time of tense, but otherwise relative, world peace. And that was because the two opposing powers had enough firepower to blow one another to kingdom come is so desired. Did they? No. Would the Bosnian Serbs be so eager to walking into village after village raping and looted, digging mass graves, if those villages were armed with more than the occasionally sickle or garden hoe? No.”

“Is that what you are going to write?”

“Do you think the Telegraph would publish it?” he asked. Then he answered himself, but I didn’t hear it clearly. It sounded like he said, “Monthly conifers.” The table
burst into laughter. Some people booed. Then someone slammed into me hard as I was bringing the glass of beer to my mouth.

"Bochenant. Bochanenant," said a women’s voice.” I turned and she broke into English. “Sorry, sorry. I’m so sorry. Are you all right?” My temper and nervousness immediately chilled when I heard this familiar New York accent. The owner was a short woman, about my age, but her glasses and thick curls made her look older. “I just had to get away from that guy. Are you all right? Did I spill anything? Can I buy you a beer? Did you chip your tooth? That was your tooth I heard, right? Oh god, please don’t let me have chipped his tooth. Can’t get a real dentist for 800 miles. My friend Nancy almost got killed by a local. He shot her so full of Nova Caine her whole head went numb. Almost numbed her heart. Oh god, are you all right? I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, I think I’m ok.” I swept my tongue across my teeth. Everything was still smooth.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“You got health insurance. You can get it through American Express. You don’t really need it. Doctors here will take anything. You can pay with chickens. They’ll remove your gallbladder for a few pounds of bacon. But if you need real medicine I would take the train to Vienna. Or if you are a student, your school will probably fly you home.”

“Really, I think I’m all right.”

“Ok, I’m just so sorry. I just had to get away from that table. That guy is such a pompous jerk-off.”
“The British guy?”

“Yeah, Kenneth. He’s a journalist covering the war, but he keeps an apartment up here. Icky. I’m sorry, what’s your name? I’m Ellie.”

“Zach.”

“Like Taylor the 12th president? He died from eating cherries and milk. A career soldier. Survived the Mexican war and hundreds of wars with the Indians, but died from eating some rotten cherries.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Are you a student?”

“No.”

“English teacher?”

“No.”

“Journalist?”

“I don’t do anything. I just got here. We are supposed to be picking up a friend’s baby.”

“Baby?”

“Well, an 8 year old boy, but she hasn’t seen him since he was a baby.”

“This I’ve got to hear. But not now. Come to my house for brunch on Sunday? It’s the best brunch in town and the easiest place to meet everyone you need to meet. I don’t like to brag, but it is an event. And I owe you. Please come by. You don’t need to bring anything. Just yourself. Here’s the address.” She pulled out a card. “Come by anytime after 10 on Sunday morning.” Then she turned just as Gisela got back.

“Ellie, Gisela. Gisela, Ellie.” They regarded one another.
“Oh. She’s invited too, of course. Bye now.” And Ellie was off into the smoky crowd.

“She invited us to brunch on Sunday.”

“She invited you to brunch, my nice guy. Such a nice guy.”

******

In the morning, I left a note on the living room table and slipped out of the apartment while Gisela was still in the bath. I went for a walk along the Danube. Large stone steps descended into the moving inky water. Old bent men stood at the bottom steps and fished with long thick poles. I stopped and sat behind a group of them. They smoked and talked, occasionally testing or re-baiting their lines with what looked like fish guts. They didn’t seem too serious. Most of them sat in close proximity to each other. Sharing palinka and cigarettes. The water was shiny with an oily film, and I couldn’t imagine eating anything that was pulled from the polluted blackness. Just as I was about to leave, the men started cheering and one of them, walking backwards, pulled a large carp up onto the steps. Someone put a boot on its head until it stopped moving. A finger reached into its mouth and removed the hook. To my surprise, instead of pitching the bottom feeder back into the moving water, the man kissed the fish and raised it up to the sun. Then he pulled a chain bearing about a dozen other carps from the water and added this one. These men were fishing for polluted carp.

In Nyguti Ter I found a café with Internet access and checked my email on mailstart.com. There were two emails in my inbox.

From: tlavery@whynot.com
To: zachs@cnet.com
Subject: Never, never, never shake a baby
Dude,
Got your note. It was really touching. I love you too, man. Whatever. Trying to get all profound on us. Can you say “total fag”? Where are you really? I need rent. If I don’t hear from you by today, I’m going to start pimping Cookie out.
Cheers,
Teddy

Attachment: cookiewearingbag.jpg

From: c_murphy@indeedpress.com
To: zachs@cnet.com
Subject: I’m preggers!
Zach,
Can you believe it? Me neither. What luck! I guess we should get married after all. Kidding, scumbag. You low life twit. If I ever see you again, I will put a finger into each of your eyes and scratch the back of your skull. Do not reply. Do not ever contact or think of me again. Budapest? Who the fuck do you think you are? By the way, Teddy Lavery is god’s gift to women. I am thinking of quitting Indeed so I will have more time to have sex with him.
Die,
cm

Neither of these seemed really pressing, and I had learned long ago that if you really want to keep someone’s attention: Don’t reply to their email.

When we walked into the courtyard of Ellie’s building, the next morning, the noisy, exhaust-laden air of the korut became silent and sweet smelling. A pear tree stood in the center of the courtyard. And English voices could be heard coming from an apartment door two flight above. Some pigeons cooed.

When we got to her landing, the door was open. I knocked, but inside everybody was talking and there was some music playing, and no one seemed to hear, so I just pushed the door up and we walked in. The first thing I noticed was Gorgonzola. A block of it sat on a wooden cutting board. Next to it was a bowl of apple slices and a baguette.
This was reassuring. We walked through a small hallway into the kitchen where a guy and a girl had their backs to us and they looked like they were involved in some teamwork effort of chopping and shredding.

The guy saw us out of the corner his eye. He turned and winked. He had the bluest eyes. Freaky blue, devilish. With colorless hair. Warhol hair. He looked electric. Then his face went blank and he turned back to the girl. Like we were a momentary itch that he had successfully scratched. I felt stupid. I was expecting a non-profit workers/English teacher’s brunch. It was still early and I didn’t want to deal with artsy jerk-offs.

"Is Ellie here?" I asked their backs and the woman turned her head.

"Oh, hi. Yeah, you must be ... Actually, I have no idea who you are, but, yeah, she’s inside..." Then the guy flinched and yelped simultaneously. He whipped around, clutching his hand which was drenched in a dark red, still yelping, "Ow, Ow, Ow."

Gisela shrieked. The girl shrieked. He started laughing.

"It’s just beets," he said. "The most intense vegetable. Gotcha."

The woman looked back to us. "He’s joking. It’s beets. Excuse him. He was born this way."

He was still smiling. His eyes made it so that you couldn’t really look at him for too long. He looked like a little kid crawling out of his skin on sugar cereal.

"Ellie’s in there. Just throw your coats in the bedroom."

We went left into another hallway and then into a living room filled with people. Everyone was around our age. Relaxed. Confident. Happy. Normal-looking people. A few shades from a J-Crew ad.
There was a table lined with food and open bottles. Incredible food. Little bowls of caviar. White and blue creamy cheeses. Soufflés. Devilled eggs. A roasted chicken. Pasta salads. Orange juice. Fresh vegetables. Bottle after bottle of champagne. People were sitting on the floor and on couches. At the end of the room, two large windows opened out onto a terrace that over-looked the street we had just come from. The room filled with a breeze.

“...what else is there to do?” a boy was asking the room. “Where would you rather be than here? It is cheap, beautiful, centrally located. Paris is a three-hour flight. Greece in two. If the Hungarians would stop letting their dogs shit all over the sidewalk and we could get NPR on the radio, Budapest would be the perfect place.”

“But it’s not real. There is a world turning without us. Back in New York and San Francisco things are happening. We are definitely not ‘paying our dues.’ We are not building any foundations for a real life.”

“Real life? Life has to be hard, for it to be real. That’s just Catholic or Midwestern guilt talking. You think temping at some shitty corporate job makes you a better person. You think you would be more human, feel more deeply, if you had to pay 1200 dollars a month in rent. It is so obvious what is wrong with majoring in Finance, working at Merrill Lynch or going to law school. No intelligent person actually does that anymore.”

“Yes they do. You are just too much a spoiled nitwit to know those people. There are millions of Americans who just want a safe nice life. Kids in Kalispell, Montana. And they deserve it. Everyone in this room had an exceptional childhood. But if you hadn’t had these perfect childhoods, you would want it. You would want money. You would major in Finance.”
“Maybe,” he said. “But I don’t think so. I think that even the America that you are thinking about has become so well off, that even those kids are bored with money with buying shit. That is why advertisers are going for the younger and younger age groups. No adult in America can in good conscious walk into a mall. Everyone, poor or rich, knows that they are a joke, are the symbol of what is wrong with our culture.”

“You are so completely out of touch.”

“You’re so completely condescending to middle-class America.”

Then Ellie appeared from a side room. She was wearing a kimono and slippers, and she had chopsticks poking out of her dark curly hair. As she crossed the room, stepping over the people draped across the floor, she gave us the heavy metal rock-on sign with her hands. When she got to us, she hugged Gisela and then me. A chill of excitement erupted when I became conscious that there was nothing between me and her large mom-ish breasts except the thin kimono.

“Welcome to Casa de Ellie. I’m so glad you made it. Don’t be shy. Just drink and hang-out.” Then she turned to the room and interrupted. “Everybody this is Zach and Gisela. Zach, Gisela this is everybody. So tell us about the baby you are here to get.”

The room stopped talking. Gisela looked at me like I had just suggested she strip.

“Maybe later.” I could feel my face flush.

“Ok, but no reason to be shy here. That is the greatest thing about Budapest. This isn’t the real world. You can say and do anything and it will be ok. No matter how much you screw up, you can always just get back on the plane and presto, you’re normal again.”

“I see.”
“You will. I can tell that you’re the kind of guy who is dying to say and do anything.”

I just laughed. Gisela was making a conscious effort to ignore her. She was deep in a painting on the wall, waiting for Ellie to beat it. Everybody but me had an idea on the kind of guy I was.

“Help yourselves to everything. There’s more food coming. We don’t really have a sit down and eat time; we just stick our heads in the trough whenever we feel like it. So you do the same, please. Just relax and enjoy yourselves. If possible, try to get really drunk. We like it best when the whole party is smashed.”

Ellie and I would never have a real conversation. She spoke to fast and with too little reign on the subject matter. I have never been quick on my feet with strangers; I would never keep up with her. She waved her arm out into the party like a cruise director and then turned and shuffled into the kitchen.

The man who Ellie had interrupted started in again: “As I was saying, there is nothing for American’s to do. Granted no one knows what they want to do anymore. There is nothing for us to feel. Wars are now fought at a keyboard. We have no causes. Could you imagine being hippie or protesting things? I mean everyone in this room is probably a good person. We probably vote democrat. We probably aren’t racist. Good guys. But don’t you all feel a little silly all the time. Do any of you ever actually feel like you mean anything? Like you are putting good things out in the world? Are we responsible people? Creating a better place for your kids. Do any of you feel real? I fucking don’t. I feel like a cartoon. I think it would be difficult for me to fuck up my life. Even when I drink hard for extend periods of time, I can’t fuck up my life. I will always
have a job. I will always have a place to sleep. Fuck, I will even always have someone to sleep with. It is so nothing. All of this. All of us. We are so nothing. Not just people in Budapest or Prague, but everywhere. We aren’t slackers anymore. We aren’t listless whiners; we are just soulless well-dressed nothings. Perfect consumer. Tasteful predictable. Clean, healthy, traveled, nothings.

“Margaret has warts,” the electric boy said as he walked into the room with a glass bowl containing a type of beet salad. There were walnuts and celery and the Gorgonzola mixed in. But the beets were so red. It looked like a bowl of guts. I hadn’t eaten breakfast yet and my throat clenched.

“What?” a woman said.

“Margaret isn’t healthy. She has venereal warts which can lead to ovarian cancer.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Margaret asked. She was Ellie’s roommate. A tall blonde girl from Minneapolis, who I would later find out was the advertising account manager for Purina Hungary. (Try selling dog food in a country were the per capita in coming is about 300 dollars a month. She had great stories about focus groups where old men would just help themselves and about a scandal where black marketers were shipping Puppy Chow into the Ukraine for human consumption.)

“I thought that I heard you had venereal warts,” he said. “And if you could get it, I’m sure the rest of us probably are capable of picking it up. Shit, six degrees, I bet we all have slept together. Or at least given one another hand jobs. All I’m saying is that we probably aren’t that healthy, so maybe that makes us something instead of nothing. All I’m saying is that it is so easy to die.”
“I do not fucking have warts.”

“If you say so, but that’s not what I heard.”

“Who did you hear that from? We don’t know the same people. I don’t even know how you got invited here. Who the fuck are you? Get out.”

“You invited me the other nights at Tilos A Za.”

“Well now I’m disinviting you. Please leave.”

“No.” And he put the bloody bowl on the table and mixed himself a Mimosa. The people immediately started talking again. It seemed totally acceptable that he wouldn’t leave the party. It seemed for a second that maybe you could do anything.

Later, the electric guy and I were out on the veranda smoking. A Virgin Records sign lit up the downtown of Pest. The clicking of trolleys and tinny honking of the cars drowned out the voices from inside. People had started to leave. Gisela had disappeared for nearly an hour, but now she was inside warming up to a Peace Corps person.

“So what are you doing here?” he asked.

“Nothing. I came over on kind of a whim. Just got here two days ago.”

“How long are you staying?”

“I don’t know. Until my money runs out. But I’m not averse to getting a job.”

“What do you do?”

“I was a web person in San Francisco until this week.”

“Internet stuff?”

“Uh huh.”

“Why’d you leave? That’s supposed to be good stuff to know.”

“It was.”
“Then what are you doing here?”

“I’m not sure.” And then I gave him an abbreviated version of the orphan story.

“Did you smoke a lot of crack in San Francisco?”

“Once or twice.”

“I mean, are you completely fucking nuts? There’s no baby. She’s using you for something. I don’t know how it works, but I know that you can get mucho beau coo for white babies. And they aren’t really for sale anywhere outside Eastern Europe. But she probably needs an American husband to get the babies out of the country.”

“A baby trade?”

“Shit, babies probably account for half of Romanians national product.”

“Romania?”

“Yeah, that country is so fucked. I can’t blame them, but the citizens publicly hung their dictator Nicolae Ceausescu on Christmas. During his regime Romanian women were required to have at least 5 babies before they were eligible for state regulated birth control. I’ve read that as of last year the country had 100,000 orphans. That is like one out of every 50 children born. The per capita income is something like $900 US dollars a year. Hungary is bad, but nothing like Romania. If she needs babies, you should go to Romania. A 24/7 blue light special. I’ve been tempted to go over and get some myself. Start my own religion. Or go down to the refugee camps in Pecs. That is war-orphaned-baby city.” -- continued