Why pay more| A novel

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The University of Montana

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WHY PAY MORE

A Novel

By

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Dean, Graduate School

Date
After work I dodge Mickey and head out into the rain thinking, as usual, about how ridiculous my job is. It’s eight at night. The people that pass by me on First stare straight ahead or at the wet pavement. Above me, in all the lit windows of downtown, people are moving behind glass. Janitors push mops and empty waste baskets; businessmen survey the city like generals while they talk on their phones; happy couples toast each other with wine glasses. All those smug fucks are dry in their towers, looking down.

The cell phone rings. I flip it open. “Yeah?” I say. The businessmen push by me in the dark. Here we are in the rain, we men and women of commerce, pushing towards home. I hear breathing crackle and rasp. “Yeah?” I say again.

“Am I speaking with Eli?” asks the voice. I always get suspicious when someone calls me by my real name.

“It’s Eli,” I say. “May I help you?”

“My name is Janos,” says the voice. There’s a slight accent. “You left a message for me... about the personal ad I placed.”
My heart does a drum roll when I remember the ad and I start to get all nervous. A week ago I responded to this ad in weekly newspaper with the heading SEDUCE MY WIFE. I never thought anything would come of it. I was just something I did on a whim in my apartment when I was bored. The thing is, it could be perfect. A guy named Janos might have some kind of wife all right—an icy blonde from Krakow, a smoky vixen from Bucharest, but still, it's weird to be actually talking to him. "This is Eli," I say, trying to sound calm.

The voice says, "Eli... about the ad. A lot of people responded. More than I thought, but your response interested me. I'd like to meet you."

Like winning a contest, I think. "Okay," I say.

"We're having a party this evening in Bellevue, and if you've got the time, I'd like for you to come out and meet my wife."

"I've been to Bellevue before."

"It's a lovely place," says Janos without a shred of sarcasm. "It'll be a small party. Some friends, drinking wine." He pauses long enough for a car to splash by and stir up the rain stench. "It won't be any big deal."

Sometimes when I'm nervous my voice shakes a little. "Sure," I say. "It's just—"

"I know it's sudden."

"Yeah," I say, kind of shaky. I try to talk slower. "I didn't expect to get the call back so soon." It comes out much calmer. When I focus, I can really lay it on thick.

"I'm well aware that you're probably a busy young man and you have plans. Think of it as a party. Think of it as, I don't know, an adventure. Can you trust me when I say you won't be disappointed?"
"I'm into it," I say. "Did you say tonight?"

"It should be quite an opportunity for you Eli," says Janos. "The opportunity of a lifetime. Sex, adventure, mystery. No commitment. Quite an opportunity. My wife is a very beautiful young woman."

All this is said without the slightest trace of embarrassment. This Janos, he's selling me. I come to a stop below a streetlight, one of the last before my apartment, and stand there listening to my phone in the damp glow. The rain starts blowing sideways and it smacks right into my face. "Your wife's down?" I ask.

A sigh. "Hannah. Her name is Hannah. We'll discuss everything when you get here," says Janos. "Are you interested or not?"

The rain stops all of a sudden and everything goes quiet. You can hear the electricity buzzing through the streetlights. It's like the city is holding its breath. "Tonight as in now?" I ask.

"If you're not interested I'd be happy to contact someone else," says Janos.

My heart finally slows down a little and I stop acting like this is such a big deal. It's just random sex, I tell myself. I'm good at that. Plus, it's been a long day and I could use a little treat. "Fine," I say. "Tonight." I say it super calm, like a guy who does this all the time.

I pull a crumpled ATM receipt out of my pocket and scribble down the address.

I live alone downtown in a second story apartment that is always too hot, especially in the winter. I wouldn't have any problems at all with the place if it wasn't for the radiator. There's no way to turn it on or off. You know how these things are. No one
knows a thing. This radiator, there's no rhyme or reason for its clickings or emissions; it comes on in the middle of the night and rattles like a prisoner's cup. Sometimes when I wake up in the middle of the night and stare at it actually looks like it's glowing a little.

The radiator clicks now, but I'm too pumped to let it get to me. I've been reading the personal ads for years but I never thought I'd be the kind to answer one. Finally, though, it just hit me that real people were placing those things and you could get sex without any of the hassle that always accompanies a girlfriend or whatever. I still have the weekly where I found the ad. I flip it open and take a look.

SEDUCE MY WIFE

Attractive prof. couple seeking hwp w/m Professional under 30. Seduce my elegant young wife. Discretion a premium. No questions or obligations. No drugs/STDs. Serious inquiries only. Tasteful encounter for reasonable, attractive individual.

It's so perfect it's unbelievable. Finally, a little luck for Eli. Janos. What a name. Hannah. I try to picture her. Hannah's the name of a girl with serious cheekbones. You see these Bellevue ladies come into the store. Trophy wives. Foreign wives. Young wives. I know these wives; I'm the one that sells them their shoes.

When I first came back from Japan, my dad got me this fax machine so I could send out my résumé. It comes with an answering machine, so every time I come home I have to listen to its insistent beeps until I finally relent and play the messages. The only faxes I get are junk promotionals: the usual all-caps-exclamation-marked urges about ways to lose weight and get rich. The machine goes BEEP...BEEP...BEEP like a robot lamb. I click play.
It's my mom. My parents don't know about my cell. If they knew about it, I'd never make it five minutes without getting a call. I'm an only child and my parents are all over me. Lately, I've started ignoring them. For two weeks, Mom's been leaving messages I haven't returned. It's not that I don't want to talk to her—Mom's pretty all right—it's just that her messages, they throw me. I listen to the last three in succession. The first is a breathless affair about the number of people that are suddenly contacting gout. The second involves the word honey. Mom stretches the word out and repeats it like baseball fans mocking a visiting star. "Honeeeey, Honneeeey, Honnneeeey." The third doesn't make any kind of sense at all. "I've just heard about a man named Charles Randall," says Mom. "I don't know him, but from everything I hear he's the nicest man in the world, and it looks like we'll be good friends. Call me Eli. Call me."

I mean, what are you supposed to do with messages like these? How are you supposed to respond? It's messages like these that make you want to seduce someone else's wife.

I pull my box out to get some cash. It's a shoebox, a Nike one no less, from a hideously expensive pair of running shoes I liberated from the store. They're silver, the kicks, shiny as chrome, and they have silver laces that would sparkle in the sun if I lived in a reasonable city that had a sun. I open the lid of the box. The red and black cardboard is stiff in my fingers. There it is, in even stacks. Cash. All hundreds. I get the bills changed special at the bank. They're crisp, stacked neat as baseball cards. How much? Three thousand, three hundred dollars. So, big deal, you're thinking, money stashed below the mattress. This money is important though. This is my getaway money. Watch. I'm on a new frugality campaign. No more spending it all on the night. Just watch. A glass of
wine here. The occasional item at the Korean grocer, but I’m socking it away. I’m going to get fifteen, maybe thirty thousand, and get out while I can. It won’t be like Japan. No chump English teaching job. I’ll do it right this time. Guam. That’s right. Guam. Palm trees and gangsters. Cowboy capitalism. I’ll get there, open a gourmet ice cream shop, and build a house with a courtyard and a hammock. When Seattle goes down the tubes for good, I’ll be out.

The radiator starts to gush heat. I take a hundred out just in case and bounce to the closet, turn on the light, and start tangling with the prospect of clothing myself. I decide on a black suit, gray shirt, no tie, and Bruno Magli loafers I picked up for free when their rep visited the store. They have a special baseball stitch on them. They feel, as Mickey would say, soft as a mink’s cunt.
Across the 520 Bridge, on the other side of Lake Washington, is Bellevue. It’s a suburb like other suburbs: mall, gated communities, golf courses, all that. Caucasian people breeding like feral cats and what not...the usual deal. Bellevue’s a lot like Redmond, where my dad lives. But aside from the Bellevue I know so well, which could be anywhere really, there’s this other Bellevue that I know about from my days at Overland. The other Bellevue, the secret one, is where the all the rich people live. The old money folks live in homes that could pass for European hunting lodges, and the new money, the digerati and their offspring, surround them like an encroaching army in extravagant constructions of steel and glass.

What kind of Bellevue man places a personal ad? Which Bellevue is Janos from? It’s early, but if I had to guess I’d say Janos is your typical suburban pervert from one of
the gated communities—a perv that lives in a house only slightly different from that of his neighbors. You know exactly what I’m talking about. There’s a stocked refrigerator, black leather couches, a swept garage with bicycles and tools hanging on the walls like mounted game. What I’m telling you is that I can see it and I’m into it. Suburban swingers. Pent-up desires. Fine with Eli.

As I follow the directions though, I realize I’m wrong. Here’s a birthday cake pink Italian villa. Here’s a Miami Vice glass shoebox with a sign out front that announces it: La Luxe. Here, complete with canals, is a chateau that looks like Versailles. This is the money zone: circular driveways, manicured shrubbery, not a scrap of litter to be seen.

All this money, I admit, makes me a little nervous. I come to the address scribbled on the ATM receipt, drive right past it, and pull into an elementary school across the street to calm myself down. I just need to focus a little and I’ll be fine. Sex, adventure, mystery, I sing. The words form like a cheer in my head. Sex, adventure, mystery, no commitment. A rally cry, no less, to combat the shark. The shark surfaces from the depths of my mind sometimes and there’s nothing I can do to stop him. He swoops in at all hours of the day, always listing my failures and snapping his cartoonish teeth. Perverted, failed teacher of conversational English... he says... son of the suburbs, failing shoe salesman, he says, despite any efforts to push him away. Sex, adventure, mystery, I think. I shut my eyes tight. No commitment.

Janos’s house is on drugs. There’s no other way to describe it. Every window glows. Nothing unusual there, right? Except none of the windows are the same sizes. There’s more. The shapes that make up the house don’t flow evenly into each other. Twisted gray steel crashes into triangular surfaces slathered with white paint. Cables come
off the roof, anchored to patches of concrete, like wires holding up a tree. What’s left untouched by white paint and gray steel is glass.

There’s a valet to take my car, a cynical hesh with an elongated nose, red face, and rain-soaked hair. He zooms off towards a kind of miniature parking lot. Next to the shiny black Mercedes land barges, towering SUVs, and curvy Starburst-colored exotics, my Hyundai looks like a toddler sitting at the grown-up table. There’s no reason for me to be nervous. It’s perfect. What kind of young wife lives in a house like this? I’m thinking French actress, leggy model, former Miss America. I’m thinking the kind of wife that only money can buy.

I jab the dooibell with my finger. The guy who answers it, no less than forty, wears the baggy jeans and hooded sweatshirt of a fifteen-year-old. These are software folks, I think. I’ll spend the whole night in a state of undo overdress. Jeans and sweatshirt or no, this guy looks a little drunk. “Come in,” he says. I have no doubt that his smile is usually confidant and white, but for now it’s blue. My heart pounds. “Janos?” I ask.


“I’m looking for Janos,” I say. The foyer is a rush of glass. There’s a blown glass orange octopus of a chandelier with these long tentacles licking and twisting down from the ceiling. Greg orders me to take off my shoes and I do so, placing them in a pile with some others. The shoes are what you’d expect at this kind of party. The dudes go in for shiny Nike cross-trainers and old school boat shoes. For the ladies its slingbacks by Gucci and Via Spiga, Prada slip-ons, and three or four pairs of ballerina flats.

“You know Janos?” asks Greg.

“Kind of,” I say.
Greg stands there with his hands on his hips like a sergeant in a gay porn. "You know Janos?" he asks again, like I didn't just answer his question.

"I've spoken with him," I say, "on the phone."

"Oh I know how he is on the phone," says Greg with a chuckle. "You don't have to tell me. I speak with him every day, sometimes three or four times an hour, on the phone. I work for Janos."

Fascinating, I think, but there's no point in being sarcastic. "How is he on the phone?" I ask.

Greg shakes his head. "He's out of control. Two days ago, someone called me. I picked up the phone. Hello? I said. Hello? All I could hear on the other line was breathing, and then even that stopped. I was about to hang up, but I said to myself wait a minute...hold on...what if it's Janos? I can't hang up on Janos. He's my boss."

"Did you hang up?" I ask.

Greg shoves his hands in his pockets. "I work for Janos. I'm practically his right hand man. Why would I hang up on him? I stayed on the phone, listening in silence, for thirty minutes."

He's telling this crazy story like there's a punch line. I hate it when people do that. "Was it Janos?" I ask.

Greg scrunches up his face. "I don't know. It might have been. I think that maybe it was him and he was trying to tell me something. Even when you don't think Janos is trying to tell you something it's like he's trying to tell you something, you know what I mean? His mind, it's red-lining. He's the original techster. The proto-propeller-head. Do you know what I'm saying?"
Greg smiles like a kindergarten teacher. I have no idea what he’s saying, or why he’s so excited. “Where can I find him?” I ask.

“This way, this way,” says Greg.

There are these vacuumed chevrons on the carpet. These tech freaks, these propeller heads… I’m telling you, they’re weirdoes. Something’s freaky about the house. The bleach smell, the way it’s too quiet, the painful cleanliness. It feels like I’m in an over-designed hospital. Still, this kind of money? Young wife? This could be better than good.

Greg leads me into the living room. There’s a banquet with all this food on it. There are rolled fingers of ham veined with fat, an assortment of spendy cheeses, and crystal bowls filled with olives and mixed nuts. Black and whites stand in the corner looking bored. There’s no one else in the room.

Greg goes to the serving staff, puts his head down, and whispers to them. We’re in the look at me room. Mahogany display shelves line the walls; pieces of tribal art are everywhere. There’s a bookcase filled with art books, all the same size, their spines shiny with lettering: Klimt, Picasso, Japanese Style, and so on. We’re rich, the books say, but we’re also creative. On the floor, there’s an oriental rug of muted oranges and reds.

A glass of bloody wine is thrust into my hand. Greg and I sit opposite each other on chairs made of wicker and steel.

Greg holds his glass up to the light. “I’ll find Janos for you in a second,” he says. “Do you like wine?”

I’d like about two bottles, but I figure it’s best to stay in control in case Janos comes down the stairs swinging a mace around or something. “It’s fine,” I say.
"I sat you down here for a reason," says Greg. "There aren’t many people that know Janos like I do. Before you meet him, I want you to know that he’s a little different, and some of the things he’s going to say to you might strike you as peculiar... forward in a way that you’re not used to."

"I just need to speak with him briefly," I say.

Greg leans forward—mister earnest with his big eyes. "You’re not listening to me," he says, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial hush. "I just feel like I have to warn you before you meet him. Before he and I were close, he often did things that I didn’t understand. One time, we were walking to a meeting, and he pushed me into the wall. Hard." Greg smiles and shakes his head.

"What?" I ask.

"He never even said anything about it later," laughs Greg. "He didn’t offer to help me up from the floor, and I’d taken a pretty good spill. The hall was crowded with people and no one in there tried to help me. I was on the floor." Greg shakes his head. "I learned something from it, though. That’s the thing with Janos...you always learn something. You know what I’m saying?"

I still have no idea what Greg’s saying. Greg snaps at the black & whites, and one comes over with a bottle. "I’m fine," I say.

"I know you’re fine," says Greg, instructing the waiter to keep pouring.

We make our way up some stairs. You should see these stairs—all mahogany, supported by a black steel beam that ramps up at this crazy seventy-five degree angle. The handrail is a steel cable that sags at spaced intervals. Party voices crash around above us. Greg stops, turns around, gives me this big blue smile, and points to the voices.
It's a dark circular room that we come to, something like a crow's nest on the mast of an old ship. There are windows on all sides that look out onto the fat black water of Lake Washington. The room is something like thirty feet in circumference, filled with women in slim black dresses. Their bare feet curl into the carpet. More vacuumed chevrons.

Everyone turns and looks at Greg and I. He's gone before I can turn to him, back down the stairs. The women go back to their conversations, bending their skinny necks towards each other like giraffes. Almost all of the women are hot, and the odds are that one of them is waiting for me. My heart is going and I'm sweating. *You're out of your league*, says the shark. *You're okay*, I tell myself, gulping wine. One woman catches my eye. She leans against the bank of windows facing towards me, away from the water. She's just my type: skinny with a great rack. She's cool and relaxed in her black peasant skirt, looking like she couldn't be more bored.

She talks to a woman that's taller and, if you're into the magazine look, hotter with her long legs and firm arms. You should see this bored leaning woman though. There's something hard about her; something that makes you feel embarrassed to stare. I stare anyway. I can't help it. She wears the chunky black glasses of a Berlin Dominatrix and cows the taller woman with her casual posture. She looks like she'd bite your ear off, spit it out, then force your head to her lap. Every so often, with a look of resignation, she gives a slinky robot nod.

There's something else too—it's like I've seen her before. I know I've seen her. Maybe at the store. It's no use trying to think of anything else until I place the nod, the glasses, the pink elbows, the wince. Let me faint and have this sexy robot kneel at my side.
and demand that someone call an ambulance. It takes a good minute of me staring at her to get her to look my way. I recognize her in a rush. A sitar jangles on the stereo, and what it tells me is that the woman is Hannah Lee, who, for a time, was an investigative reporter on KING 5 network news. Hannah Lee was a kind of local Geraldo. Her hair’s different—no longer the puffy newscaster look meant to appeal to the masses—but it’s her without a doubt. Sweat trickles cold down my back. I hear the detached head of Janos, its moist lips moving up and down in the effort to formulate words: *Hannah. Her name is Hannah.* I take a gulp of wine. How does this work? Do I just go up to her? I try to think of something to say. It’s a cold fact that there’s no acceptable way to address a celebrity, major or minor, without tooling out. Should I hang back and play it cool? Should I let her come to me? I’m so nervous it’s like I can’t even move.

A hand materializes out of the darkness and grabs my shoulder, solving the dilemma for me. When I turn around I look up into the eyes of a man that is at least six-feet-five and has the wiry gray build of an aging marathon runner. He’s clothed entirely in black, his pants and shirt as tightly tailored as a matador’s. He’s maybe fifty. His hair is longish; it flows back in a rollicking wave that crashes in shaggy white tumbles around his ears and collar. “Come with me,” he says. “Now.”

“Janos?” I ask.

He grabs a hold of my arm and leads me out into the hall. “Are you Janos?” I ask.

He holds his finger to his lip, looks left and right. “All of your questions will be answered momentarily,” he says, already walking. He moves with his shoulders pinned back and the long, hurried steps of an impatient man. The walls in the hallway are made of concrete that’s burnished to sheen.
We enter a cavernous room, pitch black until there's a click and a rush of white light illuminates some kind of office. There are whiteboards on all of the walls upon which, in red, green, blue, and black dry-erase scrawl, are number sentences and equations. I don't know anything about numbers or equations or I'd let you in on it. Let's just say there's some complicated business happening on those whiteboards. At one end of the room is a bank of flat screen monitors, and when the lights are dimmed from their classroom brightness I hear the low buzz of the computers sleeping. They sound like crickets. Here again on the floor are the chevrons.

"You're not at all what I expected," says the guy.

"Are you Janos?" I ask.

"You sounded different on the phone," he says. He's looking me up and down like he's sizing me up or something.

It's a spooky room—the room of a comic book villain rubbing his hands together and thinking about blowing up the world. I walk over to the boards and stare at them, determined to play it cool despite the sweating. It's so perfect that Hannah Lee married this guy. Back when she was on TV, we used to always joke about how hot she was and how she was probably just a machine in bed. I finish off my wine. This could be a night to remember. "Your wife was on the news," I say.

"I don't want to talk about my wife yet... let's just hold off. Before we go any further there are things we need to establish. There are rules, Eli. Do you understand how to play by rules?"

"That depends on the game," I say, all smooth.
“First, and I won’t answer questions about this, Hannah doesn’t know anything about the ad. She won’t know anything about the ad. Do you understand?”

Everything screeches to a halt. “Excuse me?” I say

“You heard me.”

“I think there’s been some kind of mistake,” I say. “I thought you might want to watch or something—”

Janos closes his eyes so that black fissures spread across his forehead. He holds up his hand. “I realize that this will be more complicated than you anticipated. If you’d like to leave I’d understand, but if you’d like to stay I need you to repeat what I just said back to me so that I know you understand.”

I decide to play along. Who can it hurt? “She doesn’t know anything about the ad,” I say. “She won’t know anything about the ad.”

“Good,” he says. He pours two glasses of scotch and hands me one. “By chance, Eli, you’ve wandered into my dream. You’re an extraordinarily lucky young man to have picked my dream to wander into, but it’ll be up to you if you want to stay in the dream or drift away from it.” He’s absolutely serious the way he’s saying this stuff. It’s like he’s about to ask me to kill her or something. If it was anyone else I’d go. Hannah Lee, though. It’s Hannah Lee. Janos goes on. “Even dreams have rules,” he says. “The players need to have qualifications. They need to understand their parts. What do you do for a living by the way?”

As you might imagine, I’m not a big fan of the what do you do question. “Does it matter?” I ask.

"Sales," I say.

Janos cringes. "You poor kid. What do you sell?"

I guess there’s no point in lying. "I sell shoes. Women’s shoes."

Janos laughs so hard some of his drink dribbles out of the corner of his mouth and he has to wipe it with the back of his hand. "This is too much," he says.

"Does it make a difference?"

Janos shakes his head. "I don’t look down on sales like some people do. I’m a businessman Eli, and all business is sales. It’s perfect. You can seduce my wife and sell her a pair of shoes." He laughs at his own joke.

I feel a flush of embarrassment. I hate it when people see me at the store. It’s humiliating as all hell. If Hannah saw me at the store it’d pretty much insure that I’d never seduce her. None of this makes much sense. How does he expect me to seduce his wife if she’s not in on it? "I don’t think it’d be too good if she came to the store," I say. I mean for it to come out like a joke but it doesn’t.

Janos snorts. "I make the rules, Eli. You need to understand that. There are rules the dream will play by, and the first rule is that I make all of the rules. You’re afraid of what she’ll think of you? Let me worry about that. If I was afraid of how other people saw me do you have any idea where I’d be right now? I’d be wearing a stained lab coat in Budapest and eating bacon fat with a spoon."

Whatever that means. "Okay," I say.

"Rule number two," says Janos. "If you don’t believe in your ability to succeed, you won’t succeed. This rule has no room for interpretation. I need to be sure that you think you can do this, Eli. You wouldn’t be here if I didn’t think you could do it, but I
need to be assured that you think you’re capable.”

“I think so,” I say.

Janos gives me an expression of mock shock. “You think so? You’re young, good looking, you can sell. You think so? That won’t do, Eli. That won’t work at all. You need to know so, understand? Now, can you seduce my wife?”

I know this drill from work. “I can,” I say.

“Better,” says Janos. He snaps his fingers. “Tell me, Eli, are you up to something like this?”

“Sure.”

“You’re into kink?”

I nod.

“You like the dirty stuff?”

I look at him. He asks these questions without a trace of self-consciousness. Me, I don’t have any issues with sex, but I don’t really think it’s necessary to go around talking about it all the time. I’m not one of these guys like Mickey that’s always giving you all the details. “I don’t have any inhibitions about sex, if that’s what you’re asking,” I say.


I have a feeling things are about to get real weird and it makes me a little nervous. I suck down about half of my Scotch. I say, “I like the conversation booths on First. I have an arrangement with this girl named Kat. No big deal. Nothing too crazy.”

Janos smiles. “The peep booths?”

“The conversation booths.”
“Explain,” says Janos.

“It’s like a jail,” I say. “It’s sort of retro porn. There’s this girl there. I don’t know her name. She dresses up in a different costume every time. It’s no big deal.”

Janos gives me a crooked smile. “I had a feeling about you Eli. How often do you go?”

I actually go quite a bit, but I don’t want to reveal too much. “Every week or so,” I say. “So, you want me to do it here? Talk to her? What?”

Janos walks towards the wall of windows that faces out to the water. He turns around, his chin resting on his hand. “It won’t work here,” says Janos. “It’s much too obvious. I’ll send her to the store. I’ll say that you’re the son of a client. You’ll say you’re the son of a client. I’ll think of something good.”

Secretly, I’m kind of relieved that he doesn’t want me to do anything here. “How should I do it?” I ask.

Janos just smiles at me. “Did she see you?”

“For a minute,” I say.

Janos sticks the end of his pinky finger in his mouth, and in the most elegant way conceivable, begins to nibble at the nail. “She never notices a thing,” he says. “She’s too busy thinking about herself. I’ll warn you from the start Eli, she’s not what she appears to be. You’ll figure it out soon enough. You’re going to have to trust me. If I tell you that she believes she’s some kind of saint, you have to trust me when I tell you that she’s no such thing, and if I tell you that you’ll be able to seduce her, you’ll have to trust me that I’m telling you the truth.”

“So what do you want me to do?” I ask.
“I need to think,” says Janos. “I’ll call you when I know exactly what I want you to do.”

I nod. This whole thing might be ridiculous. The thing is, it’s like I have this crazy feeling that I can seduce her. It’s like I know. The truth is, I don’t really think there’s a woman out there I can’t seduce. I know what they want. I know exactly. My stomach gets squishy just thinking about how into it Hannah will be if she thinks she’s cheating on her husband. It’ll be dirty all right. It’ll be just what I’ve been looking for. I finish my drink and walk over to the window. A warm buzz runs through me. I give into the urge to touch the glass with my forehead. “How do I know she’ll be into me?” I ask. When I speak, my words frost the glass and I resist the temptation to draw a heart or skull with my finger.

Janos slurps loudly from his drink. “Trust me when I tell you she’ll be interested,” he says. “You’re perfect. You’ll be her new favorite disaster.”
Three

The next morning, it all feels like it didn’t happen. I slog through the rain to work, drink too much coffee, pretend to be a salesman. Everything’s the same as it was yesterday. Seattle looms around me, soaked and moldy.

My tan, loud, enormous father moved my mom and me to Seattle from the Midwest when I was fourteen. Dad believed that Seattle was the city of the future, and, for a while, Seattle turned into just what he thought it would be. Everybody was talking back then about how the city was a natural link to the Pacific Rim; how between the university, the biotechs, and the computer industry, there were all of the foundations of a slick technological city on the up and up.
See, Dad had come to Seattle on business and had something like a revelation. Like many a visitor to the city in the golden goopy summers, he had the experience of banking above the sparkling twilight water in a jet and seeing Mount Rainier staring back at him like a hulking scoop of ice cream. The way the story goes, Dad saw Rainier and decided right then that Seattle was where we would start over. He got a middle management job at what was then Seafirst Bank. We were on our way.

Somehow or another, I got into elitist Overland Academy, an action which defied my father's numerous predictions at the time that there was no way in hell they'd let me into that place. I told them in the admissions interview that I wanted to be a journalist and document the criminal consequences of American foreign policy, which was a crock. Maybe they felt sorry for me because I was fleshy and pimpled. Anyway, my miraculous acceptance into the school affirmed my father's faith that moving to Seattle was our destiny. "This is the miracle we've been waiting for," was how he put it.

Good old Overland was the last bastion of liberal Seattle privilege. It looked like a small liberal arts college somewhere in the cow-ridden northeast. It had it all: red brick, white-trim, even the occasional yawn of ivy stretching towards the stained glass windows of the older buildings. Then there were the newer buildings: art studios, chemistry labs, a performing arts center, a whole heap of computers. The school had been lucky enough to produce a disproportionate number of software barons, (two, mainly, but two is enough in that line of work) and these software barons were reasonable geeks, happy to donate buildings to the place where they cut their teeth on computers the size of bank vaults.

I enrolled as a sophomore. One of my first afternoons at the school, I was eating lunch on the quad and listening to Slayer on my walkman. I was thinking about how much
I hated the school when Mickey strolled up. It was a warm fall day and gilded seniors leapt through the air for footballs with hands outstretched. Mickey wore steel-toed logging boots, a flannel shirt, and a dirty John Deere hat. “You want to get high?” he asked me.

I had seen him and thought he was probably pretty stupid. “Sure,” I said.

We went to Mickey’s Jeep where, for the remainder of the lunch period, we huffed Scotch Guard and listened to Mudhoney. The Jeep was filled with incomplete homework assignments and used paper cups that were sour with chew stains. Where normally there would have been a gearshift, there was a Rainier Beer tap instead.

Mickey held a saturated blue bandanna over his mouth and nose and inhaled until his eyes bulged. “I just got back from Russia,” he said.

“Did you learn Russian?” I asked.

He looked at me like I was insane. “I was at this school, Moscow School Twenty I didn’t learn shit. I stayed with a family though. I figured I’d do something nice for them, so I brought them a twenty-four pack of Charmin toilet paper and three cartons of Marlboros.”

He handed me the bandanna. I inhaled until my nostrils burned. “Did they like you?” I asked.

“The dad was some kind of oil oligarch. They had a Benz limo with leather seats and four houses. How was I supposed to know? When I gave them my gifts they looked at me like I just took a dump on their floor. None of them even smoked.”

I handed the bandanna back to Mickey. He huffed again and his red-veined horse eyes pinned me to the canvas seat of the Jeep. “What is it with you?” he asked. “What’s the problem?”
I knew what he meant. He wanted to know why I was always alone and listening to my walkman and everything. There were more immediate problems though. I was starting to see the same kind of floating flashes that you get when you stare at the sun too long. The flashes were whipping around like flies. “I don’t have a problem,” I said.

“You’re too cynical,” said Mickey “Come on. The black clothes? The death metal? That stuff’s tired. You have to think about being different in a new way. Me, as soon as I get out of here I’m gonna blow up. Do something different. You have to do something different. You have to be, like, an astronaut.”

I would have laughed but I was too high. The song was “Touch Me I’m Sick.” Instead of hearing touch me I’m sick, I heard touch me I’m Eli. “Can we please turn the music down?” I asked.

Mickey said, “What you need is a nickname.”

“Can we please turn the music down?”

He started laughing. The music was thrumming in my ears. When I closed my eyes, the spots didn’t go away. Mickey leaned in towards me, close enough to smell.

“From now on you’re the bird,” he said.

“Turn the music down,” I said. I was gasping.

Mickey kept laughing. “I will not turn the music down, Bird, until you admit that you’re a bird.”

I didn’t want to have a nickname. I especially didn’t want to be nicknamed the Bird. “What do I have in common with birds?” I asked.

“Bird, you have a beak nose and a protruding chin,” said Mickey. “And you’re fidgety.” He cackled. “Fidgety like a bird.” Mickey flapped his arms up and down,
almost in tears. He sprayed a fresh batch of Scotch Guard onto the moist bandanna, buried his face in it, and turned the music up. He offered me the rag and I declined. Mickey shook his head. “No one likes a pussy Bird,” he said, before falling into back into laughter. I waited in terror for the song to mention my name again. It never did.

After that, Mickey and I were ever after inseparable. When my mom left that year, it was Mickey that came to stay with me for two weeks. We went to college together at an expensively mediocre private university in the east. We lived in unsanitary conditions and managed to graduate. When I came back after the incident in Japan with my tail between my legs, the debts of my school loans no better for my absence, it was Mickey that got me my present job selling the women of Seattle overpriced shoes.

I go into the men’s room. Mickey’s in there flexing with his shirt off, running his fingers through his chest hair with nothing so much as satisfaction. He isn’t embarrassed. His shoulders roll with muscle. He doesn’t look away from the mirror even though he knows I’m watching.

He has muscles all right, Mickey does, from his vigorous efforts at Sound Mind & Body. He worries about my declining fitness, says I should go to the gym with him if for no other reason than to ride the exercise bike and watch the anxious cans of the girls on their elliptical trainers. One time I tried. Those little cans were nice, I admit, but it was too spooky in there. I was on the bike, legs pumping, headphones on, watching CNN, when I realized that not only was I a machine, but I was a dying machine. I get dark feelings like that all the time. Anyway, forget the gym. Those gym guys look like freaks. Besides, I prefer to be rock star skinny. It’s more natural, and I have the cheekbones for it.
I have the long elegant fingers and the skinny waist. I’m a lean, handsome motherfucker these days. I’ve never looked better.

Mickey begins, slowly, and with great pleasure, to button up his pink gingham button down. He can wear these flaming shirts and pull it off because he’s so hairy. I lean against the wall while I watch him pull his suspenders on. I say, “Problems, Mickey…you have problems.”

Mickey moves his face from side to side to examine the line of his chin. “Bird, Bird, Bird,” he says. “What are you going to do with yourself? Jesus I’m a good looking man. Admit it. I’m a good-looking man. Even your mom thinks I’m a good looking man.”

Mickey of the mainline: porn, coke, liquor, money, Jack in the Box. Somehow, he takes care of himself. He is an all right looking man, in a Burt Reynolds way, but you won’t catch me complimenting Mickey. The last thing he needs is more confidence. I say, “I think you’re losing it Mickey. You’re starting to get love handles.”

Mickey hustles his balls and smirks. “You don’t even want to start with me Bird,” he says. “Do you know you look more like a bird every day?”

Mickey was on TV while I was teaching English in Japan. He was on there hyping Seattle’s famous tech stocks during the boom years, his hair jelled, his smile loose and convincing. “Buy,” he said. “Buy buy buy.” When the market crashed, the local networks played the tapes of Mickey telling everyone to get out their checkbooks. He was fired. That’s how he got into the shoe game.

Out on the floor, it’s the usual numbing boredom. I know what you’re thinking. You suspect that I think I’m above selling shoes. You probably think it’s a perfectly
reasonable way to slog through the service industry. Let me tell you something. My college education cost over a hundred thousand dollars. I am above selling shoes. It’s fucking ridiculous. What’s even worse is that I’m bad at it.

Mickey can move it. Like a kid in Tijuana with a box of Chiclets he can move it. For him, it’s all about intimidation and confidence. He says things like, “You can’t live without this shoe,” and “Don’t walk away. You’ll regret it.” The mystery for me is how he manages to muster so much earnestness without throwing up. I watch him ring up sales for his rich old personals while I’m forced to move Skechers to the barely legal and under crowd to make my draw. I hate these girls. Mickey jokes about looking up their skirts and everything, but they’re far too sweet and innocent and stupid to do a thing for me.

Kat. Kat is a different case altogether. She’s this girl that I have a sort of relationship with without all of the talking and dinner and other stuff. I’ve been seeing her for a couple of months and I almost never think about anyone else when I jerk off. During my first break I rub one out in the men’s left-handed in about a minute. I get no further than Kat above me with a fist full of my hair and its gush gush into the toilet bowl. I barely sell a thing all day and before I know it it’s time for the weekly meeting.

Every Wednesday at lunch we have a meeting of the sales force. Our boss is named Tim and he’s a giant Minnesotan of Scandinavian descent. He looks like one of those titanic Swedes you see on morning ESPN running relay races where they use a refrigerator as a baton. Tim’s very much the captain of sales with his Zig Ziegler tapes and his motivational pep talks—the spawn, Mickey and I speculate, of farm working giants with missing teeth and fingers. Tim has that hearty Nordic look: six three, blunt features, white
blond hair that he wears slicked back. The combination of his looks and his inspirational speeches spooks me to no end.

We’re sitting in the stockroom, listening to Tim go on. Mickey nudges me in the ribs but it’s no use. Tim has it in for me. I can barely stand to look at him, and I’m always forgetting his acronyms. Tim stuffs his hands into his slacks and launches into what is sure to be a parable about motivation. “I’m going to talk about buying a mattress,” says Tim, pacing in front of the whiteboard in the stockroom where Mickey’s name is writ large with a #1 next to it. We all nod, but not like Mickey, who almost slaps his chest with his chin. Tim keeps pacing. “I went into a mattress store the other day. Can I tell you something? I don’t even know why I went in there. I didn’t even want to buy a mattress. Who knows? The point is, I went in. Here came the salesman. A mattress salesman. Balding. Overweight. Bad suit. Bad bad suit. Do you know what he said to me? Not hey Not may I help you. No. Hold on a minute there sir, he said. Wait wait, he said. How did you find this store, he said.”

Tim stops for a minute to let the gravity of the technique sink in, really staring us down. “I told him the truth. I wasn’t even thinking about it. I was just walking by, and I happened to notice the mattress store, and I walked in. Do you know what he said then?”

Mickey shakes his head. He has no idea. I look over at Edgar, the worst shoe salesman in the world, and he’s sitting there digging in his ear with his finger and then staring at the wax in the light. Tim holds up his finger. It’s as long and thick as a hot dog. “First the guy looked me in the eye. Then he said, sir, I have to tell you that you just stumbled into the best goddamned mattress store in Seattle.”

Mickey nods.
Tim shakes his head in disbelief and admiration. "Needless to say. Yeah, I bought a mattress. I bought a mattress. I bought a box spring." He punches the wall and his face turns red. "I bought a freaking headboard. Conviction, gentlemen. Conviction. It reminds me of C.O.N.S."

C.O.N.S. stands for conviction overcomes nervous shoppers.

"Can I hear it?" asks Tim, cupping his hand to his ear.

We chant.

"I can't hear you," says Tim.

We shout again.

"That's more like it," says Tim. "Now get out there and move it kids."

After the meeting adjourns, Tim pulls me aside. "I want you to have a good month Eli," he says. "I have this weird gut feeling you're starting to slip a little. I'm starting to get a little concerned."

Nothing's more annoying than the way Tim is always saying how concerned he is about everything. There's no way to respond to someone when they tell you how concerned they are. "All right Tim," I say.

"C.O.N.S," says Tim. He holds out his forearm for me to bash with my own forearm. It's true, work has turned me into a whore. I bash with gusto.

I try to imagine Hannah while I'm out on the floor. All I have left is an out of focus smudge of a face, a face of clay, stuck to which are the chunky black frames. So I imagine her feet. I imagine her bare feet in my apartment and it fills me with a desire so
crippling that a large matron covered in denim has to tap me on the shoulder and ask me if there's anyone she can talk to that knows something about shoes.

It's the kind of sale that can lock the day's performance. "Listen mister," she starts, before I can even get a word in.

In another life she'd work at Sizzler, but the six carats on her ears tell me she has a certain kind of husband: mister flashy, I bet, the kind that wears suspenders and collects antique scrimshaw. Her wrinkled hands go to her hips. "We're going to have a family portrait where we run through a meadow holding hands. There are six of us. We need shoes, matching ones, or else God knows everything's ruined. Comprende?"

With considerable nauseous effort, I say "Si," and we both have a laugh. "I know exactly what you're looking for," I say. "I'm thinking its Timberland Time."

Do you see why it's not a perfectly acceptable job yet? Honest work, you say. You try it. See if you can last a day.

I convince the woman to buy matching Timberland boots for her family of six. I find the boots in men's shoes, children's shoes, and my own department. The woman says she likes my hustle and gives me her information. In this job, his is what counts for a home run. Seventy-five bucks and a new personal in exchange for my dignity—I'd be better off stripping. Mickey nods at me from across the floor, where he's doing a magic trick, pulling a quarter out of the ear of a woman that must be a hundred and ten.

All day long, I wait for my cell phone to ring. I keep pulling it out of my pocket and staring at it to make sure it's on. We're not even supposed to have them on the floor, but I don't want to miss it if Janos calls. He doesn't call. He doesn't leave a message. Nothing. Maybe the whole thing was some kind of joke. The day drags by, tick after tick.
By the time our shift's over, Mickey's moved a truckload. Tim announces his name over the intercom. Mickey shrugs his shoulders and snaps his suspenders like he can't believe it.

Out into the dirty wet dark come Mickey and I in our trim suits. Despite my complaints, at least you can say this for the early dark of winter: there's an honesty to it. No one smiles at night, and that alone is a relief. I can't imagine living in some horrible city like Los Angeles where the sun is so unrelenting that it forces people to pretend they're happy. Los Angeles is like the spookers' world headquarters. The one time I was there I saw them, in the grocery store, naturally—the tanned spookers loitering around the meat section waiting for someone to talk to. You can't blame them, maybe; maybe they have no other outlet for their idiot cheer. So there they end up, in that cold florescence, handing you a packet of specialty sausages and saying things like, "Put those suckers on the grill and thank me later!"

The rain tortures Mickey. He'd be much happier in a place where everyone bakes their oiled flesh at poolside—a city like Orlando. He squints in the dark. "Drink?" he asks.

I shrug. Poor Mickey, he needs me to drink with him. This city is killing him. So why does he stay? Why do so many of us stay? What are all these people doing here? It's the dark, the mystery. The women in the bars. The women in the stores. The women on the streets. The real women. The real women, the ones that make you gnaw your tongue: those women are all cordoned off the way Hannah is. This is a theory of Mickey's. You never even get to see the real women. Unless maybe, you answer a personal ad.
We go into a bar like all of the bars we go to. Not too long ago there was something dirty about bars in Seattle. It was the leftover sailor smell of ashes and vomit rubbed into the wood. Even for me, come lately, come too late, there were bars of the old style when I came of age. There were bars where you could tell a black pimp how much you admired his white suit and gators without getting your ass kicked. There was something about that dirty neon—some kind of equality it imposed.

These new bars are all about segregation. Out are the torn booths and the carved tables. Out are the grimy bathrooms with their scrawled warnings: *A tisket, a tasket, a condom, or a casket... blow job no questions... I'll suck you off... I'll rape you... Asian chicks are easy... Fuck you whitey.* Here instead are Mickey and I surrounded by smoked glass, uncomfortable stools, cell phones, and red lights. Here we are with loosened ties, herded into to the yuppie shit holes that neither one of us likes. But they will herd you somewhere, these new bars. They suck you in.

Mickey props his hairy forearms on the bar and orders two vodka martinis. He says, "I like mine dirty," and gives the bartender a wink. He's a happy man, Mickey, buying us drinks. He's engaged to this twenty-two year old girl named Tanya that, three years ago, changed her name to Sylvie. She's one of those, though in this case I can't say I blame her. Tanya is the name of a fifteen-year-old girl dragged onto a talk show by her mother because she dresses like a lot lizard. And Sylvie is no lot lizard. She doesn't have to work. She's one of those, too. Her father is the founder of a smoky beef treats empire. Mickey met her in a bar like this one. Drinking is their part-time job. Cocaine is their hobby. She and Mickey are getting married in three weeks. Me, I'm no good with drugs. Never have been. They terrify me. It's all shaking and nerves; it's like sitting there
holding onto a lamp in an earthquake. You’d think I’d stop doing them. Still, I’m better than most. I don’t do the drugs too often. I don’t smoke. I don’t play video games. I don’t shove all that greasy junk food down my throat like Mickey. Not anymore. I’m over all of it. I’m looking for something real.

Yeah, he’s a happy man, Mickey, when he waits for the first drink to come. He’ll go home to Sylvie, bang her breathless if he’s not too drunk, and wake up refreshed for another day of moving it. In three weeks he’ll marry into more money than he can possibly spend. Not that he doesn’t have his demons. Mickey gets nasty when he drinks. All that insecurity inside him comes crawling out and when it does things start to break.

The bar may have all the plastic yuppie touches, but with its deejays and its stiff drinks, it makes a ploy to the ritzy hipsters too. Mickey slurps down his martini in one gulp and lights a cigarette. “She’s killing me,” he says, smoke coming from his nose in a blue plume. “Do you know what she said last night? She told me that I have substance abuse problems. She has substance abuse problems. I have a job.”

“She’s one of those tan girls,” I say, bored. I take out my phone and make sure it’s on. “You’ve got to watch tan girls in Seattle.”

A lull. A silence filled by gulping. Three shots of tequila for Mickey. He always starts with a martini and moves into the tequila. He offers to buy some for me but I’m done with all those gypsy drinks. I’m so in control it’s a joke. The night gets louder. In they come, the Belltown betties in their tight skirts and heavy make-up looking for pretty boys with money. Angry Ukrainians whisper in the booths, dealing, passing business cards. It’s beautiful, even after only one drink. The hipster girls with their gag retro sailor tattoos on their arms, the drone of the music: the beats and the bass, the lapping of a flute,
more bass, looping and looping. Here we go. I blink at the girls. They blink back. Mickey orders three more shots and a beer back—a Chief Sealth I.P.A. from a local microbrewery.

My girl from the conversation booth, the one I was telling Janos about, comes in wearing a ripped dress and stockings with horizontal stripes. She’s Egyptian or something, dark. Like I said, she’s always got some kind of different costume. Tonight, those tights—they remind me of the wicked witch of the west. She lights her cigarette and stares at me through the haze of the bar. It’s her eyes that make her look Egyptian. They remind me of a cow’s eyes my fourth grade teacher brought in to show the class. They were suspended in formaldehyde and Cindy Simmons threw up on her desk until the janitor hunchbacked in with his magic orange powder and stiff blue rag.

The witch refuses to acknowledge me. It’s true. That’s part of what I love about her. For weeks, I’ve been going to her booth and she hasn’t said a word to me. Take me to your leader, I want to tell her, because there’s something to these mystery women. Somewhere in the city are the real desires, the blood and the gasp, and I want it. I begin to walk towards her. Mickey grabs me by the shoulder. I keep going, but the wicked witch of the west shakes her head. Pure disgust. I love it. Mickey squeezes my arm hard and I turn around.

Mickey’s face when he’s drinking is a thing to behold. It’s the red eyes, the locked jaw, the hairy eyebrows crawling towards his nose and flatlining again: the face of a hairy man of passions. He knocks over his beer.

The bartender struts over and points at us. She’s a mean looking thing, what with the metallic rod jutting through her chin and some kind of necklace tattooed around her
neck. She’s all tattoos that were cool five years ago. There’s a goofy emo angel flying up her forearm. “Out,” she says.

“Make me,” says Mickey. He sneers. He’s only joking, unless he snuck off to the bathroom when I was heartsick over the witch. Mickey looks at her shoes and pans up to her face. “You’d pay to fuck me,” he says, the big kidder.

Old Mickey. They have these thick primordial bastards that work the doors at bars like this. They’ll pick you up and throw you into the street like you’re a wet sock they found on the floor. I’ve seen it happen. I’d like to be one for just a day, to walk straight at the spookers and see them look into their shirts. That would be it.

I drag Mickey out by the arm.

The rain has stopped. In the winter, this is the only reprieve. The dark, the smear of sky, is dulled overhead by fog. A group of Asian girls passes by, maybe Koreans, smoking cigarettes in their long coats and leaning into each other. Mickey stops and stares at them. “I love them,” he says.

“You’re a sick bastard,” I say. “You’re getting married in three weeks.”

“That’s the point, man. When I get married it’s all over.” Mickey slumps over onto a parking meter, holding it for support.

I flip open the phone again. Nothing. “You’ll be the same as you’ve always been,” I say.

“I’m done with it. I’m done with it all. The blow especially. It’s the mornings. How did I get so drunk?”

The Asian girls look at Mickey and giggle. Mickey shakes his head. “Why don’t Asian chicks like me?” he asks.
I don’t feel it’s my duty to point out to Mickey that he has feet like a hobbit and he can barely stand up. Instead, I insult him more tenderly. “They don’t like you because you’re a fat tub of shit,” I say.

“Fuck off,” says Mickey. “I’m serious.” He uses the parking meter like a crutch.

This dark is something. The pack of Asian hotties move down into the shadows with their cigarettes bobbing in the fog. If only the morning would never come. Restless energy drives me at night. Mickey is the same. It’s in him now, his night-lust. Mickey does his best to be a womanizer. “What Sylvie doesn’t know Sylvie doesn’t know,” he says, staring after the girls.

Mickey bores me. This city bores me. Not only is it boring, but it’s beyond dreary. I look up. What a sky. To see shrieking man-sized bats drop from its black expanse with outstretched claws wouldn’t surprise. It used to be that the downtown was dark, according to those who were here. There were t-shirts for sale: “Would the last one to leave Seattle please turn out the lights?” Now, you can go into FAO Schwartz at ten and buy a teddy bear the size of a Volkswagen. The loud crowds, even on this Thursday night, swirl around. Mickey looks—it’s almost touching—pained. “I think I’ll just go home,” he says.

“You should,” I say. “Go home and see Sylvie.”

He lets go of the parking meter and pitches violently to the left. “I should go home,” he says.

“You driving?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says. “I’m fine.”

Mickey looks even sadder. "What are you doing?" he asks. He doesn't like to miss out. "I'm going home," I say. He nods and slumps down the street. I look at my phone one last time and figure oh well, there's always Kat.

Kat's terrible. I'll tell you that straight off, before you even meet her. We met at Overland. Now she manages a hedge fund. She did it all right, Kat did: Yale, the year abroad, two years on Wall Street as an analyst. She's an icy robot in training.

Once, I saw her on the street with all of these boys that work for her. She plucks them right out of college, the earnest frat boys, and works them into the ground. They swirl around her like atoms and she never even looks at them. I bet they can't get enough; I bet they're always rubbing one out and thinking about Kat with one of her short blue skirts hiked up around her waist, her blouse untucked and ripped open, pearls dangling between her tits while she sips an Americano and tells them to get busy. All these frat boys, that's what they want—to be dominated, but they can't admit it. They don't know the score. They don't know how to give in. That's why Kat likes me. I know what she needs.

She answers the door in a Kimono, Kat does. Her hands are on her hips. There aren't enough like her in the city, the truly icy. You can see it in her long legs, her flat chest, her pinched cheeks. All eyes and bones. She likes to be hungry just like I do. Lately, I've hardly been eating. When you don't eat so much you can feel all your muscles. I bet Kat knows that feeling.

Her best feature is her eyes. She says her grandmother was Chinese. I don't know about all that, but whatever. She's mostly Polish, I think. Her full name is Katrina. Other than that, I don't know all that much about her. I know her dad is a gangster and her mom
was a showgirl. I know there are gold faucets in the bathroom at her parent’s house. I know there are peacocks roaming around in the back yard over there, and I know that looking into her eyes puts a delicious chill on me. It’s like a cold shower after hours in a sauna. God help me. Her apartment. It’s awful. It’s an Ikea catalogue. I mean this in the most literal way possible. There’s not a single item that would personalize Kat one way or another. Not even a photo. She’s my ghost girl, high above the city in her apartment, the shimmering lights of the city below her, Mount Rainier hulking like a fortress out there in the dark. I sometimes wonder if I only come for the lights, spread out as they are like a net of flashes, sparser and sparser as they move towards the squat warehouses to the south—past our futuristic new stadiums and their slick concrete parking structures.

“What do you want Bird?” asks Kat. She knows I hate her calling me Bird. That’s why she does it.

I push my way in. Every single item in the apartment is a shade of beige. A book and a cup of tea are on the beige coffee table. During the day she manages six hundred million dollars. During the night she reads books and drinks tea.

“I’m thinking of going to bed,” Kat says, flopping on a beige couch and crossing her legs. She always smells clean and lotioned, like she spent the whole day being rubbed and scrubbed with tea leaves. The smell’s on her hands, behind her ears, hot on her throat. We’ve done this twenty times. Thirty times. I’ve been here less than three months. I never call. There are probably others. Not that I really care.

I loosen my tie. “What are you reading?” I ask.

Kat holds it up and rolls her eyes.

I read. It’s a novel by one Sue Grafton. “Sue Grafton?”
Kat stands up and pushes me down to my knees. Enough playing around. Don’t worry, we know our roles. Kat rubs her foot against my stomach. She makes her finger into a hook, sticks it in my mouth, and jerks my head so I’m looking up at her. “Who’s Sue Grafton?” she asks. “You want to know who Sue Grafton is?”

I nod. Kat takes the finger out of my mouth. I chase it with my tongue the way a fish chases food. Kat grabs a fist full of my hair. “A writer,” she says. “A is for Alibi. B is for Burglar. C is for Corpse. D is for—”

“Death?” I ask.

She pulls the hair so hard I let out a little squeal. “Deadbeat,” she says.

I say, “Does it go all the way to Z?”

“You’re so bad,” she says.

You can imagine where it goes from here. There’s a mirror on the wall and I watch Kat’s face—her closed eyes, her open mouth, her horse white teeth. Her icy blond hair moves uniformly as she bounces. She throws her book down. I used to do it with her in the missionary style and sigh with gratitude, but then I figured it out. Now it’s strictly gypsy shit.

Afterwards, the city lights blink below me like an arcade full of vids. Kat brushes her hair in the mirror. “Isn’t it time for someone to leave now?” she jokes.

I laugh and sit there watching her. Efficient movements are the rule. She’s like some kind of sinister hummingbird. It’s the quick movements of her hands, the rush of steps after she puts the brush down and marches over to re-warm the water for yet another cup of tea. She picks up the Sue Grafton book, takes a bookmark from the back, and places it cover down. “Fly away birdie,” she says.
I sit up and tuck in my shirt. "Maybe I want to spend the night?"

Kat cinches the belt of her kimono. "Maybe I'll stay the night," she says, in the most mocking way possible. She points at me. "Out. I have work to do."

I put on my jacket and yawn.

At street level, the sky is a uniform black now. I'm sober, sated, in control. I look up to find the apartment I just came from, where Kat is, no doubt, reading and sipping tea like nothing happened. I check the phone again. Nothing. It's an eerie walk home. At this hour, those that would be out have shambled off to the grottoes under the freeway or collapsed onto the vents blowing hot air up from beneath the street. I'm alone out here. I never want it to end.
The morning sky takes a long, self-satisfied piss on Seattle, as is its custom in the winter. The radiator blasts its heat. The room is sour with my breath. There's no way to sleep naked, uncovered, in the middle of winter, and yet, thanks to the devil radiator, there's no other choice. So here I am, naked, too lazy to jerk off, wondering what to do. No work until later, much later. Every strategy I devise to attack the day produces only the sensation that when I move nothing will happen.

After an hour of contemplation, I decide to wiggle my toe. This I attempt, though the results are inconclusive. I lean my head forward and stare at the pale toe. It's wiggling. There's an itchy bump on my shoulder—a spider bite, no doubt. It's embarrassing, but sometimes, the slightest thing can make me weep in the morning. Shrieking from outside, for example, or The Today Show. Mornings just get me. I don't
know. Maybe it's the apartment. One of these days, I'm going to wake up in a civilized environment. These days, though, I'm always waking up alone in my shithole. It's depressing. In such emergencies, I can usually calm myself by throwing on a movie or digging under the bed for the Nike shoebox and its crisp bills. I sometimes lift them up to my nose and smell them. I shuffle them like cards. Some days, if I find one that is too wrinkled, I iron it on the board that flips out of the yellow wall.

This morning, I opt for a film. After browsing through my collection, I select *Anal Hospital*. It's one I got from Mickey. He gave it to me because he said the production values were shit and it featured a bunch of doctors and nurses, which Mickey thought cliché.

I'm five minutes in, starting to get a little worked up, when the phone rings. I let the machine get it while I stare at the ceiling. The voice of my mother fills my apartment. "Eli?" she says. "Eliiiiiiiiiiah? Are you there. Sweetie. Pick up the phone. Okay. Call me back as soon as you can. I've had quite a night. I caught a gang of neighborhood kids trying to make Monty eat an old soup can."

On the screen, T.T. Long, playing this guy named Doctor Tush, is giving it to two nurses at once, really going for it. It just doesn't seem right with Mom's voice filling the room in its sing-song way. I flip the movie off while Mom goes on about Monty. Monty is this scurvy goat my mom just had to have. She rescued him from a petting zoo after she saw child after child in a troupe of elementary schoolers pinch him. They've tracked him down, these bored kids out where she lives. They continue their campaign of terror despite my mom's threats to call the police and sue them for animal cruelty.
Mom goes on, as she will. “It’s not fair,” she says. “They know he likes to lick the glue. They know he’ll eat the paper. I just worry that one time I won’t get there and he’ll go too far. What if he eats the can? He’s a sensitive goat, Eli. He won’t be able to take it. Call me, please. I’m worried about you.”

She hangs up. I should call Mom back but I know if I call her it’ll be something like a three hour lecture. Mom’s a talker and she kind of loses it. She already had the one breakdown when she was in her late thirties, right before she left. I don’t want to be there for the next one. The breakdown wasn’t the sort of thing where she threatened the neighbor girl with a pair of scissors or anything. She didn’t have delusions that preachers on the TV were calling her a slut and a murderer, as some people did around that time.

Anyway, I don’t want to talk about it. Mom’s fine now. She lives on the Olympic Peninsula where she has two horses and works as a portrait photographer. There’s a place right by her house called the Olympic Game Farm. It’s this terrible and wonderful place, not far from her house, where you can pay five bucks and see exotic animals from the comfort of your car. The first time I went there I found myself behind an RV with a majestic eagle airbrushed onto its side. Mickey was with me, and he thought it’d be funny to drive out to the Game Farm and watch the buffalo slobber on the windshield. We smoked a joint on the way there. In we drove, too stoned to talk, past zebras, buffalo, and even the occasional ostrich. The RV in front of us stopped to stare at a rhinoceros chained to tractor tire that was filled with cement to give it extra weight. The RV wouldn’t move. For fifteen minutes, from its windows, came orbs of Wonder Bread the size of softballs. They hit the rhino on the snout, lodged in its flanks, bounced off it and trickled into puddles of stagnant water. Mickey was depressed. “Get me out of here,” he said. “Jesus.”
The weird thing was that I wanted to stay. There was something to it. There was something really honest about it.

I pick up the remote to flip the porn back on but the phone rings again. I pick it up, resigned to get the talk with my mom over with.

"Don’t tell me you’re asleep," says Janos.

My morning depression lifts the second I hear the voice. "I’ve been awake for hours," I say.

"Me too," says Janos. "I’ve been up all night. I never even went to sleep. We’re kindred spirits, Eli. Are you listening?"

"I’m listening."

"Right now. Right now, while I’m talking to you, she’s downstairs making sandwiches."

"Who?"

"Hannah."

I walk over to the mirror. I’m a lean one, all right, and, for the record, I do not have a beak nose or a protruding chin. Mickey has a projection disorder, in case you haven’t figured that out yet. "What kind of sandwiches?" I ask.

Janos coughs on the other end. "Did you just ask me what kind of sandwiches she was making? That’s funny. I have no idea. The point, Eli, is that she’s making something like two hundred sandwiches down there, and she’s going to take them down to Pioneer Square and hand them out to the bums. It’s the perfect opportunity for you. I want you to go down there and see if you can find a way to meet her. You get me here Eli? Go down there and help her and introduce yourself."

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I try to imagine how that would go. There’s no way to do it. I’d just end up embarrassing myself. “I’ll try to get down there and watch, Janos, but I don’t know. I’ve not got work.”

“What did I tell you before Eli? Do you think, when you’re flailing around on your death bed, that you’ll look back on your life and say you know what, I really wish I’d been more tentative? Don’t be tentative Eli. Go talk to her. Help her give out the sandwiches or something. Tell her the poor people fill you with sadness.”

“I have to go to work.”

“Fine. I’ll tell her to come see you.”

“What?”

“It’ll be fine.”

The line goes dead.

This whole thing is ridiculous. There’s no reason for me to be nervous because she’s probably in on the whole thing anyway. They probably made this whole elaborate fantasy up and they want to really play it out. Fine with me, but don’t act so mysterious about it. I decide to go spy on Hannah and see what happens.

I stroll down towards Pioneer Square in a putty colored suit, quite the young professional with a newspaper folded under one arm, using my umbrella like a cane. I buy a cappuccino from a girl in Rainier Square with glass skin and a spiked bracelet. I love these cynical baristas. They hate me. I don’t tip.

Pioneer Square. They’re cornering the spookers now. It used to be that they roamed about more. The people of Seattle encountered them in bars, the angry warm bars with their Eddie Money and their Heart and Pat Benatar on the jukebox and their Seahawks
#12 jersey-wearing Boeing drunks. You could piss next to a spooker in the stained urinals.

Now they herd them all here.

Now, parked on a bench, sipping hot overpriced coffee in the morning gloom, the thought of Hannah with all of her vigor makes me nervous and giddy at the same time. Pioneer Square, though, kind of has the spook on it. I can smell it in the intermittent rain. I can see it in the funereal palate of colors smeared across the sky like cold lard.

And it confronts me, as it will. There’s something about me that attracts spookers. It’s unbelievable. For this reason, I know a spooker when I see one. Here one comes with his feathered hair and his gold chain. *Hey buddy,* he thinks. *Hey pal. Hey big guy.* The anger runs fast in his walk. A comb sticks out the back pocket of his jeans. He stops two feet in front of me and stands there with his hands in his armpits. “How’s the pig life?” he asks me.


“Please,” I say.

My heart starts jacking. The coffee turns to sweat. I look back to my paper, hoping this feathered freak will get tired of me and spook off somewhere else. When I look back up, there he is, grinning like a bowl of cereal. He wags a finger at me.

When he walks away, he takes his comb out of his pocket and runs it through his feathered hair. I swear, it’s like I’m a salt lick for the deranged. I feel hot all over. My throat itches. There’s a slick ring of sweat around my neck. Normally, in such a state, I’d go home and crawl back into bed for an hour or so, but normally, Hannah Lee doesn’t waltz into Pioneer Square with three grocery bags from Larry’s and take a seat on the bench across from me.

Once I lock my eyes on her it’s impossible to look away. Hannah tucks the bags beneath her seat and crosses her legs. Around her small neck is a black scarf. A flowing gray skirt hangs down over the top of her boots (Bally, if I had to guess). Her black raincoat with vampy collar hangs well past her hips. Then there are the glasses. Really, it’s all about the glasses and maybe the rack. Here’s my pouty robot, bearing sandwiches for the hungry. Gone is the pinched face that I’d seen at the party. Instead, Hannah looks meditative with her flat lips and her crossed legs, her hands reaching up into her luxuriant mane to shake out the stray hairs. Show me something Hannah, I think. Give me something I can take home with me.

Pioneer Square is bleak but bustling. Skeletal trees shake in the breeze. Really, the square belongs to the homeless and the tourists. They co-mingle, defined by their objects. For the homeless it’s Styrofoam coolers, lumpy flour tortillas wrapped in tinfoil, the t-shirts of others (Yale University, Lake Washington Girl’s Volleyball, Microsoft Employee Fun Day). It’s army jackets and pungent blankets and wool caps; fold-out lawn chairs with
yellow and red and blue stripes; dogs that curl up and sleep; dogs that hold cups in their mouths to beg for change. It’s signs scribbled on ripped slabs of cardboard: *Will work for food... Vietnam veteran...Need money for beer.* It’s the children of tourists that wander by them. They’ve been brought to the city, apparently, to buy Doritos and stare at homeless people.

All of a sudden this old Thai guy opens a cooler and pulls out a lobster. He sets the lobster down on the cobbled ground and watches it. Immediately, sniffing spectacle, the children of the tourists lumber towards the thing. The lobster’s legs twitch like a spider’s. The children surround the lobster like an accident victim, really pumped about it. A pear-shaped boy sprints across the square towards the crowd, breathing hard, clutching a Sprite in one hand and a bag of flaming hot Cheetos in the other. He wears a glittering silver crucifix over a white t-shirt, and the powder of the Cheetos forms a tattoo of cheese from his chin to his belly button.

The Thai is this skinny old guy. His clothes whip around him: windbreaker, pressed khakis, stiff turquoise baseball cap. He looks no less surprised than the kids that there’s a lobster loose in downtown Seattle. The kids go crazy running up and down and pointing, but the Thai doesn’t get up from his seat on the cooler.

The Cheeto eater is a bossy little prick. “What is it?” he asks.

“Lobster,” says the Thai. Yes, he has a twitch. It rumbles through him and grabs his mouth at the last second, hooking it to the left.

The Cheeto eater yells, “It’s a lobster fish! It’s a lobster fish!”

Hannah wraps herself in her arms and smiles in the way I imagine she does when she sees a puppy. The bags are still tucked under the bench.
With a flourish, the Thai grabs the lobster and shoves it back in the cooler, then sits on the lid and seals his oddity from view. The children sneer at him. I imagine them roaming the city like torch-wielding Romanian villagers, demanding that people come out of their homes and produce exotic entertainments.

Hannah laughs and stomps her foot.

Here comes a kilted eccentric; he rides into the center of the square on a bicycle and begins to circle with his eyes closed, his forehead scrunched into concentration. It’s my hope he’ll lose his balance and crash to the cobbled ground. I have no use, I tell you, for these ridiculous kilt-wearing motherfuckers that I see around these days.

No such thoughts for Hannah. She closes her eyes and takes a deep city breath. She would like to be on a bicycle herself, no doubt, riding in circles, tossing out her sandwiches. That’s the sort of woman she is.

I’m not alone in my observations. A bearded spooker with aviator sunglasses moistens his lips with his purple tongue while he stares at Hannah. In his right hand there’s a can of malt liquor wrapped in a paper bag. He talks to himself while he looks at her. It’s all mumbles, but I can tell you what he’s saying. He’s telling her that it’s a life of minutes. He’s telling her that all he needs is five minutes of her time.

A much harder rain’s coming. I can smell it. The flimsy trees have the shakes. Time for the sandwiches Hannah. She stands up and looks around her, pulling the Larry’s bags up onto the bench. She takes out a sandwich. It’s in a zip-loc baggie. Dark bread. Romaine lettuce. She walks it towards the bearded spooker and holds it out like a communion wafer.
He nods his head and takes a sip of his liquor, but he doesn't stick his hand out. He
lets it stay at his side for an instant too long. Hannah frowns. Ask her, spooker, I think.
Ask her to take you to her house and scrub your hair with herbal shampoo. Tell her you'll
die if you can't go home with her. Make her pay for being so self-righteous.

No such luck. The hand comes up. It raises like the hand of man far older than the
spooker, emerging from folds of clothing, coming up white-blue in the gray morning,
shaking as Hannah smiles, as she places the thick sandwich in its quivering grasp.

The spooker looks at the sandwich and nods a thank you.

Hannah holds out her hand and when the spooker takes it she leans forward and
whispers something into his ear. You should see how sincere Hannah looks, whispering in
this guy's ear. They give each other a short squeeze and Hannah moves on.

She repeats her fake mother Theresa routine five times before the sky starts to
shake and crack. The wind picks up. The clouds scuttle across the sky. The first drops hit
the cobblestones. People scatter from the square, crawling under awnings, under bus stops.
Hannah disappears to wherever her car is. The spooker gets up slowly. Hunched over, he
withdraws the sandwich from the bag. He takes half of it down in one bite, his face tilted
up toward the rain.

The rain's a good thing for work. Outside, from the dreary smears of gray come
the women. There it is, beckoning them: the store, the yellow lights, the brass and marble.
Through the clouds of fragrance they come towards women's shoes, only to find Mickey
and I, snappy young movers in our suits and ties, shoes slick as roaches. We bounce on
our feet. Hey ladies, all you ladies, which of you ladies want to buy some shoes? We snap
and clap, tap our feet on the marble floor. Come one, come all, shoes here. Get your shoes here. Get your new shoes. And in they come, the raccoon-eyed women of Seattle, hair plastered to their foreheads, necks wrapped in silk scarves of eggplant and cranberry. It's a wet one out there, huh? How may I help you? Mam, you look like you could use some shopping therapy.

Mickey's in prime form, ringing it up left and right, down on one knee, up, jogging to the stockroom with earnest fix of jaw. I look for my mystery woman in the crowds. My pouty robot. My mother Sandwich. I've got it bad all right.

Then it happens. I look up and there's Hannah staring at the sales rack. Edgar the world's worst shoe salesman takes one look at her, gets scared, and moves to the other side of the floor. She's too icy. I watch while Mickey swoops in on her, smelling money from across the room. Obviously, he recognizes her within seconds.

"I'm Hannah Lee reporting live for KING 5," he says into an imaginary microphone. I watch Hannah wince. Mickey goes into his special money routine. All class. He says, "You look like a lady that would like to see the newest in from New York." This is his favorite line, but sometimes he'll throw in a Madame or, I shit you not, a mon dieu.

Hannah gives him a glorious stiff-arm. No words, even, for poor Mickey. No glance. Hannah just shakes her head and fixes her eyes on the sales rack.

"Why pay more, right?" asks Mickey. He means it as an insult.

She says nothing. Mickey slinks off. Because our store is so classy, strictly top drawer, there's a live piano player at all times. A bastardized ragtime floats towards my ears like the soundtrack for an abduction. I don't look at Hannah. I can't bear to. Her
image is already burned in my mind: black boots, soft gray skirt, longish raincoat with
bloodsucker collar pulled just aside to reveal her shapely rack; luxuriant brown hair pulled
into authoritative ponytail; chunky black glasses covering her wet little eyes. She’s the
kind that likes to be the boss all right. No problems there for Eli. Eli can be a diligent
assistant.

When I look up, she’s moved closer. She caresses a Jimmy Choo Tam Butterfly
Mule like a cheek. No more sales rack for Hannah, I guess. It’s just the shoe I would’ve
picked. A $470.00 casual from our boutique collection. It’s a shoe with deceptively
simple lines. Only a connoisseur would guess at its expense. The black glasses, the
posture. The sumptuous finish of the shoe. Hannah eyes me, cocks her head, and begins
to move, no, glide, across the marble floor in my direction. “I’m looking for Eli,” she says.

“That would be me. Size six?”

She looks me up and down and parts her bloody lips before she speaks. “Make it
quick,” she says.

“Of course.”

Mickey glares at me when I chug past him towards the stockroom. “Fucker” he
says.

I snap my fingers. “You look like the kind of lady that would like to see the newest
in from New York.”

Mickey shakes his head. “You’re a dirty fucker Bird.” He looks around to make
sure no one’s watching, then cups his hands beneath his pecks and bounces an imaginary
pair up and down like he’s really getting it. “Hannah Lee,” he says. “I always thought
she’d be a cunt in real life.”
The piano player, bless his heart, moves into “Unforgettable” while I float into the stockroom. How do I feel? I feel like I’m thirteen and I’m about to get some. Whatever the game is with Janos and Hannah, I’m about to play my part. In the corner of the stockroom I take a two minute timeout to tuck my hard-on into my belt.

When I come back bearing the boxes, there’s Hannah, pouting, slumped back in one of our upholstered club chairs like a little girl, her hands folded over her waist. The boots are Bally round toes; I can tell by the sheen as I get closer. They stop just below where the gray skirt starts, revealing an inch of milky skin. This isn’t a woman who you would picture handing gourmet sandwiches to the poor. She should be in a bathtub, cupping bubbles in her hands and blowing them at clusters of candles. I hold up the shoe. Hannah nods.

Humble Eli is making all the right moves. The tingle in my back is a riot. I kneel before her and unzip first one boot, than the other, with icy fingers. I move to slide one off.

Hannah moves it to the left, silly now. “So you know my husband, right?”

“Maybe,” I say. It comes out a little shaky.

Hannah strokes an errant curl behind her ear. “My husband said you were the young man to see about shoes. He’s very particular about his guys. He has them for everything. Pens, luggage, cars, watches. Apparently, you’ve become the shoe guy. I don’t buy it though.” Hannah squints her eyes behind her glasses. Her lips curl again. There’s a flash of sharp teeth. “You’re not like the other guys.”
I grab at the Bally boot again, to remove it, but she slides it away. I put the mule back in its tissue nest. If Hannah wants to play I know how to play. “I’m not sure I know what you’re talking about,” I say, in a voice that lets her know what I mean.

“Okay,” says Hannah, really sarcastic. She gives me a funny look. She sets the booted foot down solidly and stares at it. I begin to remove it, curling down the flaps and slipping it off slowly. Her foot is bare. Her ankle is sharp with bone, and her skin is a lifeless white, almost translucent, with subtle shadings of blue vein. She wiggles her toes. “For one thing, you’re under sixty. Well under sixty. You don’t have a single liver spot.”

“You just can’t see them,” I say, unpeeling the other boot.

Hannah rolls her eyes, pretending she thinks this is all a joke. “Admit it, Eli, you know my husband. My husband told me that you know him. I don’t see why you’d lie about it.”

I lie because I know that’s exactly what she wants. “Maybe,” I say. I pick up her bare foot and prepare to slide it into the delicate mule. Where the boots were, on the slender flats of her calves, there are brown hairs that crimp in all different directions. I know one thing. Women that don’t shave their legs like the gypsy stuff.

I slide the shoe on, masking the dirty foot in butterscotch flesh. “What did you say your husband’s name was?” I ask. I look up and give Hannah a wink.

The other shoe goes on. Hannah gives me this strange look.

I take a step back. “You want to move around a little?” I ask, really going for it with the bedroom voice.
Hannah holds her shoes up like a little girl looking at her feet in bed. "I think this is all a little tiresome Eli," she says. "Do you always talk to women like this? It's really very offensive, and I want to know how you know my husband."

My hard-on, in case you’re wondering, strains against the vice grip of my belt. I imagine it white, the tip of a finger with a tourniquet at the knuckle. The extra blood is all in my head. I can hear it pulsing. If she wants me to play along I’ll play along. "We’ve met once or twice," I say. "He’s been in the store. I’m the son of a client of his." I say it like a bad actor rehearsing his lines without any inflection.

Hannah pinches her lips. "This is ridiculous," she says. The expression on her face goes all wrong—it curdles into a sneer. She takes the shoes off, kicking one and then the other by scraping at the heels. She hangs her head down and zips up her boots. "If you expect me to buy shoes from some slimeball you’re gravely mistaken. I won’t be insulted by dishonesty. I won’t tolerate it."

I realize she isn’t kidding. "Wait," I say. "Let me explain."

"I’ve had a terrible day," she says. "When I tell him about this you’ll get a call. I hope for your sake you think of an excuse."

I feel the sweat on my neck. "If you give me a minute," I say.

Hannah points at me. "Tell me you’re sorry or I’ll scream."

"What?"

"In two seconds I’m going to shriek," she says.

Mickey looks over from where he’s helping a blue-hair with some Mephisto walkers. I’ve heard his bit about the Mephistos before...they’re so comfortable you’ll wear them to bed.
Hannah jumps up. She’s serious. I hold out my hands. “Can we just go somewhere else?” I ask. Hannah’s face is hot. Too late. “Please don’t,” I say.

She uncorks a fantastic shriek. Mickey drops a box. A woman puts a hand over her daughter’s eyes. The piano player mutes the keys with his hands.

Hannah grabs her purse. “Don’t fuck with me Eli. When I ask a question I want an answer,” she says.

The heels of her boots click on the floor when she storms out.

I sit down right there on the floor, my back against the base of the club chair, and close my eyes. Okay, maybe she isn’t in on it, but still. I mean, really, are you feeling me here? Isn’t she hot?

The piano player starts up again. I don’t know what it means, regrettably, to miss New Orleans. I pick up one of the discarded Jimmy Choos and hold its cool skin to my forehead. When I open my eyes, there’s Tim jogging towards me to shatter the moment, his great Scando head scanning the perimeter for casualties. Mickey smirks into his tie.

Tim says, “Uh uh I uh?” He shakes his head.

I pull myself up. “I have no idea Tim,” I say. I feel a knot in my stomach. A nervous squeeze of lust.

“Stockroom,” says Tim.

He leads me there by the arm. There, by the whiteboards with Mickey’s name on the top, he starts the inquiry. He paces around, his hands on his temples. “OK,” he says. “Calm down Tim. Just calm down. Deep breaths. Eli, do you want to explain to me what the freak just happened? Take it from the top. Give me the play by play.”
Tim won't be easy. I'm all worn out like I just had a super session. "I didn't do anything Tim," I say.


"I understand your concern Tim," I say. "This woman comes in, she asks if I can find a Jimmy Choo."

"Which one?"

"The butterfly ones."

"The mules?"

"Yeah."

"Nice," says Tim.

"I brought her the shoes. I've never seen her before in my life. She asks me if I know her husband. Tim, I don't know her husband. She kept saying I did. I told her to please calm down. She screamed. She left. Ask Mickey."

Tim says, "Oh, I'll ask Mickey. I'm warning you though Eli. I can't allow this. It's time for you to step up to the plate. It's time for you to crap or get off the pot. Kapisch?"


"All right," he says. He holds out his forearm. "Give me some."

I bash away.
I walk out of the store, blinking against the weather as I move into the night. I've ditched Mickey, slipped out before he can force me to explain Hannah stomping out of the store. No thank you, big guy, old pal, Eli needs a little time to think. There's the problem of food—the worst of all the necessities—and the lingering pinch of lust in my stomach. Maybe it's just hunger. I read somewhere, back there in college, that the way to look at art was to be hungry. I don't know, I think it was Hemingway talking about Cezanne. College wasn't exactly my finest hour. Anyway, whoever said it, I understand that feeling. It's like the hunger mimics the world around you. The hunger makes sense. A little poetic? Maybe. Maybe I'm just hungry for Kat, but it's too early. She'd still be at work. I decide head over to the Korean Grocery Store for provisions.
Grocery stores, I'll admit it, just kind of freak me out. I won't go to the big ones, and before I go into the little one by my apartment I always wait until it's empty. I stand outside, across the street, for a minute or so. The store is fluorescent. Neon Newport ads and Budweiser girls from ten years ago are plastered to the island where the counter is. At least it's empty I buy macaroni and cheese and a bottle of cheap white wine without incident.

The more I think about the incident at the store the more depressing it is. I really screwed that up, didn't I? If Janos is serious though, what am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to seduce someone that has no interest in being seduced? Someone that hands out sandwiches to the poor for fun? Here comes the shark, smelling blood: you've met your match, it says. The shark is a big cheese ball, in case you haven't noticed.

What's this, though, at the apartment? The radiator sleeps. The machine doesn't beep. There are no sobs or shouts from beyond the window I set the groceries down on the counter, kneel, and pull the Nike box out. It's there. The crisp bills are there. I pat them, add a five and some singles from the market, and push the box under the bed. Guam is good.

I measure out a quarter of the noodles from the box and make them plain, without cheese. This might be the time to inform you that everything you eat kills you: fruits are full of sugars and chemical bi-products, vegetables are marinated in cancer causing agents, and the meats, you don't even want to know about the meats. The only thing to do is to keep your meals small and simple. I got pretty heavy over there in Japan, sucking it down
without a thought, but I’ve lost twenty pounds since I got back to Seattle. I look like Christ. Japan, what a disaster that was.

I was a teacher of conversational English at the Hana School in Tokyo and, to tell you the truth, I really gave it the old college try for a while. I did. It was an ambitious young Eli that stormed Honshu offering free tutoring sessions during which sincere conversations spilled out in clipped phrases about, for example, the virtue of suffering. Imagine me in Japan. The sultry little schoolgirls, clean white socks licking up their calves, would swarm around me, put their hands on their porcelain cheeks and, I shit you not, shriek with lust. For a year, robot Tokyo hummed around me and I was a part of its pulse. But still, you wouldn’t have recognized me then. Not a chance. I was something different. And above all else, I had Mari. She started off as just a regular Saturday night thing, but then something went wrong.

I kind of fell for Mari. Sometimes I’d just sit for hours in my twentieth floor closet, imagining Mari walking through the crowds. I’d think about the way her boots would strike at the pavement, the way she wrapped herself in coats and smoked, the certain effect of a mobile Mari reaching up with lacquered finger to tuck a bleached strand of hair behind her ear. If only you could have seen me then, snug in the corner of my favorite bar, Mari at my side, denouncing Disney with my long hair while Mari smoked Camel after Camel and nodded in hushed agreement. It was almost a genuine bar with almost genuine Japanese punks, with unintelligible graffiti in the men’s and some in English: Baby...

Fresh...Cool... Die fuck. They served red wine and coke like they do in Spain. We talked about other places to live, places more alive than Tokyo. What about Seattle? What about
San Francisco? What about New York, Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Los Angeles?

"Dying or dead," I’d say, “Every one of them.”

Mari that burned half of her hair off in a drinking accident. She that memorized every line from *Top Gun*. She that was killed when a speeding cyclist crashed into her on the sidewalk and knocked her, head first, into the sparkling Tokyo street

A wretched ploy for sympathy? I don’t blame you for doubting. It’s not like I believed it when they told me. The point is that I began to crumble. The point is that I could have weathered it better. I could have been tougher. My dad survived Vietnam. My dad survived it when my mom had her breakdown. He survived it when she left him. He weathered the storms and endured.

I did it all wrong, falling like that. You should have heard me. I actually talked about marriage a couple of times. I was a chump. And when it was all over, I couldn’t do a thing.

After a time, I enjoyed with my students the static relationship that forms when those that recognize the futility of teaching meet with those that recognize the futility of learning. It was a convenient but hazardous marriage, and it was only a matter of time until one of my students complained. It was a new student, a mother of two, eager for self-improvement, that really hated the room dynamic. I should explain what the room dynamic became. My usual deal was to write a phrase on the whiteboard. The morning the new student came, I’d written *love will tear us apart*. My obligations to the Hana School fulfilled, I stared out the window for forty minutes, letting my students contemplate the phrase in silence. My new student looked around the room. She had a face full of B movie actress exasperation that was unusual for a Japanese. Finally, she raised her hand in
a way that suggested she needed to relieve a bodily urge. I ignored her. After a time, she began to grunt. I sighed and called on her.

“Would you like me to do something?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “I’d like you to do nothing.” I thought our dialogue concluded, and moved back towards my perch at the window. The student got up and walked out in a huff.

She came back with Oshi-san, director of the Hana School. Tim would have liked Oshi-san; he was a man that had, above all else, a talent for being concerned. Both the director and the eager student (I shall refer to her from now on as the savant) were red-faced, not unlike inflamed anuses, and both had whipped themselves into quite a state.

“What exactly is going on here?” Oshi-san asked.

“Nothing’s going on,” I said.

Savant jabbed a finger at me. “He expects us to do nothing. He expects us to be silent.”

Oshi-san looked around the classroom. “Is this true?” he asked.

“It could be considered true,” I said.

“You abuse your privilege,” said Oshi-san. “You owe these students an apology.”

The Japanese and their apologies. I had no energy.

“Gather your things,” said Oshi-san.

I had no things, save a dry-erase marker. I explained this to Oshi-san.

“Take your dry-erase marker,” he said.
I took my blue marker and walked out the door, a white ghost, to the accompaniment of loud applause by my former students. I don't know if the students clapped because they liked me or hated me or what.

I thought about getting another job, or lingering in Tokyo, but without Mari, the city was poisoned. My fellow English teachers, wide-eyed men, always men, from all of America's fine regions, spent their wages in bars looking for girls. I was into it for a while, but I couldn't shake the onset of the feeling that there was something disgusting about it. I lacked the conviction that Tokyo offered genuine exile, and those fellow teachers began to fill me with hatred. Watching them loll around in the bars, Japanese girls on their arms, made me sick. Even worse was when they went Japanese: the bows, the Arigotos, the kimono and slippers to wear around the apartment—it was a joke. I wanted to yank them from their barstools and scream McDonald's jingles at them.

I let the machine answer the phone. Mickey. "You okay?" he shouts. "Bird, you're a disaster. What happened? Put on something vintage and mess up your hair. Let's go drink on the hill."

I should call him back. I should call a lot of people back. For a week I've put off calling my dad. The last time I saw him he took me to this Latvian massage parlor in Tacoma. You know, a little male bonding, a little rub-down, a little eye candy. We were meant, I suppose, to towel-slap each other on the ass in the locker room and then go out for steaks and martinis. Like Frank and Dean we were to have a day of male fun filled with discussions about foreign automobiles and muscular youths and their feats of running, jumping, and catching. Dad hadn't ever offered something like that before.
How did Eli handle it? You’ll be surprised to know that I didn’t handle it well at all. Those ham-fisted Latvian women had it in for me. They muscled around my ribs; they stuck their meaty fingers deep in the tender muscles of my thighs; they scowled and told me to relax or it would be painful. I couldn’t relax. It was very painful. They really let me have it. You can imagine. When I screamed out once it was frowned upon. “Shut up,” came the command from somewhere above me, followed by the order to relax. I could feel the tearing muscle. It was good. It was too good. As is often the case in when confronted with emergency, I resorted to cliché. Think about baseball, I told myself. My mind ran to the old Mariner heroes: Harold Reynolds, Steve Balboni, Danny Tartabull. I settle in Balboni, imagining his drinker’s gut, his bald head, his fat man’s trot around the bases. Nothing.

When I flipped over, as ordered, on my back, the towel leapt off me. A shriek, high and foreign, came from above. A curse? A wail to God? Who knows. Help was called. Threats were made. My dad and I were told we weren’t welcome back. I limped out to see my dad in the locker room. There he was, tan and happy. While the rest of the world applies sunscreen, my dad uses a product called Vengeance that actually magnifies the effect of the sun times ten. He puts that stuff on and goes to the tanning beds. He doesn’t look tan, he looks orange. My orange-skinned father sat there waiting for me, smelling like he’d been marinating in Jamaica Bay Rum for a week. He rolled his from side to side. “Oh Eli,” he said.

I
Past the Tully’s “T” we drove towards Seattle. The Tully’s “T” is this huge neon sign you pass on I-5. It had, for as long as I could remember, been the Rainier “R.” Rainier Beer was the proud sponsor of the functional alcoholism of my youth, and for its red neon “R,” to replaced with a neon “T,” the symbol of yet another local brand of roasted bean, was too much.

I pour a glass of white wine and take it to the window. A streetlight flashes on saturated concrete, and into this spotlight creeps this disaster of a female dog. It doesn’t lie down so much as it collapses. I know that it’s a female dog because it has teats, at least twelve pink teats. The teats are dusted with white hair—the dog looks bleached—and it has pink eyes. I should call my dad back. *Dad, yes, are you there? I’m fine. An albino bitch has crawled beneath my window to drown in a puddle.*

The dog’s eyes are closed, and though I think I see its stomach moving it’s hard to tell with the dark. The pink teats sag into the puddle. I take a sip of wine and knock at the glass, hoping to wake the beast and make it go off to die somewhere else. Its head doesn’t move. I set my wine down, open the grimy window, and lean out into the drizzle. The rain stings my head. If I could whistle I’d whistle, but I never learned how. “Hey dog,” I yell.

The dog is still. This is the kind of thing that happens to me in this city. The scent of it. The scent of the dying dog will fill the apartment with death no matter how I hold the windows shut. I don’t need it, I tell you. The stench. The phone calls, the inquiries, the filling out of countless forms for the authorities. It’s not a good sign.
The rain is freezing. The air, for now, cold and sharp enough to burn a little in the lungs. Three people pass by the dog. They look up at me, down at the dog, and keep walking. It’s your problem buddy. It’s your deal pal.

A little girl comes skipping down the street in a miniature version of the Burberry raincoats favored by bond traders and TV news personalities on assignment. The little girl skips ahead of her protector. The protector—armed for inclement weather in gore-tex jacket, hiking boots, and fleece pants—is too far back to warn. She shouts, but the girl, this beloved little creature, takes off for the dog at a run with her little girlish love for all of God’s creatures—even dirty dying albino dogs drowning in puddles. The little girl leans over, hands on her leggings, and gives the dog a pat on the head that isn’t so much a pat as a blessing. The dog raises its head, and then, to the little girl’s delight, pulls itself up, wobbling on arthritic limbs, and limps off. The protector shouts, “Carly!” But it’s too late. This future professional has saved me.

I’m about to celebrate by throwing on a little music and finishing my wine when the buzzer rings. I grab a blanket and wrap it around my shoulders. It’s Mickey, no doubt, ready to drag me out. I press the intercom. “Yeah,” I say.

“It’s Janos.”

“What do you want?”

“I want to take you to go see the Ice Capades. What do you think I want? I want to come upstairs and talk. Buzz me up.”

I get a little nervous at the thought of old le billionaire coming over to chat, but I won’t let on. “Why?” I ask.

“Hit the buzzer Eli,” says Janos.
He's dressed in all black: black jeans, black turtleneck, black boots, and black North Face shell.

The blanket is around my shoulders like a cape. "She's insane Janos," I say. "You didn’t tell me she’s insane. She almost got me fired." My stomach tingles when I think about it.

Janos surveys the apartment. "What are you, a monk? This is terrible." He picks up the wine bottle on the counter, shakes his head at it, and pours himself a glass. "She's not insane, Eli, she's passionate. I wouldn't have married someone who wasn't passionate. You've managed to infuriate her in one day. Impressive. Very impressive. I think she might be interested Eli." He takes a sip of the wine and coughs. Then his face suddenly brightens. I realize I've never seen him smile. He's got the spook smile: all teeth. "One day, and you've managed to fascinate her. I underestimated you Eli. You might be some kind of genius." He smiles like he just bit the head off a pigeon.

I've managed to do something. I'm just not sure what. I take the cape off and head for the wine bottle. "How did you get my address Janos?"

"It's in the phone book genius. I got your last name because my wife wanted to lodge a complaint."

"Shit."

"No, it's perfect," he says. He rubs his hands together. "I'll tell her I did it. I'll tell her I took care of it, and I'll tell her that you want her to go down to the store so you can apologize in person. You following me here Eli? This is moving. This is happening. She won't be able to help herself. She'll think you're really sorry. What I want you to do
is tell her you’ve been going though difficulties lately. She’s very interested in difficulties.”

“I don’t know Janos.”

“I told you you’d have to trust me, Eli, didn’t I?”

I think back to the incident at the store, and I can’t shake the thought that Hannah didn’t like me in the least. “I don’t know if she’s into me,” I say. “She might just not want me.”

“This is about desire?” asks Janos.

“I guess.”

Janos takes a seat in my Seattle Seahawks foldout chair. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that desire is far more complicated than most people think. Let me tell you a little story about desire.” He laughs. “When I was a child my mother wanted me to play the piano. You understand? She still thought of herself as an aristocrat even though the money was gone. She rented a piano. Got me a teacher. The whole thing. I hated that piano.”

“Where did you live?” I ask.

Janos shrugs. “Who cares where I lived? Budapest, detective. I lived in Budapest. The point is that I did not like my mother, I liked my father even less, and I hated that piano. I told my mother I wouldn’t play it. She never listened. She thought once I got to a certain level of ability everything would work out. So she hires this piano teacher, Miklosh. Tall and young. Acne around his lips. It looked like he’d just taken a bite of pink toast and forgotten to wipe the crumbs away. In he’d come, Miklosh, in his gray suit. He was an artist, said my mother. She knew this, Eli, because whenever he came into our
apartment, he’d play piano for the first fifteen minutes. He’d pound out a few arpeggios to warm up. He’d moan and stretch his fingers, really carrying on. If he knew my mother was watching, he’d glide his way through a sonata while she listened from the kitchen with her eyes closed and smoked a cigarette."

I pour Janos another glass of wine and try to picture the piano. “What does this have to do with Hannah?” I ask.

“Do you mind if I finish my story?” he asks. He’s polite, but I can tell he’s annoyed.

I nod.

“I hated that piano. I hated Miklosh. Even then, I knew something. There was something funny about it. Something dangerous. Miklosh never seemed to notice that I had no aptitude for the piano. I was horrible. It went on for months. Miklosh kept coming back, and while I played he’d smoke and stare at his hands. When the lessons were over my mother sent me outside to play. Fine with me, right? Except I noticed he didn’t follow me out. So one time, I decided to wait for him. It took him an hour. You getting this Eli? An hour. I knew what was going on in there. For a small sum I’d seen my best friend’s older sister and her boyfriend perform the act of intercourse in an alley. I thought he was killing her, the way she moaned. You can imagine what that did to a six-year-old, Eli. You can imagine how angry I got thinking about that pink-mouthed bastard doing that to my mother. I could see it too easily: his nervous fingers, his eyes fluttering the way they did during one of his sonatas. I knew he wiped his sweaty palms on his pants. I knew he smoked and giggled all the way home.”
The phone rings. I hold my hand out to Janos. The machine answers it. "Eli? Eliiiiijah?"

Oh God. My mother starts up. "I found something that will cheer you up," she says. "I just read in the paper about a kangaroo petting zoo that’s about an hour and a half north of you in Seattle. I thought you’d be excited. Also, I have some very exciting news for you but I know how you are so I want to explain in person. It’s an excellent opportunity honey. Call me, Eli. I feel a little neglected."

Janos shakes his head. "Jesus," he says. "That’s your mother?"

I nod.

Janos squints at me.

"She calls a lot?"

"Oh yeah."

Janos leans forward and takes off his North Face shell. He balls it up, making a crinkling noise, and sets it on the floor next to him. "Tell Hannah about your mother," he says. "She’ll love it. I’ll go on. So one time, I’m there waiting, and something like an hour and a half goes by. No Miklosh right? I start to get nervous. My father’s coming home soon, you see, and I had mixed feelings. On the one hand, I didn’t want my father to know. On the other, I did want him to know. Understand? There was something pitiful about my father. He was so ignorant. He sat around looking smug, reading his newspaper and ordering my mother around like always. So finally Miklosh came down. I watched him, in his cheap gray suit, light a cigarette at the bottom of the stairs. There are certain decisions, Eli, that define a life. For weeks, I waited for Miklosh to come down. For
weeks, I endured it. Then I made my decision, Eli. I told my father the piano teacher spent an hour and sometimes more with mother after the lessons were over.”

The phone rings. Fearing it’s my mom again, I pick it up this time. “Hello?”

“What’s wrong with you that you don’t call me back?”

“Hi Dad. I’m in the middle of something.”

“You don’t hang up on me. What are you doing, sleeping?”

“No, someone’s here.”

“Sorry. A girl?”

“No.”

“Who?”

“Can I just call you back?”

My dad hisses out a sigh. “I’ve been trying to get a hold of you for days and you don’t even call back. It’s not even important. It’s an issue of respect. You’re being rude to me Eli...”


“Why?” Dad asks.

“Please?”

“Eli, what is wrong with you? Are you okay?”

“No. Just—”

Dad sighs and hangs up.

I say, “All right Dad. Yeah. You take care too, bye.”

I hang up the phone and shrug at Janos, who is giving me this look. “I’m an only child,” I say.
He shakes his head. "Have you ever considered moving somewhere else?"

"That's how we talk. You told your father. Did he kill the teacher?"

Janos smoothes his hair. "You realize, Eli, that by telling you this story I'm taking you into confidence, don't you? It isn't too late for you to back out. You want to hear this?"

"Of course."

Janos crosses his legs euro-style—like a chick. "He was defeated. It was pitiful. He sat stooped in his chair and rubbed his head bald. I wanted him to him to run out into the street and track Miklosh down, to grab Miklosh by the neck, throw him against a wall, and choke him until the blood was in his throat. Instead, what did I get? I got suspicion. Do you understand the seriousness of the accusations you're making? If you're lying to me I'll kill you. I got all of that. My father wanted to know everything about Miklosh. How old is he? What does he wear? Does he smoke? So I told him. I told him about the pink mouth. I told him about Miklosh's long fingers. Have you ever heard noises, asked my father? Think hard. Have you ever seen them touch each other? I hadn't. I was on the street. What did he want? We were in the kitchen. My mother came back from the market. I still remember it: rye bread, egg noodles, bacon. Are you screwing the piano teacher? asked my father. That's ridiculous, said my mother. It was so very obvious though Eli. It was such an obvious lie. It was like a blow to my father. He started crying. I'd never seen my father cry Eli. My mother glared at me. She knew. She must have. Janos just wants to quit, she said. What did he tell you? She was crying too. Hatred. She hated me Eli. She hated my father. I fled to my room and locked the door, but I could hear him beating her up. A glass broke. There were thuds, slaps. It went on and on.
Finally, my mother confessed. Maybe she thought he’d forgive her. I don’t know. He made her life hell. He beat her every other night. He grabbed her hair and shoved her face into plates of food. He’d pull her up. There would be sauce on her nose, and she would glare at me. Regardless, she killed herself Eli. She jumped out the window, splat onto the street. Do you understand why I’m telling you this?”

Because you’re a freak? “I do,” I say.

His jaw goes tense. “I don’t think you do Eli. I really don’t think you do. I’m telling you this because I wouldn’t ask you to seduce my wife if I hadn’t considered the consequences Eli. I know what I’m doing.”

“I’m doing my best.”

“I killed my mother,” says Janos. He doesn’t look as upset as he should. “My own mother. I killed her.”

Janos looks at me like he’s about to kill me. “So how do I do it?” I ask. “If she doesn’t want to be seduced, how am I supposed to seduce her?”

“You have to want it,” says Janos. “I’ll get her to the store. Then it’s up to you. What do you like to do, Eli? What do you like to do besides going to petting zoos?”

“I have a membership at the Woodland Park Zoo,” I say.

Janos looks up at the ceiling. “So take her to the zoo, Eli.” He gets up, brushes the couch dust off him, snaps on his coat. “You know,” he says. “I have a feeling about you. I’ve had it ever since the first time I heard your voice. The man in you is waiting to explode. I know you can get this done. I’m never wrong about people Eli. Never.”
My own past. My suburban dramas. How can they compete? There are a lot of stories about my mother. It’s difficult to pick one. She was a suburban eccentric, an elegant hostess, a real character.

The suburbs, they’re just not what they used to be. At the parties my mother had with my father back there in Indiana, women with names like Susan and Kathy and Barbara wore immaculate pressed dresses and pea-sized pearls. They swooped through the house in their heels and pumps, leaving intoxicating scents in their wake. I loved those parties because at the end of the night, when I was supposed to have been long asleep, I’d lay in bed with my eyes open, listening to the usual party noises: the clinking glasses, the stomping feet, the hands slapping the tables, the late-night sex jokes. “Do you see what I’ll do to avoid celibacy!” Don Adler would shout while my dad hooted.
When all of the sounds had died out my mom, in one of her floral print dresses, would tiptoe into my room downstairs. I would close my eyes, pretending to be asleep, and she would stand above me, in the dark, staring. She smelled incredible. Women don’t smell like that anymore. It’s a fact. The perfumes used to be somehow muskier; they somehow used to have more sting to them. Above me, smelling that way, my mom would stay for twenty, thirty minutes, just staring at me. After staring at me for twenty minutes, holding herself the way she did—frail arms wrapped around her torso, mummy-like, as if she was freezing—Mom would lean down, kiss me on the forehead, and then offer me some form of confession about the dismal state of her life. “This is not what I wanted,” she would say, or, “When you were a baby I had no idea what to do with you all of the time, and I felt guilty.”

I had no idea what to do with these confessions, but I began to crave them. It was like a pass into the adult world: its pettiness, its shadowy implications of failure, its consistent ability to disappoint.

My dad was a different story. My dad stomped through his life with a look of grim determination. He often looked unhappy when he smoked, and he liked smoking.

But my mom, my poor mom, she wasn’t built for the world. A hair over five feet tall, she was petite, a woman of jagged angles. Her skin looked like it was ready to tear; her bones (you could see her bones...her cheekbones, her rib bones, her twiggy finger bones) seemed hollow; her teeth, which she covered with her hand because she was embarrassed of them, were yellow, streaked with fissures stained by the coffee she never stopped drinking. This mom that would creep into my room and tell me that I was the only thing that made her happy, that told me my dad meant well, but he was so out of
touch with his own feelings that we should feel sorry for him instead of angry with him;
this mom opened my eyes to the realities of the world.

True, she had her problems. Sometimes when she came downstairs after a party
she would weep. Quietly. Stoically. I never opened my eyes. I held them tight while she
wept and thought about all of the things I wanted. Dad was right, I was a dreamer. I
wanted things. I wanted exotic birds: toucans, macaws, cockatoos; I wanted bamboo cages
that looked like Chinese temples; I wanted chrome BMX bikes, lime-green go-karts, flying
V guitars. I would think about all of those things, cataloguing them, all of that object lust
mixing with my mom's scent to produce a fuzzy sensation of pleasure I know I'll never
recapture.

I was in the car with her when she had her breakdown. Oh, it was bad all right.
We were bonded by our mutual hatred of grocery stores—her because of the drudgery of it,
the people she would have to exchange Midwestern pleasantries with, the utter lack of
selection; me because the trips to the grocery store were so long, because my mother would
compare and contrast competing brands, peering over her glasses looking for red dye # 5 or
another toxic ingredient, and because, first and foremost, I could not get the sugary air-
filled confecions I so desperately wanted.

My mom and I found ourselves inside of a sterile, fluorescent-lit Kroger I had
toured only three weeks before with my sixth grade class. Why the tour? Who knows.
The manager, whose skin was the same off-white as the stained linoleum on the floor,
showed us the grimy bathroom with exposed pipes, the freezing black cavern behind the
dairy aisle, the sneaky cameras that lined the ceiling, and the accompanying monitors in a
room with glass you could see out of, but not into. In short, he showed us a secret world of
exploitive commerce behind the neighborly façade. I never wanted to go back. The grocery store, early on, spooked me something fierce. But there I was. There we were, my mom and I, on one of our frequent trips. My mom was a terrible housewife. She never made lists, for example, like the other mothers. She was never able to buy a week’s worth of food in one go. And so we went back, and back, and back—sometimes twice in one day.

The day of her breakdown, let me think… I was already taller than her by four or five inches. Her black hair was cut short. Her skin looked taut. She was wearing jeans, a sweater, and black leather boots that stopped just below her knees, where she had tucked the jeans in, as was the style in those days. I thought she looked beautiful, as always. I was stylishly attired in a neon winter coat and red, black, and white Air Jordan high-tops. My hair was feathered. I was already chubby by then, I think. A Saint Christopher medallion celebrating my waning Catholic faith dangled between my budding man-breasts. The trip went as usual. I put Twinkies, Ding-Dongs, and Ho-hos into our cart. Mom removed them and replaced them with carrots, raw almonds, and unsalted potato chips.

A little while before, my mom had found me in my tree house with an eleven year-old girl named Lindsay, my mini dick impressively erect, considering, and, more embarrassingly, a number of twigs and leaves sticking out of the crack of my ass. How did Mom react? Did she faint? Did she scream? It’s hard to even talk about this. How did Mom react to this unsavory, and, I admit, telling scene? It was terrible. She slipped out of the tree house, her tiny feet tip-toeing down the ladder, and went inside. Lindsay freaked out and ran home. I began to remove the kindling from my ass out of guilt, but, because I was distracted by worry, left the job unfinished. I pulled my underwear up and
sat in the tree-house until it got dark. Hundreds of terrifying scenarios flashed through my brain. I imagined my father lumbering up the ladder, telling me how sick I was. I imagined military schools, institutions, and juvenile delinquent jails where boys named Rock carved tattoos into their hands with dirty forks. Then my mother came and got me for dinner (I believe those were the macrobiotic years, so brown rice and vegetables is a good guess).

My mom didn’t say anything about the incident. I was ecstatic. I loved her for being so fragile. We consumed our healthy meal as a family of three. My father chased his with a martini in an old fruit jar and said that if we were going to eat dirt he knew how we could save some money. My mother pretended to eat in her silent, sparing way, pushing her food around her plate with mournful scrapes of silverware against porcelain. I said nothing and ate two helpings. After dinner, I watched TV for five or six hours in our cave-like basement. I brushed my teeth with sugarless toothpaste and climbed into bed, where I thought about Lindsay and began to rub one out in the exploratory way of those coming into puberty. I was content. I was more than content, I remember, thinking of how Lindsay had ordered me to bend over so she could poke me with one of those sticks. I felt the brittle leaves still lodged in my crack and was really working myself into a frenzy there in the dark when I heard my mom’s footsteps on the stairs. It was rare, without a party, but there she was, tiptoeing as usual. I flopped over on my stomach and feigned sleep, hoping that she wouldn’t, through some kind of mom telepathy, detect the flush on my cheeks. Apparently, she didn’t, or if she did, she didn’t say anything. She leaned over and told me that I shouldn’t be embarrassed—that it was natural to experiment with your body, and that I should talk to her if I had any questions. I was embarrassed, of course, but overall,
relieved. She leaned down and kissed the back of my head. Her fingernails scratched my scalp, making my whole body tingle. "I don’t know how much more I can take," she said.
I feigned sleep. Her voice was devoid of emotion. Maybe if she’d sobbed I would’ve responded, but her voice was measured, hushed. Plus, I thought she was talking about me.

The grocery store. How much later? A week, maybe more. I demanded chocolate of some sort, but settled for a carob bar (yes, they had them, there in the bulk food bins). We proceeded through the checkout line and out into the brown chill of winter air in Indiana. When we got in the car, my mom turned the ignition halfway, just enough to bring to life the nasal drone of an NPR reporter. I don’t remember what the report was about. I put on my seatbelt and looked at my mom, who was listening, in her way, with her head cocked slightly to the side. None of this was unusual. But then, after a minute too long, she began to weep. I knew something was wrong. Even as she started, I had the feeling that she was sort of cracking in front of me. Her spine went limp, her hands clawed at her hair. I knew, somehow, without a doubt, that she couldn’t stop. I shouted at her and she didn’t respond.

After ten minutes, I stumbled out into the parking lot among the fat happy families and staggered towards the store. The manager, the one with the off-white skin, was outside smoking a cigarette. "Are you lost son?" he asked me.

I told him my mom couldn’t stop crying. I told him that I thought she needed help. I pointed to the car, and this I’ll always remember: the brake lights were on. They never blinked until the ambulance came, though my mother, even after they took her away, just could not stop crying.
Enough tender memories. The problem here, I think, alone now in my apartment, is that if Hannah doesn’t know about this whole deal, what can Janos get out of it? I mean, if he wants to divorce her or something, that’s a little intense. Maybe he just wants to prove what a fake she is. I can understand that, but still. Plus, despite all the drama, I’m still not convinced that this whole thing isn’t some big role-playing game both Hannah and Janos are in on. Anyway, thinking never does any good for anyone. I decide to call my mom back and get it over with. I’m on the phone with her for three seconds when she tells me that she’s purchased an appointment for me with this gypsy healer named Ron Rodrigo. This is the kind of thing Mom’s into now. It’s all crystals and scarves and leaf juice. In my opinion, she’s a lot happier, but my dad’s always making these sinister comments about her mental stability. It’s tricky, what with her arranging healings and what not.

“Mom, you can’t be serious,” I say.

“I knew you’d be narrow-minded about it. It won’t hurt you and I’ll pay for everything. There are people coming in from all over the world. What do you have to lose honey?”

“My time?”

“I wouldn’t do this if I didn’t care about you,” she says. “I don’t ask you for favors very often, but I’m asking you for one here. Please, honey… please just go.”

The problem with earnest people is that they’re almost impossible to say no to. I mean, do you have any idea at this point how much harder it is to say no? “Fine,” I say.

“You won’t regret it,” says Mom, breathing a sigh of relief. “It’s tomorrow night. I’ll pick you up in front of your apartment.”
The gypsy shit my mom gets me involved with. A year ago she made me go to this lady that wired pincers onto my forearms. This lady had a little control booth with knobs on it and she’d flip a switch and turn her knobs a few times then say something like, “There are severe irregularities with your prostrate.”

All this talk of healing makes me think of Kat. It’s bad, the meetings with Kat—it’s just flushing out the pumps. There’s nothing to take it up off the ground, nothing to make it dangerous. I’m still pretty sober. I’m just fine. I can tuck the blanket around my chin, rub one out thinking about Hannah shouting at me, and call it a night. Hannah, Hannah, Hannah. I shouldn’t even see Kat anymore. I should store it all up like a boxer in training. But the night. I’m telling you. The night. The nights get me with energy.

It’s terrible, really, me with my baby wine buzz, past the teenagers on the street, the black kids, the white kids, the Asian kids, the hip-hop kids. The hoods and baggy jeans. One tips over a newspaper machine. It crashes into the pavement with a crack. Tear it down, I think. Throw caution to the wind, hoodlums. They see me coming and run off. The streets on the way to Kat’s smell like Seattle: musty rain, evergreens. The clean air smell is on the city like a toupee. You can’t escape it.

Kat answers the door wearing a black bodysuit. “What do you want?” she asks.

“P is for Peril,” I say.

“It’s not a good time,” she says.

“Someone else in there?” I ask, trying to peer around the door. The apartment is lit for a seduction: lights dimmed, flickering candles. Plus, the bodysuit? Women don’t
lounge around in black bodysuits when they’re home alone. They wear sweats and boxer shorts and weird robe things. I know that much.

Kat squints her Chinese eyes at me. “I’m doing something,” she says. “I don’t feel like we have the kind of relationship, Eli, where I have to explain to you what I’m doing.”

I duck to look under her arm. “Can I watch?”

“Grow up Eli. If I tell you that I’m busy it means that I’m busy.”

I know she’s just playing hard to get. “Let me in,” I say.

“What?”

“Let me in. I want to play.”

“Are you drinking?” she asks.

“Of course not,” I say.

“I’m doing Yoga,” she says.

“I’ll watch you do yoga,” I say.

Kat does a combination yawn and sigh. “Oh Bird,” she says. “I’m trying to relax. The markets are shit. Don’t you pay attention? Jesus. You should know better than to come over here when the NASDAQ’s down sixty-five points.”

I can tell she’s serious. There’s something hard in her eyes. “I’m sorry,” I say. I flop to the floor right there in the hall and roll over, kicking my legs up in the air and exposing my belly like the subservient dog I am.

“You can be such an asshole,” Kat says. Her chin gives the smallest of trembles.

This is awful. I’m not one of those guys that lose it when women cry. But Kat? It’ll ruin everything. And we are talking about the stock market here. “I’m really sorry,” I say, pulling myself up. I reach over to hug her and feel her go limp in my arms when she
presses up against me. I tilt her head back, tenderly brush the hair out of her eyes, and make a combination move: the gentle-kiss-ass-grab.

Kat pushes me away. "Fuck off Eli," she says, and slams the door. She always does stuff like this.

I knock once, twice.

Kat turns on some music. The yoga music. All sitars and humping whales. The music means she’s serious.

I slump off down the hall. The shark starts swimming in circles like he’s trying to chomp off his own tail. You’ve got no game, he sings. You’re losing it.

The shark beats me down the elevator. He beats me out into the empty street. I console myself with thoughts of Hannah. Janos is basically ridiculous. The zoo? What would that be like? The zoo with Hannah? I imagine staring at the lions in the African Savannah they have there. It’s not an easy leap. Hannah might start shrieking when they chase each other. But it could be good. She could tell me about feeding the homeless. She could tell me about her driving need to help people. I could figure out if this whole thing is a game or whatever.

It’s early enough that a few people are out on First. They glide by on the way to their apartments in the sky. Couples hold each other and tap their heads together, exposing themselves as the boring fucks they are in their long wool coats, all blacked up for evening endeavors—the symphony mongers and the pricey art whores. Moviegoers in jeans and sweatshirts come from the late show and look for their Subarus and their Volvos. It must be tough, what with everyone driving the same cars. They can only tell them apart by looking at the bumper stickers: My Child is an Honors Student at University Prep...
Mountaineers Club... Save the Earth... God Bless America. I go deeper down First past the last sex shops with their pink signs and their marquees that burn all night. The marquee above the Lusty Lady advertises a movie called “The Loin King.” I dip into an alley.

The place where my girl works is in the basement of a porn theater, through an unmarked door. In this world of so much false advertising, the conversation booths are exactly what the name suggests. I started coming here because I burned out on porn. I needed something a little more psychological, and nothing is weirder than these booths. The basic idea is that you put in a quarter, the screen goes up, and then you pick up the phone and ask the lingerie-clad number opposite of you questions. Most people ask the girls if they feel hot or whatever, I guess. It must be depressing to work there and hear the same questions night after night from the same freaks. Not me, though. I just like to go there and talk. It’s my usual deal to go in there and put in quarter after quarter (a small spending indulgence that detracts from the Guam fund, I admit) without saying a word. They get pissed, my fellow conversationalists, and try to make me talk. I just stare at them. They make faces at me. They knock on the partition. When I’m sure they can’t take it anymore I pick up the phone and start asking them questions. I love it. Most of them are terrified of me.

Before I met the wicked witch of the west, I really got one to lose it. Two weeks after I got back to Seattle, the partition rolled open to reveal a sickly lamb with translucent skin and black hair. Her name was Sativa. It was tattooed on her forearm. I let the first fifteen minutes go in silence. Sativa kept shrugging her shoulders at me and blowing at her bangs. Rattled, she lit a cigarette, even though they’re not really supposed to smoke in
there. She waved the cigarette in an arc, showing it to me. She really hated old Eli. I’ll
tell you that much. When she finished her cigarette she picked up the phone.

I didn’t pick up my end of the line. Instead, I held out my hands and stared at them
to see if I could keep them still as a surgeon’s. There’s no better way to piss of a girl in a
conversation booth than to hold out your hands and stare at them. Sativa knocked at the
glass and I could see her red mouth forming insults. She was ugly all of a sudden. Hard.
She banged on the glass with the sharp end of a ring and the noise was like a coin dropped
into a bucket. She flipped me off.

I picked up the phone. “You seem upset,” I said.

“What are you trying to do?” she asked. “What do you think this is?”

“Where did you grow up?”

“What?”

I leaned forward. “I know you’re not interested, but that’s what I’m paying you
for. Where are you from?”

Sativa was ugly all right. One could only imagine. The stray hands, the dirty
uncles, the sweaty dreams of Seattle from a cheap bed in Aberdeen. She lit another
cigarette. She was shaking. “You weird me out,” she said.

“We don’t have to talk,” I said.

“Leave,” she said.

I leaned forward. “That’s more like it. Tell me what you want me to do.”

Sativa just shook her head in disgust. My time was almost up and I put another
quarter in the slot even though the ambition was running out of me. The energy of the
night was running out of me, but I didn’t want to let her go. You want weird, I
thought...I’ll show you weird. I put another quarter in. Her face was all red. Come to think of it, all of her was all red—patches of red blotched up her chest, spotted her arms, and burned across her calves. She was allergic to humble working man Eli. I hung up my phone and smiled at her. She kept talking, Sativa, her mouth moving up and down, telling me to leave. I liked it all right. I liked her orders even better when I couldn’t hear them, when I just felt them.

I put another quarter in the slot. What did Sativa do? It was unexpected, even for me. She started making these faces. At first I laughed. She pulled her ears out so she looked like a monkey, a howler monkey with her mouth open wide enough so that even through the partition I could see some ink spots of dental work. She closed her mouth and pushed her nose up like a pig. I put in another quarter. Sativa, I wanted to shout. I wanted to break down the partition and congratulate her on her performance. I loved it. I slapped the partition with an open-handed rim shot. I banged my forehead in response, once, twice, with smack and thud. She covered her eyes with her hands. Then Sativa leaned back, a little dazed, and made her mouth into a perfect o. Sativa was kind of shaking. I banged my head one more time with a thud and she mouthed the words please leave. I showed her all right. No pretending for Eli. As the curtain came down I stood up with throbbing head and clapped. But even that performance, as raw as it was, wasn’t it. I want more. I want it so raw it bleeds.

I head through the unmarked door to the conversation booths. What I want is someone that talks like the shark. Question: What do you think of me? Answer: You’re a piece of shit. You’re fucked. The jig is up. It’ll come down on you Eli, come down on you like a building, like a car crash, and you’ll deserve it. You’ll be too weak to do a thing.
Talk dirty to Eli, that's right. Because these girls know something; they see something through the glass just as I see something in them. It's the absence of manners, the look but don't touch, the raw lump of desire thrown on the table.

The hipster working the counter has the smell of the suburbs all over him. He's another band boy who's doing this so he can tell everyone how he's used to the jizz he mops up night after night. He'll write a song about it, the tourist. “Is the wicked witch here?” I ask him, tapping my fingers on the counter. I'm still in my suit. Eli the pervert lawyer.

He shrugs. “I don't know man. There's a lot of girls. It's hard to keep track.”

I imagine. “She's always in a different costume,” I say.

He minces around, checking his clipboard. “You like it here, don't you?” he asks.

“Excuse me?”

“There are some other places to check out,” he says. “You wouldn't believe some of the shit that goes on. Man, I heard about this place where they do these Hindu bleeding rituals. It's fucked up.”

These kids are always claiming to know about something I don't. Please. This motherfucker probably went to Brown and he read about the bleeding rituals in an S&M seminar. The question is whether or not all of that is just fantasy, or is there something? Is there something further and further down, if you peel back the layers?

“Yeah?” I say. “You been?”

His face goes all prim. “Nah,” he says. “I'm not really into it.”

“You know the girl I'm talking about?” I ask. “She's always in a different kind of get-up.”
He gives me a wink. "Number six."

I thank him and move off down the hall. I love it. This is old Seattle. It’s all that’s left. I love the white linoleum underfoot dappled with sparks of silver and gold flash, smeared with black streaks, crumbling at the edges. I love the faint smell of jizz, the strong smell of disinfectant, the mildew, the damp. It’s rotting Seattle, rotting walls, frayed curtains that lead into the booths. I love the mumbles you hear as you walk down the hall: What do you think about when you’re alone?... Do you like to be in the booth?... You’re really beautiful.

I part the curtain to number six. There, in all her witchy glory, is the wicked witch of the west, except tonight she’s dressed up as a baby. It’s the baby doll look that I saw in Japan, the kawaii thing: pacifier, bottle, lots of lace, bonnet...the whole deal. I’ve seen my witch four times and she still pretends she doesn’t recognize me. She tilts her head slightly, maybe, but she doesn’t nod or anything. She doesn’t pick up the phone when I sit down—she spits out her pacifier and lights a smoke, tilting her head and looking at me like a parrot.

I pick up the phone. “Are you happy to see me?” I ask.

She blows a mouth full of smoke at the glass and finally picks up. Maybe I’ve earned it, finally. She’s never picked up before. “Can I help you?” she asks.

I get tingly just looking at her. “Where are you from?”

“Ooh,” she says, sarcastic in the extreme. “I’m getting excited.”

“You can’t talk about yourself?”

“Let’s talk about you,” she says.
Oh, I like it. Her mouth spits out the words. She leans back in her baby doll dress like she’s perching on a limb. “You don’t want to know about me,” I say. “You couldn’t take it.”

The screen starts to go down and I put in another quarter. “You again,” she says when I pick up the phone.

“Me again,” I say.

“Please go on,” she says, again with the sarcasm. “You were telling me what a bad boy you are.”


She starts laughing like crazy. She’s probably really stupid. “Please stop,” she says. “I’m getting so excited I don’t think I can take it.”

Oh, she’s the real deal, isn’t she? “You hate me don’t you?” I ask.

“You wish. This is too much. Please, tell me your name so I can fall in love with you.”

“My name’s Eli,” I say.

She laughs again, louder this time, like she can’t stop. She’s probably on crack. I love it.

Her face is calm. The time is running out. She hangs up the phone and I watch her smoke as the partition goes down. She stares right at me. Then, still laughing, she makes her face all ugly and blows me a kiss.
I'll tell you, this personal ad gypsy business is just what I needed. I feel more alive than I have in months. I can even sell. By lunchtime I've racked up two new personals and moved it all morning. I go out there and it all comes into place. I just kill it. Even Mickey can't touch me, no matter how much ass he kisses.

I got up early and didn't mess around so I could go to the library downtown on my way to work. You have to be careful in the library. One minute you're alone in all of that quiet sixties ambiance, trolling through the aisles surrounded by all of those books, then the next minute some sour-smelling cat carrying a plastic bag around filled with clothes is breathing down your neck. Not this morning though. I got some articles about Guam and ice cream. Do you have any idea how easy it is to make ice cream? The profit margins are
enough to make you jizz. And what better place than Guam? It’s always hot, the
government, for that part of the world, is pretty stable, and they’re fully into the foreign
investment thing. I’m telling you, nobody knows this but the Japanese can’t get enough of
Guam. They love it. I love it. It’s closer to Japan than Hawaii. It’s cheaper. And don’t
try to tell me that the Japanese don’t love some ice cream. Guam is the new Hawaii, and
I’ll be in there early. I’ll be sitting in my hammock and kicking it while you suckers are
slaving in front of computer screens.

So I’m flowing all day, everything good, thinking about the wicked witch of the
west, thinking about Guam, thinking about Janos, but mostly thinking about Hannah,
when, what do you know, she comes into the store as promised wearing this cashmere
sweater that makes me want to weep. Her breasts, save me from her perfect breasts.
There’s not a slack inch on this sweater. It looks like they knit it around her while she
waited. She’s got on tight black pants and this pair of Manolo Blahnik patent toe
slingbacks that must run half a grand. Her hair tumbles around her cheeks. Then there are
the glasses. I don’t even know what I would do without the glasses. They give her that
dirty schoolmarm look that I’m a huge fan of.

She goes up to Mickey to ask for me. He gives her this big grin, but cools it flat
when he sees she means business. Mickey’s really something else. This morning I saw
him talking up the Clinique girl, Zo. When I asked him about it, he said there was nothing
wrong with having a side salad until you get married, but after the wedding he’d cut it off.
It’s pitiful. He can’t even keep it in his pants for a week. Mickey points me out and over
comes Hannah, standing in front of me with her hands balled on her hips.
She looks me up and down, sizing me up. I can tell by the way she holds her lips that she likes what she sees. If she’d at least waited a few days, I might have believed that Janos was telling me the truth, but the fact that she’s come right away is a dead giveaway. She totally knows what the deal is. “I was told that you wanted to apologize in person,” she says.

Yeah right, I think, what a coincidence. I say, “I really do feel bad, and I’m sorry if I behaved in a way that was offensive.” It comes out almost sincere. “Listen, I was just about to get off for a long lunch.” Here we go. The plunge. I shove my hands in my pockets and feel my heart smack around inside my chest. “I have an insane idea,” I say. “It’s just that, I always go to the zoo today and I was wondering... I have a lot to explain to you about what happened yesterday. Would you be interested in going with me?”

I’ll say one thing. I’ve caught my dominatrix with a right cross to the chin. She looks, for the first time, very confused. “What are you talking about?” she asks.

“The zoo,” I say.

“Why would I want to go to the zoo with you?” she asks, acting like it’s the weirdest invitation in the world.

“So I can apologize.”

“You already apologized.”

I’m getting a little confused here myself, but then I remember Janos’s advice. “Look,” I say, staring at my shoes, “I’ve been going through a lot lately. I really need someone talk to and Janos told me you’re very understanding.”

Hannah’s face softens a little and she looks into my eyes. “Are you serious?”
“Look,” I say, trying to catch my breath. “I know it sounds funny, but I don’t feel comfortable here. I’ve got a two-hour break today because I’m picking up a shift tonight. I want to go to the zoo.”

“I have a meeting this afternoon,” says Hannah. She crosses her cashmere arms. “I’m meeting with the Feed and Read Foundation. I’m on the board. It’s important.”

“What time does it start?”

“It starts at four. I don’t know, though. You were really rude the other day. My husband says you’re a good person, but…”

“Please,” I say. “There’s no one else I can talk to.”

Hannah kind of throws up her hands like it’s all so crazy. I get a stirring in the boxers. All of this role-playing really spices things up a little.

I don’t really have two hours. I go over and beg Mickey to cover for me and he keeps sticking his tongue into his cheek and nodding. He looks up like he’s talking to God. “Jesus what a rack,” he says, exhaling.

“Mickey?” I say.

“What’s the deal with you and Hannah Lee anyways?” he asks. “You banging her?”

Mickey’s such a scumbag. “You’d like to know.”

He grabs my shirt. “Dude,” he says. “You have to tell.”

I push him off me. “She’s a new personal,” I say, smoothing my eyebrows for emphasis.

“Lucky bastard,” he says. “How’d you manage that?”

“I’m on a terror, fat man. You better watch out.”
Mickey can only shake his head. While Hannah and I walk out of the store I watch him move over to one of his personals, a seventy-year-old woman that pinches him on the cheek when she sees him.

Sometimes when I’m alone in the zoo I can see the future spilling out before me like a string of dominos. All I have to do is give a little flick and they’ll all fall in place, one after the other. It’s the honesty of the zoo; there’s something in it that gets me all jacked up to the point that I go out there ready to just kill the world. I’m not a big fan of the newer exhibits—all that plastic rock and fake caves and what not is a bunch of bullshit. What I like are the old school metal cages. The best one is the one they have for the jaguars. It’s low to the ground, maybe seven feet high, and it’s been there since the fifties. They’ve tried to spruce it up a little by jamming some bamboo in there but no one’s fooled, especially not the Jaguar. It’s straight out of a Victorian menagerie, this thing, with a sign in front asking for donations so that they can build the jaguar a fake natural habitat with the trees and the rocks and the plastic cave. There’ve been times when I’ve stayed in front of the jaguar for hours, watching him loll his tongue out, flip around on his back, and eat his fill of the bloody meat chunks they throw him.

He’s a temperamental animal. Every so often, plagued by boredom, he lets out a howl that’s the most anguished thing in the world. It sounds like a screaming child wailing in terror. There aren’t many people that can take it, but I love it. Scream on, I want to shout at him. One time I was there alone when he started howling. We’d been staring at each other for a long time, and he’d come close to the edge. He sort of sniffed at me for a second until he let it go—this scream of injustice. What did I do? You’re damn right—I
started howling along with him. The rain was coming down on us and the zoo was afternoon empty. And so we howled, for thirty minutes. We screamed at the sky and the city and the cage, and by the time I'd worn out my voice the idea came to me. Guam, I thought. The jaguar lurched back to his sad clump of bamboo. It was one of those things. A lightning bolt.

Hannah drives us there in her car: some kind of gypsy hydro-electric thing that gets a hundred miles a gallon. She says there are only five of them on the road. Rich people, I think, God help them.

The question is, where to take her? The python? It’s a big yellow bastard, and if you’re lucky you get to see them feed it a dead rabbit. They clip the rabbit to a pole and shake it around so that the python gets riled up. Even after he wraps it up they keep shaking it. Watching the python swallow the rabbit is the best part. It goes nice and slow. The wild dogs? They’re no good, those, always lounging around in their cave and licking each other. The elephants in their faux Hindu temple? Too boring. I want something that’ll strike Hannah dumb into silence. We get in free with my card and Hannah clicks through the wooded paths with her shoulders pinned back, her hands tucked and cupped behind her like she’s looking at art.

A detour to the farm animals? A stroll through the creatures of the night? The zoo belongs to mothers and children at this hour. A cautious bunch, they eye Hannah, recognize her, and look away. “Have you ever seen the orangutan?” I ask her.

She stops all of a sudden. “I’ve never been here before,” she says. “It’s like an animal prison. Look, Eli...I don’t have a lot of time...what’s bothering you?”

“There’s so much. I don’t really know where to start.”
A tremble shudders through her but she stops it. "This is very strange," she says.

"I don’t even know what I’m doing here. One day, you’re leering at me like some kind of pervert, the next you want to talk to me about your problems?"

We come to the orangutan. He’s a sad thing, sitting on his limb scratching himself with his hand. He looks at you with his big sad eyes and you wish he would do all of the funny stuff he’s supposed to do: jump up and down and scratch himself under the arms and go ooh ooh ooh and all and maybe rub one out. Instead, he just sits there looking like a starving peasant in a foreign movie.

I feel a little guilty, which is ridiculous, considering. She wouldn’t be here if she wasn’t in on it. There’s just no way. "It seems to me like you’re a little paranoid," I say.

Hannah gives the orangutan a look of pained empathy. "I am a little paranoid," she says, "but that’s another story. Fine, Eli. You have some problems and you need someone to talk to. I believe you."

Hannah looks genuinely concerned. Believe it or not, I find this look of hers sort of moving. She keeps looking at the orangutan and kind of shivering. She says, "I can’t look at him anymore. He’s too human. You like coming here? It’s miserable."

"The farm animals aren’t far away," I say.

Hannah looks genuinely upset. "What am I doing here?" she asks.

"It’s no big deal."

"It is a big deal. That animal is miserable"

I start down the path and Hannah follows, shaking her head. "Janos said you were good to talk to," I say. "I’ve had this feeling lately, I don’t know, it’s hard to even
describe. It's like I feel like I'm alone in the world.” It comes out sounding like I'm really depressed.

“Everyone feels that way,” she says.

“Not the way I do,” I say, laying it on even thicker. “This is embarrassing.”

Hannah flicks a glance up at the swollen gray sky. “It’s not embarrassing, Eli. Do you have any idea how often I feel that way? There are times when I can’t figure out how people don’t feel alone. Sometimes I wonder if people even feel anymore. Like this place, I can feel the energy of all of these trapped animals and it suffocates me so much I can’t breathe. Jesus, I feel it in my throat. I get so angry and I wonder how people can come here and not feel it. They bring their kids here and laugh through the glass. It’s sick.”

She takes herself a little seriously, doesn’t she? It’s embarrassing to be around, but there’s something about it that’s sort of appealing. I don’t know quite how to explain it. “I understand, Hannah,” I say, still sounding depressed.

“I don’t think you do,” she says.

I look at her and scrunch up my face. It’s really a bit much. I mean, I’m overdoing it like a fourth-grader playing Santa Claus. “How can you say that?” I ask. “That really hurts me. You don’t think I understand what it’s like to be alone? How can you think that Hannah?”

She looks at me and blinks a few times in apology. “I understand that you’re lonely Eli,” she says. “I apologize for hurting you. It’s just that, I feel things. That’s the only way I can explain it. I’m more porous than most people.”

I have no idea what the hell she’s talking about. “Porous?”
"I get this porous feeling sometimes, Eli. It's excruciating, but it's like a switch has been hit somewhere, and I can see things. I can see things on four or five levels at once. And everything is going through me. Everything in my vicinity is a part of me. It's a disappearance, Eli, of the separation between inner and outer. Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you? Sometimes it gets so intense I can't stand it."

"It sounds like a dream," I offer. This is the best I can do. Hannah's not joking about this porous business. Her face is hard around the edges and I start to wonder what the hell is going on here.

She continues, "That's why I quit working for the news station. There was a time when I thought that other people actually cared about what I was presenting, but they didn't. They were just reporting what would sell, and instead of reporting on the conditions in foster homes or something, I'd be standing in front of the camera with the world's largest litter of golden retrievers. It was awful Eli. I believe that we all have a purpose here. It's real. This. Right now."

"So wouldn't that be better?" I ask.

"What do you mean?"

"If you feel a kind of intense sensitivity to your surroundings. If you're porous, wouldn't it just be better to surround yourself with things that make you feel good? I mean, it works both ways, doesn't it? If you're open to things, shouldn't happy things make you feel better?"

Impossibly, through great effort, Hannah makes herself look even more earnest. She grabs my hand and stares right at me. "That's not the best part," she says. "The best part is when I'm in the state I'm talking about. When my mind is really clicking, I can
look at something unjust in our society and see it on every level. I don't only see the problem, I see the solution. It excites me Eli. It gets me off...being able to see the problem, to really see it, and then putting yourself in motion to find the cause.”

It gets me off too, I think. This is more like it. Finally, there's something I can talk about with her too. This business of seeing the problem, there's something in that. “I think I know what you mean, a little,” I say. “You’re talking about honesty.”

Hannah looks at me without suspicion, like she's actually interested in what I have to say.

Now we're getting somewhere. I say, “Look, it's like this. The zoo is an honest place. Meat-packing plants are honest places. Landfills are honest places. Mill towns are honest places. That's what I'm into. There's something real about the zoo and the way power is. Or, like, at a meat-packing plant, there's no glossing it over. It's blood and guts and entrails, and there's no cellophane around it yet. That's what we eat, right? We kill other animals to feed ourselves the same way that other animals kill other animals. Except we pretend we don't. We wrap everything up, cut it into star shapes, turn it into little dinosaurs.”

“I don't eat meat,” says Hannah.

“That's not the point. The point is that our whole relationship with desire is a gag. There's a gap between what it is that we desire and what we actually get. Every time you want something, there are these outside filters that work on it, and then there are your own filters, so that by the time you finally get it, it's like it wasn't even what you wanted in the first place.”
Hannah says, “I think I know what you’re getting at, but there’s something voyeuristic and creepy about it. If you’re just a spectator you’re not engaging. It’s like you’re hiding outside somebody’s bedroom and looking in. You’re just watching. It’s like the way people watch when there’s a car accident. You’re not engaging with it.”

“No,” I say. “That’s not it.”

“I think you just get off on other people’s misery,” says Hannah. “You’re a voyeur.”

We go past the giraffes. They stand there munching on leaves like a bunch of cows. Hannah keeps staring at me, hands behind her back, ready for more debate. I say, “If you went to go see the lion, and you sat there and looked at him for a while, what would you see?”

“I have no idea,” says Hannah. “An unhappy lion?”

“Not just an unhappy lion... a wretched lion. You’d see how his fur has this brittle, crusty quality, like a rat living in a box, and he’s too skinny, and every so often, in all his pacing back and forth, he lets out a roar that’s not like a roar, but more like a wail of anguish. The only time he’s happy is when he’s eating or breeding. So you learn something. We’re only happy when we’re eating and breeding. Everything else is a lie.”

Hannah interrupts. “That’s a disgusting way to look at the world,” she says. She kind of gasps, starts talking, shakes her head at me, and starts again, “Don’t you believe that there are people that do something about it?” she asks. “There are people out there. Martin Luther King, or Gandhi, or—”

This is what they all think, people like her. They’re always bringing up some fake bastard that has one program or another. “Stop right there,” I say. “Those people, that list
you’re about to generate. It’s all bullshit. You know what those people are? They’re myths. You’re going to come up with a list of womanizers and tell me to have faith in humanity, and I’m not interested Hannah, because the zoo is real. The pain is real. Watch an animal kill another animal. Watch the wild dogs sleep to hold off boredom. That’s all you have.”

“So why don’t you kill yourself?” Hannah asks.

“It’s not worth it,” I say. “I never said that I didn’t want to live. I just want everything to be honest.”

“Honesty has nothing to do with it,” says Hannah. “You hate yourself. It’s not very complicated. Most people do.”

“I don’t hate myself, I know myself.”

This is good enough, apparently, to make Hannah stop in her tracks and stare at me in disbelief. Christ she’s earnest. The way she looks at me throws me a little. I have this sneaking feeling that she believes, absolutely, everything she’s saying. “You hate what you don’t know, Eli,” she says. “What I believe in is abundance. The people who achieve abundance in their lives are people who love themselves. I think you’re sick.”

I laugh. “Maybe.”

Hannah winces at me. “Don’t you dare laugh at me,” she says.

She’s not acting, I think. She can’t be. She’s just too serious. It makes me feel a little sick. “I’m sorry,” I say.

Hannah doesn’t lighten up. She says, “I have no idea why I’m talking to you like this. Something’s going on with me Eli. Something’s cracking. Something’s about to
give." She flails her hands up. "I'm in the zoo," she says. "I'm standing in the zoo with a
twisted shoe salesman discussing God knows what. What the hell is this?"

"Hey now," I say.

"What's happening to me? What the hell is going on?" She starts trembling a
little, like she's getting upset.

I almost feel sorry for her. Moving back out onto the wooded paths beneath the
gray sky, we walk past the lions. As predicted, the male stretches and trots. He screams in
agony. Hannah really looks miserable. There's something to it, the rawness of her
emotions. She puts her emotions right out there. I start to feel a little guilty. The shark
makes a quick pass. Tell her the truth...Do it now before it's too late...Something's
wrong...Get out...Pull out.

But I'm too close to it. Her gulping throat. I figure, whatever, I'll figure it out
later. Her eyes are blinking behind her glasses. "Fuck," she says. "Let's get out of here.
This is really depressing."

The path is empty and I sit her down on a bench. A flash of sun pokes out of the
sky, smacking us with light and disappearing. Yes, it's very tender the way I do it,
listening to Hannah while she laments the world she has to live in. There's no way to deal
with her. Her whole body starts convulsing. I have no idea what to do. I say, "I
understand. You can talk to me. I know exactly how you feel."
What did the dumb shoe salesman do? How did he manipulate the situation so that it worked to his own advantage? What did I do with icy robot Hannah melting at my side? What did I do when she shivered and gasped, when she told me, and I quote, that no one understood her? Did I take her to a tawdry zoo bathroom? Did we drive her overpriced golf cart to a park where I fumbled at her with nervous hands? Did I insist on taking her to my apartment for a rousing afternoon super session of gypsy love? You accuse me in jest.

I had Hannah drive to the store and drop me off. I was a perfect gentleman, a confidante, listening with earnest nods while Hannah went about the task of sobbing. The truth is, the whole thing was kind of freaky. I decided, on the way back to the store, that
she didn’t know about any of the stuff going on with the ad. She was too serious. It makes things a little complicated.

Back at the store Mickey is standing there looking a little jealous and it cheers me up. I took an hour and a half off and I’m still ahead of him for the day in sales. He looks around, sees no one, and scrunches his face up like a mime acting out a fart. “How was the zoo?” he asks, wiggling his eyebrows.

Old Mickey. He’s not much of an actor. “Did you take Zo to the Rajun Cajun?” I ask. The Rajun Cajun is this place in Pacific Center where Mickey always takes his ladies.

“Oh, sorry Bird,” says Mickey. “Zo’s really interesting, by the way. Did you know she spent two years in South America? Columbia. I think people down there cheat on each other all the time.”

“You should move there Mickey.”

“I should move there and just fall in love,” he says. “You going out tonight?”

“I’m doing something with my mom,” I say.

“What?”

“I don’t know… dinner or something.” There’s no way I’m telling Mickey about Ron Rodrigo.

“That’s hot,” says Mickey. He thinks for a second. You can tell when Mickey’s thinking because he looks like he’s in pain. “Don’t you think its weird that you’re, like, friends with your mom?” he asks.

Yeah, well, you can expect this from Mickey. His parents had this fur coat empire before everyone started feeling guilty about clubbing seals. Now they live in this depressing house in Bothell and they’re both raging alcoholics. No one, and I mean no
one, is more bitter than Mickey’s parents. It’s like that with the fallen rich. “It’s normal to be friendly with your parents Mickey,” I say.

“Not to go out with them,” says Mickey.

I ignore him and move towards the shoes. I click back onto the floor ready to move it and kick Mickey’s dick into the dirt. This is the mood that a plus-size finds me in towards the end of the day. Do you want to know why this job sucks? This woman comes in and she’s enormous, right? She grabs a house-brand pair of slides, American convertible red, and brings them over. Basic shoe, nothing to write home about. Small commission.

I take the shoe from her. “May I ask your size mam?” I look down at her feet and below a pair of swelling fankles are what look to me, in my humble professional opinion, like a pair of size nines. What’s to be ashamed of? Size nine? But I’ve seen her type before and I know how it’ll go. Plus, everything about this woman screams teacher. She’s got the turquoise blazer, the decorative silver pin with a dolphin on it, a scarf with roses all over it, and a pair of pleated and tapered pink slacks. Nobody’s worse than teachers.

She doesn’t even flinch. “Size six,” she says.

You have no idea how much this happens. I chug off to the stockroom. Perhaps you’re wondering why it is that I don’t bring down sizes six through nine? You can’t. There’s some kind of rule, unwritten until Tim included it in a memo, that you should never bring down more than two pairs of shoes. And you just can’t bring down the size six and the size nine.

Down I come with sizes six and seven. The size six? As Mickey would say, it’s like trying to put a condom on an eggplant. The seven’s not much better.
The teacher kind of blushes at this point. I smile up at her from the floor. "They run small," I say.

"I'm sure that the size eight'll fit," she titters.

Now, I shouldn't ask, but I do, because Tim says you should and I know he's on me. "Would you like me to bring down the size nine too?"

She waves away the suggestion with a hand, as if the very idea were preposterous. "No," she says. "I think that the eight will be fine."

Off I chug to the stockroom with my boxes. Down I come with the size eight. It goes on at least. "Do you want to get up and walk around?" I ask.

"Yes," she says. She gets up and I can see the skin spilling out of the shoe. I can see the way the the leather is pinching. "They feel a little tight," she says.

Yeah, I think, no shit. I say, "Really?"

"I can't believe it. I think I might have to go to a size nine!"

"Really?" I say.

"Yes," she says, shaking her head.

Off I chug. Down I come. It goes on. A size ten is what gets me the commission, and, at this point in the day, it's enough to beat Mickey. They announce my name on the loudspeaker at the end of the day and I snap my suspenders and shrug like I can't believe it.

Tim hands us our paychecks and it's clear that Mickey's is a lot bigger than mine. Mickey runs off though, pissed about losing for the day I guess. Mostly, I'm sure that what bothers Mickey is his inability to reconcile with his lack of talent. It's a hard one,
that realization. My whole life people have been telling me that they were sure that I had a
talent for something, they just didn’t know what. Surely, they would always say, passing
the mashed potatoes over Thanksgiving—surely you must be good at something. If you
ask me, this is the number one problem of growing up in the suburbs. You have all of
these kids, all over the country, in all kinds of suburbs, being told that they’re good at
things. And they’re not. I’m not. Everyone grows up thinking they’ll be so great and it’s
all a lie. What people should do, from the start, is tell you that you’re average, that your
life will be mediocre if you’re lucky. That way, it wouldn’t be so disappointing.

I stop by the bank. The guy in front of me in line is one of these Shakespearean
actor bastards—you know the ones: t-shirt, tights, beret. I’d like to hit this one in the head
with a skull. The teller is this girl I’ve seen in here before. She’s devastating in a Mormon
way. Have you ever wondered what all of these hot girls are doing working in the service
industry? Six feet tall, blond hair; she’s all bones and angles. What are you doing, I want
to ask her? What are you doing changing money? There’s a strange urge in me to
communicate with her through the plastic partition. You’re wasting your time, I want to say.

“May I help you?” she asks.

I hand over my paycheck. One thousand four hundred dollars. “All cash,” I say.

Her voice is pure pillow. “Are you sure I can’t interest you in a money market
account?”

“I’m sure,” I say.
I watch the money flip through her hands. Hundreds, fifties, twentys, a crisp assortment. I put the money in an envelope, give it a quick smell, and tuck it into my coat.

“Anything else?” she asks. She’s really looking me over and if I asked for her number I could get it in a minute. It’s too bad she’s not my type. I don’t like the good ones. I sort of wink at her and she blushes like she’s so embarrassed she can’t stand it.

My apartment building, saturated as it is, looks suspiciously eastern bloc in the yellow light. It would be a night for sitting inside with all of the windows drawn, a night for contemplation, a night to have a cup of tea, rub one out, and commune with my bumbling sitcom super friends, were it not for a certain healing that I have to attend. I slide my shoebox out and stash the fresh bills. I put a hundred in my wallet and try not to think about what the night will bring.

Outside, the rain slams down so hard you can hear the drops smack when they hit the pavement. Mom pulls up in her truck. No one should drive a diesel doolie, especially not mom, but she says she needs it for her horses. When the trailer’s hitched on there the whole outfit is as long as a semi. Driving with my mom is terrifying enough—when she’s fully rigged you sort of resign to the fact of your imminent demise.

“Mom,” I say.

She beams. “I think this is really the thing for you Eli. Ron Rodrigo is a very talented man.” We’re moving through the traffic on First and Mom reaches behind her to grab a folder. I take a look at her. For years, my dad’s been convinced that she’s anorexic, but she looks healthy to me. Her skin is rosy with health, with brown rice, tofu, raw nuts, and fruit. Her car is a mess. She’s got all of these folders full of clippings about Ron.
Rodrigo, and she reaches into the back seat. The cars in front of us stop. I yell. Mom stomps on the brakes and hands me an article. “Whoops,” she says.

Someone honks behind us. In Seattle, people only honk if their lives are in danger. “Jesus Mom,” I say.

“You can read about him on the way there. There are people who are coming from all over the country to see him. You’re lucky I got you in. I’d use it myself, but I just think it’ll be so good for you. No offense honey, but your life is a complete disaster.”

I take a look at the pictures under the light of the vanity mirror. I’ll tell you, you expect that any healer worth his salt will look like a healer—you know, turban, robe, beard, kind eyes. Old Ron Rodrigo looks like a the bastard cross of a mechanic, a biker, and a van. He has oily black hair, thick black glasses, and his arms are all full of tatts. He doesn’t pull his head out of the trough too much either—from the looks of it I’d say he’s pushing three bills. I don’t know why it surprises me.

I look up at my mom. “What kind of gypsy shit are you getting me into Mom?”

Wrinkles around her mouth frame her frown. “Eli, I’ve talked to you about this. Being racist against gypsies is no better than having prejudices against any other sort of people. I find it disturbing that, with your level of education, you can’t have a more tolerant attitude.”

See, my mom always talks like this. Everything’s a lecture. It’s a nauseating state of affairs when even the horsy people have gone politically correct. “Mom? How many actual gypsies do you know?”
"They went to the concentration camps just like the Jewish people," says my mom.

"It's a travesty that you haven't learned more about them. You're too smart to act ignorant."

The conversation's really not about me—it's about my job. All of the conversations with my mom are about my job. She's subtle about it, but it all circles back to my education, my hundred thousand dollar education, and her belief that it, whatever it is supposed to be, is ebbing out of me everyday I work the floor. I'm pissing away my talent. "They live under bridges," I say. I shouldn't egg Mom on, but it's hard to resist.

"Grandpa said you didn't ever want to turn your back on a gypsy or they'd shiv you and take all of your money."

Mom really frowns it up now. "I hope you're going into this with an open mind. I know what you think about this kind of thing, but there are people that have gifts, Eli, and I think you might try letting some of that pessimism go for a little while just to see what happens. I don't want to pay for it if you don't think it will help. People come from all over the country to see Ron Rodrigo. He has the gift. He can help to heal you, and your alcoholic grandfather is hardly a role model. The gypsies are still being persecuted. Eli, it's not funny."

Yeah, well, maybe, I think, but one time in college I went to Spain for a semester where I was studying the intricacies of Spanish language. Every time you walked by the gypsy ladies they'd track you down and grab your hand before you could say no. They'd look you in the eyes and trace the lines of your palm with their sharp fingernails and, with a voice as earnest as my mom's, they'd tell you that you were going to be very rich, very famous, and have many children. I went back to them every day. I loved it. So it's not
ignorant to use gypsy as an adjective. I learned all about Roma culture and all that there in Spain. I mean it as a compliment... an ode to a culture with a sense of humor about itself. There's no use trying to tell this to my mom. "What do you mean people come from all over the country?" I ask.

"People that want to be healed. They come from all over the country to let Ron Rodrigo heal them."

Can you imagine the convention of crumbling bastards? "Mom," I say, "This is going to be depressing. Come on Mom, a bunch of sick people in a room together. What's that supposed to do for you?"

"It's not depressing, it's beautiful. It's life. If you had an open mind about it you'd realize that there's something beautiful in the way that people hold onto their faith in the face of difficulty."

We pull up to this hotel over by Seattle Center called the Sixth Avenue Hotel. A French busboy named Omar used to work here. I bought pot from him in high school. One time, Mickey got locked in his bathroom and it took Omar three hours to get him out. Mickey was crying like a little bitch. It still pisses him off when I talk about it. I talk about it all the time.

Mom and I sprint through the flooded parking lot and water gets into my socks. There's no doubt that we're in the right place. There's a big sign with Ron Rodrigo's fat mug on it—it calls Ron Rodrigo world famous, which seems a little rich, even by the charlatan standards of new age promotion-speak. It's not the sign that puts the spook on me though. What spooks me is that we wait there in the lobby with the world's sorriest
collection of human beings. Here they are—the bruised, the battered, the sick and infirm: brittle-boned women with scarves wrapped over their heads, drooling men in wheelchairs, AIDS patients with damp sores slick on their faces and necks. They overrun the lobby. Dying children, hollow-eyed and pale, sit by their bereaved parents and push wobbly matchbox cars along the floor with their trembling hands.

My mother sits there, embarrassingly healthy, beaming around the room without the slightest trace of self-consciousness. Maybe Dad’s right, I think. Maybe she is out of it. We all sit in here whiffing up the hospital smell that has taken over the lobby—Ron Rodrigo’s beaming face looking down on us like political deity. He must be one sick motherfucker, Ron. Only the worst kind could take advantage of people this sick. Mom holds my arm and looks around the room. Everyone smiles the same dumb smile at each other. This lady comes out hold and folds her hands out in front of her, like she’s praying, except she pulls the hands back and nestles them between her breasts. A few people around the room do the same. It’s some kind of gypsy greeting.

My mom’s got her hands that way too. I lean over and hiss in her ear. “What’s with the hands?”

“It’s a traditional Hindu greeting,” my mom whispers back. “It means I bow to the god within you.”

“Jesus,” I whisper. “This is some sick stuff mom. This is really going too far.”

Mom gives me the smile you always see on the blank faces of cult members—the one that says I’m sorry you don’t see the light, but I do. She grabs me around the neck and pulls me to her. “They have hope,” she says. “Don’t you see, they’re dying and they have hope. Maybe you can learn something.”
Before I can get into a discussion with my mom about it, Ron Rodrigo’s helper lady opens her mouth in an exaggerated impression of someone about to talk. She’s got the cuckoo eyes too, and she’s wearing this scarf that’s like ten different colors over some kind of white robe. She says, “I want to thank you all for coming.” She enunciates every word like we’re a bunch of retards. “I want you to know that Ron and I have been inside meditating, and we are so full of gratitude that you’ve come, especially those of you that have traveled so far. When you go into the room, I want you to do your best to empty your head of everything that you’ve brought here with you. Let the room become a place of beauty and peace.”

It’s the expression that gets me. The condescending nod, the pinched mouth, the more earnest than thou fake holiness. My mom squeezes my arm, and though I hate myself the second I do it, I give her the what did you just get me into glare. She looks at me like she pities me. See, this is the problem with the new age folks: the angrier you get at them the more convinced they become that they’re right. This is why they join cults and end up having kids with their kids.

The helper lady goes on: “I’d like you to go inside, remove your shoes, and relax on one of the tables.”

Our festering mob goes into a convention space. Gone are the continental breakfast trays, coffee urns, and cheap chairs and tables. In their place are dimmed lights, candles, and, of course, the humping whales soundtrack that seems to clear everyone’s mind but mine. The elevated massage tables are covered with those neon multi-hued Mexican blankets; the ones teenage tourists bring home to remind them of their post-graduation week of vomiting and unprotected sex. The incense smell runs thick in the nostrils.
I kick off my shoes and lie down on a table. There’s no hope of getting this thing
over.

I don’t know how much Mom’s shelling out for this charade, but I’d say it’s
upwards of two bills, and for that kind of money I expect that Ron Rodrigo will drag this
thing out as long as he has to—that he’ll let us all relax here for a while before he comes
over and sticks his meaty hands on our foreheads. So why don’t I just leave? I’m in too
deep big guy. I’m trying to do a favor for my mom pal. I’m going along with it buddy, so
don’t say I don’t try. Besides, with my mom it’s easier to get these things over with. If I
do it, I’ll hear about it maybe one, two times more. If I don’t do it, I’ll have to endure
thirty years of hearing about the opportunity I missed. Thirty years of comments like: If
you’d gone to see Ron Rodrigo maybe you wouldn’t bite your nails so much...If you’d
gone to see Ron maybe you wouldn’t wake up hangover every other day...If you’d gone to
see Ron Rodrigo maybe self-destructive behavior wouldn’t be so appealing to you. No
thanks.

The incense can burn like a stack of tires, but it doesn’t cover the smell in the room.
Sick people sweat disease out of their pores, and this sour effluvia mixes with the
cinnamon saffron whatever to burn my eyes. It’s the same with the lights—they can dim
them to hide the buzzing fluorescence of hospital blaze, but it’s still a roomful of beds.
And these bastards can play all the humping whale music they want, but there are people in
the room that are very sick—people that are dying, and the one problem with dying people
is the sounds they make: they cough, they wheeze, they moan.

Gradually, though, the scene calms down in the ward. Maybe it’s only the duration
of time that goes by—I don’t have a watch on and there’s no light so there’s no figuring—
but it feels like hours. Maybe there’s something to the humping whales after all, like they beat you into submission with their aqueous pleasure mantras. I don’t know. What I do know is that I close my eyes and after a while I slip into something like sleep. I don’t know if I’m actually asleep or what. You know how it is...you’re taking a nap or something and you wake up and think there’s a monkey jumping on your chest for a minute. Except when I wake up it’s because Ron Rodrigo is humming to himself and rubbing his fingers on my temples. I kind of jerk, but Ron Rodrigo just smiles at me. He has a big stache and his black hair is oil-slicked towards his collar. He’s wearing a guayaberra that runs a little on the tight side with sweat stains under his pits. “Hello Eli,” he says.

“Hello Ron Rodrigo,” I say.

“Is there something you’d like to work on here today?” he asks. “Is there something that’s been bothering you?”

I’ll give this to Ron, he has one hell of a voice on him—it’s like a call from beyond the dead, telling you to walk down the tunnel, dive into the light, throw on a robe, and make yourself at home. What I should do is paste together some pap about the fact that I need to be kinder to the people around me, or about how I’d like to do more to make the world a better place, or how I want have more genuine relationships. What I should do is channel Hannah. Instead—I don’t know, maybe it’s the spook that hangs over the room, maybe it’s the dream state—I tell Ron Rodrigo: “You must feel really good about yourself.”

“Excuse me,” he says.

“Taking money from the dying. It must make you feel great.”
Ron Rodrigo smiles above me. “You’re angry,” he says. He’s heard it all in his line. He knows how to nod like he’s listening. “Sometimes,” he says, “when we’re really worried about our lives, our worries take over in the form of anxiety. The state of anxiety is at odds with living your life in the moment. Do you understand what I’m telling you Eli? When you worry, you participate in an imaginary future. Those worries can take you over Eli. Sometimes when they take you over you can try to self-medicate. You might turn to alcohol. Maybe it’s women. Maybe you sell shoes instead of doing what you love. Whatever it is, it’ll distract you from what will truly satisfy you. That’s how you might find yourself in a shallow career, drinking alcohol to and using drugs and women to numb yourself from your true quest. Do you understand? Close your eyes.”

I close my eyes, thinking yeah, well, fuck you Ron, you talked to my mom. Ron puts his hand on my forehead.

“Take your hands off me,” I say.

“Just a moment longer.”

“Get them off,” I say. I say it sort of loud.

He leaves his fingers on my eyes and I don’t even care. I just want to get this sham over with. Ron presses on my eyes until they pop with purple and pink stars. Ron, what do you know? You prey on the sick and the weak, and you’re telling me what sort of beliefs I should have? I think of the people around me. Then, all of a sudden, I start to get a little choked up. Tears are sprouting out from my eyes—right from under Ron Rodrigo’s fingers, and Ron won’t let up. It’s so ridiculous. Ron Rodrigo is there for me though, fear you not. Ron Rodrigo comes quick with condolences. “It’s okay,” he says, wiping my hair off my forehead. “Let it all go.”
“Leave me alone,” I say, my voice all shaky.

He finally shuffles away after patting me one more time on the forehead. I’m crying away in racking ridiculous bursts. Crying, it’s like coughing. Once you do it, everyone else has to start up. Soon we’re a sorry bunch: the weeping and the dying, the weeping dying, all of us together on our backs in a chorus of misery. Well, let them. They deserve to cry. The sick, the dying, the weak, they’re the only ones that have the right.

They finally let us out and I stumble into the piss-colored light of the lobby. People are all around me, hugging, and rosy-cheeked mom is in there grinning like a manhole. She looks at my eyes—mothers know about eyes and crying, there’s no hiding it like you can with dudes—and reaches out her arms to give me a hug. I walk right past her, out into the muck. Mom follows me into the torrential rain. Rain smacks the windshield as we pull ourselves into her horse hauler. The engine roars, kick-starting the NPR automaton they only let out of his box to do *All Things Considered*.

“It’s sure coming down,” says Mom, her hand frozen on the gear shifter.

She wants to have a heart to heart about what happened in there, that’s for sure. She wants to know about the angels I saw coming down out of the emergency sprinklers there on the ceiling. She wants white lights and auras shimmering like dolphin skin. “Sure is,” I say.

Mom stares right at me. “Something happened in there, didn’t it?”

Yeah, well, I’m a little wobbly. You’ll excuse me here. Something did happen. I let down my guard, that’s what. I let those sick bastards get to me, and it pisses me off, but no, I don’t want to fight with her. I just want to get this conversation over with and get
home. The last thing I need is a few weeks of guilt about being mean to my mom. The shark tells me to keep my mouth shut no matter what, but the death spook, it’s a crippler. I say, “It was the most depressing experience of my life. He’s taking advantage of those people. He’s holding out his hand for the money of the hopeless. It’s wrong.”

Mom frowns. “You know that’s not true. Even if he was a fake, which he isn’t Eli, and you know that, but even if he is a fake, how much do you think that the afternoon was worth? Can you put a price on that? An afternoon of peace and hope for someone in pain?”

Why do I do it? I don’t know. I can’t help it. “Why don’t you put a price on it? How much?”

NPR people make me want to scream, always babbling, as they do, in their soft child molester tones: “Another suicide bombing ravished the Left Bank this afternoon,” the automaton says... “Little boy, would you like a piece of candy? Would you consider thinking of me a doggy and petting me?” Mom touches the back of her hand to my cheek. “I know you felt something in there,” she says. “If you don’t want to talk about it that’s fine. I understand that spiritual experiences are sometimes very intimate. They’re a thing of the heart, Eli, but I’ll tell you this. You can’t go on the way you are, ignoring your heart.”

There’s no turning away when Mom comes at me like this. It’s just, you know, full volume emotion. “I’ll look into it,” I say.

“Can’t you see that you’re denying yourself? You’re closing yourself off to everything because you’re afraid to feel it. I wish I could say something that would make you understand. It hurts me to watch you. You’re so closed off honey.”
I feel myself boiling. “Fine, Mom, I was crying. Yes, I know you know that. I had a tough time in there. It was a big come on. It was seductive. The music, the lights, the beds, they have it all down. They put a bunch of people in a room—a bunch of people that are always moving, and they give them the chance to relax. Then this guy comes around and touches everyone and asks them if they’re okay. Fine, we could all use a little more of that. It was all really beautiful. Thank you for getting me a spot. Can we please stop talking about it?”

“There’s no need to talk like that,” says Mom. She’s really boring into me with her healthy eyes. A lifetime of eating soy paste and kelp sandwiches for lunch has made her positively shiny. “There’s more to it than you know. You’re closing yourself off. If you open yourself up—”

It’s enough. She always pushes one minute too far. “Mom!” I shout.

“Think about it for a few days, and then I’ll come over and we can discuss it. If you don’t open yourself up—”

“God dammnit mom!” I shout. I’m ten again. I’m thirteen. It’s always this way.

“Okay,” she says, her voice irritatingly soft. “Mom’s are that way. They’re supposed to nag the people they love.”

I make a sort of flailing motion with my hands in the direction of the road.

“It’s just that everything in your life is kind of fake honey. You have a fake job, a fake girlfriend, a fake apartment—”

Oh fine, I start to cry again. Someone get me a tissue. It’s not the racking sobs this time, thank God, it’s the hard squeeze man tears. I’m going all to hell and she just won’t
stop. I slam my fist on the dashboard so hard I feel it vibrate in my shoulder. "Goddamnit Mom! Please!"

Mom starts the car and we head back towards town in silence, the automaton talking about burning man—a bunch of tattooed whiteys in the desert acting special because they walk around in loin cloths and pierce themselves. "It's hard being a mom," Mom says. Then, in one of her flights into song—to know my mom is to know her flights into song—she belts out, in high show tune style: "I love youuuuu. I love you Eli."

I'm beaten. "Mom?" I beg.

Mom stares straight ahead at the road and scratches my scalp with her nails. You have to be one cold-blooded individual to resist the motherly scalp scratch. It's like the Vulcan death grip. What it makes me feel like is a big pitiful baby and I hate it. Mom scratches away. She says, "I know this isn't the time to bring this up, but I spoke to your father the other day."

"So?"

"He's really hurt right now," she says. "Maybe you should stop by and see him. You don't have to stay long."

Her hand works my head and I can't help it. I feel like curling up into a ball and sleeping for a week. "Why?" I ask.

"Because he loves you," she says. "And it would mean a lot to him."

"Mom," I say. I don't have any fight left in me.
I’m still a little wobbly when I get back to my apartment, and I can’t take the idea of a night alone trapped in my head. There’s no use even thinking about that incident in the car. Mothers have some voodoo thing. It’s like they can just push you and push you until they turn you into a baby. It’s all this thinking that’s getting me. I should really quit and just start being more like Mickey. I keep thinking about it though and I can’t quit. It was kind of close, wasn’t it? The spook, it was in me deep. I’m pretty convinced that there is a spook out there so deep it shakes you into a pile of crumbs. You see people walking around that have that kind of spook on them. It’s the look in their eyes. You can just tell, you know, there’s no one home. You probably don’t look at them, do you? I do look at them, and I’ll tell you this: if you stare at those eyes for long enough you can know what it’s like when things start to crack.
That’s why it’s no good to sit around thinking all the time. I get down to search under the bed for my crisp bills and have a nice seizure of panic when I can’t find the box for a minute, which is funny, because I’m just looking in the wrong place. The bills are there in all of their crisp splendor. I take them out and smell them until I calm down a little.

Two messages on the machine: one from Dad and one from Mickey. Dad says, “Who the hell do you think you are that you don’t return my calls? I’m telling you, I’m worried about you. If you don’t call me back I’m coming over.” Yeah, well, I really should call him. It’s just that I dread it. The questions. The heavy discussion of my goals. I just can’t deal. I deserve some sympathy. Would it be too much to ask for the radiator to cooperate just once? I know, I know, Eli demands a lot. Maybe I’d get over-excited. You can’t ask for too much, not in this day and age, what with starving children in Kentucky turning blue because of inbreeding. The radiator trembles like a man trying to crack his own teeth. Mickey’s message is the usual—file it under drinking, justification for: “I need a night away from Sylvie. I need to feel alive.”

Yeah, well. Don’t we all Mickey. The phone rings. “Yeah,” I say, all excited.

“Eli,” says Kat.

This is more like it. “Katrina,” I say. “How may I help you?”

She gives a fluty giggle. “You’re hopeless and awful,” she says.

“I’m rotten,” I say

“Why don’t you come over?”

“I have to see Mickey.” Eli plays hard to get sometimes. It always works.
"You can stumble over on your way home from the bars," says Kat. "I'll pretend like you're an old ex-boyfriend that's stalking me. You'll be tortured by me. A bum. A worthless bum. Without me you'll have gone to hell. Your hair will be falling out, you'll have lost your job, and you'll come to my apartment on your knees, begging for one last taste."

"Really?"

"You'll come over drunk and stick your alcoholic tongue down my throat. No one understands me, you'll say." Kat's icy voice is thick with mock. She goes on. "You'll say I can't get out of my own head and it's killing me. I want you, you'll say. I want it so bad I'd die for it. You'll be on your knees and you'll be so weak. You'll be crying. You'll say you'll do anything to have it just one more time. Who knows, maybe you'll be so pathetic I'll let you have it."

This is what I mean by gypsy shit. The markets must have gone through the roof. Some biotech that makes pop-on tits must have gotten approval from the FDA. Kat's tripled her money. She's rolling. "We'll see," I say.

"I know we will," slurps Kat.

Yeah, well. I pour myself a glass of wine and call Mickey's cell. Mickey's at a bar with Zo, the Clinique girl. It's this bar, the Burning Virgin, that's all dressed up in Tiki torches and dark wood. The waitresses wear grass skirts and have coconuts over their tits. They all have fake Polynesian names. It's ridiculous. You'll see a white girl from Michigan and her name tag will say something like Keilani. Good enough for me. I want out of my head, out of the spook. I finish my drink while I look in the mirror. You might turn to alcohol. Maybe it's women. Maybe it's cocaine. Exactly.
Mickey and Zo are pretty slambowskied. Every chance she gets Zo jumps up on the table in the bar and Mickey and I talk to each other through her legs. It’s like a scene in a Bond movie. Mickey rambles on. It’s hard to follow. “Can I just tell you something,” Mickey says. “Do you have any idea how huge I’m going to be? Bird, I’m telling you. Things are happening. Do you ever feel this way Bird? Things are going for me. I’m about to blow the fuck up.”

We both look up at Zo, who has her hands above her head in the finest skinny coke girl style, her face twitched up into a scary clown expression. These legs though, you should see these pale stilts sticking out of a pair of Stuart Weitzman mules. It’s a beautiful thing. Mickey grabs an ankle. “Isn’t this great?” he asks. He means the red lights, the dark wood, the cigarette smoke, the drinks that come two at a time from our sneering waitress.

I think of Ron Rodrigo. What was it? Was that big fucker laughing at me? Was he being condescending. That fat fuck, who was he laughing at? I suck down my drink and smile at Mickey. It calls for a celebration, don’t you think? Mickey and I are both talented. We’re snappy young movers. Mickey squints his eyes up in sodden affection. “Jesus it’ll get better Bird,” he says. “We’re just starting out.”

This old N.W.A song comes on and all the people in the bar go crazy. Zo’s dancing around above us, which is a sight. I look up and see the minimalist architecture of her g-string. She’s yelling the words to the song: “Coming straight outta Compton...crazy motherfucker named Ice Cube.”

Mickey looks at me. “Shots?”
The night goes on, whipping around, moving in fast forward. I'm pretty much in control. I won't go into it at length. There's no point in all that. I'll just give you some snapshots. Here's Mickey lighting cigarettes. Mickey with Zo on his lap. Mickey shouting, "Dude, I'm getting married in like two weeks," over and over again. Every time he says it Zo gives him this little slap on the face. "You're terrible," she says. Mickey asks every person in the bar if they have any blow. Mickey takes me by the arm to the bathroom, where we hunch in the stall like after school special derelicts and take bumps off the Hyundai key.

We make some friends, Mickey and I. We're all smiles and offers for our fellow hipsters and yuppies. Go ahead, we say, there's more where that came from. This one guy and I are hugging. I'm going to buy a Firebird with that sizzling phoenix right there on the hood, and this guy, my new friend, is going to blow it out for me for a surprisingly reasonable sum: Recaro seats, racing suspension, a blower sticking out of the hood. Nothing half-ass, mind you, I want to do it right. I want to race through the west, to Vegas, with a six-pack of Budweiser between my legs and that giant engine rumbling at every caress of the pedals. He gives me his card and I tell him that I'll be in touch. "I'm not fucked up," I tell him.

"Neither am I," he says, and we both nod in stiff-headed agreement over the matter of our sobriety. I charge back into the restaurant where I almost walk over the wicked witch of the west, who is dressed for some reason like a waitress in a fifties diner. She has caramel-colored hose on and a pink dress with a baby blue collar and piping around the sleeves. She's wearing a blond wig that makes her dark skin look even more delicious. I
wouldn’t even recognize her except she looks like such a freak and she says, “Hello Elijah.”

“Hey baby,” I say.

“Not tonight,” she says. She points to her name tag. It says, in screaming curliques: Kim. It seems lovely to me, the Kimness of it. It’s a beautiful thing. It’s lawn darts and martinis. You can bring a girl named Kim home to mom and tell her about your terror of the rugby-clad masses. “You working tonight?” I ask, holding out a quarter.

She gives me the thinnest of smiles. “You’re all blowed up Eli,” she says. “Cocaine’s no way to deal with your troubled past.”

“You know you think about me,” I say.

“That’s what I always think about,” says Kim. “I spend all day pining for white boy suburban fuckups. It makes me so hot to think about sitting around with them at two in the morning and holding them while they tell me all about the love habits of their parents.”

“You kiss your johns with that mouth?”

Kim smirks and adjusts her wig. “If nothing in your life is real Eli, what makes you think you’re any different?”

Oh, I like it. That’s right. Tell me, tell me, but I won’t go down easy. “And you?” I ask. “This is what you do? You play dress up and go to bars. You’re some kind of performance art Egyptian hood rat?”

“Oh Eli,” she says.

“You love me,” I say.
Kim takes a dainty sip of her cosmopolitan. “I haven’t decided yet if you’re harmless or dangerous.”

“My dad has a tank full of piranhas. He has these dogs. He speaks to them in German.”

“It must have been very difficult, Eli, for a sensitive boy like you.”

I get up and stumble through the bar and this big Ukrainian shoulders me and says, “I’ll kill you.” It’s a pretty good joke. I push past him and stumble over to Mickey, who has Zo on his lap. It disgusts me for a minute, for some reason. Ignore it, I think. They slap their tongues at each other like dogs until Mickey stops to take a drink and he says, “Zo, you’re so beautiful.” He turns to me. “Isn’t she beautiful?”

“Oh yeah,” I say.

It goes on for hours. I feel ashamed of myself. And Kim? Fuck Kim. Kim is in the corner and I make hilarious expressions—pushing my tongue into my cheek for example, or bobbing my head as if I were giving a blowjob. Kim sits there in the corner as sober as a toddler, giving little golf claps every time I perform. Question: Just how fucked up am I? Answer: I take Mickey and Zo over to Kat’s. Zo’s all fucked up. She walks like a marionette on the way there.

Problem? No. Kat’s icy and sober, but she’s bored and she’s down to do coke. What luck, and I’m the psycho ex-boyfriend, you remember; I’m over here to beg and plead, to ply her with drugs and then beg, beg, beg for it. And Mickey says, to no one in particular: “The thing about workers in the sex industry is that they’re so polite. Have you ever noticed that? Have you ever noticed how polite they are? I was in Exotic Tans and
these beautiful girls kept coming out. You ever been there, Bird? Don’t look like that. You’d be into it. You can lie in the booth for twenty minutes, and then these girls come out in lingerie. It’s so brilliant. The thing is, though, they always say *please* and stuff. I love it. And when ever they ask you a question, they really make you feel comfortable. And you know how? They’re really polite. They say *please*. Is that too much to ask? For people to say *please* more? They say, how may I help you sir? They say, Would you like me to try on a teddy sir? God, I love that place. Let’s go there tomorrow. You want to go there tomorrow Bird? You won’t be giving it to Hannah Lee will you?”

I’m like, shut the hell up Mickey, but he has no clue.

Kat says, “What?”

“She’s a client of mine and Mickey’s jealous,” I say.

Kat gives me the once over. I can tell she’s impressed.

Zo passes out with her skirt bunched around her waist. Mickey holds a glass of syrupy vodka to her mouth. “It’s okay,” he says. “Don’t go to sleep.” He kind of pats and yanks at her. “Wake up,” he says. “Please wake up.”

We do the rest of the coke right there on Kat’s glass coffee table. Kat goes and comes back with these pictures. She puts on some Madonna greatest hits collection. You can’t expect more, but the thing is, it sounds really good. That song, “Justify My Love.” It’s not half a bad song. These pictures she has are unbelievable. They’re in this album that they give to sorority girls at a big secret meeting or something, because they all have them. The pictures are in there, and there are silver and gold writings in the spaces next to them that say things, I shit you not, like *friends forever*.

Kat flips through them. “I was such a hideous baby,” she says.
“No,” I say. “You were beautiful. You were so beautiful, look at you,” I rub my finger over the picture. I’m not lying here. She really was cute.


“No,” says Kat. “I was so ugly that people didn’t even bother to lie to my parents, and Daddy could have people murdered.”

Mickey nods. “Seriously?”

“He used to be a gangster,” says Kat. “Now he’s a legitimate businessman.”

“What’s he do now?” asks Mickey.

“He has a waste disposal company,” says Kat, “and he’s also very involved with recycling.”

She flips the page, and there’s Daddy, this big Polish gangster with a red face, standing in the backyard of Kat’s childhood Bellevue home with Kat’s mom next to him wearing this gold dress that comes up, I swear to god, to her hips. They’re probably standing about a mile from where Janos lives. He probably knows Janos. Anyway, this picture. Behind Kat’s parents, just because, are all these peacocks. There’s another shot of the aquarium in their house. It’s lined with gold and there’s a shark inside it swimming around porcelain mermaid statues. Hello sharky, I think. The mermaids are topless, of course. But it’s the rest of the pictures that are really something else. Apparently Polish gangsters shop at the same stores as Elvis did, because there’s all this red leather and zebra patterns and gold fixtures and it’s a lot better than Kat’s apartment.

Mickey pitches violently to the right. “You have a really beautiful home,” he says.
Kat climbs onto my lap. The shark starts poking his snout through the drug fog:

*Leave Eli... Get up and go home... Pull out.*

It's one thing to be a subservient dog in the privacy of your own home, but it's another thing entirely in the presence of your male friends. Kat keeps, you know, slapping me across the cheek and saying things like, "Tell me I was an ugly baby. Say it," and Mickey's sitting over there with his tongue out and he just won't pass out. He's a mule. It gets pretty hazy. The room is sort of spinning. "Can we have more drinks?" I ask.

Maybe Mickey the mule will go down with one more drink. God, yes, more drinks. Kat gets up with a smirk and comes back. I can't taste the vodka on my scorched tongue. To tell you the truth, Kat doesn't look so good right now. She's kind of freaking me out. I mean, Mickey's sitting there watching, and she keeps sitting on my lap or rubbing her hand over my dick. Then there are her less subtle actions. She takes a fistful of my hair and jerks my head back and forth or up and down, depending on the question. Kat says, "Will I do anything for it?" and makes my head go up and down in a nod.

"I'll do anything if we can go to the bedroom," I say. The room lurches. Kat tells me fine, I can go to the bedroom, and Mickey's over there rubbing himself and giving me this look—I've seen him get that look before—it's like he's watching porn. Mickey's looking at me all spooky like I'm the porn. We go into Kat's room and I'm giving what is, in all honesty, one of my finest performances to date given the chemical circumstances, when old Mickey lumbers up to the door and says, "Can I come in?" He isn't polite. He sounds like a kidnapper on the phone.

"Tell him no," Kat says, bobbing up and down on top of me.
Mickey keeps banging on the door to Kat’s bedroom, even after it’s over. He keeps saying, “Let me in damn it,” like some sort of rapist’s parrot. Kat thinks it’s kind of funny, but it freaks me out a little. “Can we invite him in?” she asks.

“Mickey!” I shout. “Go home Mickey!”

We hear Mickey slump to the floor out there. We hear a dull thud as he collapses.

I have to walk by him in the morning in all of my heavy-headed half sobriety. It’s a terror to look outside and see the rain falling in angry waves against the glass of Kat’s building. Both Kat and Mickey are asleep. I get up for a glass of water and kind of wince over to the kitchen. My head is a bucket of puss—I can feel the neurons limping and cringing, and I notice my hands are trembling and there’s a red wine stain on the front of my shirt. It’s a little bit of a mystery. When did I drink red wine? When I go back into the den Mickey’s standing up, smiling. “Dude,” he says, “I didn’t suck you off or anything did I?”

“I don’t think so,” I say. “Where’s Zo?”

Mickey shrugs.

“Where does she live?”

“She lives in one of those yuppie projects in Madison Park.”

“The Windermere?”

“The Briarwood.”

I’m about to lay into him about what a psycho he is when good old Kat walks in the room holding her head. Her hair looks like a greasy stack of pancakes. She groans. “I have to get to work.”
“On Saturday?” asks Mickey, the sick bastard, still smiling. He can rationalize the hell out of everything now that he’s getting married. He believes everything will change once that ring’s on. It all makes me sick.

It’s worthless, this shit. It’s a waste of time. I need to get serious about my life. I need to devote myself to something serious. My mom’s right. It’s all fake. My mom. Why can’t I be better to my mom? Why do I wake up like this? It’s okay, though, I’ve done it before and I can get through it. I’ll start making some changes. “I’m going,” I say.

“Yeah,” says Kat, holding a hand up in a half-hearted goodbye and shaking her head. “Bye.”

It’s one of those jittery hangovers that’s all in the extremities, and I can’t feel my fingers or my feet very well except for the occasional tingle—nothing I can’t handle. I find if I talk to my hangovers I can dominate them. *You call yourself a hangover. You think you can take me? You’re nothing. Nothing.*

Mickey grins like a tunnel.

“What was up with that?” I ask. “You were a little psycho in there.”

“You’re the one to talk,” says Mickey.

“What?”

“You let her hit you like that. Does she do you with a strap-on?”

“Fuck off.”

“On your knees,” says Mickey.

I take out my cell phone. “One more word and I call Sylvie,” I say.

“That’s weak,” says Mickey.
“One more word.”

“You fight cheap,” says Mickey. “Come here Bird.” He wraps my stiff body up in his arms and gives me an earnest man hug. He’s having a great time. Mickey, I’ve noticed, is happiest when he’s hung. He loves it. Says it’s like being full after eating a big meal. Me, I get too jittery. I feel sick and shaky, and I have to really do battle with my hangovers. I always win, but I have to fight.

We walk out of Kat’s ice tower and into the rainy street, where people walk by beneath their umbrellas, spinning around each other through the rain, doing whatever it is normal people do on Saturdays. Hurrying home, I have to pass the drug addicts that hang out in the park by my house. It’s no morning for spookers, so I have my guard up. Spookers are a lot like dogs in that when you want the most to be left alone, they can smell your fear. Like dogs are they in that they come up to you with their clipped gaits. Unlike dogs, they smile at you in a transparent effort to mask their intentions. It would be much better really, if you could get them to bare their teeth and growl. Much better. You could see them coming and take off at a dead run and that would be that. Poor Eli. Can you see me with head bowed, slogging through the gray December morning looking at the pavement in wine-stained white shirt? When I look up from the sodden concrete a black guy is beside me, walking with me—a unique two, us, bosom friends two abreast. I look over at him and he smiles. He’s well dressed in a black suit, carrying a fedora in his hand. The hat is the first sign. Anyone that wears a hat like that is bound to think of themselves as a unique individual with opinions worth listening to. We all shine on and what not. Even worse, I notice, looking away from his smile and coming back to it only to see it get
jigger—he’s wearing a string tie. What, might you ask, would a black guy be doing in a string tie? And there you would have it, a damn good question. “May I help you?” I ask.

“No sir, I’m the one that is going to help you,” he says.

I stop. He stares at the wine stain across my shirt. One can only imagine what I look like: clumpy hair, a crease or two hot and red as sunburn, drug pupils the size of pennies, the alcohol sweats. “How can you help me?” I ask.

“You look like you’ve had a long night friend,” he says.

A dog passes by about two blocks ahead of us. It’s one of those enormous hounds—Scottish, or maybe a Russian wolfhound. It creeps forward on long trembling legs like a ghost. There’s no reason for a dog like that to be roaming the city. Everybody needs them though, don’t they? My fellow gentrifiers order these Clydesdales from Europe and keep them in apartments. It’s out of control.

The spooko just keeps step with me as I make my way towards the apartment. I should tell him to fuck off, just tell them all to fuck off. Instead I just keep striding.

“Hey?” he says.

I don’t respond.

“Your fly is undone,” he says.

I look down and there’s my open zipper, a smidgeon of white shirt poking its head out of the loose flap like a finger puppet. It’s not like my cock is hanging out or anything. “Thanks,” I say, zipping it up. I’ve got to admit that I feel a little guilty about the whole thing. You know, a black guy comes up to you and you automatically assume he’s a spooker. When Mickey and I were at Overland, we’d have these celebrate diversity days and the black guys were always getting up and telling stories like that. Then some white
girl, from like Redmond or some other horsy suburb, would get up and say some stupid shit like people thought she was dumb because she was a blonde. I'd be like, you are dumb, now sit down. You heard it all in those meetings. One lady came and told us that whether we knew it or not we were racist against Arabs. It was a little weird. She got angry, telling us that our racism was hurtful. Apparently, I was the only one sitting there thinking the whole thing was a little curious, seeing as how I didn't even know any Arabs. This one girl got up in tears. "I do judge Arabs," she said. "I hate Arabs and I don’t know why." She was really losing it, just bawling. I knew I couldn’t look at Mickey or we’d bust out laughing. I had to bite my cheeks. When the girl finally finished, they made us all hold hands and close our eyes. It was really very moving, in a weird I’m fifteen way.

The guy smiles at me while I zip up my fly. "Sorry," I say.

"Don’t worry about it," he says. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Do you know who the greatest man on earth is?"

I knew there was a catch. I knew. "Oh, I’m not interested," I say.

"But you know don’t you?"

"Oh yeah," I say. "I know." I give a big point to the man upstairs.

He smiles, "The end is coming," he says with a wink. "Make sure you’re ready."

The thing is, this guy seems like he’s not so bad. Even though he’s telling me the world is about to end, it’s like he has a sense of humor about it. I choked off the urge to tell him I’ll be in Guam if I can make it, swinging back and forth in a hammock and reading about the food lines and the air-born pathogens. Instead, I just say, "Thanks."

He nods. We shake hands.
I'm actually feeling a little better and then the cell phone rings.

"I've got something to tell you," Janos says.

"Go ahead."

"No. Not on the phone."

"Why not on the phone?"

"I want to see your face when I tell you," he says. "You sound terrible Eli. Did you just get up?"

"Just tell me now," I say.

"No," says Janos. "But I might have something else to tell you. Where are you?"

"I'm walking towards my apartment."

"Listen, I'm going to give very clear instructions here," says Janos. "I want you to keep me on the phone, and when you to your building I want you to say yes if you see my wife waiting out front for you and no if you do not. Do you understand?"

I keep grinding my jaw; a sick swirl of fluid in my bowels slips out like I've been punctured, culminating in an emission so sweet and sour it makes me cough. "Yes," I say

Janos says, "She's there?"

"No," I say. "I'm just saying I understand."


Then I feel myself go slack. I see Hannah standing outside the apartment building holding her arms. "Yes," I say.

"She's there?" asks Janos.

"Yes."
"Okay," says Janos. "One last thing, and listen. When she leaves I want you to meet me at my house. She’ll be gone all day and the housekeepers have Saturday off. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I say.

"I’ll give you the news there," he says. Then he hangs up.
Maybe she's feeling especially porous, I don't know, but Hannah looks unreasonably hot this morning. When you're hung like I am healthy people sort of have this glow to them. Hannah takes in the sordid state of my appearance with a condescending scanning of my vitals and attire. "Are you okay?" she asks.

"I'm a little hung."

"You look half-dead. Let me see your eyes." I lean down and Hannah parts my left eye with her freezing fingers. "Ouch. What did you do?" she asks.

"All I need is some coffee."

"You need water." Her face is really pinched up, the same way it was when she was handing out the sandwiches. She really is a beautiful woman. It's a little convenient though, isn't it, that she just shows up at my apartment? I mean, if she isn't in on this
whole thing, isn’t it a little suspicious? She seemed genuine at the zoo, but if she was so genuine, why would she be here? Why would Janos know she was here? Hannah looks into my eyes. “Are you still intoxicated?” she asks.

My answer is shown rather than told. I try my best to hold myself erect, though at some point, because, in a relative sense, yes, I am still intoxicated Hannah, I think of going to bed, and the thought of bed sends a scream of joy through my body. The thought of bed is like that thing with the dogs I read about in my psychology class. You know what I’m talking about? Just the thought of getting in a bed makes my knees buckle. “Did you need something?” I ask.

Hannah purses her lips and shakes her head. “Let’s get you upstairs,” she says. Her solid, healthy arm muscles ripple beneath their lamb’s wool sheath. There are her breasts, of course, but I don’t want to linger there. It pains me to look at them. Put those things away, I want to say. It’s too much. My eyes drift down. Hannah’s taut yoga-toned calves strain under the silky undulations of English flannel slacks. Do women like this even have sex? I mean, occasionally you do see them with children, but maybe they have people for that sort of thing. And Hannah’s smell. Oh Hannah, your smell: not the rot smell that spills from my pores, but the smell of cucumbers and seaweed, of lilac, of green tea. She smells a little like Kat, but better.

I realize that this is what Hannah’s into. She likes it that I’m a disaster. I decide to give her what she wants. She leads me up the stairs by the arm, and it is with extraordinary skill that I ham up the degree to which I’m crippled. It’s really not a hangover I can’t handle. I open my mouth and gasp on the stairs. I look at my shoes and shake my head with self-reproach. I take the act a little far and accidentally trip, which sends me falling
down the stairs for a tumble or two until I stick out a hand to catch myself. This last incident induces in Hannah a gasp of soap operatic dimensions. “Are you okay?” she asks.

“I think so,” offers meek and ravaged Eli.

We go into the apartment where I take a seat on the couch, and, with a pity-inducing massage of temples, ask Hannah if she would be so kind as to fix me a pot of tea.

“I told you,” she says. “You need to drink some water and eat something. You’re too skinny.”

“Look who’s talking.”

“I love to eat,” says Hannah. “Just because I’m a vegetarian it doesn’t mean that I don’t love to eat. It’s just that I won’t eat anything with a face. I don’t know how anybody can.”

“You don’t eat the face.”

She opens the barren wasteland of my refrigerator and frowns at the six empty wine bottles and lonely half-used container of aged Paul Newman’s fine vinaigrette.

The radiator performs as if on cue, as if brought in by the conductor in this symphony of despair. Hannah sighs and, perhaps because the gushes of heat mix with my own chemical excretions and the sour bundle of my bedding, she pushes up her sleeves and heads towards the window and cracks it open, something I don’t take the precaution to warn her about. Let her hear it all: the gravel crunch of skateboard wheels, the menacing chatter of sea rats, the chug and hiss of the tireless delivery trucks, the daytime splatter of malt-liquor piss against the brick walls of the alley—a sound that tinkles in duet with drunken pleasure groans. She seems not to hear a thing. Fine. Let her see it all. I could give her a tour. And here, Hannah, is my bathroom. You’ll notice the assortment of pubic
hairs that stand out in contrast to the yellowing tiles of the floor. I have taken care to arrange them in bird’s nest patterns. Here, oh, yes, in the corner, my semen-crusted sock. Oh...and this...this is my shoebox, my piggy bank, the fruits of my expensive liberal education.

Hannah runs the faucet and gives a semi-clean mug a vigorous cleansing with a smelly old dish scrubber. She fills it up with water and brings it over to me. I hold it to my lips with both hands and take a baby-sip. “You really look terrible Eli,” she says.

“You already said that. What are you doing here?”

I’ve been thinking about you,” she says.

Yeah, right, I think. The more I think about it, the more obvious it is. She totally knows the deal. I wish we could just get the seducing over with. I may be hung, but I guarantee you I could still perform. I can always perform. “How did you know the address?” I ask.

“It’s in the phone book Eli.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t know how it is, but I’ve become a little worried about you.”

Come here, my saint, I think. Give me a scalp massage. Let me curl up in your lap and go to sleep. “Do you have any solutions?”

She looks hurt. “I know you’re mocking me Eli, and I don’t appreciate it. All I’m saying is that you’re at an age where you need to think about the consequences of how you’re living.”

“I have no idea what you mean.”
“Staying out all night. Coming home like this. Working in a job you don’t care about. It’s simple, Eli. You can’t live your life like it’s an ironic artifact.”

A what? “Yeah, I know.”

“Oh, I don’t think you do,” she says. “The difference between people that make the most of their lives and people like you is infinitesimal. Didn’t I tell you this at the zoo?” She goes over to the window and gives a sigh or two before turning to me with piercing gaze. “If you loved yourself, Eli, you wouldn’t go out and get wrecked. When you do that to your body, when you come home like that, what do you think it shows?”

I know the answer, but it’s so much better, isn’t it, to let Hannah explain. I give a shrug of the shoulders, as meek as a refugee child with a puffy belly.

Hannah comes over, puts her hands on my shoulders, and kneels down to look me in the eye. Her firm, healthy nails press into me. “I already told you, Eli. You hate yourself. The world is so full of people that hate themselves. I can see it in you and it hurts me because I know deep down how much potential you have. You can change. You can start today. It’s there, and its your responsibility to turn things around.” She gives an earnest frown. “There are too many people in this world that hate themselves,” she says. “That’s why we have wars. They’re the result of self-hatred, and what do you think you’re doing?”

I shrug.

“You’re waging war against yourself.”

I give a knowing nod and look away towards the window. It’s too much for me to handle. I can see that you think she’s hitting on me, but honestly, it doesn’t feel that way. She doesn’t rub her hand on my thigh or kind of lick her lips or do any of the other usual
things. It's almost like she's being my mom here. The shark would love to get his teeth into that one, wouldn't he? No thanks. I push it away. I imagine her sucking on my rotting tongue and the image is good enough that it makes me cross my legs to avoid embarrassment. "Do you suggest a cure?" I ask, kind of laying it on a little thick.

The phone rings and Hannah takes her hands off my arms. My efforts to arouse her through pity are all for nothing. My erection, unfortunately, stirs nothing up in the aura-field. The debate is to be the thing here. Hannah just shakes her head at me. "You're mocking me Eli," she says. "You can't take anything seriously, can you?"

The phone rings and rings.

It is an angry Hannah that begins to gather her things with jerky movements and swinging hair. The essential problem here is that there's no way for me not to mock Hannah. She's so earnest that, in terms of relativity, all efforts to speak with her come off thick with mock. "Aren't you going to pick it up?" asks Hannah.

The cursed multi-tasking fax machine picks up for me. "Goddamnit Eli," yells my father. "If you don't pick up the phone right now!"

I leap and do pick up the phone. Then I hang it up and leave it off the hook. Tender father, how I reminisce. How I enjoy our man to man chats. We'll have to get together soon. Mom's right. It's been weeks since you told me how badly I'm fucking everything up. I look at Hannah, who has her lips parted just enough to show the chiclet flesh of her perfect little newscaster teeth. "Dad," I say, in explanation.

"I'm sorry," says Hannah. And here's the thing, she looks sorry. She looks distraught.

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Dad, you’ve done me a favor after all. You’ve put another arrow in the quiver of my vulnerability. “Please don’t go,” I say. It comes out relatively straight, and talking this way, or maybe just the voice of my father and the weariness it induces, gives me the insane thought that I should confess everything. She deserves to know, doesn’t she? Would that be the right thing to do? I could probably muster enough seriousness of intent that the result would be a deluxe mid-day super session. Hannah, I would say, let’s discuss Janos, and then it would maybe fall in line, the moral change that needs to occur. We might sit down over a good strong cup of coffee and just be honest with each other or whatever. I do hate myself, I would say. She would probably like that. Do I hate myself? It could be. No, it’s not right, is it? The shark says: you do hate yourself. Well, fuck you shark. There’s something a little off-setting with you. It’s like the guy on the street, the preacher. Nothing’s more insane than absolute conviction. Nothing. It makes you look like you pick squirrels apart with needles. No, Hannah. Sorry sharky. You’re both full of shit. Conviction is a joke. Conviction is a sham. No one changes. An afternoon of fucking. That’s all there is. There’s desire and there’s greed. There’s control. The shark floating belly-up. That’s it. Who cares if she’s in on it?

Hannah grabs my hand and gives it a tickling massage. “I don’t mean to lecture you,” she says. “There’s some kind of connection between us. An intense connection. I’ve been thinking a lot about our conversation at the zoo. I’ve been thinking about some of your ideas.”

This is more like it. This is it. I give her a big hug. She hugs back. “Oh Eli,” she says. She goes out to my room and comes back with a sour blanket. She covers me up with it and gives me a pat on the head. I’m like, what? “Where are you going?” I ask.
"To the Madison Arms," she says. "We’re refurbishing it and turning it into low
cost housing."

Sure, I think. She’s not going anywhere. The Madison Arms. Another cause. She
really gets off on it, doesn’t she? My ice queen, my saint, my mothering milf pauses in the
doorway for one last look at the puddle of Eli on the couch. Is she actually leaving? I
think about rushing her, but something holds me back. Framed by the doorway in all of its
cracking yellowing splendor, she looks at me with squinty eyes, and every so often she
kind of shakes her head in disbelief. I know that look. *What kind of gypsy shit am I
going into?* she thinks. So here, then, is the lesson for today. The way to do this is
straight. No more nips of liquor. No more coke. No more preparatory bottle of wine. The
way to get at it is through sincerity. Sober sincerity. That’s what I’m looking for.

"Do you need me to get you anything?" she asks.

I nuzzle into the couch. "You know…" I say, not cheesy, but with enough of an
edge on it so she knows what I mean.

But then she leaves. What a freak she is. I follow her into the street. Why? Why
not. She hustles when she walks, and I don’t even know what it is that I’m expecting to
see. I hang back, leaning against the building, out of the rain, just watching Hannah as she
walks off down the empty street. A man in a suit walks towards me, head down, overcoat
buttoned against the rain. He’s wearing a fedora of some kind, and his face is hidden
under his umbrella. There’s something that makes me stare at him. It’s the suit. The hat.
The way he cringes beneath the umbrella, a briefcase in his left hand. He steps within five
feet of me. I’m staring pretty blatantly. The suit is cheap. Maybe that’s what interests me
about him. The cigarette lit beneath the umbrella, the cheap suit, the craggy face, the fake Burberry. He's really going for it with the vintage detective thing. He's like a cop from a forties television show—the ghost of Seattle past. I nod at him. It feels appropriate to be formal, but he continues to stare at the pavement. I feel compelled to speak. Maybe all of this gypsy business is turning me into a spooker. "It's really coming down isn't it?" I ask.

He squints at me from under his umbrella, blowing out a plume of smoke. "Huh?" he says.

"The rain."

"Sure," he says. He throws his cigarette into the gutter, where it plops with a hiss, and walks off down the slick gray street.
I pilot my Korean lawnmower towards Bellevue for the meeting with Janos. The 520 Bridge is stuffed with traffic—the afternoon shoppers coming home in flotillas of euro-barges and SUVs. There's a full-blown windstorm that makes the rain dance sideways. One side of the bridge is relatively smooth, but the other, urged on by the wind, is a boiling soup of whitecaps. Waves slosh over the gunnels of the bridge and spit their mist, but my fellow travelers on the bridge are armed and ready. They could drive through hurricane gales. The winners of our society, they forge home in their rumbling Expeditions, their hulking Suburbans, their muscle-bound Tahoes. They clog the lanes and stare at me from their calfskin perches—they smile in sympathy. Poor boy, they think, all alone in his Korean pop can. Slick red boxes—Christmas presents held together with gold
and green bows, teeter in their rearview windows. But do they look happy? Are they winning? Even though they smile in pity, I detect the answer is no. They look depressed. I’ve been around the rich enough in my educational history to know that they’re a miserable lot. It’s the depression of having made it—the depression of going into a store and being able to buy whatever you want. There in the stores, in the malls, they have to mingle. It’s the misery of watching the sallow-skinned mulleted masses in their Seahawks jackets and acid-washed jeans, in their cracked and yellowing Nikes, while they shop. You have to watch them when you’ve got it. You have to watch them zombie through the glassy sheen of the downtown megastores; you have to watch them gulp as they stare at items they can’t afford. You poor rich bastards. It’s not like you thought it would be, is it? You poor rich bastards; how do you fuck at night without desperation kicking its spurs into your flanks?

Janos is wearing this Ming the Merciless robe made out of red silk and drinking pulpy orange juice. I start to follow him into the house and, without looking at me, he says “shoes.” The house looks pretty much the same: the blown-glass octopus chandelier, the bleach smell, the chevrons. The only thing, maybe, is that it’s a little less dramatic with the natural light coming in, a little less sinister without all of the dimmed lights and dark hallways.

I kick my shoes off and follow Janos into the office he took me into on his last visit. He stands behind his desk. “How are you feeling?” he asks me.

Do I really look that bad? It used to be hangovers wouldn’t touch me. I thought I couldn’t get one. “Fine,” I say.
“No, I mean about the way that our project is proceeding.”

The thing is, I feel a little suspicious right about now. If Hannah would have climbed on top of me and given me the business, it would have been one thing, but she just left. If she was in on this whole deal, why would she have left? “I think it’s going pretty well,” I say.

“It’s going better than well Eli. It’s proceeding exactly as I imagined it. Can I just say something?” He holds out his hand to prove his sincerity, “I really underestimated you Eli. You’re an operator. I thought you might be, and it turns out you are. Why am I telling you this? Because we’re going to talk as men, okay? Equals. Do you understand?”

I get all guilty. “Look, Janos, I don’t how to say this, but I have to know why you’re doing this?”

“What?”

“Why do you want me to seduce your wife?”

Janos nods at me. “I thought you might ask that.”

“I’m not a big saint or anything. I just need to know it’s not anything terrible. I need to know you won’t use it against her. You’re not going to divorce her because of this, are you?”


“Why are you doing it then?”

Janos sighs. “It’s a long story Eli. The truth is, I’m worried about my wife. She’s not well. You have trust me on this one. Besides, you came all the way out here. Aren’t you curious what the news is?”
"Sure. Janos—"

Janos interrupts. "You probably want the news."

"Yeah. Look—"

"You don’t get the news yet. First, I want to know everything about it."

"About what?"

"What do you mean about what? About her visit to your place."

"Where is she?" I ask.

"She’s still downtown. She’ll be there all day, scrubbing toilets. God knows."

"The Madison Arms."

"Or wherever she goes," says Janos, arching his eyebrows at me. Behind him

looms the froth of Lake Washington. The white caps are still whipping into each other, but

the rain has stopped and, in biblical shafts, sudden bursts of light cut into the room. These

flashes come in and illuminate Janos. He’s some kind of god, I think. Men like him,

they’re the closest thing we have. "Look Eli," he says. "I trust you and I think by now you

know you can trust me. When I tell you I want to know everything that happened, it

means that I want every detail. I want to know how she smelled, I want to know what it

was that she said. I want to know what you were thinking. What she was thinking. In

other words, this is the point. Do you understand Eli?"

"I understand."

"So what was she wearing?"

You’ve got to be kidding me. What was she wearing? Still, whatever, I go through

all the details with him. I tell him about the sweater she was wearing and her English

flannel slacks. I don’t say anything about the breasts, but I tell him how she pinched her
face when she looked in my refrigerator, and how she always thought I was mocking her.

Fine fine, Janos nods. It’s not until I tell him about how she smells, about the green tea and the lilac, that Janos starts to grip his table. I see his jaw muscles clenching and he closes his eyes and sort of rocks back and forth. “What else?” he says. “Did you feel like she was doing anything suggestive towards you? Did you feel like her actions were flirtatious?” His voice cracks just a little.

The shark starts to detect something strange. With its hyena voice, it says to scurry back home, get out of the gypsy business, and start to live right. Why don’t you read a book?...Why don’t you rent a movie? it asks. I think of Kim. Could I tell her about it?

“It’s confusing with her,” I say.

“That interests me,” says Janos, opening his eyes. “Tell me about that.”

“It’s not that she’s not attractive.”

“Of course not.”

“It’s just that. She was almost mothering me, and there was something. She just seems so genuine.”

“So you buy it?”

“Normally I wouldn’t but…this is why I have to know. I know what you’re going to say, but she never seems like she’s acting. It’s like she actually cares about me.”

Janos leans forward on his elbows. Something dark passes over his face. “It’s an act, Eli. I would have expected more out of you. There’s not any kind of difference between what she’s doing and what we’re doing. In fact, what we’re doing is better because we don’t delude ourselves.” He looks sinister, frowning into his orange juice like that.
I don’t like hearing him accuse her. What’s this like? I feel like I have to defend her. “She really seems genuine,” I say.

“Genuine? You think she’s genuine. You think that she works scrubbing toilets or handing out sandwiches because she wants to make a difference?”

You should hear the way Janos says this stuff. It’s hatred. There’s nothing as pure in a voice as hatred. A voice that hates spits out its words and when they hit the air it’s like they smack it. I shrug. “I don’t know.”

“She’s convincing Eli, because she’s deluded herself so completely that she doesn’t know she’s lying. She believes that she’s a moral being, and that every act she commits in that regard is not only morally superior, but effective.” He sees that I’m staring at him without absolute agreement and frowns. “It’s like with schizophrenics,” he says. “I was very interested in psychology at one time, and thought I might want to go into the medical field. The disease is about voices. The mind turns against itself, and in cases with negative symptoms, the mind turns on itself and becomes convinced that its voices are telling the truth.”

“So Hannah’s schizophrenic?”

“Sometimes I wonder Eli, but no, it’s a metaphor. Hannah has convinced herself that she has a genuine desire to help people. She is absolutely sure. Nothing could be further from the truth. It’s not healthy. She’s sick, Eli. That’s why I want you to help me. I want you to help me to help her see that.”

I don’t know if I buy it, that’s the thing. It’s painful to admit, and she could use a sense of humor, that’s for certain, but every time I think about it it kind of spooks me. It’s all that self-love business. Maybe, I don’t know. My head’s a mess right now. Maybe she
is a good person. It’s these sorts of gypsy thoughts, mixing with my hangover, that have
me all spun up in knots. I can’t figure a way to answer Janos, so I just shrug.

Apparently, it’s not a good enough answer for him, because he comes from behind
his desk. “Oh Christ,” he says. “You too. Eli, you’ve got too much going for you to give
up like this. What did she tell you?”

I should stop. “She said that more people should love themselves. That the way
people hate themselves is responsible for a lot of the bad stuff that happens in the world.”

Janos looks up at the ceiling. “Oh God.”

“What?”

“Do you hear how ridiculous it sounds when you say it out loud.”

The thing is, Janos is right. Like a lot of stuff, it does sound ridiculous when you
say it to someone else. “Sure. Maybe,” I say.

“Don’t you see what she’s doing?”

I hold up my hands. I want him to tell me. Really, I honestly do. I want Janos to
set me straight with a sound bit of world-dominating advice. Tell me she’s fake, Janos.
Convince me. Tell me how to scale the heights and make people do what you what them
to.

Janos takes a sip of his pulpy orange juice and smacks his continental lips. “She’s
a fake,” he says. “Don’t you see what it does for her. Try to look at it this way. What do
you think she gets off on?”

“I don’t know.”

“Suffering, Eli. She gets off on suffering. Now tell me, what could possibly be
sicker?”
But I think about her in the zoo. I think about the way she held the spooker’s hand. I think about the way she put the blanket on me, and it just doesn’t mesh. I just can’t buy it. Or maybe... I mean, she is a little full of herself. It is a little ridiculous to hand out sandwiches when you’re wearing Bally boots. I just don’t know. “You’re right,” I say.

“I know I am. The world runs on desire. If you can define what it is you want Eli, you can have it. But you have to focus on your vision. You have to push away the distractions. And you can’t delude yourself. Otherwise, what you get isn’t pure. Don’t you see that? If you get off on suffering, you can’t pretend otherwise. If you do, you’ll eventually lose yourself. Look at you, for example. Why do you think someone like you ends up selling shoes?”

I feel the old defensiveness. I can’t help it. “It pays well and I don’t know what else to do.”

“Do you want to know how my uncle died Eli?”

The truth is, I don’t really care. The more Janos talks, the less any of this makes sense.

Janos doesn’t wait for an answer. He strides over to the window like some kind of baron surveying his grounds. “He was tortured to death, Eli, by the Russians. While Hannah was lapping fresh hot milk in her mother’s arms, my uncle was dying. The thing is, he believed in what it was that he died for Eli. I believe that, even to the end, he believed in his cause, which was to fight communism. He was older than my father, who was, of course, his ideological antithesis, and he was a passionate nationalist for Hungary. He fought in the war on the Russian front in weather so cold urine froze to his penis, and afterwards he went underground to join the resistance. It was all very romantic to me
when I was a child, Eli. You can imagine. In my childish way, I imagined that the
underground was a literal underground, where tunnels connected cavernous room lit by
candles. Of course, the Russians were methodical and organized, whereas the underground
was a group of loose romantics linked only by an impossible conviction in the possibility
of revolution. My father held forth on them night after night, calling them fools, saying
that his brother hurt the rest of the family by being a known fugitive of the state. My
selfish father, you should have heard him. Instead of worrying about the danger his
brother was in, he complained night after night about how he would never get a car—he
would linger forever on the waiting list because of that brother of his.

"They finally caught him, of course. The great trick of the Russians, if you’re
interested in learning anything from them, is that they knew how to be patient. They
carried out their investigations with relentless persistence, never letting obstacles alter the
rhythm of their slow march to dominance. This was in Stalin’s era, Eli. You know what
Stalin did to his own people, so you can imagine what it was like when he caught those
perceived as traitors in other countries. There were rumors, of course, as there so often are
in cases like these. Some people said that my uncle had been shipped off to a gulag in
Siberia. Others said that he’d been shot immediately. Still others argued that he was being
held in an underground prison right below Budapest. There was no way of inquiring. My
father never seemed particularly upset. Instead of weeping, he pounded the table and went
on and on about the car he’d never get.

"Years later, when I first came to this country and was working my way through
school, I received a letter in the mail. It was from a man named Laszlo that said he’d
found my name when he was passing through Boston to visit his sister. The letter
explained that it was his custom to look through the phone book in every new city he
visited, searching for Hungarian names of people he might know. He knew it was a long
shot, he wrote, but he mentioned my uncle’s name and asked if there was any possibility
that I was related. If I was, he wrote, he would be glad to have me in his home, and said
that he could shed some light on what had happened to my uncle. I’d always admired my
uncle immensely, and I was thrilled to have a chance to visit. During a semester break, I
made arrangements to meet with Laszlo in Cleveland.

“Eli, I’ll never forget what I saw there. The man was no older than I am now, but
he looked like he was in his eighties. His hair was a shocking shade of white, his back was
stooped, and his teeth were rotten. More than anything else, though, it was his fingernails
that I’ll never be able to forget, because he didn’t have any. I didn’t have to ask how he’d
lost them. We went for a cup of coffee. I remember that I was consciously trying not to
stare at his fingernails, but it was no use. I couldn’t help it. Laszlo told me, without
ceremony, that my uncle had been held in a prison cell with him beneath Budapest. He
told me that the cell was filled chest-high with water and that, in order to sleep, he and my
uncle had to take turns sitting on each other’s shoulders. They were tortured at length.
Laszlo told me that my uncle was a strong man. He had the constitution to endure torture.
He maintained his conviction until the end. Eventually, Laszlo told me without judgment,
he himself began to think of the whole thing as absurd. It became a joke to him. The very
concept of the elaborate tortures became a joke. The nationalist movement became a joke.
He spent his time holding Laszlo aloft on his shoulders while laughing like a madman.
Laszlo, on the contrary, said that my uncle’s conviction was so absolute that he never even
smiled. My uncle, Laszlo told me, eventually got sick, and was sent to a hospital to die.
You may wonder how this relates. I can see the way you’re looking at me with that blank expression.”

Indeed, I think. “It’s a good story.”

Janos turns around, frowning. “The reason I’m bothering to tell you this, besides the fact that I consider you a friend, is that there is a profound connection between conviction and insanity. You can apply that connection to Hannah. Think about it. Laszlo was right that conviction in the face of such circumstances was absurd. The tortures were so obscene that it was reasonable to laugh at them as a kind of joke of fate, but what’s more important here Eli, is that Laszlo was the one that survived. You see, he survived because he refused to hold onto his conviction when such conviction became unreasonable. You see, there has to be a balance Eli. On some occasions, it’s insane to have conviction. It’s also insane to think of everything as absurd. Do you see? The important thing is balance. Hannah, as wonderful as she is, is like my uncle. She deludes herself with her conviction, and refuses to see things as they are. It’s a form of madness, Eli. Now, let’s look at you. Do you have the necessary balance, Eli, or are you stuck on one side of the equation?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

Janos shakes his head back and forth with a little whistle he must use especially to express denial. “Let’s start with your job,” he says. “Your job’s a joke. For some people it’s an honorable profession, but for you it’s a joke. Admit it.”

“Well.”

“You, Eli, are the antithesis of Hannah. You have no conviction. You see, you’re trapped. The way isn’t to choose either conviction or absurdity. No, what you need to be
able to do is to acknowledge your own outlook, acknowledge the outlook of those with conviction, and use the knowledge of both sides. That’s how you win, Eli. That’s how I win.”


Janos hits me again with the whistle of disbelief. “You’re distracted. You don’t know what you want. You have to be able to focus on everything, and you have to be able to play your strategy without vanity or emotion. Now, what do you want? Money?”

I nod.

“Women?”

“Sure,” I say.

Janos smacks his hand on the desk. “Not like that,” he says. “Look around you. Look at this house. Look at the lake. Look at this room. Do you think I was vague about it? I saw this, all of it, before I ever had any right to dream of it. I saw the cars. I saw my wife. I saw the whiteboards and I saw the way the carpet would be vacuumed. A scale model of my life was in my mind before it was here. I knew what slippers I would put on. Do you understand what I’m telling you Eli? You can’t dream in an abstract way. You have to do it without vanity or emotion. You have to define what you want down to the shoes you’ll have in your closet, but if the situation becomes absurd, you need to modulate your conviction and plot the course to what it is you want. Now tell me what you want.”

There’s one thing, of course. I want out. Out of this rotting city. Out of my apartment. Out of reach. I tell Janos about Guam, about the ice cream, about the Japanese tourists. I’m not halfway through the first sentence when I realize how lame it sounds out loud. But instead of quitting it’s like I can’t stop. I tell him everything. I say, “I want to
quit my job. I want to get away from Mickey. I want to get away from my father.” I can hear the child in my voice—the squeaky pre-pubescent fatty—I can hear him and he sounds like the most pitiful bastard in the world.

Janos looks at me for a good minute before he answers. He comes towards me shaking his head, none too fast, and grabs my shaking shoulders with both hands. He looks down on me from above and stares right in my eyes. “Everything you just told me is fantasy,” says Janos. “Don’t get upset. You’ve been lying to yourself. Be honest for once. What do you really want?”

“The Japanese really can’t get enough of it” I say. “And the profit margins—”

“No, what do you want?”

I feel something slip in me. A crack of light maybe. It’s all clear. It’s Hannah. Janos wants honesty. I want honesty. I think about Hannah standing over me in my apartment. I think about her screaming in the store. I think about her crumbling in the zoo. “Your wife,” I say

“Then push everything away and take her,” he says. “You’ll learn how to live.”

“Okay,” I say.

Janos puts a hand on my shoulders and I try to look into his eyes. They’re the warmest I’ve seen them: wet and wide open. Janos says, “I have to warn you what I’m giving you Eli. You need to know that the cruelest truth of life is the temporality of it. She doesn’t understand this, Eli, and I have to make that clear. She’s laboring under the illusion that we live in a moral world, and that her decisions are permanent, but she’s blind. No doubt, you’ll find that belief seductive. That will be the most difficult part for you Eli. The truth is, she’ll develop an infatuation with you, and she’ll believe, completely, that it’s
something more. You’ll want to believe that as well, Eli, because she’s a very attractive
woman, and there’s nothing as seductive as conviction. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

Janos takes his hand off my shoulder. “I’m not sure if you do,” he says. “She’ll
seduce you and then drop you Eli. You’ll have to prepare yourself for that. You have to
be able to focus your conviction on the next thing you want.”

“I’m not emotionally involved Janos,” I say. “It’s just desire.”

“I like the way your mind works,” says Janos.


I feel dizzy with the need to get out of the house. It’s the shafts of biblical light.
The churning water. It’s the chevrons and Janos. Too much. All of it. It’s just too much.

“Yeah?”

“I’ve got to fly to Palo Alto for a few days,” says Janos. He gives me a wink. “I
expect a full report when I get back.”

All the details, I think. I nod.

“If you ever feel sorry for Hannah, you might want to watch this,” Janos says. He
hands me a videocassette in a white case.

“What is it?”

Janos gives me this crazy wink. “It’s Hannah doing some of her reporting. Enjoy.”

What should I do with the weight of all this Janos wisdom? What should one,
when gripped with new knowledge, do in the leafy confines of Bellevue proper? A jaunt
out to Bellevue Square for some Christmas shopping? An indulgent but efficient fast food
treat? A walking tour of the auto dealer row? Perhaps a stroll down memory lane. Take, for example, the park by Yarrow Bay where I was interrupted right in the middle of giving it to this girl named Jasmine by a local officer friendly. I could reflect on the sound of his flashlight—big as a forearm—slapping on the glass, and the way he said, without a shred of irony, "I know what you're doing in there." What else can Bellevue offer you? A drink? There're a number of Irish pubs. There's one right around the corner, Scotty MacDooley's I think it's called. It might have actually been shipped from Ireland, board by board.

I sit in my car like a safety dummy, unable to decide where to go. You have to understand this feeling, because it's important. You'll remember it was a moment like this, in her own car, that finally pushed my mother over the edge. A moment when, in the pace of everyday routines, she fell off the treadmill and couldn't get back on. At moments like this the spook descends on you like a fog, and you can't even move anymore. Such moments are to be avoided. The thing to do is run. Hop back on. Keep going. Keep driving. Keep going to work. I start the car.
The thing is, I feel a lot better about the Hannah and Janos thing. If I really think about it, Janos makes a hell of a lot more sense than Hannah. That’s a guy who knows how the world works. That’s a guy who has his head straight. Besides, the more I think about it, the more it seems like I don’t have anything to lose. If Hannah does sleep with me, Janos is totally right. If she doesn’t sleep with me, he’s wrong. You see how easy it is? I feel much better with all this straightened out, and I decide the thing to do right now is see my dad and get it over with. It just has to be done. If I don’t see him, he’ll keep leaving those messages and all. He’ll come storming into my apartment and there’ll be all this drama. I think I have enough drama in my life just now. Besides, my mom asked me to see him, and no one can guilt me into things like Mom.
My dad lives in Redmond, which is like Bellevue, but filled with even more gated
neighborhoods of McMansions and shiteaus. His house is a sprawling perversion: brick
and stone, ivy crawling halfway up the walls, and, in the summer, flowers the colors of
different flavors of Kool-Aid: sunshine punch, mountain berry, tropical fruit. You get the
idea. He has all the necessary amenities: sport court, weight room, hot tub, stocked bar
with imported beers on tap in the basement, piranha tank. Is Eli rich? Are you wondering?
One would think, wouldn’t they? No, not the way old dad spends it. A true American, he
does the patriotic thing for the economy and consumes like crazy. Only a pinko wouldn’t
refurbish his electronics every three years. The big ticket items do the most good:
HDTV’s, computers, cars; this stuff is what keeps the blood of our great nation pumping.
But it takes it’s toll on him. He pays for Mom’s horses. He can’t retire. I’ll probably
inherit his debts. I mean, even Mickey’s parents, disposed furriers that they are, were able
to pay to send him to school.

Debt. Are you sympathetic? Don’t start weeping. It’s unnatural not to be in debt.

In my line you have to turn down the occasional credit card, and it’s sadder than Lassie
getting run over by a milk truck. I’m entitled to everything I’ve gotten. I am. I am. I am.
Don’t you doubt that for a minute. These customers, sliding their beleaguered plastic over
the counter... I hate to deal with them. You can see them praying before you roll the old
magnetic strip. They look like they’re playing the slots. Just one more purchase, they
pray—one more prayer before the gig is up. More often than not, they get their wish. The
credit card companies, they’re understanding like that; they have a vested interest in our
nation’s economic health. They’re the proud sponsors of the war on poverty.
Here's the thing. I know I'm making a mistake while I'm making it. Every time I visit my dad I'm filled up with all this guilt. The guilt spook is almost as bad as the death spook. It's not that it's so bad being told what a failure I am. That I can take. What really spooks me are the endless and suffocating silences between us. I choke on those silences. Every time I visit, it feels like I'm gasping for air.

I go through the security gate, where this guy—you know exactly who he is... he's the sorriest bastard in the world—asks me what my business is in Eagle's Nest. I could tell him I was looking for little boys to fondle and penetrate with vegetables and I don't think he would give a shit. He's maybe seventy-five. His fingers shake. He cocks his ear to hear better. Sometimes you see these guys working at McDonalds or Wal-Mart and you feel like tying an anchor to your foot and jumping into the lake.

The sorriest bastard in the world presses the little gate button and next thing I know I'm pulling up to Dad's, where the usual pack of German Shepherds comes storming from the backyard like a coven of dingoes. I haven't said much about the German Shepherds, have I? A little much, these things. My dad trains them day and night. He's part of some weirdo German Shepherd obedience club. He's got four of them. These satanic hounds, they bring him his shoes, they bring him the paper, maybe they bring him comely young women for all I know. You should see the way that they cower when he comes into the room. You should see the way that they bark when he tells them to speak, the way they stand on their hind legs, roll over, play dead, shimmy across the floor on their bellies like swamp commandoes. It's freaky. They would maim for Dad, they'd kill. Needless to say, they spook me to no end.
As is my custom, I wait in the Hyundai while they circle me and gnash their teeth. Their long pink tongues snap through their spotted gums; they bark with guttural menace; they rub their backs against the skimpy flanks of my imported deathtrap; they carry on for a good ten minutes until my dad comes rumbling out of the house with a lit Pall Mall and two mannish bottles of Miller. Dad looks like Dad, his skin the familiar shade of orange.

The dogs line up like the Hitler youth while Dad comes over and opens my door. "Elijah," he says. "The dogs don’t get you too excited, do they?"

There is one of the awkward pauses I was talking about. I get out of the car.

"Dad," I say.

"How’s work?"

"Fine," I say.

"The month’s going good?"

I nod, and for once, he doesn’t volley my answer back with a scowl. "That’s the way," he says, with philosophical rub of chin. "Bust your hump early and that way your quota’s not hanging over your head like the sword of Damocles." With that, he spins his enormous frame and leads me towards the house. He mutters something to the dogs that I can’t make out, mostly because he uses his German when he commands them (it’s part of what they learn there at the club). He turns to me. "Want to go to the bar?" he asks.

He means the basement. This is usually a warning sign. This usually means we’re about to talk. It means I’ll get a little advice, a little motivation; it means my dad will string together a couple of clichés and I’ll sip my beer and nod, and fine, what else is there to do? Sip your drink and pretend to listen. No one ever tells you that, but that’s what I call advice.
We sit there at the bar, where Dad has Bass ale on tap and peanuts in convenient trays. He picks up a remote and turns on the evening news. If he’s anything, Dad is a man that just doesn’t miss the news. On the screen hanging in the corner is the usual fare. The international savagery flicks by: charred hearts, chopped limbs, extended bellies, flailing hands trying to hold up the sagging stock market. Bring it all, I think: the melting glaciers, the rising oceans, the infected meat, the bombs filled with nails, the random suburban killing sprees. Give us an earnest report. The feature story is about gangs of teenagers in Indonesia eradicating sorcerers. “They drove around in circles atop motorcycles,” says the reporter, holding his hand to his ear, standing there in a safari jacket. “They carried sharpened sticks, impaled upon which were the severed heads of those accused of sorcery. The crowd pressed in on them, surging. Someone started a chant. Allahu Akbar, they shouted... God is great.”

Dad wouldn’t miss it for the world.

I shouldn’t think about the news, there’s just no point. What I should do is focus on the pyramid scheme of familial relationships that transpire between Dad, my mom, and yours truly. I don’t know. All I can think of is the glorious concrete expanse of 520—the wind in my hair as the Hyundai inches through the traffic towards sodden Seattle. Still, there’s something different here today. Dad looks tired, for one. Jesus does he look tired. It’s out of nowhere, his cracked face, his humped shoulders, an inch of sag off his chin. I swear, he got older in the last two weeks. There’s also a certain element of chumminess, I’ll admit, down in the basement pub. The alcohol dances around in my overtaxed, and, until now, hung over pores; my dad sits there all enormous, drinking and smoking, and he’s something of yesterday’s outlaw—John Wayne with his dogs and his digital cable and
his twenty-four hour reports on the sorry state of the world. And there in the corner, behind us, the previously mentioned tank full of piranhas he sometimes throws meat to. Plus, it’s been fifteen minutes or so, and he hasn’t waged so much as a veiled insult my way besides that one about the massage parlor. A new record? Maybe he’s turning over a new leaf, Dad. Maybe he’s doing something right here. Admittedly, he has his eccentricities, but the thing about his eccentricities is that they all correspond to a fantasy he may well have conceived drunkenly in his twenties. Here it is, around us. We’re touching it. But my fantasy? What’s my fantasy?

Dad stubs his cigarette out in a precise elbow. “You know what?” he says. “I look at you and, this is honest, I wouldn’t be your age again for all of the money in the world.”

“Mom says the same thing,” I say.

His eyebrows elevate in surprise. “Your mother and I have far more in common than she would ever admit.”

“Really?”

“You thinking about moving?” he asks.

“I can’t afford it.”

“All of that school. I can’t tell me what it does to me to see you living in that kind of apartment. I just don’t get it. You always had promise of some sort. I felt like it was buried there under the surface, that maybe you were like a Ferrari without a set of keys. But you just never seem to be able to pull it all together at once. You know what it’s like?”

“No?”

“It’s like you don’t have any heart.” A new tactic, is it, an appeal to my inner man.
Heart? No beating around the bush, no talk about motivation courses or broker trainee programs or, savior to the moderately talented white man, law schools. No more talk about being a dipshit failure. He’s going straight for blood. He hates you, says the shark. He hates everything about you. I feel a little shaken, honestly. I’d just gotten used to the standard insults. Dad lights another cigarette and I worry that he’s going to start talking about the Tet Offensive, or the way he paid for college, or the way he did the best he could after my mom lost her mind and left him, but he just drags from his cigarette and stares into the dusty mirror behind the bar or up at the flickering CNN. He sits there telling me about having a heart, but doesn’t it matter what all of that heart is for? What, for example, does my Dad have a heart for? The Mariners? German Shepherds? The stock market? It’s all fake, and if it is all fake, isn’t it better to just give up?

I’ll tell you what the problem is. It’s not a question of what you believe in being fake, because everything’s fake. The problem is, do you believe in your own legend or don’t you? Happy people, like my dad, like Mickey, or even Tim, they believe in their own legends. At any given moment, they buy into what they’re doing. They have absolute conviction that at some point they’ll look back on it and say that it was legendary. I think about Janos and his practical conviction. There’s a guy who buys into his own legend. Me, I’ve never bought my own legend. I’d love to. I just can’t. I think too much, and because I think about things, people like my dad say I don’t have a heart, but they don’t know, they don’t know how to know… I can’t do it. I just can’t buy in. I finish my beer and get up.

“Have you seen your mother recently?” he asks me.
Possible answers—I’ve thought of them a thousand times: Better off without you... Why pretend you care... Go fuck yourself. “She’s doing great,” I say.

“Really?”

“I mean... she’s the same.”

His face creases up. “I got a call,” he says.

My stomach grits. “So?”

“A policeman found her walking around six miles from her house.”

“So?”

“You know what I’m telling you Eli. She was lost and when he asked her what she was doing she said she was going on a walkabout.”

“What exactly is a walkabout?”

“The hell if I know. An Australian quest. I think there was something about it in Crocodile Dundee. Eli, I don’t know, but that’s not what I’m worried about.”

“She was lost?”

“She said she wanted to be lost. The officer said that when he was talking to her he noticed that she looked out of it. He said she looked crazy.” Dad stares down at the polished bar, blowing a stream of smoke at his dull reflection. Maybe he’s remembering how she used to put up with him. “He said she looked like she was on something.”

My stomach goes all into knots. “Maybe she was trying to—”

“Eli.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“You saw her?” he asks again.
“She looked, you know—” I think about how much we talked about me. My mom, of all people, paying for me to see a healer. I think of my hand slamming on the dashboard. *Goddamnit Mom!* It makes me sick to think about it. I wish, sometimes, I could just keep my mouth shut.

“I won’t be alive much longer,” says Dad. “I’m dying.”

Good, a move on to a cheerier topic. “What?”

He holds up his Pall Mall and waves it around. “You heard me,” he says.

“You’re not dying,” I say.

“Okay, Eli, I’m not dying,” he says.

I feel, I admit, a rush of panic. “Did someone tell you?” I ask. “A doctor? What’s wrong?”

“I hate doctors,” he says. “I smoke. I don’t work out. You don’t have to be a rocket scientist.”

I imagine what his dying would entail. I’m not ready for all of that. No way. “You scared me.”

Dad takes a pull of his cigarette.

“You’ll live to be a hundred,” I say.

“I want you to do something for me Eli.”

“Kill you and put you out of your misery.”

Dad smiles. “I want you to go visit your mother. Make sure she’s okay. I’d do it, but I just can’t.”
I watch the TV. A handheld camera rumbles down a bombed out street in the Middle East. Women stare out of windows. Soldiers run with their guns. “You shouldn’t watch this stuff Dad, it’s making you negative.”

“Tell me you’ll go out and check on her,” he says.

I nod. Why not.
After the exhilarating lurch through rush hour traffic—an hour and a half of inching forward that culminates in an unexpected mid-bridge crying jag—something about my father and the mirror and the heart comment and the stuff about my mother…who can pick?—I come into the city with my head spinning. It’s my dad. He has no right to play the victim. Just because of his age. He doesn’t deserve it. All of these sorts of thoughts. You know them. After all of that drama, it’s a great source of relief to devote my energies to the videotape that sits next to me in the paper-strewn confines of my car, snug as a bug in its techno-sheath, resting solidly on the fine Korean cloth of my passenger seat. Would it be too much to ask for one sane parent? Never mind. It’s no time for you sharky boy. You’ve been fucking me in the ass all day and I’m finished with you. The videotape. At least I can watch the videotape. Really though, imagine me crying in the middle of 520
Bridge. It was actually funnier than it sounds. A frosted milf stared down at me from the Olympian altitudes of her Tahoe. I let the tears track down my cheek. She wanted no part of it. I didn’t blame her. I sympathized with her when she checked her teeth in the mirror. I saluted her with military precision as she kept her eyes fixed firmly on the bumper ahead of her.

I can’t wait to thrust the tape into the VCR and let it take me away. Hannah was in her prime when she was the pride of KOMO news. Hannah, a genuine Seattle celebrity. Okay, admittedly an oxymoron, that, but it’s fun to think of nonetheless—frizzy banged Hannah hobnobbing with Joe Nash and Ross Schafer, or kissing Brian Tracy on the cheek at a posh Bon Marche fashion benefit. Enjoy, Janos said. He means for the tape to be some kind of proof of Hannah’s insincerity. I swing by the Korean Grocer for a fortifying bottle of white whine and some crackers. I feel better already. While waiting in line for the checkout, I see a free copy of the famous independent weekly that started this mess in the first place. With heartbreaking nostalgia, I snatch one from the pile and flip immediately to the back.

**TUTOR ME DADDY!**

*hot gym college student w/ learning disabilities and attachment issues*
*iso slender b/m any age/race*
*to fuck me HARD and puke*
*on my back. Me cute/slim/fem.*
*Yr. Place only. Hv. roommates.*

I close my eyes and imagine a nice boy from Spokane slinging his bag over his shoulder and saying goodbye to eagerly waving parents.
LEARN 2 B A SLAVE!

sexy anorexic rdhead iso/ w or b/m
w/ healthy appetite to consume lrg
quantities of food in my presence. Usual
nos. I can cook!

Well, at least she has standards. I scan the ads looking for something with a little more
psychological bite to it, but it’s a weak batch of ads, and there’s no accompanying hard-on
o make the wait in line a little more entertaining. There is a section, a favorite of mine,
where you find the ads that defy categorization. Even here the ads disappoint this week:

ATTENTION LADIES:
TWELVE HORNY DWARVES!

Sexy cannery workers at
Alaska fishing camp seek 18-20
HWP Snow White for sharing
Around. Have the time of your
Life and make your dwarves happy!
Herb friendly a plus. No STD’s.

Good luck with that one boys. How boring is that? I flip to the back, the employment
classifieds. There aren’t any jobs better than mine, what with the Seattle economy, but
here is a zany call for volunteers:

HAVE FUN! FEEL GOOD! LEARN TO COMMUNICATE! Does your life lack
MEANING?! Have you been looking for the opportunity to make a DIFFERENCE
in someone’s LIFE?! Exciting new literacy program iso volunteers for adult
literacy program! Come to our informational meeting in the Kaplan test-prep
building on University Avenue at 8:00 THURSDAY NIGHT and learn how YOU
can HELP!!!

I move to the register to pay for my wine. Outside, I don’t even know why I do it, I
rip the page with the advertisement from the weekly, shove it in my wallet, and put the rest
in the trash.
The tape of Hannah Lee is a report on the self-proclaimed video vigilantes—moralists armed with video cameras, who were notorious for a time in South Seattle for harassing the hard-working-prostitute-loving citizens in the communities surrounding the SEA-TAC Airport. The video vigilantes, I remember, organized into a number of chapters and pursued immoral behavior with a zeal that was forever being commented on by the local press. It wasn’t like it was hard to tee up on them. Pursuing moral wrongdoing around the airport was like going bird hunting for sea rats. In time, the vigilantes became a kind of army, camping outside the cheap motels next to the freeway in their mini-vans, wielding their cameras to catch men, always men, making for their cars with detective show glances to left and right. A cause for Hannah? A complicated one, you see, for civil liberties champion Hannah, who felt that people, no matter how reprehensible, had their right to privacy. People with extreme conviction often get into trouble. They have no control. They don’t know when to stop. That’s how you get vegans and pro-lifers playing Bridge together. Poor Hannah. How will she play it?

I have a nice buzz from my dad’s good ale that I keep pushing along with sensible gulps wine. The wine calms me considerably. A good bottle of wine at the right time can do wonders. I feel a thrum in my heart as the tape rolls, sealed as I am in my apartment, with disconnected phone and sleeping radiator. The tape feels somehow definitive. First, some preliminary shots: Hannah Lee painting the background of the story in navy blazer replete with broach, customary Burberry Raincoat flapping in the autumnal winds. Next, Hannah at a meeting of the satin-jacketed vigilantes. You should see this bunch—the receding hair-lines, the pregnant bellies, the bad jeans and white tennis shoes, the mustaches nodding over mouthfuls of donut. I feel sorry for them the minute I see Hannah
in their midst. This is what happens when masculinity fades. This is where they all end up: the high school football heroes, the muscle car advocates, the convenience store parking lot joint smokers, the toilet paper on trees guy. They cling to each other for protection. You can see it all: their loud, fat wives, their kids all yellow and skinned from crank, craven in front of the looping MTV, hungry for indulgent celebrity. It’s cold, I’m telling you, in the shadow of the American dream, and to see educated Hannah in their midst, thin and angry, is to know their hatred. And you should see Hannah; her glasses an incendiary for infirmities; her suggestion of wanton lust beneath her bookish exterior; her bangs just teased enough to suggest vanity. The men can’t bear to look at her. She’s poison. You can see it in their eyes. When she interviews them they look at their shoes.

The sea rats heckle outside my window in anticipation. Cut to the first victim. Hannah sits next to the volunteer video vigilante in a turquoise and navy blue Dodge Caravan with a Seahawks pinstripe painstakingly etched the length of its sides. You know what it is about Hannah? It’s the skin. The skin is all different on Hannah. It’s the skin that only education and money can buy—it has the Vail flush, the salt massage from tropical waters, the sharp eyes of hours in the library. The video vigilante, he’s sour, he’s full of rot, stuffed with processed meats and purple dyes. He looks yellow. He looks like he’s cracking. “Here one comes,” he says.

And out of the smog-cured motel comes a john in a cheap gray suit. Suits like this make me feel genuine pity. He’s a civil servant. He’s a telemarketer. He’s every shit job that makes him wear a cheap suit without any real reason. The prostitute? Have you ever noticed how much prostitutes look like prostitutes? They must have a store on Aurora just for hookers. Her skirt. Jesus. It’s either for little girls or made just for whores. The video
vigilante is out of his car with his camera, and Hannah after him, and the news camera after them. The john gets into his car with the prostitute. The vigilante speaks to him in the parlance of cop shows: you’re busted now buddy, the jig’s up, to which the john, his cardboard suit stretching around his ribs without give, throws an arm over the velour headrest of the passenger seat of his, ouch, late eighties Chevy Lumina, and brodies out of the parking lot in high Luke Hazard style. I feel like clapping for the bastard. This happens all the time. I always want the drug lords in movies to stay rich. I want the last big score to go well for the jewel thief. I want Specter to take over the world and turn it into Vegas. Anyway, the vigilante zooms in on the poor john’s plates and focuses there, recording for posterity the identity of the offender.

Local law enforcement agencies are in full accord. Deputy Sheriff Queensboro, with earnest shrug, says that the vigilantes provide a valuable moral service to the community. They match up license plate numbers. They provide phone numbers. And the offending john? He can expect to have his wife get a call while he’s at work. He can expect her to find a videotape in the mail.

Hannah, her face pinched with the conflicting emotions, makes her pleas about the constitution. Freedom of speech, she says, civil liberties. The thing is, I think I can see what Janos is getting at. She’s faking it. Her questions come out gentle—she asks about effectiveness, but beneath the surface, boiling in her tigress heart, lurks her compassion, undeniable, for the shamed john. His desire, she thinks, the currency of desire, that’s what’s been violated here. She thinks the way I’d think, that there’s nothing honest about the video vigilantes. They’re doing it, not because they have any real investment in it, but because they’re scared of not doing anything else.
Did this go on? These vigilantes? Are they multiplying? Are we to have a moral society, created by a fear for public humiliation, by the year 2010? For one thing, if you pay attention to the news, we’ll all probably be dead by then. For another, the video vigilantes were banned. They interfered in more popular pastimes like drinking and driving and it was the death of them.

Did Hannah stand up for what she believed in? Was what she believed in fake? Was it knee-jerk, a liberal reflex? I rewind the tape and watch it again, fantasizing about the real Hannah, the one beneath the surface, the one that wants to force our noble video vigilante to the pavement and make him sob for forgiveness for being such a self-righteous prick. Look close and you can see it—the sneer at the corner of her mouth when she’s in the meeting, the far-off look of hopelessness that Hannah acquires when she’s on her stakeout in the Seahawks van—you can see how much she hates what she has to do.

You’re wrong Janos, she’s not fake. She says what she has to say for work—true, she fakes it—but what she really believes, the murk belief, she genuinely believes in. The murk belief. I’m a huge fan. It’s not what people say they believe, it’s what they really believe. Hannah, in other words, actually knows what she believes in.

Hours later, I jolt out of sleep to see the tape frozen; Hannah’s mouth just parted to give the old company line; her teeth frozen sharp and white, as if to devour the microphone. I turn off the TV but that image of Hannah with parted lips, I can’t get it out of my head. One can imagine all of the phrases I fill that mouth with in with my imagination. I’m sure you have ideas. Have you ever been hit across the head with a microphone? comes to mind. I don’t know where they comes from, these longings for
cruelty. I spend the night in a fever dream of desire, rubbing one out occasionally to no avail—draining, as it were, the cyst.
Maimed by desire, eyes blurry, I stroll into work the next morning. The first person I see is Tim. "You spend the weekend in Vegas?" everybody's favorite Swede asks me, taking a gulp of his coffee.

"I've had trouble sleeping," I tell him.

"Rub some water on your face or something," he says. It's great fun for Tim. He has a good laugh at my expense, keeping it coming even as he walks off. I get an incredible surge of energy, as he walks away, thinking about violence. There's nothing better to wake you up. Imagine punching a person in the face. Imagine throwing them on the ground and kicking them in the side and saying "You like that?" Go on, do it, it's good for you. In this vein I imagine Tim tied up in a chair while I tell him everything I've ever
thought about him. I imagine my fist in his face again and again. I imagine him
blubbering for forgiveness.

Mickey comes striding up, his black Armani suit jacket snug over a white shirt and
lime green tie. He looks, I have to admit, like an aftershave model. “Bird, oh Bird, where
have you been all my life?” he asks. It’s so annoying when Mickey smiles. He has teeth
like one of those Sportscenter guys.

“I’ve been busy,” I say.

“That was something the other night,” he says. “A little out of control.”

If only you could remember Mickey, I think. “I think I’m through with those
nights,” I say.

Mickey shakes his head. “Sure you are Bird,” he says.

“I’m serious.”

Mickey holds up a shiny black foot. A Gucci loafer, just hatched, from the looks of
it,

from the box. “You like?” he asks.

I nod. They really are a beautiful pair of shoes. “How much?”

Mickey gives me his favorite grin. The one he saves for guilty pleasures. “My
fiancé bought them for me,” he says. “You should think about marrying rich Bird. It’s
unbelievable. I come home, and they’re just sitting there. Sylvie just bought them. I
thanked her and she just shrugged. It’s all relative. For her it’s like no big deal.”

No big deal. SUVs, barges of food, cities of chickens ground into nuggets. It’s
sick sometimes, when you catch a glimpse of it. “I’m not into the whole spend a lot of
money thing anymore,” I say. My voice comes out sounding kind of stupid. It comes out like Hannah’s voice.

“Whoa,” says Mickey.

“Sorry. Bad night’s sleep.”

“Just tell me they’re smooth.”

Fuck Mickey I tell him no such thing. He snaps his fingers and sings something about what a jealous bird I am. This is what it’s come to: talking about shoes, selling shoes, pretending about shoes. This job, it’s such a gag it’s not even funny.

I find myself thinking about the stuff Janos told me, all that stuff about absurdity. The funny thing about gags in real life is that the punch lines never stop coming. Once you find yourself living the hip ironic life, there’s no getting out. There’s a punch line around every corner: punch lines buried in the refrigerator, punch lines all over the streets—spookers, if you think about it one way, are punch lines—and there are punch lines, for certain, every time you turn on the TV. And my place of employment? Oh, it’s the biggest punch line of all. Ba Boom Cschoo goes the cash register, every time it rings. Rim shot! yell the salesmen, every time they bag a sale. Eli! shout the women. Eli, Eli, Eli!

This is the sort of mood I’m in when I encounter Mrs. Schumann. She’s one of my personals, Schumann is. And what a personal she is. She terrifies me. In she comes two, three times a week, waving her divorce money around like an octopus in a china shop—a quivering vegetal mass that, because she was the number one non-business cell-phone user in the state of Washington, won a year of free service gratis. She caresses a crocodile print Ferragamo skimmer, squinting her eyes at me. “You know my size Eli,” she says, by way of a greeting.
I get the skimmers. They’re as ugly as argyle: red, black, green, and yellow leather. Mrs. Schumann grins like a fender; I take the shoes out of the box, hold one up. She looks at me from her perch on the couch. The piano music—“Unchained Melody”—is all around me, and everywhere there are women. On the couches are women. Standing in front of the sales racks are women. Behind us, leaning over the cosmetics racks, are women. What kind of relationship do I have with women? I’ll tell you. I have a gag relationship. These women, these Mrs. Schumanns, they think I’m a real kick in the pants.

I assume the position, down on one knee, and start to slip one of the shoes over her pointed foot. When I look up, I notice a number of things. I’m staring at Schumann’s knees, which are tanned to black. Her short pink skirt is hitched unnaturally high around her waist. Her oily knees, already mentioned, are spread just a little too wide apart. How wide apart? I have a full meal vista of the dark damp thatch of her pubis, visible beneath the flimsy coverage of a pair of pink panties of obvious expense. You want to know the difference between Mickey and I? Mickey probably loves his sort of thing. He probably says something like: *It’s hard to complain about work when you’ve got a view like this.* But I can’t say it. Correction. I can say it, but if I did I’d have to haul myself off to the men’s and stick my finger down my throat to get the bile out of my stomach. I slip the shoes on and Mrs. Schumann purrs, “I don’t know what it is about these shoes Elijah, but for some reason they make me feel positively scandalous.”

I mean, what if Hannah is onto something with her conviction? Maybe it isn’t fake at all. Do you buy it? Is she onto something? She’d been thinking about it. She’d been thinking about our conversation at the zoo when she came to my apartment. That means, by default, that she’d been thinking about me. I look up at Mrs. Schumann, who has her
eyebrows frozen in a perpetual smirk. I try to remember what stupid sort of conversation we were in the process of having. I offer, “They’re nice shoes.”

She looks at me like I just slapped her. “Nice. Eli. You should know that I don’t want anything to do with nice. I prefer naughty.”

She needs a mail-order boy-toy. She needs oily studs to fan her with palm fronds. Why does she feel he need to take it out on me? “They’re both nice and naughty,” I say.

She gives an exaggerated pout. “You’re no fun today Eli.”

I stare at her underwear. How to recover. How to get the snap back in my suspenders. Nothing comes to me. I look over at Mickey, his clenched jaw, his gelled hair. He bends over, the shiny black fabric of his suit-pants stretching tight over his ass. We’re Chippendales. It’s really funny, isn’t it? Mrs. Schumann locks her knees up, kicks off the shoes, and stands. A sigh. “I hope for your sake you’re not so banal the next time I come in.”

I notice Tim, lurking around the floor, arms crossed, watching me. “I’m really sorry,” I say. “I’ve been going through some personal problems.”

Mrs. Schumann grabs her kidskin bag. “Please Eli,” she says.

Tim and I both watch her as she clicks away. Imagine me there. Knees pressed to the floor. A penitent Eli, cast off multi-hued Ferragamos spread before him, alone in the bustle of commerce. A lone failure.

Tim gives me a mannish look of feigned sympathy, his face straining like he’s squeezing out one more rep on the old bench press. “Oh no you didn’t,” he says.

There’s a lot of stuff I can think of to say to Tim at this moment. I can tell him how she’ll be back in fifteen minutes—such is her lust for shoes that she probably will. I
can tell him that I talked her out of the shoes so that I’d have her trust in the future. But Tim. Fuck Tim. His life’s pitiful: his jet skis…his endless conversations about food and cars…his late-night recreational browsing of The Robb Report. I say, “She wanted me to tell her how much I liked looking at her cooze.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

Tim gives me a genuinely confused look. I’ve had the sack to be explicit. Imagine that. “Are you serious?” he says.

“I won’t be sexually propositioned Tim,” I say. “If it was a woman you’d have a court case.”

“Oh come on man,” he says.

“I really feel used,” I say.

Tim gets a hold of himself. “It’s Mrs. Schumann,” he says. “Edgar could bag a sale to Schumann.”

“Tim, I’m not going to be belittled—”

“Calm down. This is funny Eli.”

“I’m sorry Tim,” I say.

“Eli, I’m really concerned about you,” he says. “You’re blowing sales, you’re losing your sense of humor.” Tim squints his eyes into a look that either represents manly compassion or the presence of a bad smell. “Eli, I’m not trying to hurt you, I’m trying to motivate you. Selling isn’t just about selling, it’s a way to make it through the world. It’s about conviction, Eli. What are you without conviction?” Tim doesn’t wait for me to respond. “I’ll tell you what you are Eli, you’re lost. You’re a ship without a rudder.”
What is it with conviction? Is there anyone who doesn’t have an opinion on it?

Jesus. “If it was a woman Tim—”

“I’ve been talking to Mickey,” says Tim. I almost laugh when he tells me this.

One can only imagine the proposed remedies traded back and forth between the two of them. More one night stands! More jet skiing! A healthy afternoon of catalogue browsing! Tim puts his hands on his hips. “Mickey and I both agree that you’re becoming distant. You’ve had some good moments, but we worry that you’re drifting away from the team in the last few days.”

I see Mickey over at the cash register. It would be one thing if he was grinning. Sarcastic grins I can handle. Instead, his face is fixed in a look of genuine concern.

Mickey has the nerve to worried about me.

This job is beyond ridiculous. Both of them, with their earnestness, all over the sale of footwear. I force a clenched smile. “I promise, Tim... I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’m having some personal problems.” Why do I bother to lie? I should just tell him to fuck off and get it over with. But it dies hard, the survival instinct. The need to have a job. The need to live the life. The survival instinct scrapes at my throat. The shark swims himself into a boil. Say something, he says. I say, “My father just told me he’s dying.”

Which isn’t a lie, exactly. The line is levered with yet another tremble of my chin. I’m turning into an abused daughter in a TV movie. Oh Tim. Oh Big Guy. Oh pal. Come on. A little sympathy here?

Tim manages, how I don’t know, to become even more earnest. “I’m sorry Eli. Do you need a few days?”
“I think I’ll be okay Tim,” I say. “I think I’m better off working.”

Tim eats it up. He crosses his arms and crinkles his forehead for effect. His blue eyes hold mine and I worry for a second that he might get all choked up. “That’s exactly how I feel when I’m down.” He looks at his watch. “Why don’t you finish out here today and then take two days off?”

Why don’t you fuck yourself in the ass with the sharp stick, I think. “Sure thing Tim,” I say.

Mickey starts coming towards me on my way out into the street after work, but I glare at him and shake my head. For once, he takes the hint.

After work, you can feel the rain breaking up. The sky is going dark, but it’s clear. The sidewalks are drying in the crisp night air. I look up and there are stars. Yes, stars. Go home Eli, says the shark. Get some macaroni and cheese, rent a movie, drink a bottle of wine. But domestic seductions, they have no appeal tonight. I’m nearing the fluorescent oasis of the Korean grocer when it occurs to me that I might not have any cash. I open my wallet to check. Then I see the VOLUNTEERS WANTED!! advertisement. I look at my watch. Jet skis, convictions, one-night stands, Mrs. Schumann’s vegetable smile. He said she looked really confused. Maybe it’s the thought of being alone with my thoughts. I don’t know. Maybe it’s the seduction of doing good. Whatever it is makes volunteering sound better than anything else, and I realize I have just enough time to make it.
The Ave, in U District, with its surplus of Teriyaki joints, faux-intellectual cafes, churches, record stores, and seedy bars, is home to both the cheery students of the University of Washington as well as a large population of the city’s homeless teens. Amidst all this, the Kaplan test-prep center stands ready to offer its services. For only a thousand dollars, you too can learn proven techniques to maneuver your way around the standardized tests that have such a dramatic impact on one’s future. Old Mickey and I, frequently stoned, did our test prep here.

The Kaplan Test Prep Center is a building that, after ten years, already feels like it’s falling apart. Visible cracks split the dry-wall. There’s paint chipping away from the handrails. Amidst this decay, junior achievers with lap-tops and cell phones drift by, the names of far off college towns dripping lustily from their lips: “New Haven, Charlottesville, Palo Alto,” they whisper, like hymns to the dead. A sign in the lobby (ADULT LITERACY VOLUNTEERS UPSTAIRS, ROOM 12!!!) directs me up the stairs to a room full of smiling adults in professional attire sitting patiently around a conference table.

I assume my place just as introductions are starting. The first man, a jolly retiree named Bob, stands up while he introduces himself. “I used to work at a local think tank,” he says, “but that doesn’t mean I’m always thinking.”

My fellow volunteers titter. Bob goes on. “Say,” he says, doing a piss-poor imitation of someone having a spontaneous thought, “I don’t know if this is the right group to ask, but something tells me there are some singers here tonight. I’ve been working with a group of troubled teens at the church right down the street, and I’m just really having a
hard time coming up with songs to sing with them. I was just wondering if any of you might have suggestions."

His question is followed by a general cooing in the group. I steel myself for the impossibly lame suggestions that are sure to come. And come they do. “Clementine!” shouts a fifties white woman wearing, for no apparent reason, a purple cape.

Bob takes care to write down all of the suggestions in his notebook. Camptown Races, Jimmy Crack Corn, This Land is Your Land. I imagine the teenagers, holding hands, waving candles above them like they’re in that old Coke Commercial. The problem with the earnest, I’m telling you, is that they have no sense of humor.

Bob finally finishes taking suggestions, then thanks us in a way that is so warm as to be embarrassing.

“Great!” says the instructor, a sincere looking bald intellectual named Ben with John Lennon glasses. He hands out glossy materials that have been donated by a local coffee manufacturer (their vaguely maritime label is the most prominent aspect of the cover). We read through some introduction materials: always be courteous, always call ahead of time if you need to cancel, always .. .blah blah blah. Ben tornados through a primer on phonics, tells us some jokes about the value of repetition...I can't tell you how valuable repetition is (pause) I can't tell you how valuable repetition is... Ha! and shows us a video filled with success stories from the program’s past, in which employed graduates, sipping gourmet coffee beverages, speak at length about their gratitude for the program. This video, this is more like it. It’s honestly moving, what with people admitting their prior shame at not being able to read. It’s a thing to admit shame. I admire
that. I get a little choked up seeing the integrity of people's gratitude in the video, and I have to focus on the coffee cups, the logos, to keep from embarrassing myself.

I’m not alone in being moved. After the video cuts off and the light flicks on, there isn’t a person in the room that isn’t ready to join up. Ben smiles at us. “I can see that this is a good group of people here tonight,” he says. “I have a surprise for you.”

A dramatic pause takes over the room until Bob just can’t take it anymore. “The suspense is killing me!” he shouts. My fellow humanitarians offer chuckling agreement.

I have to admit, I’m right there with them. This Ben character, he can really move it. Like Mickey he can move it...his videos...his earnestness...his belief...he could give Mickey a run for his money if he ever went into the shoe game. Ben straightens his back and folds his hands into the Hindu gesture favored by my mother and Ron Rodrigo’s helper lady. A deep breath. “Normally,” says Ben, “It takes at least a week or two before you get to meet your literacy partner, but as a special treat, we have your actual partners here tonight.”

A chorus of applause. I’m like, what?

Ben goes on, stern now. “You don’t have to really get down to it, but we do have something for you to read if you’re comfortable. We’ll match you up with some of these gentlemen and ladies and introduce you.”

Bob raises his hand. “Say Ben,” he says. “Are we going to meet the actual person that we’re going to be working with for the next few months?”

I wonder if this guy’s a plant. Ben nods his head; a wave of nervous energy crashes over the room. Me, I’m a little worried here. Me, I didn’t plan on meeting anybody face to face...not yet anyway. Ben holds out a cautionary whoa horsy hand. “I
want to tell you that if you want to back out right now there’s nothing to be ashamed of. This is an experiment, throwing people together like this, and we know that nobody here has fully committed. We’ll take a break, and if you want to come back, we’ll set you up.”

Curiously, the urge to flee, normal enough, is overcome by an urge to see what happens if I stay. It’s so wrong, it seems, that it gives me a little buzz; it outdoes the Kat urge, the wine urge, even the Hannah urge. What the hell am I doing here?

What the hell am I doing here? I could be home, drinking wine, rubbing one out over the Hannah vid; I could be over at Kat’s; I could be out with Mickey. What am I doing in one of the Kaplan Test Center’s poorly constructed gray and white fluorescent rooms? No, I need to rephrase. The question, exactly, is what am I doing here in my post-work suit, sitting across from Phil, a string bean stringy-haired hunchbacked sweatshirt wearer, alone? No no no, all of that, admittedly somewhat awkward, would be fine. The real question, the one that’s making me sweat, is why are Phil and I having a staring contest?

Go ahead, mock me, have your fun. It’s hilarious, isn’t it? Selfish Eli doing his best to help out in the community? I know, but the fact is, I’m here, whereas Phil, Phil is nowhere to be found. Phil might be searching for booby traps in Diem Biem Phu for all I know. Every so often, his bloodshot eyes flicker with suspicion, but other than that, he won’t respond to anything. “How are you doing tonight Phil?” I ask.

“_________.”

“What sorts of things are you interested in reading?”

“_________.”
“Look, Phil. You’re not making this too easy for me. I really want to help you out, but I can’t help you out if you don’t say anything.”

“_________”

No response, true, but Phil looks at me with something like a curl in his lips. He looks at me like I might be a little insane. This is progress. Insane I can do. Phil looks up at the clock in the wall. According to Ben, our twenty minute appointment is meant to be filled with idle personal chat followed by the reading of a certain flimsy story I now hold in my hands. Yeah, well. I rub my silky tie. “Can I ask you a personal question Phil?”

He looks at me, again, like I’m the crazy one.

“Why are you here if you don’t want my help?” I actually get a little pissed. I mean, he’s wasting both of our time.

Fine, I think. While Phil stairs at the bloody stumps of his fingernails, I read a moving story about a father looking for his car keys. It’s pretty whitebread. I’d be happy to modify it with a few, Goddamnit where are they? but there’s no time. At the very least, you expect one of the characters to be named Dominique or Xavier or something to make things interesting, but the kid in the story is named Danny and his dad is named Paul. Where did they get this stuff? Phil says nothing. I read on. That Danny…oh man…he had the keys the whole time.

I’m standing up to leave when Phil looks at me and says, “Leave me alone.”

A part of me wants to do just that. I don’t know though, I end up reading the thing again. It feels good the second time. This must be why people are always going on and on about reading to their kids. I add a few sarcastic inflections to spice things up. Ben pokes his head in the door, smiles, and shuts it gently.
Phil looks at me. "Leave me alone," he says.

"What?" I ask. "You want me to read it again?"

Phil pounds his bony fist on the table. I just sort of stare at him. He does it again, with both hands this time. I mean, this guy's a real freak. But I won't leave. I won't let him win. I wait until the twenty minutes are up and Phil's banging his fists on the table the whole time, his face all red. It's a little unnerving, to tell the truth. "Hey," I say. "Stop."

He glares at me and keeps pounding.

"Please," I say. "I'm just trying to help you out. Why won't you let me help you out?"

He pounds again. "Who are you?" he asks me.

Jesus, the logic of some people. "I'm just someone who's trying to help you read."

Then, all of a sudden, he leans forward and grabs me by the lapels. He's really quick for an old guy. He's all over me, holding me by the lapels and his face is like two inches from mine. I can smell his sour breath and I think, my God, this guy's about to bite my ear off or something. I start kind of shaking.

Phil lets me go and falls back in his seat. He shakes his head and laughs at me. He's really dying. He's laughing like this is the funniest thing that's ever happened to him in his life. Forget this. I get up.

"I know what you are," says Phil.

I walk away, shaking my head.

Bob, Ben and the others stand around in the hallway like a bunch of lottery winners, recapping their conversations line by line. I walk past them and out into the
night. My heart’s still beating really fast and I feel humiliated because of the way Phil was
laughing at me. I’d like to go back there and strangle him. That’s what I should do. I
should have known better. I should have just stayed home. That’s the thing. You see
where thinking gets you? You see where taking risks gets you? I think about going back
in there and strangling the bastard and it’s like I can’t stop shaking.
The sun smacks me awake. Maybe you live in some gypsy place like Los Angeles or Tucson or wherever and this is standard fare, but for me it’s like falling asleep in your bed and waking up on a fluorescent slab, an alien above you prodding with a scalpel. When the sun comes out like this in the winter, after a period of sustained hibernation, the people come out with it. I don’t have to open my windows to know this. I know what they’re like out there. They’re dumbstruck outside office buildings, walking around drunkenly like survivors after the apocalypse, looking in every direction to take in the foreignness of the landscape. They’re out there sunning like turtles, bumping into each other and laughing with idiot happiness.

A parting of the blinds confirms my suspicion. There they are, squinting into the sun. They’re out in force. I want no part of it. Why? Shouldn’t I feel better after a night
of solid humanitarian endeavor? Because it's a tease. The sun comes out on a day like
today pretending to convince you of an end to the nastiness. There it squats over the city
like a bully on our puny chests, basking everything in its nauseating glow. Do people buy
it? You don't even know. Go spend five minutes out there, and I guarantee you'll see
some chump in shorts and a tank top preening around like a peacock. No one accepts the
truth of it. No one accepts that it's just a crack in the murk. Tomorrow will bring the rain
back with double cruelty. It'll come back in sheets, and with the rain will come double
depression. I'd rather bivouac in my apartment for the day with the light sealed out,
waiting for the early dark. That's the only way to do it, really. You can't give yourself
over to false hope.

Down on the street, a hobbling spooker has the nerve to step out into a crosswalk.
A silver Mustang heads straight for him. The driver screeches and veers, just missing the
guy. I see this Mustang prick in his car, shaking his fist. You can imagine what's coming.
Out of the car pops the Mustang driver in his terminator sunglasses and tight t-shirt. The
spooker starts yelling something about watch where you're going. The two men square
off, their pale skin burning white in the winter sunshine. I limp over to the kitchen to
breakfast on some Tums. I've got no interest.

I really should just take my day off and take it easy, I think. Then I hear a female
voice joining the fray. It's full of a very familiar tone of self-righteous contempt. Oh no, I
think. The voice says, "You don't need to insult somebody because they're crossing the
crosswalk. It's their right. Is this how you handle situations? You threaten people with
physical violence?"
In spite of myself, I feel a smile splitting my face in two. That poor muscle-shirted steak has no prayer. He has no idea. I hear him offer a few mutters. Something about the safety of his automobile and the countless hours of labor he logged to pay for it.

He’s cut off. “This man has the right to cross the street, and you’re just taking the opportunity to unleash your anger on him because you think it’s permissible.”

“But—”

“Does it give you pleasure to intimidate him?”

“No,” says the steak.

I tiptoe over to the window, not wanting to miss the opportunity to see Hannah in her natural environment. There, in the needling sunlight, she forces the steak to apologize to the spooker. They shake hands like kids on recess. Who else would do it? Who else would have the sack? Mysterious Hannah, you’re the last of your kind. You’re ridiculous.

The buzzer rings.

Hannah’s face is flush with pleasure from taming the steak. From the day. She whisks into my apartment without even bothering to give me an excuse. It’s a good sign, I think, this intimacy we share. Whether she knows about the ad or not, she’s here at least, and if you want to know the truth it feels good to see her. There’s something about this state of hers, this girlish happiness, this energy, that I find strangely seductive. Even her outfit reflects it. Today she’s casual Hannah, in slim stylish jeans. I don’t know quite what you’d call the wash. It’s not the usual. The jeans have a kind of weather-beaten look that you’d associate with wooden planks in a ghost town. On top, a tight-fitting Washington State T-shirt left over, by the looks of it, from her school days. Around her
waist is a hunter green Patagonia fleece. The tight clothes give me a detailed preview of
what’s underneath. This is just what I need. I need to stop thinking so much, sweep all the
clutter out of my head, and just focus on what I want. I mean, straight up, Hannah’s got
one of the best racks I’ve ever seen. Hannah really is just my type. I think about Phil.

Phil! “I have something to tell you,” I say.

She smiles at me. “Eli, if I didn’t know better I’d say that you were smiling.”

I make my lips go flat. “I volunteered for something.”

Hannah gives me a look of surprise that’s beyond over the top. “No,” she says.

“What?”

“Adult literacy.”

A matronly look of approval. A hand to the heart. Hannah walks over and grabs my hand. “I am so proud of you,” she says.

Oh, I know what you’re thinking. It’s low! It’s evil! Using participation in the
noble cause of adult literacy to seduce someone else’s wife, but really, that’s just not fair.
No one’s seduced anybody. And really, is it impossible? Is it impossible, after twenty-
five years of suburbs, bars, girls, and video games, I might have an urge to do something
morally responsible? Come on? Are you with me? Okay, it’s a push, but you should see
Hannah. It’s working.

“I heard you out there,” I say to Hannah.

She blows out a punch of air. “What an asshole. It’s people like that that get us
into wars Eli. They scare me. Sometimes I see things like that and I get shivers.” She
bounces over to the kitchen and gets a glass of water without asking. She gulps it down
and re-fills it. “Have you looked outside today?”
“Briefly.”

She almost chokes. “Eli! You have to go outside. It’s glorious.” She’s almost shouting. “It’s like Spring!”

“I don’t think it’s healthy.”

“What?”

“When you go outside you just get your hopes up. You get soft in all of that sunshine. I think it’s a lot better to stay inside. We both know it won’t last.”

“Are you serious?” There’s genuine shock in her voice. She looks at me like I’m speaking Japanese.

I nod.

“Eli?” she says, moving towards me. “That is the single most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard in my—” she breaks off. “No,” she says. “It is the most ridiculous. Come on, get ready. We’ve got work to do.”

“Work?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Does it involve going outside?”

“It doesn’t Eli, but we’re going for a walk first.”

I get a little nervous driving in Hannah’s greenmobile. One hit from a Suburban and you’d be picking slivers of your spine out of your teeth. I don’t bother to point it out. I suppose the golf cart’s no worse than my lawnmower. Anyway, Hannah and I make our environmentally correct way over to Green Lake, where, as to be expected, the whole city has congregated with idiot smiles to collectively worship the sun. People that would
ignore each other in the rain play ping-pong matches of neighborly greeting. Runner’s spill over the path that goes around the Lake. Children scream on the playground. Basketballs bounce. Next thing you know they’ll be renting out the paddleboats. But despite all of the reasons to be miserable—despite my avowed pledge to never enjoy myself at Green Lake—there’s something in the air. It’s the smell of the sun baking the moldy earth fresh again, and once this smell hits our you, you can’t get enough of it. You see people inhaling like pigs, closing their eyes with pleasure and taking sniff after sniff.

Hannah holds herself with her arms out and tilts her face to the sun, taking off her glasses to get the full treatment. “Absolutely glorious,” she says.

Some spooku bastard jogs by wearing nothing but a Speedo and a pair of gloves. Explain that one to me. He and Hannah smile at each other. I get a little monkey bite of jealousy somewhere in the chest. The thing is, it’s never really occurred to me that she might sleep around. I might be one of many. Janos never said anything like that, but why is she so interested in me?

But I won’t lie. I don’t really care all that much right now. Walking around the lake with her I get a strange feeling. There’s something in her presence, in the way that she keeps closing her eyes to enjoy the scent—something about it that focuses only on the act of walking. She’s really happy. It’s a little contagious. “What sort of work are we doing today?” I ask.

Hannah smiles at me. “I’m not going to tell you Eli. It’s going to be a surprise.”

The eternally mysterious Hannah. “We’re not making a human chain around an Evergreen or something are we?”

“Maybe.”
“You know what Hannah, you should really thing about moving to the Sudan. Impoverished masses. War. Starvation. Polluted water supply. AIDS epidemic. It’s got it all.”

“That’s not funny Eli,” she says, but it’s pretty obvious that she does think it’s funny—at least a little. Hannah has the capacity to laugh at herself without admitting it. It has the effect of undercutting the earnestness a little.

“I’m not making a human chain. That’s where I draw the line,” I say.

“You’re unbelievable,” says Hannah.

“I’m honest.”

She doesn’t go so far as to blindfold me, but she might as well. She squirms around in her seat on the way to wherever it is we’re going, and as we head into downtown she keeps saying things like “This will be so good for you,” when she looks at me. The city is like a fever dream in the afternoon sun—people standing outside, everywhere, doing nothing. They thank whatever it is that allows them to be alive, to be an employed young professional in Seattle. Imagine, they think, I could be in Sierra Leone, getting my eyes scooped out with a dirty spoon, but instead I’ll be eating sushi with another employed young professional. It’s disgusting. The guilt. The posturing. It’s gross. Leave me alone sun. Leave me be. It won’t though. All of the smiling faces, the heads lolling from side to side like they’re stuffed with yarn. I have the sudden memory of a past Eli walking through the same streets. It’s so vivid that for a second I look at the dashboard, afraid that if I look up I’ll see myself—my former self—home from college for Spring Break. How I’d hustled then, wearing the shiny black shoes of a young man from the east coast, a black
coat, the collar up, a *New York Times* folded under my arms. I fit right in. People noticed me.

Look at them now, the sun struck contingent of well-fed Seattleites. I was wrong. No one out there is thinking about Sierra Leone. Not a single one of them is thinking about anything. They just float along, abandoned to happiness, mumbling their private prayers of thanks. Not a single one of them has a care on a day like this. We pull up to the Madison Arms and Hannah looks at me like she just gave me a Christmas present.

It's an oozing sore of a building. An urban puss bomb with the boarded up windows and, I know it before I smell it, the aroma that can only come when walls are marinated in urine. But I'll give the Madison Arms this, it's a solid structure. There's something different about the concrete that they used to use to make buildings. Piss on me, scrawl your graffiti, it seems to say; do what you'll do, but I'll endure. And me personally, I'd much rather settle in a building like this than in one of the stucco tents they're erecting with abandon in Belltown. Hannah stands next to me, looking up that the stained concrete. A poetic moment. She hugs herself. She's open, says the hug. The energies of the building. The...what did she call it? *The collapse of the separation between inner and outer.* The graffiti and the piss and the boards; they're flying through her like phantom bats and she hugs herself and faces them down. She's having a real poetic moment right there in front of the building.

But poetic moments—they wouldn't be poetic if they lasted. You won't catch me believing in poetic movements. There's a loud slurping noise from over to the side, where a pitbull of some kind is helping itself to a container of cottage cheese. Animals all over the city are adopting our dietary habits. They've had enough. The sea rats demand Burger
King. The dogs are sick of eating dried shit. They want people food, and not just the scraps either. Hannah looks at the dog with horror and tries to hustle me inside, but I linger. The little curds of cheese cling to the dog’s pink gums. It eats calmly—not like a dog at all—more like an old woman. After I stare at it for a good minute it finally looks calm as can be and, I shit you not, smiles at me.

I turn to Hannah. “Did you see that?”

“It’s always hard to go in,” says Hannah.

I look back at the dog, but it’s gone back to enjoying its meal.

Hannah takes a deep breath in front of the building. “There’s a lot in here you have to cope with,” she says. “I think you should prepare yourself.”

“I understand.”

“I don’t think you do. There are still people living here.” She takes a deep breath.

I nod.

We walk through the lobby, through the piss smell and the graffiti and the errant refuse that collects in places like this, the coke bottles and slick flats of cardboard boxes that refuse to decompose. All of the stuff that refuses to decompose gets swept into the corners of places like the Madison Arms and stays for years.

Hannah looks positively grim. It’d be easy to pass this off as an act, but it looks like more. Her breath is short walking up the stairs. Her chin trembles. She keeps touching me on the shoulder like I’m as upset as she is. “Are you okay?” she asks.

I nod, trying to look like it’s getting to me. Is it? It’s bad. It smells. There’s grime and grease, but getting to me? Can anything get to me? How can it? How can it get to you when it’s so unsurprising? Plus, I can’t shake the feeling that all I need to focus on
is desire. It’s the only thing that makes sense. If I stop thinking so much, I can take what I want. “Where is everybody?” I ask.

“Some people are already in their apartments. No one’s working today, but I told Howard that you and I would come in and clean one of the stoves in an apartment we’re refurbishing.”

“Who’s Howard?”

“He’s running the project to turn this into attractive low-income housing.”

I follow Hannah while she clutches herself. Most of the apartments are abandoned but occasionally one hears, behind the closed doors, the sounds of human movement—people scurrying away from the footsteps of Hannah and I. Hannah turns around. “We’re not going to kick anyone out,” she whispers.

We resume. The whisper. Her light footsteps. I feel like we’re robbing the place. Hannah walks with her head down. She’s about to open a door when two children open it for her. Hannah screams. They tear down the hall, laughing. “Come back here,” she yells, but I can hear their voices echoing in the stairwell—their little feet smack against the stairs as they descend.

We go into the apartment where, indeed, the place requires cleaning. How does the apartment look? It’s a shithole apartment. The same way that prostitutes look like prostitutes, dentists look like dentists, and weathermen look like weathermen, shithole apartments look like shithole apartments. Despite the efforts being made, nothing can be done for it. The paint’s too thick, for one; it coagulates in spore-like clumps in the corners. The floor has a oily sheen that no amount of scrubbing will dry, and the smell. I’d have nothing against poverty if it didn’t smell so bad, and the poverty smell is everywhere in
here. It’s rubbed into the walls. It’s the smell of fast-food sweat, alcoholic puke, shelter-
food diarrhea. I’m not a big fan of the poverty smell. “It’s nice,” I say.

Hannah looks appalled. “Children aren’t supposed to be in here.”

“Maybe they were just exploring.”

She points to a bedroom that’s out of my line of sight. I step over and look
through. It’s not what you’d expect—balls and toys, but plants, yes plants, that Hannah
stares at. They’re in makeshift pots, but they’re plants all the same: a ficus stretching out
of a sawed-off plastic milk jug, a cactus of some sort lovingly prickling out of a Chinese
food carton, a cluster of geraniums with red flowers that match the coke bottle they call
home. And some others. Healthy, loved-for, plants, arranged in a semi-circle on the floor
beneath a cracked window.

Hannah puts her hand to her chest. “Oh Christ,” she says.

Oh Christ, I think myself, she’s about to lose it. She looks all emotional staring at
the plants, like she’s about to collapse or something.

Hannah begins to shake. Her chin gives. Then her mouth. It’s really
uncomfortable to be around someone that’s being so emotional. She’s just laying it all out
there. She sinks to the grimy floor and I sink with her, putting a manly arm of comfort
around her—there, there—but it’s not too long until I’m slapping around in the drink of
misery myself. I try to do it on the sly at first—sighing in heaves, rubbing at my eyes.
You know how crying is. Hannah convulses. She sits on the grimy floor and smacks it
with her hand. She gasps. I’m on the floor with her. I’m kind of shaking a little bit. I
need to focus. I need to just take what I want. Hannah faces me, tilts her head to the side,
and hugs me so hard that her arms begin to quiver with the effort of it. I hug back. The
sun comes through the cracked window. Hannah takes off her glasses and sets them on the floor. “I knew it,” she says.

When she kisses me, I can taste the tear-salt on her tongue. Hannah starts laughing mid-kiss. “God,” she says. “What am I doing?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

“I just knew it. I knew there was an intense connection between us.”

“We both weep at the sight of plants.”

“You can feel it can’t you?” Hannah’s hand goes to cover her heart. “Can you feel the love in these plants? There’s so much love, and it’s battling everything around it. I thought… it’s like when I walked in here. I could feel the hatred in every bit of that graffiti scrawl. This building’s been condemned, not by the city, but by hatred. I felt that, and then to get in here and see those plants. Oh, Eli. You feel it don’t you?” she says, sniffling a little.

“Yes,” I say. I’m a little dizzy. The shark says something about remembering Janos. She’s not well, but there’s no doubt that she feels what she feels. She isn’t acting, if that’s what you’re thinking.

Hannah says, “I’m sorry for—”

“It’s okay,” I say.

We sit there for a minute longer while the sun washes over the plants. We don’t say anything. Hannah gets up with a deep sigh and walks over to the kitchen. I hear the sound of rubber gloves snapping over her thin wrists. With equal silence, I follow her, where she hands me a pair of gloves and a ball of steel wool. She points to the grimy stove.
It takes an hour, maybe two, to clean the stove. We don’t say much, lost in the movement of the job. Every so often, when I look up, I catch her looking at me. During one of these junior-highish exchanges, she leans forward and kisses me. I put my hand on her flat stomach and she pulls it away by the wrist.

“What?” I ask.

“I need your help,” she says.

I laugh. “I need your help,” I say, mocking her.

Hannah pinches her face with mock hurt. “I’m serious.”

“Sorry.”

“I don’t know if it’s possible to make you understand this Eli, but I’m really having a hard time…there aren’t many people I can trust. I need to tell you something.”

I want to tell her to stop talking and pull me to the floor. “Anything,” I say.

She pushes her hair back with both hands and takes a deep breath. “Eli,” she says, “It’s about Janos. I know you think he’s incredible. Everyone does. He is, but…he’s a monster.”

The sun outside slides down a foot, I swear, in the grime-streaked kitchen window.

“What?” I ask.

Hannah rubs her face just a little too hard. She really looks upset. “I don’t know how to explain it Eli,” she says. “I feel like he’s keeping things from me.”

Don’t do this Hannah, I think. “What kind of things?” I ask. It feels obvious that I’m lying.

Hannah bites her lip. “He’s abusive,” she says.
"Janos?"

"It's not—"

"Huh?"

"It effects everything I do," says Hannah.

She looks calmer, tougher, like she used to look on the news. I feel kind of sick with guilt. It's like there's a rock in my throat. "I'm sorry," I say.

"I'm not making any sense." Hannah picks up her glasses from the floor and puts them on. "There's a reason that I'm telling you this Eli," she says. "I think that I've always been susceptible to the influence of someone like Janos. He's very powerful and domineering. He's so smart."

I nod.

"And I've always had too much respect for intelligence Eli. Janos knows how people work. His mind is always whirring. He knows people on an intuitive level."

I think about Greg, that guy I met when I first walked in the house. I think about the phone calls and the time that Janos pushed him down in the hall without offering any kind of explanation. My hands start to shake a little. "What does he do to you?" I ask.

Hannah grabs my wrist tight. "It sounds ridiculous Eli, but I think he's trying to brainwash me. He doesn't do anything physical. He doesn't hit me, but I don't know. I get the feeling that there are things going on behind my back."

_Tell her everything_, says the shark. _Tell her before it's too late_. "Are you kidding?" asks Eli.

"It's this way he has of being cruel, Eli. I can't explain it. But I understand why you wouldn't believe me. That's why I need your help."
Now, says the shark. “How can I help?” asks Eli.

Hannah walks back towards the plants. I follow her and stand behind her. She’s looking out the window where the sun is dropping now, turning everything black and cold. She coughs. “I need to know what he’s doing,” she says. “Something’s going on.”

Again, the desire to confess. I think of Janos in my apartment. *I underestimated you.* He’s just selling me, I think. She’s the one that’s about to get hurt in all this. Still, I can’t do it. Maybe it’s because I know what’ll happen. I know that the minute I say something she’ll run out of here. “Wouldn’t you know?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “There was a time when I thought I would know, but not anymore. He’s made me start to doubt myself. Don’t you see that that’s part of it? If there’s one thing I’ve always clung to Eli, it was my belief in myself. And now, it’s like I don’t even have that. He’s shaken it. That’s what I mean. He’s made me doubt myself.”

“We all—”

“No, Eli. He’s doing it on purpose. He’s trying to control me.”

It won’t go away. I try to tell myself she’s crazy, that she’s lying to herself, but the dirty desire to tell her everything won’t go away. And it is dirty, the desire to confess. In my experience it always leads to very uncomfortable situations. It’s better to just ignore it.

Oh, but they’re tough, dirty desires. They have teeth. The urge to confess sits in my stomach like an aching hard-on. My plan? How would I submit to the dirty desire? *Hannah, honestly, the reason for all of this is that I answered a personal ad.* There’s something about it, maybe, that could appeal to her through honor. A moral Eli, confessing that he could no longer go on with the lies and the deceptions. She wouldn’t storm out of the room then, would she?
There's a numb anxiety in the emptiness of the room—a sense, in the creeping shadows, the dropping temperature, of the afternoon slipping away too fast—that causes me to imagine what my life would be like without either of them. Maybe I could go back to pretending I'd go to Guam. Maybe I'd get some motivational tapes and pull myself together at work. I see myself in an outdoor chair, sipping Bud with my orange dad. I see Mickey and I watching Sportscenter and passing a joint back and forth. I see myself on my knees at the store, or bashing forearms with Tim. The rainy mornings. The numb nights...

What does it matter anyway? It occurs to me that if we do have sex it'll be exactly as Janos said it would be. There'll be a brief infatuation, and then she'll move onto the next concern. It'll prove that her beliefs aren't bound in any kind of moral sense, but in a desperation, a desire—no different from any other desire—in that it's just a desire to stop thinking for a little bit. I might as well enjoy it while it lasts. "Hannah," I say. "I'm here for you."

I should leave you out of this part. I don't want to make it seem cheap in any way. The cold room. The disappearing sun. We move over to the room with the plants. It's a little like one of those foreign movies that no one understands, isn't it? Hannah's glasses hit the grimy floor with a click. A fluorescent light buzzes somewhere in the kitchen. Downstairs, at this very moment, my semi-elite brethren are going home from work in their pressed business casual attire, their messenger bags slung over their shoulders. Hannah and I start kissing again. I feel guilty... I feel... I should give more physical description here: a carefully wrought sensual description of our contorting bodies in the afternoon light...
I can’t. I don’t know how to describe it. Hannah pushes me to my back and I look up at the ceiling…which is sweating…these rooms smell like…what’s this? Hold on. She pushes her fingertips towards my chest and pulls off my sweatshirt. “You’re beautiful,” she says, and there’s no way to respond….she looks me right in the face…the way she kisses. We don’t even use a condom. It’s too raw for that. It’s the real deal. It’s the first thing to make sense to me in a long time. I’m inside Hannah just an inch when she tells me to stop. “First I want to look at you for a while,” she says. “Can I?”

“Yes.”

A moment to collect my thoughts. There’s no thinking though, when someone looks at you that way. Hannah looks at me like she wants to crawl into my throat, like she wants rip my heart out and chew it. There’s something violent and painful about it that makes me feel want to die. Her chin quivers the way it does when she’s about to lose it. Her eyes blink and squint. Her mouth opens and closes in quivering gasps, and when she kisses me, I can feel her whole body tensing. She pulls me towards her and we’re tearing at each other, biting. She’s crying a little, but she looks right at me. She looks me right in the eyes until it’s done, and I can’t look away.

“Oh my God,” says Hannah, wiping her eyes.

I want to confess. I want to die. I want to say something to explain how incredible it was. “Hannah—”

Hannah puts her finger to her lips. “Shhhh. Just don’t say anything. Just sit there and look at me.”

Her pants are wrapped around her left leg. Her Washington State t-shirt is pushed half-way up her flat stomach. I want desperately, I admit, to look at the breasts that have
been monopolizing my fantasies. When I undo her bra and pull it down I’m burning with anticipation. I’m about to touch them, the breasts…the perfect breasts. I put a hand up her shirt and give a confident squeeze. They feel warm, but something else…something strange.

“You like them?” asks Hannah.

“Oh yeah,” I say. “They’re firm.”

Hannah cackles. “That’s because they’re fake Eli. They’re implants.”

I feel again. I’ve never felt fake ones before. “You wanted them?”

“I could care less now.” She sighs. “I got them when I was in college. It was so stupid.”

Hannah, eternally complex. Only the vulnerable are beautiful, I think, looking around the room. And the room. This terrible room. You know what it really smells like? It smells like ruin. And ruin smells like sex. And I feel so guilty that I almost run out of the room, but I can’t leave her. I never want to leave her.

“Oh my God,” says Hannah, shaking her head at me.

“Are you okay?”

“You’re my new favorite,” she says. She laughs and kisses me on the forehead. “My new favorite,” she repeats. I keep waiting for a sign while I look at her. A panic, maybe. A clear spook indicator that tells me to flee. I wait for the usual symptoms: the dry mouth, the dizziness, the heaving chest, that indicate the descending spook. I keep waiting for the unflinching certainty that something bad will happen. “Come here,” says Hannah, pulling my head to rest on her silicone pillows. She massages my scalp with her fingernails. “It’s okay,” she says. “Really, it’s okay.”
And it was okay. Afterwards, we went to this restaurant in the International District and ate buckets of noodles. Gutter steam wafted from my bowl. I leveraged the noodles onto my giant white spoon and doused them with sugary plum sauce. Hannah and I ate a large bowl each and hardly said a word to each other. Have you ever experienced this? Companionable quiet? A person who can just sit there and not say anything?

She dropped me off at my apartment, kissed me on the cheek, and slyly said, “I don’t have to tell you this is just between us, do I?” She didn’t have to tell me. Everything was okay until I started thinking about Janos and had this horrible realization that he was probably right—she wasn’t in on it. It was possible that she was the kind of person she said she was, and even that she was out of her mind. But who cares? So, she wasn’t perfect. She wasn’t a saint. So what? It threw me for a while, but then I realized it made
me want her even more. I realized it didn’t matter who was right, that it was a question of what was going on between Hannah and I. I wouldn’t tell Janos anything. There wouldn’t be any point. Janos would only hear about thwarted efforts, the purity of her intentions, and the limitless outreach of her charity. Janos would hear about the faithful wife that was everything he was afraid she was. I finally figured it out. I would enjoy the desire, but I wouldn’t give Janos the pleasure of being right. Hannah would win. I would win. Only Janos would lose. It was perfect. Hannah and I lingered, there in the silent car, staring at each other. “I have to tell you something,” I said.

“What?”

I leaned over, as if to whisper a secret, but there was no temptation, for once, to confess. None of that mattered now. I leaned over and stuck my twitching tongue in Hannah’s ear. She giggled. I got out of the car and cantered up to my apartment with my belly full. I hadn’t eaten like that since my self-imposed fast began two months ago.

Before my return from Japan, I ate like that every day. I ate hunks of cheese the size of golf balls. I ate buckets of gooey microwave popcorn. I drank liters of coke. High school. You don’t even want to know how I ate in high school. I used to abuse my vehicular freedom to go from establishment to establishment. I’d start at the 7-11 with Big Gulp Slurpee and strawberry Charleston Chew, then I’d drive to McDonald’s and shove myself full of cheese, bacon, meat, fries. I’d leave the parking lot and have a desert of fried chicken and biscuits from KFC. I ballooned, but never mind the past. The present is what you have to wrestle with. The present is what requires immediate attention.

So here I am, sitting in my apartment, alone in the shadow of night, finally feeling good about things. You’re punished, in Seattle, for these nice days. The clear brings the
cold, and, in apparent response, the radiator gushes and cracks like a jackhammer. Never mind. No problem. You can’t talk to me that way radiator. I commemorate this a day of accomplishment. I celebrate by rubbing one out in memory of my afternoon session with Hannah. Something incredible happens. I make a discovery. It can actually be done. You can actually rub one out thinking about earnest love. It’s the way that the bodies come together. I think about that. The way that the bodies come together it’s like if you touch someone else you feel that touch on yourself. Am I losing you? Are you in on the secret of earnest love? It’s fucking incredible. Why didn’t anybody tell me about it?

I guess that maybe I got the closest with Mari, but Mari….well, I didn’t tell you before because I was a little bit embarrassed and I didn’t want you to think badly of me. I know I vowed to be honest, but there are a few facts I have left out, believe it or not, that would probably make you think I was some kind of freak. Don’t worry, it’s not like I raped anybody or anything. Nothing like that. It’s just…well, Mari and I, we used to play dress-up games, and she would sort of beat the shit out of me. Maybe you’re wondering just how that would work, considering the fact that Mari was a tiny Japanese girl. Believe me, it used to happen. She had props. That’s the thing. I have some pictures of Mari that I used to use, but all of them picture her in costume. There’s one in there of Mari wearing camouflage, a riding crop in her hand. Have you ever been hit by a riding crop? If you have, you’d understand how pint-sized white girls can make horses run circles around barrels. Sometimes, with my hands chained to the bed and Mari hovering over me, just out of reach, I would think that I had tapped into the depths of desire, but I can tell you, honestly, that that sort of thing has nothing on earnest love. No contest. It’s not even close.
But what to do? I have to sock myself off, for one, but after that? I can’t call Mickey. You know where that’ll go. I can’t call Kat. I’m done with her. I swear it. I should call my mother, but I’ve had enough emotion for one day. I unplug my phone just to remove all temptations. I open the refrigerator and find a half bottle of Chardonnay. Why not? I should read a book, settle down. If I had a fireplace, and it wasn’t so goddamn hot in here, it would be the night to light a fire. For some reason, though, I start thinking about Janos. The bitch of it is that one of them has to be lying. One of them is wrong, and I want...I know that it’s Janos, but why? I can’t get my head around it...never mind. Wine, it ties my brain in knots. I’ll admit all of my problems freely. You know that, don’t you? I just told you all about the riding crop, didn’t I? I’ve let you know about my father. I haven’t pulled punches on dear old dad. I let you in on Kat and Kim. And I think even the coldest amongst you would admit that this last day has been something like a revelation. I mean, all at once, you’ve seen me engage in helping the homeless, sort of, and genuine intimacy, and hearty nourishment. I’m heading the right direction for certain. I could go eat again. There are hundreds of reasonable things to do.

Her outfit tonight has some sort of Swiss theme. Hard to imagine? Yeah, I don’t blame you. It takes me a while to figure it out too, but then I finally get it. You know who she is? She’s Heidi, what with the blond wig pulled apart into pigtails, the frilly gingham frock, the high socks and Mary Janes. She looks ten years younger than she did when she was dressed up as Kim the haggard waitress. I love it. Pure Gypsy shit. She even has a crook. Her eyes and lips are blacked so she looks a little bit like a zombie, but other than
that, she's pure innocence. When she sees me, she gives me a combination head shake-
yawn.

I consider not picking up the phone so that I can see if it upsets her, but it's a
fleeting thought. I know it won't upset her. I know that nothing will upset her. I pick up.
“That’s a little too much, don’t you think? Even for you. You look like a defiled fifteen-
year-old.”

“Don’t bore me with a conversation like that, Eli. There’s no point in that
collection because we both know exactly where it will go.”

“Fine with me.”

“You’re not a cop, are you Eli?” She pouts her black lips at me.

I lean forward. “Are you really so bored?” I ask.

“Poor lost lamb,” says Heidi, flitting her eyelashes at me. “Have you been looking
for love in all the wrong places again?”

“We don’t have to play games,” I say.

“Is there a point to any of this detective?”

Maybe you think I can’t control myself, but the actual reason I’m here is that I still
can’t stop thinking about Hannah. I feel guilty. I feel jittery. I feel sick. I don’t know
what I feel. I need someone to talk to. “Can you just listen?”

Heidi shrugs.

“I need to talk to someone and I can’t tell anybody, so I’m telling you. I can trust
that you’ll keep what we say in confidence, right?”

Heidi puckers her lips up and blows me a kiss through he glass. “Not really,” she
says.
“It’s kind of a long story.”

“I’m ready to be shocked. Start from the beginning Eli. I’m dying to know everything.”

“I think, for some reason, that you’ll be able to help—”

“Just start,” she says, with what seems like genuine impatience.

Heidi pulls one of her legs up under her in true little girl fashion, and I can see that beneath her gingham frock she’s wearing this baggy old-fashioned underwear. She says, “Just tell me Eli.”

“It all started with this belief that I had. I’d been thinking a lot about desire.”

“You haven’t been reading books, have you Eli?”

“I wanted to do something different.”

“You aren’t trying to seduce me, are you?” says Heidi. She appears to be, for the first time, feigning excitement instead of boredom.

“I answered a personal ad,” I say. “It was placed by this guy in Bellevue. I didn’t know that when I answered it. The guy was looking for someone to seduce his wife. I answered it, we met up.”

Heidi tries not to smile, but I can see her teeth. They’re slightly crooked. “You answered it?” she asks.

“I did more than answer it Heidi. You underestimated me, didn’t you? I seduced her. She took me to this apartment building, the Madison arms, to do charity work, and I actually seduced her.”

Heidi keeps smiling. “Tell me Eli, the guy, what’s he like?”
There’s something sinister about her smile. It’s the smile of someone telling you a joke they know that you don’t get. I go on. “He’s this Hungarian genius of some sort. You know, eccentric, driven, rich. He lives in this crazy future house.”

“An evil genius Eli?” Her mouth is wide open. I can see the veins in her gums, even through the scratched partition.

“I thought he was evil at first. He might be. That’s the thing, I don’t know. He’s just sort of cold. I’m sure he thinks of himself as smart rather than eccentric. He thinks of himself as this guy that knows everything.”

Heidi nods. I can’t help but see something condescending in it. “How about the wife?” she asks.

I can’t take her mouth anymore. “Why do you keep smiling like that? It’s freaking me out.”

“I’m sorry Eli,” says Heidi, putting her hand over her mouth the way my mother used to. “Never mind me. Just go on The wife…”

I think about Hannah sitting on the floor, in front of the plants, and I can feel the pinch of lust come into my stomach. “She used to be on the news, but she quit, I think, cause she realized that it wasn’t about serious reporting, or helping people, but about ratings.”

“That’s surprising,” says Heidi.

“She does a lot for other people,” I say.

“I’m sure,” says Heidi. “Anyway, you’re paying for my time Eli. Why don’t you tell me about seducing her. Was it enjoyable?”
I feel myself blush, despite the wine buzz. The little light goes on and I put another quarter into the machine. “Almost all of the encounters I’ve had with women have been purely physical. This was something different. I can’t even really describe it without sounding… I don’t know. It was incredible, but now I feel guilty.”

Heidi rolls her eyes. “You don’t have anything to worry about. It’s not wrong, really, if she consents. What’s the problem?”

There’s something about Heidi that puts the spook on me and makes me want to change the subject. “Does the come smell ever bother you?” I ask.

Heidi holds up her cigarette.

I say, “Okay. The problem, the way I see it, is that it really bothers me that she might not be faking it. If she isn’t, if the guy isn’t right, I’m going to mess her up.”

“Are you faking it?”

“I was, but not anymore. And her husband says that it’s all an act… that it’s what she does.”

“What does she say about her husband?”

“She thinks he’s playing games with her, which he is.”

“How do you know he’s thinking of it as a game?”

“It’s all a game. He just wants to prove a point. He just wants someone to prove that she’s not as sincere as she thinks she is.”

“Maybe she’s not,” says Heidi.

“I used to think that too, but I’ve spent time with her. She’s exactly what he keeps insisting that she’s not.”
Heidi stubs her cigarette out. “Eli,” she says. “Think about it. How do you know that this whole thing wasn’t her idea?”

“That’s what I keep asking myself.”

“And?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. I honestly don’t think she’s faking it. If she is, she doesn’t think she is. Her husband thinks she’s crazy. God, it’s confusing. Does any of this make sense?”

Heidi gives her breast a thoughtful stroke. “I’d be careful if I were you Eli. If I had to guess, I’d bet that she’s faking it.”

Heidi winks at me. It pisses me off. “What do you know?” I ask.

“I know some things.”

“You don’t know anything about it,” I say, picking up my coat. “This is crazy.”

“I know you’re talking about Janos and Hannah,” says Heidi.

My throat tightens up and I sit back down. “What?”

“You heard me,” says Heidi.

The partition starts to come down over a smirking Heidi, and I fumble in my pockets for a quarter, but can’t find one. I whirl around, out into the hall, where I can hear the mechanical conversations through the curtains: *You like that, don’t you... Oh yes, yes, you like that...*

I run up to the grinning hipster to get some change. Back in the booth, I put in a quarter. The partition opens. Heidi is gone.

I run out into the street. She has to come out some time. I stand there over the stairs, wanting to choke Heidi until she tells me what she knows. A flash sizzles and
evaporates in my head: the image of me dragging Heidi down the street by her hair, her platform heels scraping on the concrete. What’s happening? What if there’s a secret entrance for the conversationalists, so that they can avoid being harassed by obsessive clients? I walk down and take a right into an alley—empty except for two wasted frat guys in baseball caps, one helping the other to his car. I walk slowly down the wall of the alley, looking for cracks in the brick wall where a secret door might be. There are no cracks, but there is plain old door. I lean back in the shadows by a nasty dumpster, trying not to think about anything. How would she know who they are? Janos. There’s no other way, but if she knows Janos, why does that mean that Hannah’s in on it? Why should I trust her? A dark head peeps out of the door. I scoot further into the dumpster’s shadow.

Heidi steps out into the alley, lights a cigarette and looks around. It takes me a second to make sure it’s her. She’s not in costume anymore, for one. Her black hair is pulled into a ponytail; she wears jeans, a royal blue gore-tex jacket, and New Balance running shoes. Without her heels on she’s about five-four. I watch her head down the alley, her short legs moving fast, her cigarette trailing smoke that rises into the red neon haze of the bar signs in Post Alley.

She moves down the alley and cuts a left into another. We emerge on First. There are a few cabs and some traffic, but for the most part the street is empty, and I follow as she moves down the street towards Pioneer Square. A quick left on Seneca, down another alley—this one too clean, devoid of dumpsters or garbage bags, all scoured of the rats that creep up from the Sound—and then it’s a quick right, back onto First. Heidi never looks back.
We swoop down into Pioneer Square, then it’s another right, another alley. Heidi starts to run. I follow, coming out of the alley in Rainier Square. You know where this is going. There’s no sign of her at all. I shark around in circles, looking for one of the bridge and tunnel bars she might have ducked into. I think about Hannah and the sandwiches and the phone call that preceded my witness to the entire event. Isn’t that a little suspicious? Isn’t that somewhat staged? The homeless have abandoned Pioneer Square, fled from the cold into shelters or under the freeway. It feels like the old downtown—the cobblestones, the skeletal trees, the echo of footsteps. There’s a rhythm to it, this lonely walking through the city, and I can feel it buzzing inside me. I could scream and no one would pay attention. I could take a piss on a bench and leave my scent for the ghost hounds. That’s what they are, these dogs. Ghost hounds.

This guy passes me on the left, his hands tucked into the pockets of his overcoat. He’s wearing a fedora and smoking a cigarette. I pick up my speed and walk after him yelling “Hey friend, do you know who the greatest man who ever lived was? Hey pal! Hey buddy? Hey big guy?” He flees, his wingtips smacking the cobblestones. Ghosts: ghost people under the bridge, ghost angels above me in the towers of light—ghost city singing to be shaken to crumbles by an earthquake, smothered by waves of molten Lava spewing out of Mount Rainier, attacked by rogue missiles. Who cares if Janos is lying? Does it matter? Hannah, can you hear me? I don’t care.

I’m staring at my shoes, shuffling home, storing up the hate-energy for another soulful inner-monologue when I see Heidi at the world’s worst bar, illuminated in the light, drinking what looks suspiciously like a cup of coffee. I bust through the door and stand over her.
Heidi never looks up. "Sit down Eli," she says.

It's the sort of bar built exclusively for tourists. You can always tell these bars by looking around at all of the paraphernalia. Tourists, apparently, don't mind being barraged by advertising materials. There are so many beer posters featuring bikini women—cavorting in the snow, hooting atop jet skis, bending over and staring at the camera from between their legs—that it has the same feel as a porn shop. Except, in the bar, there are real live girls too. They represent Chief Sealth Ale. They'll tell you that's brewed with fresh mountain water. I've see these girls before. If you're alone, or with other men, they come up behind you and shove their tits into your back until your stomach pinches with lust. Then they make you sign up for a beer-tasters club and leave you sipping a complimentary hefeweizen with your hard-on tucked up into your belt.

Heidi, or whatever she's called, sips her coffee. "Are you okay?" she asks.

"You care?"

"Let's just say I'm interested."

"So what are you?" I ask. "An artist of some kind? An actress? Some sort of intellectual trying to understand the sex industry?"

"That would be much more glamorous," says Heidi, "and it would probably make you feel a lot less guilty, but no. I have a daughter. I do it for the money."

"I don't want to play this game anymore. Maybe you can fill me in here Heidi, because I'm having a hard time figuring out what all of this is supposed to mean. I'm trying to figure out what the point is besides making me feel stupid."

"My name's Kristin," she says.

"Whatever," I say. "Just tell me what you know."
"I shouldn't have said anything to you," she says. "You just looked so confused about it. I couldn't lie to you anymore, and I don't want to see you get taken. A year or so ago a guy comes in and puts a quarter into the booth. Usually, I'm not creeped out by people, but this guy, there was something off about him. It took me a little while to figure it out, but then I placed it. It was money. You know how it is with rich people. You can just smell the money on them, and you can see it too. Rich people have soft hands. Their clothes just fit, and they're clean. This guy could have paid for someone to come to him, I knew that, but there he was, sitting in the booth, looking at me without any sign of embarrassment. It creeped me out."

I feel sick to my stomach. "Janos, right?"

Kristin looks around like she thinks someone is watching her. "Yeah, it was Janos," she says, "But he didn't tell me that right away. We talked for a while and he asked me a lot of questions that were a hell of a lot like the questions you asked me when you first started coming. He wanted to know about my past. He said he was interested in my biography. I held him off, the same way I held you off, and he talked about himself for a while. He went on and on about Hungary or wherever, his parents, how he killed his other, all this stuff. He kept putting in quarter after quarter until we were there for at least an hour. Finally, he asked me if I wanted to make some money. I didn't trust him. He said he'd pay me a thousand dollars to go over to his house and watch him and his wife do their thing."

I order a whisky.

Kristin keeps looking around, and it's this, more than anything else, that convinces me she's telling the truth. "You went?" I ask.
"I needed the money," says Kristin. "I followed him out to his house, across the bridge. Like you said, it's crazy. We had a few drinks. It kept getting weirder. I kept asking about his wife, and he kept saying that she was upstairs, that she was waiting, and that she liked waiting. Whatever, you know. I was pretty convinced that something bad was going to happen, that it was like the movies, any minute he was going to pull on a pair of black leather gloves and start choking me. It kept getting later and later. He kept asking me about my past and pouring me more drinks. By the time we went upstairs, I was totally fucked up. His wife was up there looking like something out of Hustler. Worse. She was wearing trashy lingerie. Janos told me all I had to do was watch, and that was all I had to do, but it felt shady. There was no emotion in it, you know? That would have been better, if it felt like they were getting off, but they weren't. They went through it silently, like two robots. They were mechanical."

I can see it all—the drinks, the questions—and it fills me with disgust. They've been playing me, using me like a chump. I gulp my whisky until it burns in my throat.

"Did he pay you?"

"Yeah," says Kristin. "Look, I have to go."

The whisky hits my head and I feel like choking her. "You're not going anywhere," I say, all angry.

Kristin rolls her eyes. "I just wanted to tell you. They're using you. It wasn't enough, whatever I did for them. They want something better."

"It doesn't prove she knows about it," I say. It sounds hollow the minute it comes out of my mouth.
Kristin starts to get up. "You deserved to know," she says. "Think about it, Eli. You answered a personal ad. He tells you his wife doesn’t know a thing. Just think about it for a second."

"But——"

Kristin winces and shakes her head at me. "Eli, just think about it," she says.

The last thing I want to do is think about it. What I want is to listen to her talk. I know if she goes there will only be more night—the gap between the night and the all-day hangover that is work. "Wait," I say, but all I get in response is this condescending frown from her on her way out the door. I order another whisky and drink it while I stand up. This has to end now, I think, but that, too, the voice in my head, the one that craves the end, sounds hollow. Time to go home and go to bed. I won’t react without consideration. I won’t react without carefully weighing my options. I will not go out to Bellevue and demand answers. I won’t. The Chief Sealth beer girls come up behind me, filling the air with all their cheap perfume. They have these daisy dukes on and Chief Sealth t-shirts and suspenders. "Would you like a free sample?" one coos. I sort of stick my tongue out at her and flick it like a snake. They don’t stick around after that. They don’t want anything to do with me.
The house in Bellevue is completely dark, which in and of itself doesn’t prove anything. I stand, shivering, in the parking lot of the elementary school, wishing I’d stopped to buy a bottle of whisky. All I can think of is that I want them to pay. I want to throw rocks through the windows. I want Hannah to come out so I can see her face. The spidery playground equipment sits empty off to the left—surely too boring to amuse the Ritalin-fueled little pricks it’s intended for. Without the cars, the lights, the buzz, the house looks far colder, and its coldness seems to confirm everything that Kristin has told me. The house itself talks to me in the tone of a consoling mother. *You had fun, didn’t you?* It says. *Nobody was hurt,* it says. *Think of it as an experiment,* it says.

“Fuck you house,” I say.
I climb over the gate with ease, half-expecting a strobe light to shine on me that signals some kind of wailing alarm system. It’s spooky silent tonight—no cars or wildlife or anything. Down on the water, the lake would normally lap against the shore, I suppose, but tonight even the lake is calm. How could I let them do this to me? How could I act like a chump? Every time I think it’s like a needle is getting pushed into my brain. You know what the sad part is, though? If Hannah came to the door and begged for forgiveness I’d get on my knees in front of her. I’d grab her legs like a little kid and press my head to her knees. At the same time, I want her with my teeth. I want her to want me with her teeth. I want us to tear each other apart until we’re both bloody.

I come to where the front door is and stare at it. I’m almost afraid to ring the doorbell. I mean, who knows what kind of gypsy shit is going on in there? I imagine carnival sex scenes. I imagine oiled young freaks walking around with silver trays heaped with champagne flutes and candy-colored condoms.

Getting closer to the house does me no good at all. The house is cold and dark and silent. No shadows, no lights. No noise. It’s a black nothing. I should be happy with this. It’s a virtue, isn’t it, to be content with nothing? Those are the happy people, the ones who can stuff themselves with nothing and feel like royalty. Football fans, gamers, porn-hounds. Pot, fast food, pizza. Nothing nothing nothing. Nothing’s good enough for them. I should just go on home, my pockets full of nothing, and be happy.


I will learn to take my nothing and like it, I think, after five minutes of waiting.
Nothing is enough for me, I think, as I stumble through the silence to my car. The game’s over. The dream’s over. All for nothing.
"I have breast cancer," says my mom on the phone.

It's eight the next morning. The rain smacks against the window of my apartment in angry bursts. I'm sitting in the Seahawks chair. When my mom tells me this I can't think of anything to say. I say, "What?"

"I checked and I felt something," she says. "I went to the doctor."

"What?"

"I felt like I should tell you in case I keel over," Mom says. Then she actually laughs. Her voice is sing-songy like always and I think about her standing beside my bed when I was a kid. The smell of her perfume. "What?" I ask.

"You can't just keep saying what, honey. They have to do more tests. I didn't want to tell you anything until I was sure, but..."
“Can they do something?”

“It is malignant,” she says. “But there are options. Most people end up fine.”

Alarms go off in my head. Thoughts crash into each other. Worthless thoughts lift their heads like snakes. My mom, I think, is the daughter of dead people. “Do you want me to come out there?” I ask.

Mom sighs. “Don’t be silly. There’s nothing you can do. I told you honey, the odds are really good... I just wanted you to know. I’d rather you didn’t make a big deal out of it.”

“Are you sure? I’ll come out there. I have the day off.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Mom says. “It’s not that big of a deal.”

I think about Ron Rodrigo. Did she know? “Mom?”

“It’s not something you can do anything about,” she says. “So much of something like this has to do with your state of mind.”

“Did you know when you took me to go see Ron Rodrigo?” I ask.

“I wasn’t sure,” she says.

“Why didn’t you let him heal you? You believed in all that stuff.”

Mom sighs again, louder this time. “I’m strong Eli. You’re not going to believe me when I tell you this, but I think there’s a spiritual element to disease. It’s about faith. I don’t believe in disease. I refuse to.”

It makes me sick to listen to her. It makes me want to puke or something. “Are you kidding?”
"Honey...I don't need faith because I already have it. You're the one who doesn't believe in anything. It may sound strange to you, but you needed Ron Rodrigo more than I did. Trust your mother. Mothers know these things."

It's not the time to point out what a load of shit this is, but I'm tempted. "You're sure you don't want me to come out there?" I ask.

"I'm sure," she says. "Enjoy your day off. Do something that'll make you laugh."

She doesn't really mean it, though. I can tell. She's just telling me what she thinks I want to hear.

She hangs up and my head starts spinning and it occurs to me that this is no time for thinking. Thinking, in my state, can only lead to more thinking, and if you want to know, it seems to me that I am thinking all too well. This is sharkland; this is where everything is too clear. My mom may think she's safe, what with the nuts and berries and soy and kelp, but she's not. None of us are safe except the meanest. Hate. Skepticism. These are the ways to last. My dad may say he's dying, but he doesn't fool me. You want to know who's dying? Hannah's dying. My mom's dying. Remember Bob and Ben, from the literacy center? They're ticking time-bombs. I guarantee it. You want to know who's living? Besides my dad, there's Mickey, there's Kat, and, of course, there's Janos.

It's so quiet in my apartment. The radiator doesn't say a thing. The phone sits in the corner, silent. The spookers and the drivers, the bible pushers and the drug dealers, they're all taking the day off. I'm taking the day off and I can't think of anything better to do than think.

I walk out into the street and I swear that the city is in mourning. People move around downtown in self-contained bubbles of silence. I wait for someone to come up to
me. I’d settle for an old friend from Overland. I’d listen to amusing stories about
corporate law. I’d settle for a stranger, a spooker. I’d settle for Mickey or Kristin. I’d
settle for Tim, but no one even looks at me. I wander through tourist-infested Pike Place
Market unscathed—no one even offers me a free sample of honeycomb. I try my hand in
Belltown. The rain pelts my hood. Warm, healthy looking people try on jackets in the
yellow glow of the Patagonia store, comparing and contrasting, joking with the grizzly
salespeople. I make the ascent to Capitol Hill. Nothing. Even the homeless teens, the
future spookers, look into their trench coats when I slosh by them. I can’t even cry. I try
to, you know. I mean, I’ve cried over dumber stuff, but I can’t. It just feels like I’m all
frozen, like I can’t feel a thing.

After a few hours of stumbling around in the rain without a confrontation, I find
myself back in my apartment. The machine beeps. I run towards it and press play.
Someone’s called just to hang up. No Janos, no Hannah. No Dad, no Mom. No Mickey
or Kat or Kristin. There’s nothing to do but think.

Four hours later, tuckered out by my thinking marathon, I find myself in Bellevue
again. I’m tooling around the manicured streets and doing slow drive-bys of la casa
billionaire. My mission is to stop thinking, but it’s no use. All I want to do is hold her. If
she’d just let me kiss her, just one more time, I swear I’d leave. The lights are on at the
house. It’s pitiful how happy it makes me. It’s ridiculous.

Things are much livelier tonight in Bellevue than they were last night, I’ll tell you
that much. The wind tears around. The lake froths. Sea rats chuckle somewhere in the
distance. I lean on the doorbell for a good three minutes.
Nothing.

I lean on it again, this time with feeling.

The door cracks open. “Eli?” Hannah says. She’s wearing a blood-colored velour sweatsuit and her hair is pulled back into a tangled ponytail. “What are you doing here?”

A reasonable question, given the circumstances, but one that I find difficult to answer. “Is Janos here?” I ask.

“He’s away on business,” she hisses. She looks around like someone might be watching. “I can’t believe you came here. Why didn’t you call or something?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

“There are cameras everywhere, Eli. Who knows what else? Were you here last night?”

“Were you?” I ask.

“I was sleeping,” she says.

An image of my mom tears through my aching head. She’s sitting at home with her tea. She has a blanket over her lap. Her eyes are half-closed. Humping whales moan in the background. I push it away. I stare at Hannah until I can’t think of anything else.

“I can’t stop thinking about you Hannah,” I say.

Hannah doesn’t look me in the eyes. She stares beyond me, towards the elementary school. “You shouldn’t have come Eli. What if Janos had been here?”

“I just have to know,” I say. “I’m going out of my mind. I have to know what this is about for you.”

“Are you serious?” she asks. There’s a brittleness in her voice, an impatience.

“Don’t I look serious?”
"I'm married Eli. You know that. None of this is easy. Do you have any idea what it's like to not know whether or not you love the person you're supposed to spend the rest of your life with? It's a very confusing time for me." She takes this little step back.

"But not for me?"

"Of course for you," says Hannah. "You're a part of this... a necessary part."

My heart bleats out a warning. You're a part of this. I should have known. "What this?"

Hannah sighs. "It'll sound awful when I say it out loud."

"Say it."

"I'm so confused."

"Say it."

"I have to sleep with you to see whether or not I'm in love with him Eli."

"But that doesn't make any sense," I say.

"It makes perfect sense," she says. "If, over time, the novelty of sleeping with you doesn't wear off, I'll know that I've fallen out of love with Janos. God, it does sound awful when I say it out loud, doesn't it? It makes me sound like I'm using you. Eli, I understand if you want to end things. I understand this isn't fair to you, but you deserve to know the truth."

"You said he was brainwashing you. How can you be in love with someone that you suspect might be brainwashing you?"

"I said I thought he was brainwashing me. Don't raise your voice. None of this is very clear to me. I feel like I don't know who to believe. I feel like I don't know anything anymore."
God I want to tell her. You don’t even know, but I can’t do it. I need it tonight. I need her. “It’s just so cold,” I say.

Hannah makes her lips all pouty. “Eli, I don’t want to be cruel, but you shouldn’t come pounding down doors in the middle of the night if you’re afraid of what you might hear, and, for that matter, you shouldn’t have affairs with married women if you want some kind of relationship. Really, Eli, I wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t have feelings for you, but what did you expect?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “What about our intense connection? What was all that about?”

She takes another little step back and I want to shake her or something until she starts making some sense. She frowns at me. She has the nerve to frown at me. “It’s not that there isn’t something there,” she says. “I feel a connection. It’s just…this is my life we’re talking about.”

“Jesus.”

“I’m sorry,” she says. She’s really working that frown now. She’s so stern you wouldn’t believe it. “Look, I really don’t feel comfortable here,” she says. “Can we go somewhere?”

It’s a shame, at this hour, that the zoo is closed. There’s something that would be worthwhile: an all night zoo complete with floodlights for the people that can’t sleep at night. Nocturnal animals for nocturnal people. “Where?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she says. “I just feel like driving. Hold on a minute.” She hops back inside and closes the door shut.
I can’t even say no. Standing out there waiting for her, I feel like the most pitiful bastard in the world. She might be calling the cops for all I know, but I stand there, waiting. Cameras? Do I believe this? I look at the house, its looming triangles of glass, its steel wires... maybe. What really confuses is Hannah’s theory. She’s using me. **I have to sleep with you so I know whether or not I love him.** The only thing about it I can grab onto is that it strikes me as just fucked up enough to be honest.

She comes back in a new costume, looking like she’s threatening to go on a hike: fleece pants, gore-tex jacket, vaguely Asian multi-hued wool cap with flaps that cover her ears. All she’s missing is the odd dangling carabiner and one of those Nalgene bottles that everyone seems to need for trekking through the city.

“You’re really ready,” I say. It comes out sour.

She starts marching down the pathway. “Where are you parked?”

I point to the elementary school. Hannah takes off, her small legs moving fast. Maybe it’s her size, or her stupid hiking clothes, I don’t know—something about the whole thing makes me feel like this might be all right. If she’s telling me the truth, it means she feels something for me. It means she’s into me. It means we’re into each other. The silence of the suburbs at night adds to this. I feel that same feeling I used to get when I snuck out of my house in Redmond. Walking around, you’d get the feeling like everyone else was gone—like you were the last ones left on a planet without a sun. “You’re energetic,” I say to Hannah’s back.

“I’m all wound up,” says Hannah. She shakes her arms violently. “I’m so wound up and confused. I didn’t want to answer the door, and then I realized it might be you. And then I wasn’t sure whether or not I wanted to answer if it was you. So many things
were going on in my head all at once, and I was feeling so many things at the same time that it was like my body just shut down. It was like I was paralyzed and then... do you see why I’m a wreck?”

We come to the car. Unlike Hannah, I have no such confusions. The quiet suburbs at night. I just want to touch her once, to make sure she’s real. I put my hand on her arm and she gives me this look like take it easy. I look at the elementary school. Even in the dark, you can see the colorful splatter of art projects shoved against the window—tissue paper that’s supposed to look like stained glass. I think about Hannah on a reading rug.

“Want to break in?” I ask, pointing to it.

“I know where we can go,” she says. “Let’s just get in the car.”

Hannah directs me through the maze of Bellevue. We troll aside manicured medians, zoom down corridors of low-lit shopping malls, shine our headlights on abandoned nurseries and sleeping houses. Eventually, the landscape becomes more rural, and Hannah has me on a maze of wooded roads until we reach what appears to be a barn, next to which is a shiny metallic blob of a trailer: a vintage Airstream. Hannah leans forward, scrunches up her forehead, and scans the perimeter through her glasses. I stick my hand on her thigh and she doesn’t push it away this time. I squeeze hard and she gives a little gasp that makes me want to bite her. “This is where Janos keeps his horses,” she says, opening the car door.

I follow her into the barn, where the unmistakable and sickening stench of horse waft comes strong. It’s a combination of smells that reminds me of nothing so much as my mother: hay, shit, horse-musk. Like being in a Petri dish. That strong animal scent—it
reminds you that you're slowly rotting. I just stare at Hannah as hard as I can until the feeling goes away.

Hannah hits a switch and the barn lights up like the inside of the Korean Grocery. There are three horses staring at us from their plush stalls. These horses live better than ninety percent of the people in the world. These horses live better than I do. The muscled flanks, the sudden jerk of feet, the glassy flickering eyes. These luxe horses bring the spook something fierce. It doesn’t help that the usual array of sinister medieval-looking horsy tools line the walls, hanging on ordered hooks. There’s even a riding crop. “I hate horses,” I say.

Hannah shakes her head. In agreement? In disagreement? Who knows? She’s unreadable in her Asian hat. She’s all multi-hued wool and chunky black glasses. “They all have peculiar names,” she says. “Who knows where Janos comes up with them?”

She points to a menacing black beast that lifts its lips to show off its yellow horse teeth. “This one’s name is Zetelaki,” she says. She points to the other two, equally large, equally skittish. “That’s Georg, and that one…I’m not even going to try.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “They’re beautiful, aren’t they? They’re all muscle.” She reaches out and strokes the head of Zetelaki. I wait for the skittish snap, the pop of teeth, but the thing actually seems to like her touch. I would too, if I was a horse and I lived like this. It’s really more of a condo than a barn.

“Don’t you think they’re beautiful Eli?” Hannah asks again, stroking Zetelaki’s black head. “Don’t you think they’re pure?”
I think they’re freaky, but I could care less. I just stand there staring at Hannah and kind of trembling. Hannah takes the cue, turns off the light, and leads me, by the hand, into the trailer.

The Airstream is decked out to look like the inside of a ship: porthole, mahogany, vintage furnishings. It’s also a mess. There are horse magazines, brushes, and dirty plates, apparently from the groom. “It would drive Janos crazy if he saw this,” says Hannah with a devilish grin, picking up a plate with a half-eaten orange on it and some remnants of cottage cheese.

The same smell, the dense smell, runs through the stuffy trailer.

Hannah drops the plate with a crash. “He had to have it, though, an Airstream. Jackie Kennedy toured the country in one just like this or something. Maybe she toured the country in this exact one. You never know with Janos.”

I put my hands on Hannah’s hips.

“I know I’m not being fair with you,” Hannah says, her voice all raspy. “I’d understand if you wanted to cut this things off.” Her fingers move over my lips and I can taste the horse on her fingers. “Maybe you should cut things off,” she goes on. “I really don’t know how I feel about all of this. I want to be fair... if you can’t handle it—”

I want her to keep talking. I want her to keep touching me. I get down on my knees and she sticks her fingers in my mouth. “I’m so confused,” she says.

She eases me onto my back, takes off her shirt, and sits on top of me. I tear at the silicone with my teeth. She unbuttons my jeans. “I have no way of knowing anything,” she says. “Let’s just fuck and get it over with.”
The trailer pitches slightly. The animal scent is thick. I’m inside her in about two seconds. Hannah bites my neck. I tear at her lips. She takes a fist full of my hair with her hand. It’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before. It’s just too f***ed up not to be true. It’s just too f***ed up not to be the real thing.
Work. When you don’t sleep at all, when you’re up all night with your thoughts, work is a whole new deal. Work just doesn’t make any kind of sense. The ash-colored light mocks my apartment. I have to go to work, but why? Why, exactly, is it that I’m working? If I’m not working to go to Guam, if I don’t care about my debts, why do I bother? All I can think about is Hannah. She hardly said a word on the way home. It was like she could barely look at me. She gets to go back to her luxuries, her world-saving. I get to go back to work. I didn’t even tell you about the sorry collection of messages on my machine this morning. First, it’s my dad, reminding me of his noble concern for my sick mother—talking all about how it’s my duty to go and see her, especially now. Next, a hurt but sexy monologue delivered to my cell phone by Kat in her finest gypsy dominatrix
voice: “I'm very angry with you Eli. You've been very bad by ignoring my calls, and if you come over here tonight I will punish you.” I never said she was a particularly creative dominatrix, did I? Then, of course, Hannah: “Eli, I hope you don't feel funny. I want you to know that I enjoyed our evening... we should talk about it. I want to see you again.”

And, why not, Janos, making a point to say he was calling from the road, saying he was wondering if there'd been any new developments, asking to meet me at five o'clock at a venerable local steakhouse. Finally, a message from my mother, sounding anything but sick... sounding, well, ecstatic. “The light of God surrounds me. The love of God enfolds me. The power of God protects me. The presence of God watches over me. Wherever I am, God is, and all is well!” That one gets me out of bed. I get up and turn it off before it can tear me all to hell.

Do you see what kind of life this is? Do you see what I put up with? A life lived by messages. There has to be something to that, no? All of these indirect communications... they're driving me to ruin. They're pushing me into a box. Maybe what I really need is solitude, divine loneliness, yoga, herbs, something. I need some help here. I need some love here. There was something else this morning. Driving home from Bellevue as the light was starting to come over the city, I was convinced all over again that Hannah had been telling the truth the whole time, that she didn't know about the ad. What about Kristin? Hundreds of explanations presented themselves. Janos paid her, or maybe Janos was a client of hers and she asked him to pay. Maybe he'd had me followed, knew that I went to see her, and found her that way. I mean, I did tell him about her, didn't I? Isn't that a little suspicious? That retro spooker in his detective duds... he could have followed me. Cameras? Janos wouldn't even blink.
I put on a turtleneck with my suit because I have these bite marks on my neck and I don’t want to hear about it from Mickey. It actually looks kind of smooth, the turtleneck under the suit, kind of seventies or something, but I’m too tired to enjoy my reflection. I’m sitting there staring in the mirror for a while when I suddenly have this great idea. I do have to see my mom, right? I should do something for her is what I should do. I dig around under the mattress, find the shoebox, put a hundred bucks back in the box, and stick the rest of it in an envelope. I stick the envelope in my inside breast pocket. I’m about to buy something for my mom—something nice, something big. I’m no longer holding back. I look in the mirror again and it’s pretty clear that I’m beat. That’s one thing about earnest love. It really tuckers you out. Gypsy shit, you push it away as soon as its over. Earnest love, it lingers. Earnest love, it gives you a bitch of a hangover.

On the march to work various scenarios pop and fizzle in my brain, all of them involving immediate relief: a slice of pizza, a morning beer, slipping off into the men’s as soon as I arrive at work and rubbing one out. I slump through the glum morning. Not a blue spot in the sky. Not a trace of the sun. The winter sky is like a stained jar over all of us bugs. I need medicine. I breakfast indulgently on two egg McMuffins, two hash browns, and a chocolate shake. I eat it in ten minutes.

All full of poison and loathing, I find Mickey grinning at me with sympathy there in the stockroom. Admittedly, I’m looking a little haggard. At McDonald’s I looked down and saw that I was wearing a blue sock and a black one. These are not the sort of mistakes I make. “Nice turtleneck,” says Mickey, laughing his ass off.

I ignore him.

“Are you okay?” Mickey asks, pretending to be concerned.
"Fuck off," I say.

"No, Eli," he says. "You don't look so good. Are you all right?"

Maybe it's the processed grease sloshing around in my stomach, but Mickey looks, I don't know, exceptionally healthy. There's no blood in his eyes, for one. His dark blue suit, his French blue shirt, his silky understated tie, his square-toed Ferragamos... he looks like a million Lira, and it makes me hate the sight of him. He asks me if I'm okay? What is this, Mickey, concern? Selfless concern? This makes me very uneasy. This makes me, in Tim's parlance, a little concerned. "I've never felt better Mickey," I say.

Mickey shakes his head. Whatever it is, he just can't believe it. "I've felt so good these last two days," he says.

"Let me guess," I say, "You found God."

"It's not that."

This is the last thing I need. "What?"

"It's just that I've really been thinking about things, Eli. Really been doing a lot of thinking. I just can't do the things I've been doing anymore."

"Sure Mickey."

He looks stricken, more earnest than I've ever seen him. "I mean it," he says. "I'm done with the girls and the going out and the drugs. It's time for us to grow up."

It's really too much. In addition to the other darts being thrown at me this morning, there's this one, an earnest Mickey. "You've been enlightened," I say.

"It's Sylvie," he says. "I've realized how in love with her I am. I'm excited about getting married. I'm excited about the future."
The thing that's really annoying is that he looks excited about the future. "You're sure it wasn't Zo?" I ask.

"Fuck off Bird," he says.

"It's funny, because two days ago, you were trying to molest Zo on the couch... and Kat, but now you're over it?"

"Seriously, dude, fuck off," says Mickey.

I'd love to fuck off. You don't even know, but this is too much. I just can't. "No more coke, right? No more Zos. What's left, Mickey?"

He makes a pretty good show of looking hurt. "I always thought that the problem with relationships was communication." He leans towards me, the better to give the hard sell. "The problem isn't a lack of communication like they always say it is on the talk shows."

"Who needs communication?" I ask.

Mickey ignores me. He crinkles his forehead. He's thinking so hard it hurts. "I've been thinking about this a lot," he says. "The problem is that most people, after a while, have nothing to talk about. They know each other too well. They don't change. That's why marriages go to shit." He's really preaching it, Mickey is, waving around his hands like a spooker on a milk crate.

"Wouldn't that be communication?" I ask.

"Granted, but you know what I mean Bird..." He makes exaggerated quotes with his fingers... "Communication. The problem I always had with Sylvie, and with women in general, was that if something was wrong, they always wanted, like, to talk about it forever."
I nod.

Mickey shrugs. "That’s fine and everything. Sometimes, you have to have a serious talk, but what I realized, Bird, is that if you have good small talk, you don’t really need all the serious talk. The healthy relationship, the way I see it, is the one that has good small talk. I was sitting around in the condo the other day, and she wasn’t even there. Where was she? I didn’t even know. The thing I realized as I was sitting on the couch was not only that I didn’t know where she was, but that I didn’t really know she was gone. Small talk Bird. I realized that we didn’t have any kind of exchange of small talk."

"Clearly," I say.

"I was out, you know, or I was at work. When I was at home, I played vids or we watched TV. We didn’t do things together that we could talk about. We didn’t share any interests."

This is some news. "You broke up with her?"

"No. I realized that our problem wasn’t the need to communicate over the big issues. What we needed was an ability to talk about little things...you know what you need to talk about little things, Bird?"

Now it’s my turn to be earnest. "Mickey, I have no idea."

He points at me and nods his head. "Hobbies," he says.

"Hobbies?"

"Hobbies," he says, still nodding. "Jogging..." still nodding..."fishing..." still nodding..."Glass blowing..."

Do you see what I put up with? Do you see what this is like? All of this enthusiasm for hobbies, this isn’t something I can take. This just isn’t something that I’m
ready for. There's something else, too, in the question and answer strategy Mickey employs, in the nods and the frozen expressions. It takes me a second to get it, but when it hits me it comes full force. Mickey, he's talking just like Tim.

"Yoga..." says Mickey, still nodding. "I know you'll call me a pussy or whatever Bird, but I'm serious. Things have to change. Sylvie and I need things to talk about. That shit's important."

As pitiful as it is, you have to admit it's kind of entertaining. I steer Mickey over to the coffee machine where we fill up our mugs in preparation for the Wednesday meeting. Mickey's mug says Fueled By Espresso, and mine, which I've been tempted to smash more than once, says Java Java.

"Numbers are down," says Mickey, raising his eyebrows. "It's been a bad week."

"Heads will roll," I say. I mean it as a joke, but Mickey sips his coffee and nods at me.

We take our seats with the other poor bastards and wait. Tim comes into the room as stern as a school nurse giving out vaccinations. His jacket's off. He wears a white shirt, green tie, and eggplant suspenders. You can tell he really hates it before he says a thing. He slams down a binder on the table and stares at us. Edgar the world's worst salesman looks like he's about to flee. The rest of us stare down at our shiny loafers. Tim puts his hands on his hips and paces back and forth, exhaling air. It's so fake. The fake drama. The fake tension. It's like a movie or something. Mickey takes visible deep breaths and I bite my cheeks so I won't laugh out loud.

"I don't know what to say," says Tim. "I just don't even know where to start. I was driving to work today and do you have any idea how I felt?"
Silence in the audience.

"...I felt depressed. I was sitting in my brand new Cherokee thinking Tim, why do you want to go to work today when you don’t even know what you’ll find when you get there? Tim? I asked myself, will you find people there that want to sell? Will you find people there that are hungry? And..." Tim pauses for a mournful headshake "...you know what? There was a time when I would have said heck yes they’re hungry. I would have said, shoot yes, this is the best shop in the country, and if you would’ve asked me if, in any given month, we’d be outsold, I would have said get out of my face you crazy jerk-wad. I would have said you’re out of your freaking mind. This is the flagship store. I would have said that the people I’ve got will eat you for breakfast and be hungry for freaking dessert."

Nobody dares to look at him. When I twist my neck even the slightest, I feel his glare hot on me.

Tim picks up the book. "Portland," he says. "PORTLAND!"

Edgar begins to weep. I think about my dad and his dogs. Shaaaaame. Edgar weeps like a child, with lots of snot on the wrist. Tim stops pacing long enough to look at him. He crosses his arms across his chest. "I don’t like doing it," he says, "but I am responsible for the performance of the flagship store. It is my duty to make sure we are an example, and I don’t like doing it, but one of you won’t be here at the end of the day."

Edgar weeps on, rubbing his face with his hands.

"...I’m not going to do it in front of everybody," says Tim, "but it should be a warning to all of you. I will not accept good anymore. I will not accept adequate."
Thankfully, we’re spared death by motivational cliché, and Tim dismisses us without any chants or group hugging. He’s changing tacks. I’ve got to give to old Tim. He’s figured something out. He’s motivating through guilt.

I don’t have any illusions. I know that if it wasn’t for Edgar, it would be me. Edgar doesn’t have any illusions either. He is the worst salesman in the world, after all, but there was no reason for Tim to make a spectacle of him. It just wasn’t right. We weren’t all born to move it. Not all of us can manufacture conviction. Those of us without any illusions, we have a chronic deficiency of conviction. Go be a monk, Edgar, I think. Go work in a library. Tell him to fuck off and move to Guam. I’m almost out the door when I hear Tim yell my name. I fill my Java Java mug to the brim and slump over to him, ready to throw my coffee in his giant face.

“Tim,” I say.

Tim nods at me. “Are you feeling all better today?” he asks me.

“I’m happy to be here Tim,” I say.

Tim steps closer, making me feel his height. “Why are you wearing that turtleneck?”

I shrug.

“You look sullen... Eli, I don’t really know how to tell you this, but... this is a commission-based job, and the past few days before your break your performance was mostly in the blue zone. I know you’re going through some stuff and all, but this is a business. If you don’t make your draw—” He pauses.

I haven’t told you about Tim’s zones, but they have to do with performance, and I think Tim got his whole zone theory out of a book somewhere. I hope Tim got his whole
zone theory out of a book somewhere. There's something that even I find sympathy
worthy when I picture a lone Tim sitting at home dictating strategy into a handheld voice
recorder. There was a regular symposium on Tim's zone theory a month ago, but I'll save
you the trouble and let you know that Tim's color symbols are best thought of in regards to
temperature. Blue means cold.

I'm so tired the room is sort of spinning. "I can't say I disagree with you," I say.

Tim frowns. What he wants me to say is that I've been thinking about the red zone
all week. And the fact is, a week ago I would have told him what he wanted to hear, if for
no other reason than to get him to leave. "Eli, I'm concerned," Tim says.

"I know Tim."

"Do you know what happens when you hang around in the blue zone for too
long?"

You turn into Tim? You break out in sores? Who can answer these kinds of
questions and take themselves seriously? I mean, come on. "No Tim," I say.

His face starts to go a little red. Tim takes his zones very seriously. "Think about
it, Eli. If you stay in the blue zone for too long, you turn into a blue. Then it becomes a
habit that you can't break. You can't turn into a blue and say, I want to be a red. I think
I'll be hot again today. No. It doesn't work that way pal. What happens is, you go blue
for too long, you stay blue. I'm telling you this for a reason, Eli. Do you know why?"

I shake my head, as if he's asked me a riddle. "I really don't Tim," I say.

"You've been in the blue zone, by my calculations, for at least three days out of the
last four."
"But Tim," I say. "That doesn't really make sense. If you can go from red to blue, why can't you go from blue to red?"

Tim looks at his watch and winces. "There's something in that voice I don't like. Don't forget who you're talking to. I'll fire you faster than you can say temping."

"I just wanted to know what you meant, Tim, for my own clarity," I say.

He pauses me for a minute, sizing me up and down, like we're about to fight. "Eli, do you have a refrigerator?"

"Sure Tim."

"Does your refrigerator have a freezer?"

"Yeah Tim."

"What happens when you stick something in the freezer and leave it there for three out of four days?"

"It gets frozen Tim." I manage to say this, I'll point out, without a shred of sarcasm.

Tim claps his hands together. "Bingo," he says. "Now, what's happening to you, after three days in the blue zone, is that you're starting to freeze." Tim snaps his fingers. "You can be unthawed, but it's so much easier, Eli, to never be frozen in the first place."

I don't know whether to laugh or cry or what. The room keeps spinning. Tim puts one of his dinner plate hands on my shoulder. "I'm tired of mediocrity, Eli. You want a job? Think hot. Think red hot."

Tim leaves me to contemplate his metaphor. This is no way to live, going around with a head like this, and it's no way to sell. Thinking...it's all I do. I think and think, and
what good does it do for me? What good has thinking ever done for anyone? But selling, the question I have is about selling. The question I have is about why it is that I need so desperately to sell? I feel the four thousand dollars sleeping in my pocket. I could coast for a while with that money. I could just stop and go hang out with my mom or something—get away from the city. I look at Mickey, who still has the same smug smile. He’s laughing it up with a couple of junior misses. He likes doing this.

A menacingly fit thirty-something Bainbridge Island hausfrau wearing, I shit you not, some kind of Mexican Josie Wales shawl, comes up to me with a chunky pair of black Cole Hahn heals. Ugliest pair in the store. “Can I try these on?” she asks.

Then it hits me. You can have a little fun with this job. “You don’t want to try those on?” I ask.

“Excuse me?”

I imagine cameras in the walls, analyzing my sales performance. I imagine Tim in front of a bank of flat-screen monitors, watching me. I pick up the shoe like it’s a severed ear smothered in urine sauce. “It’s ugly and it isn’t well made,” I say.

There’s a look of general confusion on the woman’s face. She’s wearing a Patagonia fleece under the stupid shawl and a pair of Norwegian clogs. There’s a Volvo outside with her name on it. A Volvo with those stickers...those fucking bumper stickers: Visualize World Peace...Don’t Like Abortions, Don’t Have One...Save the Earth. Her joke liberal politics include a worthy clause about embracing cultural diversity, but she knows maybe one person who isn’t white. In her house, there are books on the religions of India and the Far East. Hannah may be right. Maybe people hate themselves, and that’s the source of all the problems. What about love, though? What about blind love? This
woman, and Mickey, and Tim—there are a lot of people who love themselves a little too much, who define themselves a little too easily. As if any of this shit matters, as if it says something about you. “It’s a real piece of shit,” I tell her.

Vanna Volvo stares at me with her clear blue eyes. She has it all figured out all right. There’s no room for nastiness. There’s no room for conversation that isn’t polite. “I like these shoes,” she says, looking around.

“You shouldn’t like them,” I say. “They’re hideous. If you want someone to sell you those things talk to Mickey.” I point over to Mickey, who is kneeling on the ground showing off his muscles to the giggly thirteen-year-olds. He gives me a thumbs up. “Mickey will sell you whatever you want.”

“Thank you,” says the woman. She pauses. Confusion. “You really dislike them that much?”

I glare at the shoes. “I despise them. You have no idea how much I despise them.”

“Are there shoes you don’t despise?”

I sigh, then take her over to a pair of discounted blue pumps, store label. “These are the shoes for you,” I say. I can see the horrifying march of associations that track through her mind. These pumps hurt. Stewardesses, wearing these pumps, take smoke breaks with long white cigarettes; school teachers kick these pumps off, groaning, and massage their necks; poor people in Eastern Washington get ready for church, sliding the shoes onto puffy stockinged feet.

Not that Vanna Volvo would acknowledge any of these prejudices, my little liberal senorita…not that she’s ever had an inappropriate thought. She looks around the store, as
if for help, then gives me a polite smile, as if this is some sort of gag. “I don’t like these shoes,” she says. She gives a tentative laugh.

I return fire with something more explicit. “You are these shoes,” I say. “You’re these shoes whether you admit it or not. We’re all these shoes.”

In her mind, the parade of images goes on. Conspicuously overweight secretaries ride the bus to work, take off their EZ Spirits, and trade them for these pumps at the last minute. These pumps belong in fast food restaurants; they feel at home in the presence of football games and potato chips; they stride mightily over thimble-waisted Barbies with pointy tits.

Vanna Volvo won’t tolerate it. She will not. “I don’t understand?” she says, her smile gone. This joke, it’s over, she thinks. If only she knew. The joke’s never over. Vanna Volvo’s problem is that she just doesn’t get it.

“You wouldn’t,” I say.

She’s thinking about it. I can see it. She’s never been impolite before...it really is inappropriate though...the nerve of this Eli, this sneering salesman who has the nerve to be honest.

Vanna Volvo bites her lip. “I don’t think it’s your job to tell me who I am. You don’t know me, and I think it’s grossly presumptuous for you to tell me what kind of shoes I should like.” Her chin trembles a little. “I demand an apology!” she says.

Let it all out! Go on with your bad self! Act now, think later! Why pay more! “I think it’s my job exactly,” I say. “If you buy those Cole Hahns they’ll be uncomfortable and they’ll make your ankles look fat. You’ll be under the illusion that they look stylish,
when they’re not, and you’ll stop wearing them. They’ll end up in a landfill somewhere, or maybe the ocean, and if a seal eats one of those shoes it’ll definitely choke to death.”

“I like the Cole Hahns,” she says, sassier now. “I want to buy the Cole Hahns and I think you should go get them.” She sort of motions me with her arm, ordering me.

It isn’t so shocking, this transformation to nastiness. It’s lurking everywhere in the city. The thin veneer covers everything, and it’s just a matter of time before it cracks and all of the nastiness seeps out. Let it happen. It’s time to set hammer to chisel. It’s time to take off the mask. “You fucking would,” I say.

Genuine shock here. The impolite world. Really, she has no idea. “Excuse me?” she says.

I give her my snappy young mover smile and lean forward so that I can say it right to her face. “You fucking would!” I shout.

Things just stop in the store. There’s this weird calm for a second. The piano tinkles the mournful strains of Lionel Ritchie’s “Easy.” Vanna Volvo doesn’t like this. No not at all. She never wanted to be the center of attention. Even Mickey shows genuine shock. And here comes Tim, the man on the scene. Tim too, more full of earnest shock than fury, walks very fast to where the woman and I are facing each other. He can’t even form words. We’re beyond words, the three of us. We’re smells: leather, perfume, semen, cologne, blood, sweat. We’re sounds: short breaths, buzzing ears, rushing blood. We’re finally honest.

Tim just holds up his hands and shakes his head back and forth. The woman has burning cheeks, blinking eyes. Mickey looks up from the floor.

Why am I the only one that can take a joke?
“He...the woman starts,” before Tim holds up his hand.

“Eli, this won’t do,” he says.

“I’m concerned Tim,” I say.

“I’m concerned too,” says Tim.

“I think I’m even more concerned than you are Tim,” I say.

This beautiful moment of confusion passes over Tim’s face. Then his face floods with red. He’s really losing it. He looks like he’s about to hit me. “You’re fired,” he says.
It's a few hours later. I find myself drinking alone in the appointed steak house, spinning my cell phone like a top on the mahogany bar, waiting for Janos. I really didn’t have a choice now, did I? I mean, staying around there pretending to sell shoes, it was dishonest, and if there’s one thing that I’ve decided it’s that there isn’t going to be any more dishonesty. I thought about not even coming here to see Janos, but I felt sort or obligated or something to not let him feel like he’s winning. You saw it coming, didn’t you? The big climax. After all of that tender stroking, all of those whispered promises, all of that footsie beneath the table—it’s time to get down to slapping bodies. If I’m out of this city, some bodies will smack before I go. You saw it, didn’t you?—this moment, the one right here, the moment when certain facts would come to the light and there would be a change of character—a shift, as it were, in Eli’s outlook on his own state of affairs.
Maybe you longed for it. You said he’s selfish, he’s vain, he’s saving money to go to Guam for Christ’s sake... he’s answering personal ads, he’s selling shoes. When will the madness stop? Won’t he change his mind?

I have. The facts are in and I’m voting for earnest love. I’m swinging my support to the side of honest pleasure. It was more than just the discovery of earnest love. Much more. All of that stuff I was talking about before, all of that dreary speculation, that was all just warm-ups. That was all so much stretching before the race. Now I’ve got it dialed. I’m moving on it. I have resigned, finally, to the death of my youth. I’m serious. I was never very much good at being a young man anyway. Dare I say it, I was too aware. I’ve recognized, a little too late maybe, but with certainty, that the forces of Seattle are destroying me. The voices in my head, they’re the ones that are doing it. I catch murmurs of them every so often—the voices in my head. There’s a flicker in my heart that longs for cruelty. There’s the shark. I ignore him completely now. I’ve got him swimming the other way. I am the shark. I say no one changes. I say fuck it. It’s much healthier this way. The thing to do, when you hear voices in your head, is to turn them off. And what about the other voices? Can you turn all of them off? What, for example, about the voices of materialistic training that you heard from me earlier? The judgment, for example, of shoes. These, I admit, are the hardest to get rid of. I hear the murmurs of those voices more often than I’d like to admit to you. Subconsciously, even now, I offer commentary in the cut and wash of jeans. It’s all the advertisements. I’ve heard millions of them and here’s no getting around them in this city.

All of this gypsy talk has a purpose. It’s to tell you that I’m shifting demographics. I’m a young man sitting in a steakhouse with four thousand dollars to spend and no job.
This is a demographic shift. They’re throwing me out of the eighteen to twenty-fives. It’s time to stop pining. It’s time to resign to slacks. It’s time for change. It’s time, I dare say, for the big ticket items. Relax. I’m not off to law school yet. If you’ve stuck with me this far surely you know. No. Not Eli. It won’t do. The way I figure it is that you come to a crossroads in your life. You can put off the decision for a long time. I mean, you can probably keep putting it off forever, but at some point, if you’re someone that thinks about it, you have to make a decision about the gag life. You can do his a few ways. You can embrace it: move to the suburbs, buy the cars, the toys, the amusing attack dogs, or you can kill that side of yourself. You can kill it off and proceed. You can stop thinking and move on.

But I don’t want you to think that I’m losing it. I am not losing it. I’ll finish this thing and then I’ll go see my mom and buy her something nice and my head will clear. I’m closer now to honesty than I’ve been all along. I’m convinced that there is an honest way to live. Dad, are you out there? Oh dad, fuck off will you. I will not pretend to accept our relationship. I’m severing ties. I’m going to find out what is going on around here. I’m going to solve this business of Hannah, this Janos business, once and for all, and get out of this sorry city.

These thoughts are my drinking buddies at the bar. For someone who has given up on thinking, I’m a world class thinker tonight, and drinking alone, my thoughts are getting some time to marinate. It feels appropriate somehow to drink in the presence of bleeding flesh and healthy visitors and hearty locals. Steaks pop on the grill, filling the place with wafts of char-smell. “Whoooo-eee,” says a man next to me. “Look at the size of that filet. God damn....” He gives a lustful Texas eye to a couple sitting a few feet away.
sharing a bloody chateau briand. "It looks juicy," says the Texan, "and tender too. Oh that's what I'm getting. That is it."

I want to kiss him on the cheeks. I settle for a thumbs up. He returns my gesture and ads a wink. This is the place. I never would have come here before. I'm not too big on steaks, for one, but I also would've scorned the old-world charm: the brass rails, the mson carpet, the rich lacquered wood. Not for me, I would've said. They've even got s bartender from Boston who's talking to a customer about the new police chief. But I ll not go to anymore yuppie taverns. I just won't tolerate it. The red lights, the frosted iss, the parade of tattoos and leather. I resign. I quit. Juicy and tender, that's what I unt. I need a juicy and tender plan.

And I have one. A bacon cheeseburger is a good start. I proclaim myself liberated m the guilt involved with guilty pleasures. I proclaim myself liberated from guilt. nnah, look what has become of me without you? Hannah, you've thrown me into spair. I'm unemployed, I'm in a steakhouse; I'm drinking and eating like a Viking. ou've turned me into a whore for earnest pleasure, Hannah, a chump. I think I'm in love. in't you feel me out there Hannah? Where are you? Can't you see that you've drugged e on earnest love and that life is just too short.

My bacon cheeseburger slides in front of me. "Now that," says the Texan, "That looks like one fine sandwich." He tilts his head up at the coffee-colored wood ceiling. Whoooo-hooooo," he says, raising his glass. He gives me a crazy wink. "You enjoy at."
I toast him with my whisky. "I will," I say, giving a wink back. You have to love it. The Texan. He's acting just like a Texan. His wife, God love her, has fake tits, (once you know how to spot them, you see them everywhere) and hair the color of banana taffy.

I'm chomping my cheeseburger when Janos slides next to me. He's wearing a black track suit of some sort with a white turtleneck. It makes him look like a Russian gangster. He's holding one of those black leather man purses, Coach maybe. "Eli," he says. "My young protégé Eli."

He tells me what I want to hear, I think. I wonder if he's ever told me the truth, the piano teacher. The torturers. All of the things he's said about Hannah. None of it, if you really look at it, holds up to the light. It's all a bunch of bullshit. It's hilarious, if you think about it. "Protégé?" I say, laughing.

Janos doesn't smile. Our barkeep, acting just like a barkeep, stops polishing with a rag to come over and give Janos a brotherly nod. "Coffee," says Janos, with flat lips.

The bartender turns to me. "Another whisky?"

I nod back. We're all very civilized, us men, sitting around, surrounded by mahogany. Janos stares at his coffee. "There are some things we have to talk about, Eli."

He flat lips. "I have reasons to suspect that you might be confused about what's going on with Hannah."

His hands tremble a little when he pours the cream. They're old man hands, wrinkled up like dried fruit. This is the best joke of all. It's a riot. I take a slug of whisky.

The gag, I want to say. Ba Boom Cschhh. I have reasons to suspect you might be confused Janos. "Confused?" I say, trying not to smirk too much.
Janos takes a tentative old man sip of his coffee. “I’m a person that has spent my whole life taking risks, Eli. Do you know something? The biggest risk of all is to think that you actually know something when you don’t know a thing.”

No smiles? No pat on the back? No fatherly compliments? No tales of torture and survival? Surprise surprise, Janos isn’t who I think he is. I give him a solemn nod. Why let it go on a little longer, the charade of it? “You should tell me about the time you a six mile tunnel with a toothpick Janos…or…or—”

“Eli,” he says.

“I’m joking Janos,” I say.

He puts a hand on my shoulder, but not a fatherly hand. There’s a menacing grip release. “You’re not going to want to hear this,” he says, “but I have to tell you.”

I have some things I need to tell you, I think. I smile at Janos. “I can only give.” I say.

He taps his hands on the bar and squints his eyes, pretending like he’s really king about it. “I’ve been dishonest with you,” he says.

No shit? “Really?” I say.

“There’s no need for sarcasm. You’re acting like you know everything Eli, but don’t. You don’t know any of it. Hannah knows, Eli. She’s known the whole time. as her idea to place the ad. It was her idea to pretend that she didn’t know about it. It her idea…the whole thing. The problem is, I’ve come to really respect you Eli. i’re a good kid. I don’t want it to go on anymore. I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

No one wants to see me get hurt, do they? I’ll tell you something else; I don’t eve a word of what he’s saying. “I have no idea what you’re talking about Janos.”
"You’ve been seeing her, I know that," says Janos. "I know what happened at the Madison Arms. It’s a game, Eli. She gets immense pleasure from his sort of thing. She’s known the whole time and she’s been pretending.” Janos stares into his coffee and takes a tentative sip. "She enjoys it."

"But you don’t," I say. "You find the whole thing a little tasteless, right...that’s why you’ve lied to me all along."

He doesn’t look at me. "You have every right to be upset, but I’ll have you know at we’re happily married and we’re both very open minded about sexuality. If it’s any consolation to you Eli, she enjoyed the physical encounters that you two had together. We’ve both come to the decision that you’re taking this all too seriously and neither of us want it to go on any longer. There’s no conspiracy Eli. I’m telling you the truth."

He’s lying. It’s bullshit. It’s all a bunch of bullshit. “Nothing happened between us, Janos. She wants to help me. She thinks I’m spiritually wounded.”

Janos smiles like he knows something. “She wanted me to tell you that she’s very sorry, but she doesn’t think you’ll be able to see each other anymore and that she regrets how much it will probably hurt you. For a while, we hired people. We thought that it could be best, to have professionals. We thought we were well served to have our encounters be anonymous. But it wasn’t enough for her, Eli. She wanted something with bite to it. She wanted something that was not only physically erotic, but psychologically erotic. I know you won’t understand."

I think of Kristin. Oh, do I ever understand big guy. I understand the game pal. I have the last card buddy. "I don’t know what you’ve bought Janos, but it’s not the truth," I say, taking a bite of my burger. The meat juice and tomato and mayo floods my mouth
and I almost choke. The restaurant clanks around us. It clanks in applause for the
conviction with which Janos lies. "You can’t buy the truth, whatever you think," I say
with my mouth full. "Nothing happened between us. Your wife’s worried about you. I
think I understand why."

Janos smoothes his coffee cup with his hands. He looks at me and his eyes squint
d holds his mouth so tight it just quivers. There’s a hardness there. A defiant hatred.
youth, my life, my lack of ties. He hates me because I have the one thing he can’t get.
s energy and drive. His past. I feel it all coming at me and judging me. He knows all
out me, I think, and it doesn’t make it any better. He knows how talentless I am and
erthing. He knows about my boring past. He smells the failure on me, the fresh quit,
d it doesn’t matter, because deep down what he doesn’t know is the only thing that he
ly needs to know: whether or not his wife is in love with me. "You don’t know what
u’re saying Eli. You’re confused. You think you know me. You think you know what I
ow? You don’t know anything about this.” His voice is hissing a little.

I grin at him. I know everything, I think.

Janos shakes his head. "I feel sorry for you Eli," he says. His voice is syrupy
w, soothing. "I almost hate to show you this. I know how you’ll feel, but you can’t say
idn’t warn you. You can’t say I didn’t tell you how she is."

Janos pulls the man purse up onto the bar. Its leathery flesh glistens super oily in
dimmned bar lights. "I don’t know anything, right?” says Janos, shaking his head. I see
bartender glance over at us. I smile at him. This is nothing I can’t handle barkeep.
is is just another trick. Janos undoes the clasp and stares at it for a second. “Emotion,
i, it’s not something that I you should give any credit to. Emotion is a worthless. The
best way to think about emotion is that it's just water. We're carbon-based life-forms with a binary intelligence function. We each come equipped with a beautifully designed system of machinery, and through that system runs emotional water, ruining everything. Do you want me to show you this, Eli? Or do you want to trust me?"

I stare at the Texan and his wife. They have a bloody château briand of their own. They have steak fries, sautéed mushrooms, and baked spinach. The smell wafts over me and I feel myself fill up with food lust again. I take a bite of my burger. "Whatever it is for you Janos."

Janos pulls out a brown manila envelope and sets it on the bar in front of me.

It's too much, really. Like a detective movie from the forties. *Double Indemnity* ring humble Eli, the washed up salesman, and Janos, the wronged husband. I put the rest of my burger down, scoop up some fries, and slide the plate away. I pull the envelope front of me and open it with my greasy fingers. Janos slumps over and stares at his flat in the gleaming mirror behind the bar. He takes a tentative sip of coffee. I open the envelope. It's full of photos... 8 X 10's. Hey, what's this? Pictures of Hannah in a.el room, a look of clownish appetite on her face... a black-haired man with his hands on shoulders. Hannah contorts her face in lust. Hannah gasps like a porn star. Hannah les in various stages of undress. It's her all right. You can tell by the tits.

"You could have had them done," I say. The pictures look real. "You could have had someone that looked like her. You could have—"

Janos stares at the mirror, shaking his head. "She has a psychological addiction to , Eli. She's been lying to you. I've gone along with it until now, but I can no longer
watch while she damages you. She needs professional help. If you’d like to see more
pictures—"

The barkeep raises his eyebrows and goes back to polishing the mahogany. People
yell. Forks scrape. I get up and Janos makes no effort to stop me. Despite the three
whiskeys, I feel woefully sober as I stumble out into the streets. They are already slick
in. The wind howls. The rain whips in whatever direction the wind tells it to go. Soon
ough, it whips cold ice drops right into my face. The shark lurches from it’s sleep. Go
me, it says. Just go home. I’m tired of the options here. I’m tired of thinking. I’m tired
all this self-control. The rain hits my face and I like the cold feel of it. It’s like a
ower. It’ll clean me up on my way to the bar.
There’s a moment, upon waking up, when everything feels normal. The fax answering machine beeps insistently. The familiar bodily emissions tickle my nostrils with their sour scent. I hear the radiator clicking away. I hear the soft patter of drizzle against the window, and, below, on the street, the muted sound of cars splashing through the street. My balls itch. I give them a satisfying scratch. Everything in order here, Captain Eli. Everything ship-shape. Work, I think. I have to get to work.

Then I open my eyes.

Oh not good. This is not good at all. I’m in the bathroom, for one. Not just in the bathroom, but curled up in a fetal position on the bath mat, which is okay, which is nothing I haven’t handled. I’m still wearing my suit from the day previous. The front of my shirt slays out over unbuttoned fly. You’re okay, I tell myself. I pry my lips apart and inhale a
puff of sour air. Time to adapt to the present state of affairs. This turtleneck, for one, needs to go. Also, there is the need, for certain, for some answers. There are certain unsolved mysteries that someone more able than myself needs to solve. Someone, for instance, needs to stage an inquiry about why there is a bottle of Mad Dog 20/20, Blue Hawaii flavor, staring at me from a perch next to the wastebasket. Get the boys on that finger of syrupy blue liquid left in the bottle. That's evidence. Don't ask me though...I don't remember a thing. Still, I've survived these mornings. You have to talk to your hangovers. You have to tell then who's boss. "You call yourself a hangover," I croak.

Then I stand up.

The bathroom gives a sick lurch and a thundering burp rumbles through my body. A hot, sour liquid fills my mouth I lean down, shaking, and deposit it into the toilet with a dainty splash. The toilet, upon squinty-eyed inspection, is already filled with yolky yellow bile. Something tears in my head and I close my eyes. Oh Eli, says the shark. This isn't the time for heroics. This is the time to take it easy. My arms shake while I hold the bowl. My stomach lurches again, but I check it. A little more rest, then I'll straighten myself out. A greasy breakfast. A little coffee. Then I'll go see my mom like a decent person. It's time to live right. I mean it. No problems here. I lie back down on the bathmat. I can't stop shivering. I close my eyes. Oh Eli, says the shark. Don't think, I tell myself. Bat it all away.

Then the memories start.

I have no use for the memories, the images, this parade of masochistic porn that begins to march through my cracked head. Everybody loves a parade though. There's no stopping a parade once it picks up steam. There's proud Eli, strutting out of the store,
having just quit his job. Janos stares in the mirror with his flat lips. Janos holds his coffee cup. Janos passes over the manila envelope. The problem was that whisky. The pictures. Hannah, her mouth parted. Her teeth. The hands on her shoulders. A tourist bar. A woman with big hair. Where was she from? Montana? A stewardess, no less. That’s pretty funny, isn’t it? Getting slambowsskied in a tourist bar with a Skywest stewardess from Montana? Is that right? Is there really a city in Montana named Bozeman? Gypsy drinks…novelty shots: the prairie fire, 151, 151 again, and again, then the blow job, the mindbender, the eraser, the Hot Damn!, the Aftershock, the insistence on an impromptu low price whisky tasting, a stamina enhancing line or two or three or six in the bathroom with the kindly stewardess then…Enough of the parade. These memories, they’re not doing any good to the old constitution. They’re not helping at all.

Then I open my eyes again.

Time to get up. I solemnly declare it is time to march the parade, if nothing else, over to the bed. Opening your eyes, though, in this sort of state, it’s not something I would suggest. The room spins in all sorts of directions. The room spins in a way that is just no good. I close my eyes again. The parade starts up, going full bore. Horns blast. Tubas moan. Drums snap. A New Orleans parade. Ba Boom Cschhh! Why not? Punch lines are everywhere. There I am, with the bottle of Mad Dog inconspicuously concealed in a brown paper bag…rim shot!…stumbling around Pioneer Square, swilling blue coconut nasty. Tell the boys downtown one case is closed, anyway.

Time to get up. There’s an incredible itch around my balls. I reach down and scratch it. A man of action. Time for the long march over to the bed. A little water, a little rest, a little aspirin. There’s no stopping the parade though. The parade has ideas of
it’s own and, if I’m to be completely honest, I’m in a position with very little leverage. The paraders want to turn into shadowy phantoms in an alley. The paraders want to bring the spook. Fine then, bring the spook, it’s nothing I can’t handle... it’s nothing I haven’t handled before. The alley, the trash, the drizzle. Figures above me, laughing. Ba boom Cschhh! Phantoms above me, laughing.

I feel my inside jacket pocket, which is supposed to be filled with four thousand odd dollars. Thank god, I think. It’s there. I’ll be fine. I reach up and grab the slimy lip of the sink. I pull myself up and stare at myself in the mirror. The mirror’s no good. It looks like I’m gaining weight again, for one, and there are all kinds of these like unsavory creases on my cheek. There’s filth on my clothes. What I need is a shower. A good shower. No thinking.

I rip my stained clothes off. I almost cry a little when I see the bite mark on my neck, but I hold it together. Help me, mirror, I think. They’re there: my rock star cheek bones, my slender waist. I’m here. I’m okay. It’s when I reach down to scratch my balls again that I see it.... there’s a certain rash running from my cock to my thighs. Slick red bumps, sore to touch. I think of Hannah. She has a psychological addiction to sex. My heart. My dick. My Hannah. Suddenly I know the truth: everything Janos told me at the steak house was right.

Tender Eli, head splitting, manages to clothe himself in a civilian’s uniform of jeans, hooded sweatshirt, and silver Nike running shoes. He sits in his apartment and attempts to calculate a plan. So Janos is right. So she’s not perfect. So she used me. I’m okay. There will be jobs to file for in the near future. There will be rain to slog through on the way to interviews. There will be phone calls to make. The answering machine reveals
fractured loyalties, insistent urges, and accusations of treachery. My father, for example,
has been informed by Mickey that I’ve quit my job. He’s very concerned, my father. He’s
still concerned about the mental stability of my mother in her state, and now he’s
concerned about the mental stability of Eli. My father and Mickey are shaping up to be the
sanest people I know. What does that say? Mickey is concerned about me, and he takes
time out from a game of Risk with his bride to be to tell me so. My mother is concerned
about my father’s concern concerning me. Fair enough. Kat is concerned that I no longer
call or write. There’s a lot of concern going around. Kat issues forth ultimatums. She
won’t wait around forever. There are plenty of men she could abuse. Even Ben, the head
of the reading center, is concerned that I won’t remember my appointment with Phil
tomorrow night. Everybody is concerned about Eli, but what, exactly, is Eli concerned
about? I’ll tell you. I’m concerned about Hannah. It’s pitiful. It’s wrong, but I worry
about her. She’s given me a rash of some sort. I know Kat. If it was from her, she
would’ve let me know. She’s very conscientious about that stuff, Kat is... very safe. We
always used a condom. No, it’s Hannah. She’s stained me good, Hannah has. Between
my thighs, in hot red bumps: proof of her infidelities. It hurts to scratch. I scratch away.

She has a psychological addiction to sex. The pictures. The rash. We could be stained
together. Oh earnest love, look what you’ve done to me. You abuse me, you hook me,
and then you disappear. Conspicuously absent from the symphony of concern that plagues
my ears is any notice from Janos or Hannah. Neither Janos nor Hannah apparently, is
concerned in the least. The cell phone gives it’s banshee shriek. I pick it up, expecting to
hear someone’s concern. “I need to see you,” Hannah says.
I can barely form words. My neurons move like a chain gang. I say the only thing that makes any sense. “The zoo,” I say. “By the farm animals.”
I don’t bother to feed myself. I can barely do the buttons on my shirt. My body is an alcohol funny car...it wants to race. It churns on hate, raring to go, in fine form. Hate invigorates. It burns. It gets the blood pumping. My car though, it isn’t feeling me. I want to speed over there, to screech into the parking lot, but the Korean lawnmower rattles every time I get too excited. Traffic, too, it just isn’t feeling me. It’s early, time for people to go to work. I can’t just sit here in traffic because sitting here reminds me that, really, there’s nowhere to go. There’s Hannah. There’s fifteen minutes at best, but even that...what good is that going to do? What’s the point? One more gag? Then what? Mom, I think. One more gag and then I’ll go see mom and pull it together. I shouldn’t even see Hannah. What else do I need to know from her? The pictures, the rash, isn’t it
enough? I grip the steering wheel and inch forward, a rock in a raging river of grim-faced commuters. The thing is, it isn’t enough. I need to see Hannah. I really just need to see her.

It’s no kind of day for the zoo, what with the torrential ice whipping around in mini-tornados of pain. I don’t bother to bring a rain coat. I don’t want an umbrella. I want Hannah to see me drenched, meek, stained, begging. I want her to see what she’s done to me. Icy rain has a different smell than the warm stuff. It smells metallic, like a damp penny. Icy rain slaps against my bare head as I move towards her in the empty zoo. No one’s out today. They sit in offices, sipping coffee and looking at porn. They check the stats for their fantasy teams. They E-mail each other amusing tidbits. People are home, lounging behind windows, sealed inside from the weather. They read books or newspapers in the warm yellow light. They pad around in rag wool socks, the fucks, up in their gleaming towers. Scalded clean by a long hot shower, they sip their tea beneath plaid blankets while I’m liquor sick, frozen to the core; while Hannah, stained Hannah, stands under an umbrella in her expensive outerwear and stares at the shivering sheep. They push their dirty snouts through the gaps in the wooden fence. They stick their warm tongues out, exhaling breath, as if to give Hannah a lick. They bleat in protest.

“Eli,” says Hannah, with a sly little smile, as if she’s surprised to find me out here in the cold soup, begging. She looks me up and down and the smile disappears. “You look terrible,” she says. “Are you okay?”

That’s it Hannah, mock me. Give me your fake concern. Lie to me. “There’s no reason to bother Hannah,” I say. “I bought it all. I fell for you.”
"We should move in there, you're shivering," she says. Dry Hannah, her eyes crisp behind her glasses, points to a fake barn they've constructed.

I laugh. I'd still fuck her. I swear I would. That's the thing. "You're worried about me?" I ask.

"Don't be absurd Eli," she says, doing her best to look earnest...to hold on to the illusion of sincerity. "You're freezing." She gives me a motherly pat on the back and moves me over into the barn, where the metallic smell of the rain mixes with the smell of rotting hay. "I've been thinking about things," says Hannah.

I laugh.

She ignores the laugh. "I've been thinking about you and I."

My teeth kind of start to chatter. "I fell in love with you," I say.

"No you didn't," Hannah says. "Try to calm down."

An icy robot in a barn, telling her lies with earnest vigor. Why can't she just drop it? I laugh again.

"Are you okay?" asks Hannah, looking a little more worried now at least.

"Can't we just stop pretending? Can't we just drop the pretense Hannah?"

Hannah feigns surprise. "What are you talking about Eli? You really look like you're out of your mind. Is it your parents? Is something going on?"

Oh Hannah, stop. My parents. The gag, it's too much. I'll laugh myself to pieces.

"You made me fall in love with you," I say. "You made me believe you."

"Eli—"

My fingers tingle. They're going numb with cold. My teeth are chattering like crazy. "I saw the pictures, Hannah. Janos told me everything."
Hannah still feigns surprise. She still refuses to give me the icy robot look of cold knowing that I deserve. The icy robot shrug. It’s what I need and I can go back to my old life. It’s what I need so I can go see my mom and pull myself together. “What are you talking about Eli?” asks Hannah, still wearing the mask…still looking like she means what she’s saying. “I’ve never misled you. I never said anything about love. I told you that I’ve been very confused. There’s an attraction between us…you’re a special person—”

“It’s how you get off,” I say. “You can stop lying now. I know everything. I know what I am to you. How many are there? How many other ones have you done this to?”

Hannah pretends to look upset. “Eli, I don’t know what’s happened to you but if you let me…I was straightforward with you from the beginning.”

“Janos showed me the pictures Hannah.” I unbutton my jeans with my numb fingers and pull them down to my knees with my boxers. My shriveled cock is a blue-white oddity in the field of red. “I’ve got a rash Hannah. I’ve got some kind of fucking STD.”


“The pictures of you with some guy.” I look down at my diseased, shriveled blue cock. “You did it to get off. You knew about it. The ad. Janos said you knew about the personal ad.”

Hannah opens her mouth. “What personal ad?”
“Seduce my wife, Hannah. You knew. You were faking it the whole time. You were pretending. Did it work? Was it everything you wanted? Was it fucked up enough to do it for you?”

“Janos showed you pictures of the affair. That was two years ago Eli. It’s complicated. It was one night. You’re not making any sense.”

The charade keeps going on. She insists. It makes me want to scream. “It’s over, Hannah. The game’s over. The dream’s over.”

“Just shut up for a second.” She looks around. There’s a little girl and her mother standing bundled beneath an umbrella. They stare in open shock. “Pull your pants up Eli,” hisses Hannah.

I pull them up with fumbling fingers.

“Just explain one thing at a time. What personal ad?” Hannah’s chin quivers and she starts to cry behind her glasses. Fifteen feet away, the sheep bleat mournfully in the icy rain. “Oh Eli,” she says. “Janos put you up to this?” She’s crying now. Give the woman an Oscar. “He made you do this?”

“You made me do this,” I say.

Hannah just shakes her head. “Oh God,” she says.

“Just tell me you knew,” I say. “Tell me so I can leave.”

Hannah just shakes her head. Bravo, Hannah. Make your big exit. She pops open her umbrella and stares at me. “Does he know?” she says. “Did you say anything to him about us?”

“I didn’t say anything,” I say.
"How could you Eli?" she says. "How could you?" She runs off, her little legs moving fast through the rain, past the pigs and the sheep and the goats. It's finally done.

The game is finally over.
Things are changing with alarming speed, but I'm surprisingly all right. It's afternoon already. This day is coming to an end. When the game is over, it's not really over. I won't commit to any game over. You have to go on. What choice is there? You have to go on unless you want to do something dramatic and really, I just don't have the stomach for the dramatic. That's the sad truth of it. All this drama, it's killing me; it's making me weak; it's making me think too much about what all of this means. I'm fueled by Hannah-hate, fueled by the spurs of her betrayal. At least I have an enemy. I mean, come on, the acting. The way she kept it up. It was too much. Maybe Janos is right. Maybe she is crazy.

Shivering, hung Eli steps out of the shower. No drama. No emotion. I'm surprisingly all right, but I keep sort of shaking. This is no time to be alone. I pick up my
cell phone and dial Kat’s work number with the towel wrapped around my slender waist.

She answers right away. “Kat?” I ask.

“My little birdie,” Kat says.

“I flew away.” My voice shakes, but not too much.

“Duh,” she says.

“You doing anything right now?”

“I’m bored,” she says. “The market just closed. The markets are shit, Eli. I need to get out of here.”

“I want to be bored,” I say.

“Whatever,” Kat says.

“I’ll meet you at your place.”

“Mmmm,” says Kat.

See, without drama or emotion or dishonesty, life makes a lot more sense. Life would be something manageable. Comedy, tragedy, you can have both of them. They’re not for me. I’ll burn on hate. I’ll burn myself up until I can live the flat life. The boring life, I predict, will come to me eventually. I predict trips to Old Navy, lunch dates at McDonald’s, frequent viewing of the news. I predict extensive consumption of gourmet coffee drinks and Chief Sealth Ales. I’m forging ahead. Maybe you have questions about my emotional state. Do I feel guilty? Am I guilty? Am I to blame? The answer is no. Hannah’s the one who won’t admit her part. She’s the one that’s taking things too far.

The important thing is to go on. The important thing is to rely on clichés. I need to put the past behind me. I need to take one step at a time. I need to live in the moment. I need to stop shaking. I put on a t-shirt and jeans, my silver Nike running shoes, a
sweatshirt, a sensible gore-tex coat in case it rains. I head out into the rainy afternoon, my head filled with fantasies of watching the night come on from Kat’s glowing oasis in the sky. We’ll sip a little wine. We’ll listen to Kat’s goofy Madonna. No sex, not for me. I’m done with all of this gypsy business. We’ll just get good and drunk and I’ll go home and get a good night’s sleep before I go see my mom.

Kat answers the door naked as a slice of melon. She blinks at me a few times and flicks her hair. I’d like to say that I don’t feel a thing. I’d like to say that there’s an icy core in my groin. Kat leans against the doorframe on her elbow. “Get inside,” she says.

I take a step back and stare at her. I look her up and down. I’d like to say I’m over it, but her naked body makes me want to get on my knees and press my lips to her flat stomach until I see it: the traces of a rash curling around the borders of her well waxed pubis. It’s really a pretty good joke, a nice little gag. I almost laugh. “What is that?” I ask her, pointing at the angry rash.

Kat folds her arms over her little breasts. “What?”

“That,” I say, jabbing at the rash with my finger.

Kat sort of takes a step back. “It’s my pussy Eli.”

“No, the rash. What is that?”

“Oh this…” she looks down…it’s practically gone.”

“What is it?”

“I got it from the pool or something. It’s just moleskum. Don’t be so paranoid Eli. I had it checked out and they said it was just some kind of reaction.”
I don’t even say anything. When a joke’s good enough, you don’t have to say anything about the punch line. I head off down the hall.

Kat yells after me. “Eli! Why are you being so dramatic? It’s nothing!”

I push the lobby button on the elevator thinking how it’s a good question, really. It could’ve been herpes, gonorrhea. It could have been AIDS. I should thank my lucky stars. I should count my blessings. I should see that the glass is half-full, then I should drain it.

Maybe you saw this coming: the innocence of Hannah, the opportunity I missed. I should get on my knees and praise the symmetry of it: two people ruined equally by a collision of desire. But what about Janos? Is there any kind of justice in that? Why does Janos get everything? Still, I should be grateful. I have my money. I can get by for months, maybe half a year if I really stretch. There’s only one part of it left to figure out and then it’s done and I can move on.
“Hello Eli,” says Kristin. She’s wearing a Catholic schoolgirl uniform.

The romanticism of the place is gone during the day. Maybe it’s just me. There’s nothing attractive in the rot when it’s illuminated by the sun. I keep looking for it. I need it. I look at Kristin in her cliché Catholic schoolgirl uniform and feel almost sorry for her. “How much did he pay you?” I ask.

“Someone who worked for him came by here. He knew you’d been seeing me. He said his boss would give me a thousand dollars to say that I’d been involved with Janos and Hannah.”

“You told him everything,” I say.

“I’ve got a daughter,” she says.
I still need to know. It's pitiful. I still need to hear someone say it. "But you told him. Kristin, why'd you have to tell him?"

Kristin lights a cigarette. The smile on her face, for once, isn't mocking. Instead, she looks like she's the one that feels sorry for me. "I told you what I was paid to tell you, but I didn't do anything else. The assistant came back. He wanted to know whether or not you had slept with Hannah again after you had sex with her at the Madison Arms. I told him I didn't know."

"You told the truth."

She shrugs. "You might want to try it," she says. "You want to talk about something?"

"But you lied to me. You never went there, did you?"

She shrugs. "The guy that came to me said Janos's wife needed psychological help. He said she wouldn't allow herself to be helped until he could prove it. They had you followed Eli. They know everything. I think they want to put her in an institution."

I want to hate her but my heart's not in it. All I feel is a kind of damp disgust. A kind of diluted disgust that makes everything look the same. Can you see where I'm heading? Can you see it?

Kristin, if you want to know the truth, looks a little nervous. "I'll talk to you if you need me to," she says. "I mean it." She looks like she's scared of me. If only she knew. I'm no match for her. I've got nothing in me.

The street is full of sun gawkers again, and every smile that I walk by on my way home is a slap in the face. Every smile, every couple holding hands, every kid riding a
dad’s shoulders, they all say the same thing: you don’t get to hate her. They think they can reflect my hatred and wound me with it. They’re right.
Five am... The truth is, maybe I do hate myself. This knowledge, this suspicion, it keeps swimming up from the back of my mind. What do you think you are shark, the truth? Leave me alone. I don’t need any truth around here. The shark wants me to own it, though. I can’t own it. I’m no kind of owner. This knowledge that keeps rapping on my head, it doesn’t feel good. How does it feel to know how everything turns out? It feels like I can’t sleep. I open the window, hoping to let in the sounds of the street, but there’s an eerie quiet over the city. Where are you spookers, now that I need you? The clouds are gone and you can see the stars. It’s cold. All night I’ve been tossing and turning, my anxiety like a shield to the wine I drank to help me sleep. The shark drinks my wine, burps, and asks if I have any more. Is there any way to make it right? I ask myself. Is there any way to apologize to Hannah, to explain it to her? The problem with these questions, I realize, at this hour, is that I’ve asked them knowing the answers all along, and
it's no use asking questions you already know the answers to. That's why the shark keeps smiling. There's nothing I can do. Hannah and Janos will get a divorce, or they'll stay together. He'll put her into an institution like the one my mom went to, or he won't. The dirty wash of disgust—the stale gray water—it soaks everything.

I drive my wheezing Hyundai north, leaving the lights of the city twinkling crisp behind me. I drive to Kingston and get on the first ferry out to the Olympic Peninsula. It's another sunny day, of course, and people come up to the topside deck despite the chill to watch the water sparkle when the morning sun hits it. Some of them are bringing Christmas gifts back from the city—shiny packages that little kids prod at and giggle. The boat rolls from side to side. My head's still spinning. There are things that I know. I shouldn't complain, right? I shouldn't think. I know that Mickey will get married and it may well make him happy. I know I'll get another job and that it'll probably be worse than my last one. I know that it'll be a good long while before my dad dies. I know that my mom will be there when I visit and the odds say she'll be okay. So why am I bothering? Here sharky sharky, swim over here with all the answers. Tell me what I know. All of these hours of walking and working and jerking off and drinking and thinking don't add up to anything do they? They don't mean a thing. Thank you for sharing shark, now swim away.

I get off the ferry and drive towards my mom. Everything in me wants to turn around. I'm so afraid of what will happen to me if I see her. I pass the Olympic Game Farm and pull in at the last second. Just a quick peep, I think. Just a little time to collect myself. Why not? A little bondage? A little torture? It's seven in the morning, but
instead of finding the place empty, I see crowds lining the gates. No ones driving around inside; they’re all lined up along the roads, standing beside their RVs and their SUVs looking towards the empty grounds of the park. I park behind a tour bus-sized RV called a Grand Monaco and get out of my car.

The owner of the Grand Monaco wears a blue baseball hat that says USS Monaco on it in gold letters. He’s an enormous man that looks even bigger in his red and white checked shirt and dark Wranglers. “Good morning,” he says to me.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“You don’t know?”

I shake my head, feeling him look me up and down. I must really look like hell. I noticed it on the ferry too—people staring at me.

“It’s your lucky morning,” he says, smiling.

“Why’s that?”

“You know the rhino in there?” he asks.

I nod.

“He’s sick as a dog. They’re bringing in a helicopter to airlift him.”

I look towards the Game Farm. You can see some of the buffalo and zebras from the road. They stand still, munching grass without enthusiasm. The thing about animals, the thing you’ve really got to give them credit for, is that they have this ability to survive. Maybe that’s all there is, survival. Maybe that’s the only thing that matters. Goldfish patrol sewers like gray submarines, looking for the newly flushed. Squirrels dig peanut butter and jelly sandwiches out of dumpsters. Sea rats stick their nervous yellow beaks
into discarded bottles of ale. Evolution is really terrible, but all of these animals endure it without complaining.

"Here it comes," shouts my neighbor.

The chopper is one of those Navy jobs with the two rotaries. It’s orange and white, really crisp looking, with the letters NC7H on the side facing me. It thuds towards us, deafening people’s cheers. Workers from the Game Farm guide it towards the rhino and it settles down, whipping the beach grass into knots, hovering thirty feet above ground. The chopper drops a harness that’s made out of some kind of canvas material. It floats down like a parachute.

I don’t know if they use electric shocks or what, but somehow they get the rhino to stand up so they can get the harness beneath his stomach. I can barely see it. Once he’s harnessed up, they unlock the chain that connects the rhino to the cement-filled tractor tire. The people watching from the road cheer again.

I know it won’t work. That rhino will die chained. "It won’t work," I shout to my neighbor over the thwack of the helicopter.

He holds his hand to his ear. "What?" he shouts.

"It won’t work," I shout again.

He puts his hands on his hips and smiles at me. "It’ll work," he says.

The rhino looks too heavy. The rhino looks too sick. The workers on the ground give a thumbs up to the chopper. It begins to lift towards the sun. It seems to groan with the weight of the rhino beneath it until first the forelegs, then the whole of the rhino, lift. People cheer again, really wild, like they’re at a football game or something. The chopper
lifts up, staying close to the ground, and starts to fly out towards the coast. I don’t know if it’s the wind or what, but the rhino seems to be nodding its head.

The rhino, he just won’t stop nodding. I start laughing. The admiral of the USS Monaco looks at me like he doesn’t get it.

I find myself at the grocery store. You want the truth? There’s nothing so much in it. It would be one thing to have a nervous breakdown, to die, to kill yourself. It’s another thing to find yourself in the grocery store with a bouquet of flowers. The muzak plays. I hold a bouquet of tacky flowers between my hands and wait in the checkout line. The muzak plays and the line inches forward and I’m not laughing or crying or anything, I’m just sort of there.

I pull up towards my mom’s house and the first thing I notice is that my dad’s Riviera is parked in the driveway. It’s perfect, really. Just what she needs. I park on the road and get out, clutching my flowers to my chest. The bouquet is so tacky. It’s so cheap. The flowers are all different colors, the colors of Kool-Aid flavors. The sun hits the house, illuminating my mom and dad in the breakfast nook. He’s drinking coffee. She’s drinking tea. She has a blanket wrapped around her tiny shoulders. I sort of stagger through the yard, clutching the cheap flowers to my chest. They leak onto my shirt. I have no idea what I’m supposed to say. I walk towards the window through the damp dormant grass, clutching my flowers, shaking like a geek.