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Hockey tale and other stories

Stephen Morison

The University of Montana

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A Hockey Tale and Other Stories

by

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A Hockey Tale

There's nothing like the scent of a sloppy joe to remind you you're in school again. Summer was over, senior year had begun. The guys were at the table in the corner under the clock. The same guys. New haircuts though. Billy had let his bald head get stubbly. He looked like he had a reddish skull cap pulled snug atop his bowling pin body. Jordo was sporting a full blonde Wayno doo, as in Wayne Gretsky, long in the back, flat on top and sideburns shaved clean.

They'd been my friends since the fourth grade when they'd welcomed me to town by hanging me by the waist band of my cup from the wall of the visitors' locker room at the Lynn English rink, mostly because Mr. Richards cut Randy Garston from the Mite traveling team to make room for me.

"Hey, Jordie," Cathy called from the next table. "Becca thinks you look like a Cubist sculpture." She winked at me.

Jordie patted the flat-top where he'd spiked it up and thanked her. It didn't matter that Jordo didn't know what a Cubist sculpture was; he had other strengths. When he crossed six feet that summer, he became marketable. Scouts had been showing up at games since sophomore year, but he'd needed height and weight to be taken seriously. His dad had been grooming him since PeeWees. Back in the days when my dad would help me cut and tape my sticks, Jordo's would occasionally make him jog home for not hustling. Billy and I used to kid him about it. We'd sit on either side of him on the bench and say stuff like, "That was pretty brave of you to miss that shot. It's cold out there tonight."

"There he is," Billy said as I joined the table. Steino and Jordie looked past me at a broad-shouldered guy, maybe five-ten, with curly blonde hair sticking out from under a baseball cap with a sea gull on it.

"Who are we looking at?" I asked.

The new guy took an empty table, chewed his tater tots and stared back.

"Look at him staring at you, Jordie," Billy said. "You think he digs you?"

Billy was five five, wide in the hips, with freckles and a constant grin. The lunch ladies thought he was charming, but these were different ladies than the ones that had been there when he superglued Benny Sherbaine's hand to Pamela Reardon's butt in the sixth grade.

"No really. It's that haircut, Jordie," Billy said. "He thinks you're Courtney Love. I heard he's into grunge."

"I wouldn't be talking about haircuts if I was you, Captain Picard," Jordie said.

"Hey, bud," Billy told him. "This haircut is for your brother."

Jordie's little brother Frankie was dying of leukemia. The team had shaved their heads in the spring after the chemo knocked his hair out. Jojo, the coach, made him stick-boy after we beat Danvers. Jojo would do anything to preserve a win streak. He'd wear the same clothes, keep us in the same uniforms, preserve tape balls and pucks, anything. He invited Frankie to sit on the bench for the Danvers game. After we won, he became a permanent fixture.

"Kid, I love you," Jojo told him on the bus home after our third win on the road.

"If you can't part the harbor waters, I don't want to know about it."

Frankie's hair was gone by Salem and that's when Jordie started rubbing his head for luck. It bothered me a bit when the rest of the team started doing it. We'd all line up after warm-ups and wait our turns to slip off our gloves and run a couple fingertips over the soft skin of his skull. There was no way around it, it was weird and I wasn't sure what to think of it. I sat down next to him on the bus home after the Medford win. He was only ten so I asked him how school was going.

"Okay," he said, then added, "I'm the only bald kid."
I wasn't sure what to say back, I mean hell, he was the only bald kid everywhere. So I said that.

He looked over his shoulder. "I don't really notice it here," he said. "You guys are different."

I looked back and saw Jordo wearing a Burger King crown pushed down around his nose. He'd cut out squares for eyes and was using it as a guard. We'd stopped for dinner on the ride back and now a bunch of guys were having spitball fights with straws. I saw Frankie's point. These guys were different. Fitzy, the netminder, was moistening a wad of paper napkin in his cheek across from us. He made himself puked before every game. He did it loud and the noise echoed through the locker room like a microphone was right in close on one of those nature shows. Dana and Prior were playing a portable Nintendo game a couple seats back. They played defense together and had the team logo tattooed on their chests. They got it the same size and place as on our jerseys. Rich Thibideau in front of us was a skinny third line winger who, because he'd once scored after getting cut on the chin by a stick, liked to cut a finger with his skate blade before every game. Billy was so superstitious that he made sure to wipe his nose with the same hand during a win streak. Not to change the subject, but there's something spiritual about a game that can create that level of meticulousness in a guy who once tortured two outcasts by gluing them together.

In some weird way, having Frankie there justified all the craziness and I guess that let us relax a bit. The Swampscott game was pretty typical. The rink was built to seat about two hundred people. But before warm-ups were over, there was at least twice that inside. They were lined up three deep behind the Plexiglas. The bleachers shook every time another group of guys came in and added to the crowd and the cops had already thrown one group out for fighting. While I was warming up Fitzy, two guys waving beer cans started shouting my name and yelling things. I went over to swap sticks.

"Must be tough when they say stuff," Frankie said.
In stores around town there were photocopies of Frankie's face in front of donation jars. People dropped in quarters and felt good about themselves. "Must be tough being the only bald kid," I said and he laughed.

When I was younger, younger than even Frankie, hockey meant something different, something more personal. Not better or worse, just less a group thing. Sometimes my dad would wake me before the sun came up and sometimes I'd get up myself and walk the mile to the edge of the pond, lace up my skates, give it a test smack, then step out onto the black surface.

There were a lot of raw sensations connected to that step onto the ice. The burn of the cold wind was one; the click-scritch of your blades leaving white scratches behind you another. But the most familiar was the sound of the ice settling under your weight, the heavy cracks sounding off the bottom then rising back up and bouncing off the trees.

There's a story my father told me about those cracks that's pretty silly. I told it to Cathy one night after we got stoned and parked at the Catholic Center near the pond. It's about a kid who loves skating so much that he refuses to leave the pond at night. His mother brings his meals to the shore and he sleeps right there on the ice. Spring comes and the pond begins to thaw, but the kid is stubborn. One morning, he wakes up at the bottom. Pickerel are swimming through his blades. But the kid takes it all in stride. He just closes his eyes and decides to nap till winter. Unfortunately he oversleeps. Winter comes and he's trapped under the ice. Each year the same thing happens, he oversleeps then gets pissed and pounds on the underside of the ice when the first skaters come. And that's the story behind the noise of the ice settling when you first skate over it. At least, that's the one my dad told me.

When I told it to Cathy, she said I might be more sensitive than the Mademoiselle quiz she'd taken about me had indicated.
The championship game was held at Boston University. Seventeen thousand people showed up. You could feel the crowd as you were getting dressed. There was a rumble in the locker room like we were getting dressed under the Tobin Bridge. Billy was skating beside me as we took our first lap. He'd Neated his whole body in the shower before getting suited up. He was hairless from head to toe. He said he felt reborn. Jojo had warned us not to look up during warm-ups, but we looked anyway. The faces started at the top of the boards and rose until you lost them to the shadow of the rafters. There was constant noise, but I could hear Billy swearing.

The starters kept their helmets on during intros. It wasn't until we were lined up for the anthem that we pulled them off together and revealed twenty bald heads. Across from us, St. Francis had shaved their heads into monks' tonsures. People started whistling right in the middle of the song. When it ended, the place erupted. You couldn't hear, everything seemed brighter, and for a second I felt like I was trapped in the stomach of a living thing and the sides were coming in.

The team lined up by the boards in front of Frankie. When I reached him, I pulled off my glove and let my fingertips drift over the skin of his head. Seventeen thousand people dropped their voices and stared at us while we did it, even St. Francis stopped skating and looked over. It was like we were worshipping something so basic, like the cells that were screwing up Frankie's bones and trying to kill him were so obviously worthy of a moment that even the competition had to give it their attention. But not for very long. Billy was so damn nervous that when the puck dropped he just planted the wing across from him. He drew two minutes for interference and they scored a minute later.

We ended up losing. The locker room was quiet afterward, then the bus ride was dead silent. The coach gave us a quick speech about how it had been a respectable year, something to be proud of, and then we all filed out and went to Billy's mom's house and played dizzy sticks around a keg Steino's brother bought.
Frankie had his relapse two weeks after school started this year. The parents weren't saying much, but you could tell by their expressions that there wasn't going to be any more remissions. The day they checked him back into the hospital most of the team went over to the Richards' house. We brought our sticks and took slappers at the net in the back yard until it was time to head out to the year's first hockey meeting. I felt terrible for Jordie, we all did, but there wasn't much we could do. He looked away when anybody tried to talk to him. Mr. Richard was at the hospital, but Jordie's mom was there. She looked a bit out of it. She kept offering everybody sandwiches.

At the meeting, the coach talked about the previous season a bit, then gave a speech about setting goals for the year ahead. He looked at me a couple times, or at least through me, his eyes don't focus directly on you when he's talking. When he was done, he introduced the new guy.

"This is Sam Walters," he said. "He just moved up from Scituate and he'll be playing with us now."

Walters stood up and stared toward the back of the room. "Thank you, thank you very much, Coach Johnstone," he said. Only he didn't really say it, he mumbled it in a deep voice. Then he took off his hat and swiped a hand through his hair and swiveled his hips a couple times while his hands waved back and forth. It took me a minute, but eventually I got it. He was up there doing an Elvis impersonation. Never mind that he had curly blonde hair and no music.

"Sorry," he said. "Sometimes the ghost of the King just takes hold of my body and I can't help myself."

Billy nudged me as we were leaving. "Freak," he said.

I went over and walked beside Walters for a second. "You must really be into music or something," I told him.
"Aw, it's mostly my dad," he said. "He and my mom take a trip to Graceland every year for Elvis' birthday. He's even trained the dog to howl along with Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog."

At the hockey banquet the year before, Mr. Richards went up to the piano before people had finished eating and started playing Great Balls of Fire. When he kicked over the piano bench the room got pretty quiet. Mrs. Richards finally went up and got him to stop.

"You might fit in around here," I told Walters.

"You think so?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

We all headed over to Shore Park. It was late and people didn't feel like doing any formal drills so we dumped our sticks in the center of the outdoor rink and chose up teams for roller hockey. As soon as the ball dropped, Billy passed it to the new guy to see what he could do. Walters immediately tripped and went down hard. When he picked himself up, his right knee was bleeding. I skated over.

"Sorry about that," he said. "I'm still breaking in these blades."

They were an old pair of in-lines.

"They look pretty broken in to me," I told him.

"I mean to my feet. They're second-hand."

He improved as the game went on and played pretty well considering the skates. He even broke up a three-on-one against Jordie's line. Afterward, on the ride home, Billy asked me what I thought.

"He might be okay."

"Oh, come on. He could barely skate."

"He's got cruddy blades, but his stick handling's pretty good."

"You can't tell anything from roller hockey," he said.

"It's true," I told him. "You actually looked pretty good."
He gave me a look I hadn't felt since the fourth grade. "You get a couple pats on the back from the coach and all of a sudden we've got a prima donna on our hands," he said. Prima donna was an expression Jojo used whenever somebody screwed up a play by not passing. Billy glared at me a second more, then went back to criticizing Walters. "Besides, he's not going to fit into the whole team mentality thing as well as some of the other guys."

He had a point. Jojo liked to emphasize teamwork. "No fingers!" he'd shout and stick out his finger about twice a practice. "Fingers are weak, fists are strong," he'd say and curl up the finger. Occasionally he'd smack somebody in the side of the helmet to show off the strength of fists.

"Maybe the guys will warm up to him," I said.

Billy snorted. "Oh sure, I love the King."

Frankie Richard died a week later. They had him on the local Boston news. He was smiling from his hospital bed, but he looked thinner and grey on TV. I remember thinking that he looked cold, like all those days next to the ice had finally caught up to him. Dad tried calling Mr. Richard, but couldn't get through. They held the services that Monday and Mr. Richard thanked everybody and explained that they'd gotten so many calls he'd taken the phone off the hook.

We went back to school after the service, but the guys just hung out in the gym locker room skipping classes. That afternoon at practice everybody was working a bit harder than usual, everybody except the new guy. Walters was huffing and bringing up the rear in each drill we did. At the end of the mile he collapsed and lay on the ground moaning about how hung-over he was. I realized that I hadn't seen him at the funeral. Apparently nobody had ever told him about Frankie.

When calisthenics were through we laced up the in-lines for the usual game. We went through the rotation a couple times. Walters seemed to be getting better, but nobody
was paying much attention to him. We were all watching Jordie. We were pretty surprised that he’d even bothered to come. He was playing pretty aggressively and guys were trying to keep out of his way. Everybody except Walters. Jordie blew past him one rush, but Walters spun and caught up. Just as Jordo was teeing up for a shot, Walters stretched and knocked the ball away. Jordie ended up swinging at air. The surprise almost sent him into the boards. While Walters went after the ball, we all stopped to watch Jordie.

It was as if Walter’s steal was the last straw. He skated to the net and very deliberately broke his stick over the metal frame. Then he hopped the boards, sat down on one of the benches and let his face fall into his gloves. You could hear him crying. We stood there, not sure what to do until Walters broke the silence.

"Ain't nothin' but a hound dog," he said. "Just crying all the time."

Jordie looked up at him, then came back over the boards, dropping his gloves as he did. I skated in front of him, trying to slow him down, hugging him and holding him back. "Come on Jordie. This guy doesn't know what's going on."

And it was true, Walters had a different agenda in his mind. Guys had been sizing him up and putting him down since the first day. Every new kid faced an inevitable scrap and Walters had been waiting for his.

"I'm not scared of that guy," he said. "Let him go."

"Shut up," I told him.

"Oh man," Walters said.

"Just shut up," I said again.

"Why? You want to go instead," he asked and let his stick and gloves fall.

"C'mon you pussy."

"Listen, Walters," I told him. "You have no idea what's going on."

He spit at my feet. "Well maybe you should show me then."
And suddenly it was me and him facing off and everybody watching and I was thinking how on earth did this fucking happen? Which is when Walters clocked me in the side of the face. It stunned me a bit. I once saw a show on the Nature Channel about a guy who had been attacked by a lion. The guy had lived and he explained what it was like during the show. He said that during the attack, even when he was in the lion’s mouth, he wasn’t scared, just sort of amazed because he’d never seen the world from that angle before. Getting hit by Walters was like that. I don’t remember being scared, just surprised.

Most of the guys gave us room and Walters backed off long enough for me to clear my head.

"C'mon you pussy. What are you, scared?" he said.

"No." I tried to smile, but my mouth was already stiffening. "You gonna hit me again, Elvis?"

And he did. This time square in the nose. Oh, damn, I thought, this is getting really bad. I pushed him back, but he got another shot in. This time to my stomach and it took the wind out of me. I was still on my roller blades and that was pretty much the end of it. I fell down and Walters skated over to change into his shoes. That was a pretty good move. If I hadn't surprised everybody by not defending myself, I'm pretty sure Billy would have felt justified in hurting Walters. As it was, he ignored him and came over to have a few words with me.

"What the fuck was that?" he asked.

"Billy, I don't need to hear whatever it is you're gonna say."

"You can't just take that shit, man. Why didn't you hit that fool?"

"Well," I started, but I really had no idea.

I told Dad I caught an elbow during practice and he said it made me look tough. I told Cathy the whole story, she said she wasn't sure what to think. She said she was torn between feeling bad for me for getting beat up in front of all my friends and being really
excited that I was beginning to fit the profile of an "artist" as described by an article she'd saved from Cosmo. I liked that because I knew how Cathy felt about artists, but I really couldn't see how getting beat up qualified me for anything.

We lost the opener. Then last Thursday, we just managed to squeak past Salem, who we usually crush. Tonight, the place was packed before the zamboni finished clearing the ice after warm-ups. Jordie seems more excited than I'm used to seeing him. He's slapped my shinpads about ten times already. I caught his eyes the last time he paced by. They reminded me of Frankie's, but older. He looks worried and it occurs to me why. It isn't going to do him much good to be the best player on a mediocre team.

It's been a month since the scrap with Walters and I don't catch many people talking about it anymore. He's starting to fit in with the team a little better. I suppose beating me up helped earn him a little more respect than he'd been getting. He's not a bad defenseman, even better on skates than he was on roller blades.

So things aren't going badly, but I had a weird feeling before the Salem game last Thursday, I really did. Two guys were shouting things about my mother while I was warming up Gottlieb, who's been starting since Fitzy graduated, and I looked over at the bench and I got sort of choked up. Without Frankie there, I wonder sometimes what all the fuss is about.

Once the games start, there usually isn't time to let your thoughts wonder. In between shifts, I'm usually staring at the play and the coach and muttering under my breath for him to give me the signal to get back in there. But last Thursday, during the closing minutes of the game, I found myself staring at the boards and wondering if it wouldn't be too much to ask for some kind of a sign. I don't know who I was praying to. Not Frankie necessarily, not even God, just anybody. Just a knock or two from the other side of the ice, that's all I was asking for. It was strange, but like I said, we won. Maybe that's a sign of sorts.
Jordo comes by again and slaps me in the shinpads for the eleventh time. "You ready to play?" he asks. "You ready to play?"

"Of course I'm ready to play," I say slapping his shinpads back. "What the hell do you think I'm doing here?"
Roni

Roni Northey tucked a stray strand of blonde, shoulder-length hair beneath her pink sun visor and tried to ignore her unsettled stomach. The unease was a direct result of the proximity of Manuel Guillermo, her golf instructor, who was positioned directly behind her, carefully appraising the tension in her grip, the bend of her knees and elbows, the weight transfer in her hips and God knew what else.

A year ago she would have ignored the suspicion, brushing it away like the lingering eyes of an unfamiliar passerby. But today, these days, she wasn't so sure she shouldn't pay more attention. Oh this was ridiculous. Manny was her golf instructor. Sure he was attractive enough, although a little short. She liked the smooth midnight crest of hair that broke above his forehead, his calm, thoughtful eyes, the patient way he paused to heft his club each time he demonstrated a stroke. Argh! This could only be desperation. You are paying him to teach you golf, for God's sake. She took a practice swing, then thought of Manny again, behind her, appraising her.

Years ago, in high school, she would have delighted in the crush and taken steps to advertise it through the friends that stretched like human radio waves between herself and the boys, but now, well, she wasn't in high school anymore that's for sure. Suddenly forty-seven seemed very old. Not two years before it had sounded like such a comfortable age. Jesse and Buzz were almost through with college, the house was paid off and Bill was talking about partial retirement from Princeton.

She inhaled and let her hands, warm and damp in the kid gloves, tighten around the neck of the three iron. She raised it in a quick motion then jerked it down carelessly, striking the patched earth with a blow like an ax. The heel caught the edge of the golf ball and sent it ahead for a short line drive. It was a terrible shot, but the dark clump of dirt and sod that followed it for half its distance felt satisfying.
What a stupid game, she nearly said aloud, with its neat little greens and ridiculous turtle ponds, orderly, tidy and neat, everything the outdoors shouldn't be. At times she thought she simply preferred littering the course with divots. Half the fun was stomping the earth you'd torn up back into place, as if those naked blades would just sprout new roots and stay healthy instead of dotting the fairway with brown patches. That's what good players missed out on, she told herself, the opportunity for release.

"You tensed up, Veronica," Manny said from his spot just out of range of her back swing. "In the shoulders. Tranquilo."

"I know, Manny, my head just isn't in it today."

"My students come to relax, not to worry, Veronica," he said stepping forward and easing the club from her hand then continuing to her bag which stood upright before her on its wheeled caddie. She watched his slender shoulder blades rise and fall beneath the thin material of his polyester shirt as he slipped the long club home and eased the shorter nine iron out and into her palm. "We will play the chip shot. Picture the green near the little tree there." He pointed to a rhododendron bush whose rubbery leaves looked out of place among the reddening maples. It was mid-morning on Thursday and the course and range were empty but for the hum-clack of the caged cart that drove back and forth scooping up orange range balls.

"In the head, Veronica," Manny continued, "you must picture the shot."

He was the first man since her father to ignore her corrections and insist on pronouncing her full name. And Roni had to admit that she enjoyed the way it left his lips, with an accent on the consonant and a lengthening of the vowel on the third syllable, so that the "nee" so often ignored by Americans in their rush to finish, was stretched and left to dangle lazily in the air.

The club had hired him the summer before and Roni remembered watching him thoughtlessly with a glass of punch in her hand as he danced with Martha Chamber's daughter Perkin at the spring opener. Perkie had a son in one of Bill's classes and was
over forty with thighs enough to squeeze Manny's delicate Iberian midriff like a chocolate eclair in a vice or, perhaps, Roni thought, like a $400 driver in a vice. She was saving Bill’s clubs for just such an operation. She'd tucked them away behind the rolled blue shag carpet in the basement. There they had lain for twelve months, like doomed prisoners awaiting the day when her anger sent her downstairs to lop off their heads. Who was she kidding? They were awaiting his return, like the tools still hanging neatly in the garage and his pillow on the bed. She shook her head and focused on her swing.

To hell with Bill, she thought. To hell with him and his twenty-three-year-old graduate student with the little boy's haircut and those ridiculous horn-rimmed glasses. Let her spend the next twenty-five years picking zits off his back, let her reassure him that bald men were sexy even as she crouched down to clear his hair from the shower drain. Roni’s eyes fixed on the golf ball. She swung furiously and was surprised when the ball left her club and flew in a graceful arc high over the intended line to land parallel to the range’s fifty yard mark.

"Terrific shot, Veronica!" Manny nearly shouted.

"Oh c'mon, Manny," Roni told him calmly. "I've overflown the green."

"No, no. Wonderful." He dropped another ball for her. "One more time."

He stepped behind her and this time she relaxed and wagged her hips before her swing. It seemed to come naturally enough. She'd seen other golfers do it. Of course, she'd always laughed whenever she saw Bill do it, but this time it seemed appropriate. Except now there was no way to imagine Manny without picturing him staring straight at her bottom. Which was okay, because that part of her had aged just marvelously, which is probably why she'd had the temerity to shake it at this, this rather short Spanish man, who in any event was much too young for her and men were the last thing on her mind. Well, that's not completely true. After all, her plaid knee-length golfing skirt with the club logo was lying on the floor beside the bed at home, rejected for the rather snug green mini she had on.
All the same, she was making more out of this than she needed to. She didn't need men or anybody at all really. Not that she was mad at them, or even mad at Bill. Disappointed might be a better word. In any event shaking her bottom was just a natural part of golf. She was just centering herself, settling herself for the next clean shot. It wasn't something to fixate on. She felt good about it. She had done it in any event and if Manny had noticed then he'd probably enjoyed it. Although he had no business enjoying it or viewing it as anything more than the natural precursor to the typical swing of a typical golfer. Which is what Roni was.

Behind her she heard, or perhaps she misheard, the beginning of a consonant.

"Yes?" she asked him.

"Yes?" he asked back.

"You were about to say something?"

"No, no. You're just fine. Please continue."

Just fine? She almost laughed, because the image of just fine and the image of a forty-seven-year-old woman wiggling her bottom at her golf instructor belonged in two separate categories, didn't they. The first labeled "just fine" and the second labeled something quite different, something like "a bit odd" or perhaps "unrefined" or, saddest of all, "pathetic."

"Veronica? You can hit the ball now."

Unrefined she might have settled for. She might have embraced unrefined with a yellow pile of MasterCard receipts for shorter skirts, higher heels and maybe even a halter top like the one Madeleine Schumeyer had on last Thursday when Roni had passed her washing her mini-van. What scared Veronica was that she wasn't fine and didn't know how to get unrefined, which left her with pathetic. She needed training, and perhaps something to take away those damn lines that had begun to form in the skin where it ran back from her taut jaw and slid into the softening flesh of her neck. Was she expected to
start over? Or was she supposed to just succumb gracefully? Roni Northey, the graceful divorcée.

"Veronica?"

Manny stepped forward to stand beside her. His eyes were on level with hers and they stared into each other for a moment, hers light and uncomfortable, his brown and smiling.

"You are thinking too much, aren't you?"

"I suppose so."

Ask him Roni. Stop this ridiculous charade and ask him. You do not love golf. The idea that you are troubling Bill by lingering at his club is ridiculous. Bill has stopped golfing here altogether. There is no more reason for you to be here. But instead, she shook her head, tried to relax, raised the club past her shoulder and swung firmly. The result was an ungainly, unbalanced slash. She missed the ball and the overly relaxed follow-through spun her completely about. She felt her skirt hike up as her torso twisted and was worrying about that when her club caught Manny, who hadn't finished retreating, in the head. A noise like a tenderizing mallet striking a cutting board drifted across the range and Manny's body unhinged and collapsed before her with a speed more startling than the original contact.

My God you've killed him, she thought.

"Manny?"

"Yes, Veronica."

"Have I killed you?"

"No. But I think I need a short break."

You should be crying, she thought.

"I'm sorry, Manny. I really am. I don't know quite what's wrong with me. I'm having a terrible time relaxing. I think I just overdid it. I wasn't trying to. Oh, I'm terribly sorry."
He stood up slowly, investigating his head with a tentative finger. His eyes glinted. She watched them as he tried to focus on the untouched ball.

"Veronica, things are a bit blurry."

"Oh, I'm so sorry Manny. I completely missed, then was concentrating on relaxing. I just spun and... I... I want to make it up to you Manny. Let me take you to lunch."

Manny glanced at her, then shook his head. "Veronica, it isn't necessary. It was only an accident. I'm sure it is nothing very bad."

"I want to Manny. I want to take you to lunch. Even if I hadn't hit you in the head, I would want to take you."

He stared her; his eyes still looked a bit milky.

"A date," she continued, "between you and me, the two of us."

"There could be talk," he said, but his eyes appeared to be brightening.

Roni felt her cheeks getting hot. "Manny, if you don't want to, that's all you have to say."

He was smiling. "I'm sorry, Veronica. I was only teasing. I would be very happy to have lunch with you."

That afternoon, Roni was cleaning the dead bugs from the light fixture on the kitchen ceiling when Bill called. She climbed down and managed to reach the phone before the machine picked up.

"Oh good, you're at home," he said.

"Bill?"

"I was hoping to stop by today and maybe pick up some of my things. I'm in the car now. I'll be out front in a minute."
When the bell rang she paused to check her hair in the hall mirror. She was still wearing her sun visor. She dropped it on the little table and pushed her hair up twice hoping to find a little bounce but ultimately giving up in disgust.

"Hi, Bill," she said casually as she opened the door.

"Hi, Roni."

She stared into his face. It was tinged yellow and the bags under his eyes had darkened. He was drinking again. The realization calmed her, quelled her flustered surprise, reminding her that this was the same Bill Northey she had known since she was a child.

Her silence flustered him. "Is everything all right? I'm sorry, Roni. I can come back at a better time."

"That's okay, Bill. Come in. Take off your jacket." Make yourself at home, she thought. It should be easy for you.

He moved into the foyer and tugged at the sleeves of his navy-blue windbreaker. He was a tall, lanky man. There wasn't quite enough space in the vestibule for him to take off his jacket comfortably, but he seemed reluctant to step further into the house. Roni stared at him thoughtfully as he struggled with the coat. His fine blonde hair was still thinning and she noted that he'd taken to growing it long and sweeping it back in an effort to lessen the effect. It seemed unnecessary to her, even sad. The bald spot suited him. It went with the hawkish nose, the arrogant thrust of his chin, his penchant for tweed sports coats. His whole damn professorial persona.

He got the jacket off finally and slid open the door to the coat closet. Roni watched him pause then and glance down to where his golf clubs had been.

"I moved them," she said.

He nodded.

"Can I get you something, Bill? Grapefruit juice?"
"No, thanks, I just stopped by for a second. Just for some of my things. My file cabinet and a few books I haven't collected and, yes, the clubs and things. I thought maybe you'd be glad to get them out of the way."

"You rushed out of the meeting with the lawyers," she said.

"I'm sorry. It didn't seem like a moment we needed to preserve."

She nodded.

"Surely, Roni, I mean, I've been as generous as... I've given you everything without the hint of a fight." He stared at her. His eyes were jaundiced above the dark bags.

"You look like old parchment, Bill. Are you well?"

"I'll be just fine if I can just get comfortable on the course again. I was ready for a new set, but I just can't get warmed up to this driver. It seems silly to buy another, what with mine just across town."

"You came for your clubs," she said, mostly to herself. She turned toward the bay window. The sun passing through the dogwood entered the room in flickering shafts. It felt warm on her skin. She tried to leave it, to travel inside herself and analyze what was going on in there. Was something breaking? She couldn't tell. Her ears felt full, like the pressure had dropped around her. For twenty-five years she would have told Bill about the sensations, asked him what he thought they meant. How could she possibly feel so external, like she was inhabiting the outer layer of her own body? She shook her head lightly.

"Have you talked to the boys lately?" she asked.

"Buzz and I spoke last week. The Toyota broke down on him and I sent him a check to get it fixed."

She stared at him.

"Roni?"

"You're drinking again," she said.
He shook his head.

"Your eyes are yellow. Look at yourself."

"It's nothing, Roni. A..."

"It's none of my business. I'm sorry I brought it up." There was an awkward silence. "You'll have to forgive me, Bill. I'm in the middle of lunch. Your clubs are in the basement."

She left the front hall. Leaning against the kitchen table, she listened to his heavy footfalls on the cellar stairs. Outside the morning clouds were gone. Leaves from the maple on the corner drifted lazily, scratching the sidewalk, gathering at the base of the hedge.

Bill closed the basement door behind him.

"Do you know Manny at the club?" she asked him.

"Sure."

"Do you think he ever notices the bottoms of the women he teaches?"

There was a pause then the light laugh that Bill affected during lectures and cocktail parties. "Actually, Manny's something of a purist. In Spain the caddies used to live at the clubs and do nothing but study golf. He might have been famous if he'd been able to hit the ball a little further."

"Really? Famous?" she said and stared across the lawn at the sun glancing off the Jetta's windshield.

"If he notices a bottom, it's probably only to help him analyze somebody's stroke. Why? Did he say something?"

"No. Perhaps he will tomorrow. We're having lunch."

Bill stared at her from the hallway. "You're dating the club pro? Oh that's special, Roni, that's really special."

"We're having lunch, Bill. Is that a date? Yes, I suppose it is."
"Roni, I don't have to remind you that I, that we still have friends at the club. It doesn't concern you that you might look a little ridiculous lunching with the..." he paused uncertainly.

"The what, Bill? The help?" she turned. "Where's that child you're corrupting? Shouldn't she be here to listen the great Poststructural, Postcolonial, post... post-married hypocrite."

Bill opened the closet and removed his jacket. "Tabatha is twenty-five years old, Roni. Older than you were when we were married. If you want to make a fool out of yourself by adding your name to Manuel Guillermo's list of conquests, then I'm sure you know exactly what you're doing."

"Of course I know what I'm doing. I know exactly what I'm doing. This is exactly how I always pictured myself at age forty-seven!"

•

Not the blue dress, Roni. It's only lunch. The hair's got to come down, but you are not going to Myrna's, you are not getting it done for a lunch date. Business slacks? You're not selling him a house. Shoes! If you can settle on shoes the rest will come to you. Well, certainly not heels and maybe not tennis shoes. What else do you have? What have you been doing for the last twenty years? Where are your shoes? Where are your expensive outfits that you should have never indulged in? Well, you sensible prig, now you're stuck. The blue flats will have to do, or maybe the dark green pumps. There, you are down to a choice of two and it's nearly nine-thirty. Time just flies.

Roni made herself some more coffee, then grew concerned that another cup would make her jittery. She laid out three possible outfits and the two pairs of shoes, then put on her jeans and vacuumed the living room rug. She thought about washing the car, but then
worried that she might actually make herself late, then considered the pluses and minuses attached to arriving late.

At no point did she feel excited. She felt uneasy and unprepared, like an exchange student about to meet her host family. Her clothing was inappropriate. Her hair was wrong. She was not equipped. She boosted her breasts in her hands and made a face at herself in the mirror and felt like an old woman.

She chose a set of slacks, a turtleneck and her new dark green blazer. It was a conservative outfit, but she needed it to hold herself together.

"You look marvelous," Manny told her as they left the club and walked toward her car. "You really do, but I also just wanted to say that. Do you know Billy Crystal on Saturday Night Live?"

She smiled. "Not really, but my boys used to kid each other with that when they were in high school. Do they have that program in Spain?"

"No, no, I watch it on my television here. It helps me to learn English."

They got in the Volkswagen and Roni drove them out of the lot and toward the town center.

"So, what made you decide to come to America, Manny?" she asked and looked across at him. She found him fiddling with the air vents next to the glove box.

"Dr. Jordan never told you of his hole-in-one?" he said.

She shook her head. "No, tell me."

"I was working at Club Med on the Costa Del Sol. Have you heard of this club?"

"Oh, sure. I remember when Cathy Jordan was planning that trip." She glanced over again and, this time, found him trying to glimpse himself in the side mirror.

"I agreed to leave Pedreña, which is my home club, for the tourist season," he said. "Dr. Jordan was one of many vacationing golfers. He was not very good, but our third hole was quite short. Eighty yards. A good player might reach the green with an
eight iron. Unfortunately, the green was surrounded by water traps and sloped away from the tee. It was impossible to know how to play the hole unless you had played it before. I instructed Dr. Jordan in great detail about the correct club, the wind conditions and the proper placement on the green before teeing off. Dr. Jordan hit a very good ball that hopped once and rolled straight into the cup, a hole-in-one."

"He must have been thrilled."

"Thrilled, I think is not quite the right word. He talked about it for the rest of his stay at the club. In the end, he tipped me an enormous sum and invited me to come to America and join his club, your club, as an instructor. He would complete the paperwork and arrange a work permit and even help with my flight costs. Two weeks later, I received a letter from him assuring me that he was serious. I considered the request for a day, then agreed to take him up on his offer. Here I am." He raised both hands, palms up, as if presenting himself.

They were entering the downtown.

"Have you tried Silverstein's Deli, Manny?"

He laughed. "No, I'm sorry. I am something of a fan of the Big Mac."

"Really?" was the only thing she could think to say.

"I know, it's foolish," Manny said and gave her such a smile that she found herself wondering if he wasn't unusually proud of his teeth.

They found an empty table against the wall, away from the window.

"This place reminds me of Spain," he said.

"Really? You have Jewish delis in Spain?"

"Well, no. But there are places like this. The tables and the board with the menu, this is very common in Spain."

They opened the plastic menus and examined them. As they did, Roni felt Manny's foot brush against hers under the table. For a moment their shoes were touching, then his foot slid past and she felt the knob of his ankle against her heel. She breathed in
hesitantly and was surprised to encounter scents that she'd ignored: the dill and garlic of
the pickle jar on the table between them, the pungent aroma of fat frying in the kitchen
and, for a fleeting moment, the citrus scent of Manny's cologne. She moved her foot.

Manny lay his menu down. "You know you are very beautiful, Veronica."

She smiled politely but thought, Oh, Roni, who is this foolish man? "I'm sorry,
Manny," she said. "I'm not very good at this. It's been some time since I..." Since you
what? she felt lost suddenly. A moment before she'd felt confident and critical and now
she felt lost. Control yourself Roni, you can do this. For God's sake, your own children
can do this, just settle down. "Can we order lunch?" she asked.

"I will have a Reuben. Is that good?" His grin continued.

"Sure. I mean, I think so. I haven't had one since I was a kid."

They lay down their menus and waited for the waitress to return.

"Do you work, Veronica?"

"No, not to speak of," she said, readjusting the narrow band of her wristwatch. "I
have two boys, but they're grown. I'm thinking of going back to school, maybe getting my
real estate license. I've volunteered for St. Bonaventure over the years, but now, I'm not
sure."

"What did you do before your marriage?"

She smiled. "I went to high school and one year at Hersheim's Business School
for Girls. Well, less than a year, really. I was pregnant by February."

"You must have had many boyfriends in high school."

She looked up uncertainly. Well, yes, she thought, but then wasn't sure how
pertinent her high school habits were. She was happy when the waitress interrupted them
for their orders. But as soon as the blocky woman departed, Manny leaned forward in his
chair and asked in a low voice, "Did you have many boyfriends, Veronica?"

She shook her head. "I hardly remember, it was so long ago."

"Veronica, I want to make a deal with you." His wide grin seemed fixed now.
You obviously think you're very charming, Roni thought, but I'm beginning to regret this whole idea.

"I want to trade you one story," he said. "In my story, I will reveal one secret. If I do this will you tell me about one of the boys before your husband?"

No, she told herself, but then found high school memories intruding on her thoughts. The memories, like the boys they contained, were unformed at first; skinny, hairless things, with stiff clothes and few words. But then she remembered Charlie Lipschuler and their hesitant kiss after the May Fair and she blushed. She was forty-seven years old and sitting at Silverstein's with a stranger and she had just blushed.

"How old are you, Manny?" she asked.

"I am very old. How old are you? No, I will guess. I guess, thirty-eight."

"I asked first," she said, ignoring the flattery. "Are you thirty-eight?"

"Ay, no," he said with an exaggerated sigh. "I am not so wise as I was at thirty-eight. I am forty-one and since age thirty, I have been growing younger every year. I am almost reduced to a child again."

"A child," she almost smiled. "That's funny, Manny."

"No, it is foolish. You have pointed it out yourself. I confessed that I was a fan of Billy Crystal on Saturday Night Live and you reminded me that this was a show for young boys. I confided that I have a fondness for Big Macs and you laughed again. I am scared to reveal my secret dream of going to Walt Disney World."

Roni smiled without meaning to.

"And now I have told you a secret without anything in return. Will you tell me a story, Veronica?"

Roni looked down at her menu for a moment. What were you hoping for, Roni? Passion? Poetry? The thought brightened her somehow, for of course she didn't want that. That would be like starting over. Bill had written her lovely poems. But she was no longer a child. You're forty-seven, she began to tell herself, but then a shudder ran
through her, not along her skin but deeper within, like a cold blue slap along the length of her spine. She bit her lip. Say something you ninny.

"When I was fifteen," she began then stopped to take a breath. "I went on my first date with Martin Watkins. He was two years older than me and I had to lie to my father. I called him from a clothing store where I worked. Herbert's, it was called Herbert's. Anyway, I made up a story about staying late to sort inventory.

"Martin picked me up and we went out in his mother's station wagon. We were both kids and neither of us had anything to say, so he started playing a game. He waited until we were on a straight section of road, then announced that he wouldn't open his eyes until I kissed him. I barely knew him and I refused, for tactical purposes if nothing else. He kept his eyes closed and a bend neared. I waited until we were nearly off the road, then I couldn't help myself. I screamed. He did it again a couple minutes later and seemed to think it was a great game. When he tried a third time, I refused to scream. The car went off the road and into a ditch. The police came. Martin had broken his arm and my nose bled all over my clothes."

Manny's smile was finally gone, but the look of concern that replaced it seemed so foreign to him that Roni almost laughed.

"My father was called, of course, and Martin's mother. After they got me cleaned up, and put Martin in a cast, I was confined to the house for the rest of the summer."

"That is a wonderful story, Veronica," Manny said.

"I don't know why I told it."

Manny was quiet for a respectful moment, then he leaned forward again and whispered, "You know Veronica, I believe you are wearing red underwear right now."

Roni lay both hands calmly before her. "What, Manny?"

"I think you are wearing red underwear."

"Why on earth are you worried about the color of my underwear?"

"Since you asked me to lunch I have thought about little else."
"Listen Manny, maybe you're getting the wrong idea. I simply wanted to have lunch. You know, tell stories, chat; exactly like we've been doing. I'm... I'm forty-three years old. I don't play these sorts of games."

Manny stared back at her, his grin gone, but his eyes still smiling.

Apologize you ridiculous man, Roni thought, but before she could work up the nerve to demand it, the waitress returned with their lunch. Manny lifted one corner of the toasted rye bread of his Reuben and lowered his face to sniff the sauerkraut and corned beef filling. When he looked up his grin had returned.

"When I was a teenager at Pedreña," he said, "there was a girls' school not far away. Once a year they would come and we would have a dance with a record player in the main hall of the club. The old people, they followed us with eyes like wolves, eyes that promised we would be eaten for any trouble. I remember those eyes, but mostly I remember the excitement. The feeling of my own body. The way everything smelled. Like it was my first day with a new nose. I felt that way upon seeing you for lunch today."

Roni made her stare a cold one. "Was that your story? The story you were going to tell?"

"No, no," Manny said and shook his head. "I promised a secret. Would you like to hear it?"

"Why not?" she said with a wave of surrender.

"I'm afraid I left some things out of the story of Dr. Jordan's hole-in-on," he said. "The most important is that when Dr. Jordan hit his ball, it landed very close to where I had instructed him to aim, and, in fact, stopped only a few centimeters from the cup. But it did not really go in. Instead I shouted with delight, waved once to Dr. Jordan and his partner on the tee, then walked quickly to the ball and knocked it in with my foot. It was the third hole-in-one I helped with that summer."

"You lied?"
"No," Manny said. "I did a magic trick."

"It wasn't magic, it was cheating."

"Magic is always cheating," he said. "Only very small children think it is something else. But now you have heard my best story, Veronica. You have seen my tricks and you have choices about what you will believe from now on. I have one or two more stories, but then, unless you are very interested in the history of golfers and golf courses, then I might begin to bore you. I am a golf pro, Veronica. An older golf pro. You are a divorced mother. Together we form something that could be easy to laugh at." He paused and looked at her blankly. "No?"

She looked down at her sandwich. She couldn't remember what she'd ordered.

"No," she said after a moment. "Of course not."

"Certainly we are very silly."

You, Manny, are very silly, Roni thought, but I most certainly am not. Her foot was tingling. It had fallen asleep after she'd jammed it under the lip of her chair and kept it there in an effort to avoid bumping against his ankle again. She inched it forward and the tingling seemed to climb up into her head. She took a deep breath and was assaulted by his cologne. It wasn't citrus at all she realized, but anisette, a soft warm licorice smell. She looked across at him. His eyes were clear and in that moment, he didn't seem a fool. He seemed distant and a little wise, as if he'd played his role and now was wondering if Roni was interested in joining him on stage. Her turtleneck itched. Oh Lord, Roni. Your first date and you wore a turtleneck.

She folded her hands carefully over her lap and said, "I have no idea why I'm telling you this, Manny, but I'm wearing white underwear."

"White?"

"I'm afraid so. Well, off-white. Ivory, I suppose."

"Ebúrneo."
"The bra's a little silky and I think there might be a little bow. There often is. But the bottoms are just cotton."

"Be careful," he said, his grin returning. "I may fade into such an infant that you will have to carry me out after lunch."

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The phone rang at ten that night. Roni picked it up on the fifth ring.

"Roni? It's Bill."

"Really?"

"Yes, of course really. Is everything all right? Were you sleeping?"

"No. I'm awake."

"I was just calling to check and see if you're okay. I haven't been able to get over the idea that you had lunch with Manny. I know I sound like an old fuddy-duddy, but Dick Jordan is always joking about what a Lothario he is. I'm sure he was quite a handful."

"Yes, quite a handful."

"But everything went all right?"

"Swimmingly."

A moth was knocking about inside the shade of the hall lamp. The soft glow of the light framed the bedroom door.

"Swimmingly? Are you sure you're okay, Roni?"

"I'm fine, Bill."

"And Manny? He was a gentleman?"

"A complete gentleman." She paused, then asked, "Would you like to talk to him?"

"He's there? Manny Guillermo's in the house?"
"Oops, I'm afraid he's resting right now. He's had a hard day."

There was a pause. "Are you insane? You're kidding me. Say you're kidding me, Roni."

"No, I don't think so." She was surprised by how nice it felt to hurt him, to strike back. He was an idiot to act this way.

"Roni?"

"Good night, Bill."

She replaced the receiver in its cradle on the nightstand then tried to make herself comfortable again. For a moment she wished it was true, she wished that Manny was there exuding rhythmic breaths and strange scents from the shadows beside her. She wished that instead of smoothed sheets and a hollow emptiness in the pit of her, there were unfamiliar limbs and an aching urge to run, to flee. She closed her eyes and shook her head but for a moment she couldn't control her thoughts and instead of directing her memories, she floated among them. Bill was crying, the boys were running about, her father was saying something and poor Martin was looking at her in shock while warm blood soaked through her sweater and she realized that the laughter in the car was her own.
Leaving at 4:30

Money, I try to keep it away from me. The Safeway's good. Spare change. Plain food. People like to give bananas. Also I can watch the hospital. Today, there is a little girl in a pink dress. She has a fistful of balloons. Silver, most of them. Streamers tied from the necks hang down and touch her face when she looks up. You get older, balloons become plastic shreds hanging from phone lines, streamers caught places they shouldn't be. She frees one, talks up to it, lets it go. It blows across the street and gets wedged under a car. I walk and get it. The sliding door opens and the little girl turns to smile at Mom. Mom is in a bad chair, a motor one with tanks and a hose. I leave the parking lot. Dad puts Mom in the mini-van. The little girl notices me crossing the street. I am running. Hat, plastic bags, sleeping sack, everything bouncing, lifting off, coming down, it must look funny. So clean to be six and standing with balloons while Mom comes out strapped to death and a funny man crosses the street to meet you. Dad stares and I slow. He opens her door and puts her inside. He prods the balloons then closes the door. She pushes her head through and puts her nose on the window. I let the balloon go and this time it flies. Lord how it flies.
Josey only remembers the face of one of the men leaning against the flyer-spackled wall of Henry’s Deli. He’s tall and skinny with mottled skin and a mane of dreadlocks that fall in dark ringlets across his forehead like the wilted feathers of a rumpled Indian war bonnet. She remembers his face because he steps forward and offers to sell her pot.

“Sinse?” he asks. His eyes stare into hers confidently, flirtatiously.

Josey shakes her head.

The other men drink beer out of brown paper bags. They line the wall in ill-fitting clothes, baggy threadbare jackets and pants that are either too short or too long with the hems flipped up. Josey pictures them assembled in a shadowy oil painting, thick dark brush strokes on a rectangular canvas. Before she’s passed, one says something about her hair, “Nice hair” or maybe “White hair.” She’s not sure which. Her hair is bobbed, dyed black and buzzed up the back so that, if it wasn’t for her hips and torn nylons, it might be possible to mistake her for a boy. The comment makes her more aware of her freckled white skin. She jams her hands into the pockets of her leather jacket and stares straight ahead until she reaches the door of the deli.

Inside Henry’s, a black plastic television on a shelf over an ice cream freezer is tuned to a soap opera. The front room is empty. Next to the freezer is a life-sized cardboard cutout of a woman in a bikini holding a beer bottle. Josey stares at the cutout. I went hungry in the eighth grade trying to have thighs like yours, she thinks. She tilts her head to the side and decides that the woman’s breasts are fake.

- I enjoy breasts, Josey told Jared at the bar ten nights earlier.

They are another place to exaggerate or diminish, to make lopsided, awkward, off-kilter, to create beauty by experiment. The thought reminds Josey that she hasn’t
opened a packet of clay in two weeks. Some sculptor, she thinks, a little loneliness is all it takes to kill your fantasies.

She hears a noise in the back room and shifts her attention to the linoleum counter. The menu is written in black marker on a plastic board. A corridor behind the counter smells of barbecue sauce and cooking meat. Josey wrinkles her nose then stares at the menu until a short black man in a Camel cigarette t-shirt comes from the back room and asks her what she wants. Sweat beads on his forehead and between his eyebrows he has a dull mole the size and shape of a number two pencil eraser.

- One chicken sandwich, please, Josey says.
- Barbecue?
- Uh, plain.
- Gravy? Stuffing? Jelly?
- No, just plain.

The man scribbles Chix Sand on a green pad then returns to the back room. Josey puts her hands back in her pockets and turns her attention to the floor.

What are you doing here? she wonders, then admits that she knows exactly what she’s doing there. She’s hoping to run into Jared, who told her he liked the place. It’s been ten days and he hasn’t called. In the meantime, she hasn’t been getting any work done. He glanced once at the hands she’d been working in clay on the little bench by the front window, said “uh, huh,” and went back to kissing her. Obviously his opinion wasn’t worth anything, but she still wishes he’d call. When the phone rings it’s only her mother. Sam is drinking again, which means things are already worse. Josey can hear the pleading in her mother’s voice when they talk. She wants Josey home, but Josey isn’t coming. Tips were good last Saturday. Rent is paid. She has enough for food and supplies. Everything is fine, except for the loneliness.

A little bell hanging from the door jingles and an enormous black woman in a complicated indigo dress steps into the shop then crosses the cracked linoleum floor to
wait by the counter. A thin blue veil winds from the broad hilly slope of her shoulders up and around a cylindrical cap. The counterman returns and Josey drops her gaze from the back of the woman’s head to her nearest hand. It’s surprisingly petite with a thin gold wedding band and slender fingernails painted pale blue with tiny rainbows in the centers. They are the opposite in every way from Abe’s hands, or at least the sculpture of Abe’s hands in the Lincoln Memorial.

Josey read an article in one of her mother’s magazines that said the size of a man’s hands are an indication of the size of his penis. Abe’s massive fingers resting on his big white throne made her walk to the front of the monument and shift her attention to the shadows of his crotch. She tried to make out a bulge or an outline of some kind, but if it had been there in life the sculptor left it out in stone. It seemed a waste to her, a loss somehow.

The perspiring counterman appears again, this time carrying a handful of sandwiches wrapped in tinfoil. He pulls a paper bag from below the counter, shakes it open and begins filling it with sandwiches, then looks up and notices the indigo woman.

- Somebody sick? she asks him.

He stares a moment before answering. - Belle’s got the flu.

- I’m not used to seeing you here, the woman says.

The man shakes his head slowly.

- Haven’t seen you at church lately, either, she adds.

The two stare at each other.

- How you been doing?

The man considers the question, but then there is a sound from the corridor and he shifts his attention back to the sandwiches. A moment later, a skinny light-skinned black woman emerges from the hallway, wiping her hands on the bib of a stained white apron.

- Sarah Jeffreys! she says loudly to the indigo woman. How’re things at City Hall today? The mayor shouting for his barbecue again? He gotta big appetite, huh?
The fat woman shifts uncomfortably.

- Naw, Carrie, I can't be talking...

- Raymond, what are you doing dawdling up here. Get your butt back there and fix up this girl's sandwich. The skinny woman waves a hand at Josey.

The counterman shrugs and steps into the corridor.

- So how've you been, Sarah? I haven't talked to you since, since, when was it?

Must've been the fireman's ball, last November. How's Harold?

- Harold's... nice.

- Still working at the courts building? What was it he was doing down there again?

- He's a public defender.

- That's right. The skinny woman laughs and turns to pull herself a cola from the stand-up cooler behind her. - You'd think he could've found a better way to use that diploma. After the way Mrs. Leonard Jeffreys worked for that boy, now he's out there defending criminals. Well, I suppose a man's got to take his money where he can get it. Ain't that right?

- Sure.

- What's the matter, girl? You outta sorts?

- No, no. Just a little preoccupied is all. Working for the mayor, you know; the man's moods are enough to tire anybody out.

- Long as he keeps buying his pork sandwiches at Henry's, I'll keep voting for him. Has Raymond got your order together here?

- I'm not sure. He didn't say.

- Raymond! the skinny woman calls down the corridor. - That City Hall order all put together up here? Let's not keep the sister waiting.

Raymond steps back into the room. He's wrapping tinfoil around a sandwich bun.

- Carrie, you don't need to yell. I was right down the hall, he says.
I wasn’t yelling. I was just asking if the City Hall order was complete. Is sister Perkin’s order here or not?

The fat woman shifts her attention to the television.

- There ain’t no call shoutin’ at me in front of customers, Raymond says. - If you want to ask about an order, stick your head in the hall and just ask.

- Now, I know you’re the same man that’s been married to my sister for thirteen years. The skinny woman shifts her attention to Josey. - That’s a long time, don’t you think? Josey nods her head in quick agreement, but the skinny woman has already turned back to Raymond. - But don’t think that means that you can just be behaving anyway you like in this store of mine. You got that? Have you got that?

Raymond ignores her and turns to Josey.

- Order’s ready, he says.

Josey doesn’t budge.

- You got that, Raymond?

- Listen, I can come back, the fat woman says.

- Oh, no. You just hold your black ass a minute, sister, your order is waiting right here on the counter. Your boss sent you down here for lunch, you may recall, not just to make eyes at my sister’s husband. Now, I asked you a question, Raymond?

- I heard you, woman.

- And?

- I got it.

- That’s all I was asking. That’ll be twelve seventy-five, Sarah. You’ll give my love to Harold, won’t you. And how much is the girl’s?

- Two ninety-five.

- You want a drink with that? she asks.

- No thanks, Josey says.
Outside, the men have heard the raised voices and are facing the door. Their curiosity has brought them to life. They stare attentively, almost kindly; and Josey hazards a smile at the youngest of the men, the sinsemilla dealer, but he shakes his head and turns away. She balls the bag up around her sandwich, puts her hands back in her pockets, and hurries off toward her apartment.

She can hear her phone ringing as she jogs up the steps of her stoop, but whoever's calling gives up before she makes it through the vestibule. She sits at her little card table and eats her sandwich deliberately. When she's finished and has washed her hands and thrown the tinfoil away, she dials her mother's number.

- Hey, Momma.
- Where are you? I just called your apartment.

Josey examines her fingernails. They're uneven from her biting and the bases are worn where she's jammed the cuticles back. - I just stepped in.

- Well, congratulations. You missed your Uncle Wally's funeral.

She pulls her gaze from her fingers and stares through the front window at the buds breaking through on the azaleas lining the walk. Being Sam's brother doesn't make Wally my uncle, she thinks.

- The Hughes of Huntington managed to stage another fiasco, her mother continues. - Mamma Nelly dumped a Dixie cup of rosé on cousin Lillian. 'Bout killed the family reunion. Afterward, Sam got in an argument with Wally's oldest boy and then...then we had one of our own.

- He didn't...

- It's okay. He was just drunk. We both were.

Josey stands and paces off the corners of the striped rug she bought from a street vendor. - Are you okay?

- Naw, you know me. You know how I get after a couple glasses of wine. I've just got to learn.
- Did he hurt you, Momma?

Josey's mother doesn't answer.

- Shit, Momma, Josey says. - Answer me.

- Now, Josey, there's no reason to use language like that.

Josey places her thumb and forefinger in the soft recesses of her temples and squeezes her forehead. - Loneliness just ain't that bad, Momma.

There's another pause then her mother speaks up. - Oh, honey. If you're lonely, you come home here to your own bedroom. You're too young to be off by yourself in the city.

- I'm not lonely, Josey says. She stops on a corner of the rug and inches her toes to the edge. She shakes her head. - You know that's not what I meant.

- You're not even nineteen, Josey.

- I'm fine, Momma. This isn't about me.

Her mother is quiet.

Josey feels the muscles in her back tightening and tension begin to rise up her spine. I can't handle this, she thinks, not today. - Listen, Momma, I gotta work tonight.

- Are you okay, Josey?

- I'm fine, I just gotta go. You take care of yourself Momma.

Josey slides her finger over the disconnect button and pushes it deliberately. She replaces the receiver then puts her jacket back on. Outside, she follows the streets toward the Mall. It's four blocks to Dupont Circle, then ten more, past a park and a hotel and intermittent groups of middle-American tourists dressed in dowdy dresses and windbreakers, to the White House. In Lafayette Square, she joins a group of older Asians wearing cone-shaped red-silver-and-blue paper hats and walks with them down 17th Street and across Constitution Avenue. She leaves them when they pause before the reflective black wall of the Vietnam Memorial. She continues to the Lincoln Memorial where she climbs the stairs to the statue.
Josey's never worked in stone, but she loves the idea that stone sculptors don't create, they simply remove excess rock. She backs up and examines Abe's tired profile. In this case the rock may have had something else in mind, she thinks. She looks at the statue's curled and knobby hands. She likes those, they remind her of the azalea bushes in front of her apartment, withered but resilient. She tries to imagine a giant stone bush in place of the seated president, then laughs at herself and turns to face the day.

The Asian group is moving now, climbing the steps three and four abreast, like a rising human wave, the silver tips of their paper caps glinting in the afternoon sun. They follow their guide past Josey to the back wall where the guide reads the Gettysburg Address to them in thickly accented English.

Josey leaves the monument and walks past the reflecting pool and through the long line winding about the Washington Monument. She follows the walkways to the Capitol then joins a tour as they file into the empty Senate chamber to watch an old man read a speech to a stationary C-SPAN camera.

The afternoon turns to evening as she makes her way back toward the Lincoln Memorial. Her feet and legs are tired and she pauses by a telephone cubicle near the Vietnam Memorial. Someone has knocked the receiver off its hook and it dangles from its chrome-sheathed cord. She hangs it up and a quarter falls into the change box. She slips it out then impulsively drops it into the slot, lifts the receiver and dials her mother's number. The phone rings three times before the machine picks up. It plays the message for Sam's business and beeps.

Josey hugs herself with her free hand. - Momma, it's Josey. I gotta just say this, so listen. Things are good with me, but I was thinking, I could use a roommate. I mean, I have enough money and everything, but things are good so if you need a place to go...

The receiver picks up in Maryland.

- Momma?

- That you, Josey.
- Sam.

- That’s right, girl. He pauses and Josey hears him draw on his cigarette. - What’s this nonsense about your momma moving to the city? He exhales. - You know what your leaving has done to her. Your momma’s not as strong as you. You’ve got to spare her what grief you can.

Josey changes the subject. - How’s work going, Sam? she asks.

- It’s going.

- That right?

- It’ll come around. Always does. Things will pick up come spring.

- Momma says you’re off the wagon again.

Sam laughs. - Your momma said that, huh?

- You ever think that your drinking had to do with you losing work?

She listens to him exhale. Seventeen miles away, she feels the rise in his anger and it scares her, makes her eyes squint, makes her back tense in preparation.

- Shit, he finally says, my drinking ain’t no different now than it ever was. And it certainly ain’t something I’m gonna sit here and take crap from a kid about.

Josey squeezes her bottom lip between her teeth. - I heard about you falling asleep next to the Podolski’s water heater. It isn’t the weather, Sam, it’s you.

- You’re talking fucking crazy.

Josey feels tears welling in her eyes and it angers her that she can’t control them even now. - And I know about Mrs. Willins. I know about her, Sam. The next time you raise a hand to Momma, I’m gonna tell her. She may not be strong, but she has her pride. She’ll leave you.

Sam laughs again. - That so? You’re talking crazy. I don’t know who you been listening to but you’re talking crazy. That city’s twisting you, Josey. Maybe your mother’s right. Maybe you need to come home.
- I know you heard me, Sam. She waits for him to start yelling. He can't scare me here, she tells herself, but she can feel the sweat under her arms. She's gripping the phone too tight. - I'll do it, she says when he doesn't respond. - I'll fucking do it you asshole. She slams the receiver down, then picks it up and slams it down again.

- You're gonna break that phone, says a voice behind her.

She turns and finds the man with the dreadlocks from Henry's staring at her from the walkway.

- You, she says.

- Boyfriend? he asks.

She stares at him. - Boyfriend, hah. That's a laugh.

- Father?

- Stepfather, she says.

- Bad one, eh?

She looks down at her feet, then has time to consider the encroaching darkness and the fact that they're in the empty little hollow by the Vietnam wall. She looks both ways then looks back at him. He stares back. It makes her nervous.

- I have to go, she says.

The man dips two fingers into his shirt pocket and extracts a joint. He lights it, takes a drag and offers it to her. She shakes her head and he shrugs his shoulders and puts it back in his mouth.

- I'll see you, she says and starts to walk away.

- Where you going? he asks.

- Nowhere, she says but then hesitates. - To the memorial, I guess.

- So am I, he says.

Josey clenches her hands nervously, but lets him catch up. They walk to the top step and sit. The sky is still streaked with color. Washington's white monolith is pink and on fire.
- Cherry blossoms will bloom soon, the man says.

Josey snorts but the comment makes her trust him a little more. - You sound like a tourist, she says.

- You’ve seen them?

She shakes her head.

Below them a guard unlocks the little aluminum booth at the base of the steps. The man offers her the joint again and this time Josey accepts and takes a careful drag.

- I’m Josey, she says when she’s handed it back.

- Ráf, he says and extends his hand. She takes it. His fingers are long and delicate, the nails well-cared for.

- Watch the guard house for me, she says.

- Why?

She stands and steps into the monument, ducking under the purple velvet rope that keeps visitors from the statue. She walks to a spot between Abe’s legs and jumps and grabs hold of the forward edge of his chair, then pulls herself up and into the vee between the President’s legs.

- You're going to get in trouble, Ráf says.

She steps up into Lincoln’s lap. - I want to look at his hands, she says.

- Why?

- I sculpt.

She leans against the side of the chair and sights down Abe’s arm.

- Maybe you could sculpt me, Ráf says.

She laughs.

- Is that funny?

She shakes her head. - I just met you, she says. Across the pool, the pink glow has sunk to the base of the marble needle. - Do you know anything about sculpting?
I have a friend who shares an art space with some people. One of them's a sculptor.

Josey looks down at him and remembers smiling at him as she was leaving Henry’s. - Smile for me, she says.

- That something to do with sculpting?
- No.
- Say something funny, Rafé says.
- I can't think of anything funny.
But then he smiles a broad smile.
- What? she asks.
- You're sitting in Lincoln's lap, he laughs. - And I'm asking you to think of something funny. That's rich, girl. Don't you think that's rich?

She smiles back and the twilight leaves them. Cars are honking and a yellow haze hangs over 17th Street. Josey closes her eyes and thinks of her mother in the kitchen of her house. She pictures the sunlight being pulled from her yard like a bright coverlet, then follows it as it retreats from Maryland and Virginia. The continent rolls out beneath her, blanketed in dark wool, dotted with pinpricks of light. Josey shakes her head and giggles.

Rafé looks up at her. - Good pot?
- Yeah. She looks down at him. - I like your hands, she says.
Sparring

I walk into the Sportsman feeling in serious need of an ego shot. After twelve hours in York, PA, it's nice to be back among my own people. The place smells familiar, a combination of gin and sour beer and the thin sulphur of matches and cigarettes; citrus and ashes. I lean back into a stool midbar. I feel tired.

"Hey, Dynafoot," Jimmy says. "Ice tea?"

"Yeah." The other bar stools are empty. "They call for reserves?"

"Big one 'cross town on Myrtle," he says. "Five bells."

"How long ago?"

"Long time, maybe three hours. Still want that drink."

I nod. Three hours is long enough to stay put. I check out the tables. There's a group from the nursing school across the street; fat tough women and gay guys, a table of stubby heads. In the back, at the two-person table near the bathrooms and the phone, a woman's sitting at the edge of the light from above the pool table. She rises, steps to the bar, and interrupts Jimmy to ask him something. He nods then hands her the clicker for the widescreen TV opposite the bar. She's pretty, I decide. Mid-thirties, maybe forty. She's done something to her hair, had it straightened, and dyed, maybe. Her face is okay. Not much of a chest, unless her arm's hiding something.

She puts down the clicker, then leans forward and talks to Jimmy again. He walks halfway back to me, then reaches and slides a green-and-white box of Merits from one of the cartons behind the speed rack. She starts to pull the plastic off as she slides off the stool. She's got a nice butt.

I head toward her, scooping a pack of matches off the bar and reaching her just as she's getting settled back at her table. I light a match. "Light?"

She looks up at me over the matches in her own hands. Without any real evident response, she lowers her hands and leans her cigarette forward into the flame.
"Where’d you come from?" she asks.

I think a second, then say, "The Euphrates when dawns were young."

Jimmy cuts around the end of the bar and hands me my drink. "Mind if I sit down?" I ask her.

She looks kind of cold behind the veil rising up from the Merit.

"Where’s the line from?" she asks.

I slide into the open chair across from her. "Langston Hughes."

She snorts, laughing to herself, then looks to the bar for a friend she can repeat the joke to. "You’re a poet?" she says finally.

I shake my head. "My name’s Larry."

"I know," she says. "I recognize you from your picture. Nice to meet you Mr. Dynafoot."

I twist. Jimmy framed the article from The Record and a poster from the Atlantic City fight. Both are hanging on the column between the bar and us. She drags on the cigarette, waiting for me to say something.

"What’s your name?" I ask.

"Let me hear that poem, first."

"Hardly seems fair, me reciting poems and you not even telling me your name."

She leans forward and stubs out her cigarette in the ashtray. We watch her fingers as they squash the filter.

"What’s that stuff you’re drinking?" she asks.

"Long Island Ice Tea." I swirl the straws.

"What’s in it?"

"Let me order you one."

"What’s in it?"

"Taste it."

"What’s in it?"
I put the drink down in front of her and wave my hands like I'm washing it away. She smirks, then leans forward and tugs off both straws at the same time, leaving a red lipstick mark on both. She nods her head.

"Okay, I'll take one."

I turn and wave to Jimmy and tell him I want another drink. There's silence.

"Tell me the poem and I'll tell you my name," she says.

"How 'bout I get a question for every three lines?"

"You don't need to know that much about me."

"Three lines?" I stare. She stares back. Touch gloves and come out fighting.

"I've known rivers." I raise a single finger. "I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the." I raise a second finger, although I have to wonder whether the line really ends or old Langston simply ran out of page. "Flow of human blood in human veins."

She pauses a second, maybe to think about the lines, maybe just to look like she's thinking about them. "My first name is Lenore," she says.

"Lenore," I say. "I like it."

"That in the poem?"

"My soul has grown deep like the rivers." It's tough to say the poem aloud and not hear Jeeter's voice. "I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young." His little boy's voice sounding gravely and abused coming from his fat old-man's body. "I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep." Jeeter was my coach. I've known him since I was fifteen when he taught me two poems to use to keep calm in the ring.

"My middle name is Mary," she says.

"Mary?"

"I was raised Catholic."

"Catholic girl?"

"That supposed to mean something?"
I shrug.

"The religion didn't stick, I move too fast for it," she says pulling another menthol from the box in front of her. "That was three facts. You owe me nine lines," she says.

"Let's just call that one big fact."

"Is the poem over?"

"I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep."

"We've already heard that one," she says.

"I'm just finding my place."

"I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it. I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset." I look at her.

"Last name: Johnson."

"Married? Maiden? Divorced?"

"Lines?"

"I've known rivers: Ancient, dusky rivers. And I feel old. My soul has grown deep like the rivers." I nod.

"Married," she says and pulls at her cigarette, widening the lipstick stain on the filter.

I stare at her hard for a minute, wondering where I go from there. The poem's over. What the hell. "Carving canals through the dry body of the land. Crossing oceans, spanning globes. To lay new roots and grow old." She's listening pretty close, but she seems to be buying it. I hold up three fingers.

"Happily married?" I ask.

"Separated."

"Poem's over," I admit.

"So what are we going to do for entertainment now?" She sips through her straw and doesn't look at me.
"Why don't you decide."

"Tell me about yourself, Mr. Dynafoot. You're a boxer?"

"I'm a firefighter."

"Here in Jersey City?"

"Uh, huh."

"What about the poster?"

"That's kickboxing." I shake my head. "I used to be a kickboxer. Now, I think, I'm just a coach."

She twists her cigarette around and blows on the lit end. "That's a funny way to put it." She repeats my words, "You think, you're just a coach."

"I'm a coach." In my glass, the cubes are melting.

"There any money in kickboxing?"

"Not much."

"Not like boxing?"

I laugh. "No. Definitely not like boxing."

"So you coach now?"

"Yeah," I say.

"Little kids?"

"Not so little. I drove them to a tournament in Pennsylvania today."

"Yeah?"

"Except they all lost."

She smiles. "All of them? How many?"

"Seven."

"Teenagers?"

I nod.

"From around here?"

"Yeah."
She sips her drink. "I got kids," she says.

I nod. "That right?"

"Two girls. Eight and ten."

I nod again, but she's distracted by something behind me. I glance over my shoulder and find a guy with a rise and a gold earring big enough to catch the light.

"Marvin," Lenore says to him. "Nice of you to make it."

"It's been a bad day," he says.

"You're thirty minutes late. I got a sitter at home. You know I can't afford this shit."

He's leans over me. "I could have come by anytime," he says.

"You're not coming there anymore, not without the cops coming."

"Woman..." he starts, but I stand up and he stops, sizes me up and steps back.

"You got a problem, nigger?" he says. He's the kind of guy you usually don't find in the Sportsman, the kind of guy that stands around at apartment fires eyeing the cops.

Lenore interrupts our staring contest. "Larry, thanks for the poem, but I don't need your help anymore."

"You a poet, Larry?" the man says.

"That's right. You know any?"

"I know a song called Cap Your Ass." He laughs, a sad choking laugh that means nothing's funny.

"That right? Can I hear it."

He shakes his head. "No, you can't fucking hear it. What do I look like, a fucking rap star?"

I smile, because actually he kind of does. Lenore is still standing. "Listen, I'll just take my drink to the bar," I say, "and let you two work this out."

"Now that's a wise thought, nigger," he says to me. "A very wise nigger."

"Sorry, Langston," Lenore says as I step away.
I smile at her over my shoulder. Then sit down next to the column with the poster on it. Her voice rises up pretty quick.

"How'm I supposed to feed your kids if you can't come up with a lousy two hundred bucks every two weeks?" she says.

"Keep your tone down, woman."

"I ain't your woman and hell, you ain't even a man," she says.

I see him in the mirror. He rises slow, his head turned away, his face toward hers, then he walks to the door. As he passes, he pauses and considers me and for a second I think, here we go. Then he drops his head and keeps walking. There's no more need to be angry.

I don't do anything for a while, just sip my drink and occasionally glance in the mirror and see how she's doing. After a while, she comes over and sits down. Her drink is mostly finished and lingering in her hand like an invitation.

I look at her in the mirror. She looks up and stares back, then smiles and waves away the concern in my eyes.
Island Hopping

I met a Peace Corp volunteer on the streets of Bangkok. She was tiny, only four nine, with blonde hair so thin I could feel the ridges of her skull when I stroked it. We ate lunch in a fish market then made love in a guest house a mile from Koh Sang Road. Afterward we smoked the last of my opium. Damp and burning, we spilled back onto the suffocating streets, grew terrified, retreated to our room, yelled at each other, sobbed beneath the thrum of the fan, fell in love again and tore at our clothes. We fucked as the sun left us, intermittently holding each other and pounding away with dulled genitals, rubbing ourselves raw and purple on the straw mat.

But by the time I reached her again in the north, she had patched up things with her Thai lover. She let me stay but wouldn’t touch me. Instead I pretended to be a friend. The lover talked with me without suspicion in his pidgin English and I drove with them to remote villages with a fixed grin like an eccentric uncle pleased to be along for the ride. Nights were torture. The longer I stayed the further she pulled away until I begged her to love me, crying in a ball on her mattress. She stroked my hair and cried but in the morning distrust replaced the sadness and I left. I caught a truck to Udon, badgered a pharmacist for a fistful of Valiums, then caught a bus that would take me all the way to Surat and the island ferry. There I met Lonnie.

It was a night passage and, although the monsoon had passed, the sky was low and empty and grey. The boat was just an old tug that somebody had converted to a passenger ferry by creating a low-ceilinged sleeping area between the engine and the top deck. Loose carpet and pallets of foam rubber lined the hull to either side of a narrow aisle. Naked bulbs lit the place but the wiring shorted before we left the dock and passengers had to find a spot to sleep by hunching over and feeling with their hands in the dark. Lonnie, his tall frame bent almost double, a pencil light in his hand, was one of the
last people to board. He lay his pack on the mattress next to mine, adjusted his blonde ponytail, lit a joint and passed it.

"This doss fucking boat would make a helluva coffin. I hate it," he said, holding in the hit.

"What makes you say that?"

It was just a little boat, but the sea was calm and there was no reason that I could see to worry about sinking.

"Paranoia," he said. "In my gut. It's fucking brilliant."

We hiked the five miles from the landing and that was when the sun rose. It was one of those mornings you imagine travel to be when you're still in the States waiting tables and living in a shit apartment with a shared bath. The horizon glowed dark as if just beyond the curve of the earth there was a city on fire, then everything lightened, and then, as if for no reason at all, it was another day.

"Sometimes I like the sun," I told him.

"Setting it's better," he said.

"How could it be?"

"You'll see."

When we reached the freak beach, I took a hut next to a little open-walled restaurant and we stowed our packs. Lonnie ordered us a couple mushroom omelets from an old Thai woman who sent a little boy into the jungle to find the shrooms. I was still tired from the boat ride and had a bad history with psychedelics and daylight, but I didn't say anything. When I think back to that first day, I realize that I stuck with Lonnie because he had something I was hoping to find in myself. A kind of relaxed confidence, as if Brahma had nudged him with a horn and assured him that he was the only fixed piece in the kaleidoscope we were lost in. But at the time I told myself that I was just
with him for a lark, that I would never be capable of caring about him, that I would never envy him or love him or find myself trapped in the shadow of his ego.

"The little wanker the sheila sent out for these," Lonnie said waving his fork over his plate. "He's not six, yet he knows how to tell the trippies from the ones that'd kill us." He looked at me. "From a city, right?"

"Me? More like the suburbs."

"I'm a country boy."

"Queensland?" I asked him.

"It's not a place thing." He jabbed his fork at his head. "It's inside."

Under us the earth was spinning. From the restaurant bench we watched the shifts change at the beach. The fishermen were mooring their boats and the early rising tourists were coming out and stripping off their clothes. An old white guy with a body like an empty sack and big tufts of colorless hair growing from his earlobes jogged by in a pair of blue-and-white striped bikini shorts. Two young guys with loose black curls and cut-off fatigues came out and started knocking bamboo sticks together like they were kung fu fighting. A short broad fisherman from the boats dragged a four-foot hammerhead up the beach to us. Blood was still bubbling around its jagged mouth and dripping out a spot where a square chunk of flesh had been cut out above its tail. It left a trail in the sand. The man raised the fish and looked at Lonnie, but Lonnie shook his head.

The omelet had been down for about a half-hour by this time and I was trying to discern the effects of the psilocybin from the adrenaline jitters that came with too little sleep. When I closed my eyes, the inside of my lids filled with flickering dots, like stars coming alive at night.

When the sun was high enough to warm the island, we crossed the peninsula to the west-facing beach to sit in the glow of the sun and talk to people Lonnie knew. At noon, we had another omelet. This time when we emerged from the shade of the
restaurant the sun seemed very far away and the sky had a pink cast like water in a sink after cleansing a wound.

It was only a few minutes later, as we were sitting on the beach sifting sand through our hands and Lonnie was telling two Spanish guys and another Australian about his trip to the north, when a woman in the water started shouting. She was fair-skinned with a chin like a flattened heel and round sunburnt breasts that exploded into crystals when she jumped to get our attention. She was pointing toward the surf breaking over the reef. I followed the direction of her jabbing and way out, past the bar, I made out the head and flashing arms of a tourist fighting the tow.

"What kind of doss cunt?" Lonnie said, then let his eyes narrow on the yelling blonde. "Do we know that sheila?"

"Llega lundi passado," Felix, the older of the two Spaniards, said.

I stood up and brushed at the sand on my legs. Little grains, like powdered glass, hid in the roots of the hairs.

"There's a reef and a fucking hell of rip," the Australian, a teenager from Bondi Beach, said. "There're sharks 'round the coral."

"We need the fisherpeople," Felix said.

"Fishermen," the other Spaniard corrected him.

"Are we sure that's a person?" I asked, suddenly unconvinced.

Two naked women who had been sunbathing nearby were standing, holding their hands over their eyes to see the swimmer against the glare. The nearer one had a tattoo of a Buddha's hand on her right hip. She said something in German to her friend then turned and glared at me.

"A woman is drowning," I told her.

"We must wake the fishermen," Felix said.

"Lonnie will save her," the Australian said.
Lonnie was already in the water. When it reached his belly he pressed his palms together and dropped in like a penitent Catholic. His body flattened out beneath the waves, a swatch of velum, like a dull cloth patch stuck on the glistening liquid body of the sea. He swam like a champ, three strokes and a breath, feet fluttering effortlessly, the tide pulling him.

"That ‘im, Martin?" An Indian woman in loose jeans and a white v-neck t-shirt had joined us. Her hair was braided in a bright black rope that hung to her waist. "That Lonnie?"

The Australian nodded.

"When’d he get back?"

"Morning boat."

"He on anything?"

The Australian shrugged.

"He will meet her," Felix said.

Lonnie neared and the swimmer stopped trying to beat the undertow. We could see the round dot of her head clearly then. Lonnie stayed a couple feet from her, his hand lifting and jabbing in new directions. They began drifting. The four of us paralleled their path, walking past the little cove where the fishing boats were moored to a spot where a rocky hillock covered in jungle thrust through the beach and dropped down into the water. By then the two heads were very far out. They dipped and the two began swimming again.

"What about a boat?" the woman asked.

"Shari," Felix shook his head sadly. "The fishermen are sleeping."

It took a while, twenty minutes or more, but you could see they were inching back. We hopped from rock to rock, threading our way out to the tip of the promontory.

"There are sharks," the Australian said.

"Where? I can’t see them," I said.
“Don’t be ridiculous,” Shari said.

I noticed dark shapes in the water.

“What are those shadows?” I asked.

“They’re clouds,” she said.

“In the water?”

“Look out for sharks!” Felix yelled as they neared.

Lonnie lifted his head and looked about him, his eyes wide. The girl swam harder, her strokes sloppy with exhaustion and fear. We helped pull them onto the rocks. Lonnie scraped himself and bright blood wept from a striped gash on his stomach. The woman was skinny in a neon green one-piece. The Indian woman, Shari, helped Lonnie to his feet. When he was standing, she punched him hard in the stomach.

“You don’t even tell me you’re back. You’re a selfish wanker, Lonnie!” she said then turned on the black rock and headed for the beach.

I stared at Lonnie, we all did.

The tips of his fingers were pink where they had brushed his stomach. He pointed at the saved girl. "Sunsets are double-price from now on," he told her.

That night, on Lonnie and Shari’s porch, Shari packed opium in the bowl of a hookah and collected money. Travelers played music. Before us the ocean turned pink and yellow beneath a sunset bleeding from dark jagged islands on the horizon. A slender Dutch boy in loose linen pants arrived with a miniature slide trombone and the other musicians paused to watch him assemble the horn. The two guitarists had been coming for weeks, Shari told me. An American girl with hands that dwarfed the neck of her violin had been there three days. The saved girl and her friend were playing a tabla drum set that Shari had given Lonnie as a present in Puri.

The sun set, we smoked and Shari lay her head against my leg, her hair rough from the salt and heat. It covered my calf, a darker shadow than the encroaching
darkness. The skinny Dutch boy played beautifully. His hand gripped the slide with a forefinger and his palm opened on high minors like a magician offering us palmed notes.

On my back, staring at the underside of the thatched ceiling, I thought of the flashgun motion of our overhead fan in Bangkok and daydreamed my lover's body against me. The soft tabla beat of the saved girl. The fan's fwip-fwip, the gentle backbeat of our time together. Fwip-fwip and traffic noises. Fwip-fwip and the slap of flip-flops in the hallway and the sound of voices talking in the common room and the distant murmur of a television in the bar across the street broadcasting Star TV. Fwip-fwip and my lover's teeth biting her lip, forcing a squeal through her nose. Afterward, the room smelled of childhood beaches; the dank rot of seaweed buzzing with greenheads, the sun warming feces in the sandgrass. Even sleeping she spoke to me, her arms twitching. It didn't matter that it was Bangkok, it could have been anyplace. In the morning I walked to the fish market and bargained with a hair-lipped man in pidgin-Thai and it seemed a game to me. Lazy flies flew tight arcs through the stabbing sun shafts, moving from plastic barrels to men to dried fish. Words left my lips like children playing and the fish sellers loved me.

Lonnie, Shari and I went to Ko Samui to see the bullfights but never made it out of the western-style Holiday Hotel. They were flush with money from the opium Lonnie brought down from Chang Mai. He'd been carrying it when I met him, stuffed in a hollowed-out copy of *Moby Dick*. We rented a room with two queen sized beds and a television. It was a little box of America, wrapped up and shipped to a spot four stories over a Thai island. There was an Englishman in the hotel bar, in his 50s with carefully combed grey hair. He held his cigarettes, duty free Newports, using his thumb and forefinger like a Gestapo officer in a war movie. He'd been to bullfights on the mainland.
"Spectacular. You must go. But here it's just for the tourists, you know." He gestured with his scotch and the ice swirled in his glass. "They're Brahma bulls. But of course they are." He laughed. "What else would they be."

Lonnie had traded some of their opium for heroin on Ko Phangan and the three of us were glowing and connected, lit by a warm electric fire.

"You haven't been to the one's here?" Shari asked.

"Certainly not," he said.

"Do they kill each other?" I asked.

"They're lovely, really lovely. You must see it."

"But do they die?"

"Beautiful creatures, really beautiful."

He smiled without using his eyes, as if I was a fool to be tolerated. I thought to strangle him but had no confidence that I could lift my arms fast enough to seize him so I forgave him and sat on my barstool tracing patterns on my forearms. I looked at my friends. Shari's eyes were black and glittering. She looked at me and smiled. We took a bottle Japanese scotch to the room and drank until the perfect day was gone. I fell asleep and when I awoke they were fucking. The covers and sheets were in a pile on the ground and they were kneeling on the naked mattress, mumbling and laughing as they penetrated and were penetrated.

"You'll wake our Yank," Lonnie said clearly and Shari laughed.

I got up. In the elevator I felt like I was drowning in a tank with crisp corners, but on the beach my head cleared. I realized that I felt no passion for any of this anymore, I'd fallen out of love and into something else, and the only thing I'd cared about for weeks was the idea of those bulls.

Shari had a beautiful body. She was slender and dark, turned black in places by the sun. She had thick nipples and small breasts and a gentle curve in the small of her
back but on the beach, when we walked into the surf, my eyes got lost in the heart of her. Between her breasts and her waistline were deep furrows, peaks and valleys of distorted flesh, as if somebody had grabbed her head and stretched her then let her snap back into place.

“She had a baby,” Lonnie said. “A little wanker. She carries pictures of him. She’ll show you if you ask.”

“Where is he?”

“He died. His dad was a Paki guy, not English. Her family shipped her off to the old country to get married.”

“Shari?”

“Claims they drugged her. The baby might have lived in England. Least that’s the way she sees it.”

We woke alone that morning, Shari and me. Lonnie was already on the beach. I asked her about the boy and she reached into her pack for the photos. The boy was old enough to stand, older than I’d imagined him. He stood against a door frame, a wide grin stretching from one side of his round head to the other.

“My sister came for the wedding,” Shari said.

I held the picture of the two of them. They were dressed in pink saris with loose glittering yellow shawls and rings in their noses and ears. It was a picture of two village girls from the mountains of the Hindu Kush.

"It was like dress-up for us," she said.

I shook my head but wondered if someday Shari wouldn’t revisit it in a different way, knowing how the things our parents do to us linger. You shake at them and shake at them and then one day you wake and forget why you ever wanted to leave them at all.

"It looks like fun," I said.

"Look at my eyes. They put Sembutal in my food. They give it to virgins on their wedding days. I was half asleep."
It was a new story, a London girl kidnapped to a dusty corner of the mad world for a glittering ceremony that would have delighted the old queen at the bar. In the photo, Shari and her sister appeared to be laughing at the idea of their own surrender, yet the drugs glittering in their swollen pupils had them losing ground. We went down to folding chairs on the beach and Shari asked the waiters if they had umbrellas for our drinks.

"Yes, we have small green plastic swords," said a smiling Thai waiter in a flowered shirt.

We ordered piña coladas with pineapple chunks and watched Lonnie swim back and forth in front of the hotel.

The sunset club on Ko Phangan ended when Lonnie got arrested on his next return from Chiang Mai. Oldboy, one of the young Thai mainliners, let me know while I was tanning and waiting for Shari. God knows how he found out.

"Lonnie in jail," he said, working his hand through a black tangle of hair.

"Where?" I asked.

"Pokapi. Police stop him at checkpoint."

A couple of the older freaks came over later and told us they had heard and were sorry. The only person to show for sunset that night was a thin, bearded American from Florida named Mel. He was wearing a Mexican serape and already looked stoned.

"Bummer, manno," he said when I told him.

Shari took the boat to the mainland the next day, but the bus up from Surat killed a bicyclist enroute and they diverted it directly to Lonnie's jail, of all places. The police arrested the driver and the passengers sat and waited for the evening bus to pick them up. Shari hadn't been able to get any money in Surat and the coincidence with the bus spooked her. Instead of feeling lucky at having saved cab fare, she lost her nerve. The cop in charge of the jail told her visiting hours were over. He told her to come back the
next day, but Shari thought he was fucking with her, messing with her in order to force a blowjob out of her, or worse. Instead, she came back for me.

When I woke the next morning she was on the edge of my bed with her knees under her chin, her eyes tired and puffy. She was sitting, rocking like a kid on the edge of a panic, talking about how she’d stayed up all night on the boat watching its wake glow with churned phosphorescence, how Lonnie had been the first one to point that out to her, and how she wondered if maybe everybody made a trail like that, that you could only see if you looked at the right time in a certain part of the world. She told me her own wake would reveal all her false starts and stops, how she’d lived her life frozen one minute and running full out the next, and then asked me why did it have to be that way? And why didn’t Lonnie realize? How could he have ever expected her to handle this without running?

I didn’t know the answers to her questions, but I understood them. She’d combed her hair out to visit Lonnie and sitting in the light of the doorway at the end of my bed, it covered her back like spilled black wine; violet, glistening and wet. I sat up and stroked it with my hand, slid my fingers through it. She stopped rocking to lean back into my hand, testing it, asking me to hold her by trusting me with her weight. I put my arms around her and let her cry. Through the doorway, a quarter-mile out, I watched the slim silhouette of a fisherman pulling nets in over the gunwale of his little boat. He was no more than a shadow before the throbbing lip of the sun, but the fish flashed around him, reflecting sunbeams as they realized their souls.

There was something there, right then, with my hand slipping through Shari’s hair while the boat traversed the rough frame of the door, that was more important than place. It floated in the air above the earth and clung to people and defined them more than language or culture or clothes.

"I have to go back," she said.
I nodded and knew that later in the day I would put on my clothes like going to work and turn back again to face the world.

That afternoon we walked to the landing and the boat. During the trip to the mainland, Shari told me about the credit cards. Lonnie had left her two, but the bank had refused to even run them through without a passport to match the name on the cards. She thought I might have more luck because I was white and male. We rode a tuk-tuk to The National Bank of Siam, then waited in the park across the street watching a circle of businessmen in shirts and slacks juggle a wicker ball with their feet. Behind them, old ladies in old clothes, the kind of stuff I remember my grandmother gardening in, practiced Tai Chi. The bank doors opened at nine and I took the cards and crossed the street.

A broad-faced Thai woman dressed in a simple blue dress smiled at me over the wooden counter.

"I'd like cash advances on these," I told her. "Three hundred dollars each."

She smiled and nodded then took the cards to a man at a desk in the corner. The man readied some forms beside the cards then picked up the receiver from an old black phone. He spun the dial patiently using the eraser end of a wooden pencil then leaned back and eyed me across the room while the connection was made. He spoke briefly then picked up a card and read the numbers off. A moment later he jotted a note on the paper before him then picked up the second card and repeated the procedure. He hung up the phone, stood and walked over leaving the paperwork behind him.

"I'm sorry Mr. Stillman," he said. He spoke English with an English accent. "I cannot help you with these cards."

"Yes," I said with a smile. "I was afraid that I was nearing my limits. Did you try lesser amounts?"

"Unfortunately, but both cards seem to be overdrawn."
"I don't mean to ask for anything improper, but I'm very short of cash and my wife assured me that she would make the payments on those cards in the United States. Can you think of any other solution?"

He tapped his pencil against his lower lip as if thinking very hard. "Another bank?"

"Wouldn't the same happen at another bank?"

"Yes, but there are organizations, companies, with other policies. Wait one moment."

He walked back to his desk and pulled a telephone book from beneath it, flipped it open to a yellow section then jotted something on a pad and returned with a tear of paper.

"I have written the addresses of two companies that might be of help," he said. He handed me the slip of paper. It had two addresses written in English. "And on the back," he said and showed me the addresses in Thai.

"They gave it to you?" Shari asked when I returned to the park.

I shook my head.

The first address was a residential apartment in the northern part of town. We took the staircase to the fourth floor then followed the hallway until we found the right door. A short man wearing square metal-rimmed sunglasses checked the card numbers with a book in his desk drawer then reached behind a disassembled copier for a sliding machine that made impressions in carbons from the raised numbers on the card.

"How much?" he asked me.

"How much is possible?"

"Seventy-five American dollars, but we have two companies, so one hundred and fifty is possible. Minus fifteen dollar fee, of course."

The next company could only give us seventy-five, minus a ten dollar fee, so we ended the day with two hundred dollars in worn American currency. By that time it was too late to head to Pokapi so we stayed in Surat and crashed for the night.
Shari remembered a guest house that she and Lonnie had stayed in during a threeday trip from the islands. The credit cards had still worked and he'd bankrolled himself then for his first run north. In our room, we pushed the matts together then turned out the light and stripped to our underwear. Beneath thin sheets we lay on our backs without touching.

"Is it enough?" she asked me.

"I don't understand," I told her.

"The money."

I shook my head in the darkness. They'd caught Lonnie for real. A policeman had searched his bag and found enough opium to fit in two cupped hands. Money wouldn't help.

"I don't know," I said.

"He would save me," Shari said.

"How?"

"He would try."

I closed my eyes and saw the face of my Peace Corp volunteer, Catherine, above me while she stroked my hair. Even in her leaving, she showed a strength I wanted for my own. I imagined her alone beneath a purple monsoon sky, then laughing with a small man whose language changed tones without asking questions. "You would have left me anyway," she had said while her boyfriend spoke to a man replanting rice shoots. "Never," I told the darkness then thought about the scars on Shari's belly and the boat's phosphorescent trail and the objects in my own wake, the bruises on my mother's face and my own, placed by a stepfather that I would crush with the world I was gathering.

"Tomorrow, we'll see what we can do," I said.

"What about after tomorrow? Will you stay?"

"I don't know."
In the night I woke. My arm was asleep beneath her. Her face was close, her
breath hard and stale.

"Shari," I said.

"Just hold me," she said. "Pretend you're my father, for tonight."

My back and legs and hair tingled, as if a gentle gas was settling, preparing me for
the warm flows that would come to hold me in the arms of time. Even now I feel it. The
memory is preserved in a room with water that aches to drink.

At the jail, there was a desk just inside the entranceway. On it, facing inward,
there was a TV broadcasting a Hong Kong action film, you could tell by the noise.
Behind the desk the room was cordoned by rows of bars. There were no solid walls, just
the dull steel bars running from floor to ceiling, intersecting to form cells. The prisoners
sat cross-legged, two or three to a cell. Lonnie was in the center, three cells back from
the desk, leaning with his shoulder against a bar while he watched TV.

The officer behind the desk walked to a cardboard box and flipped through paper
folders until he'd found Lonnie's. He lay it on the desk before me, then turned and rifled
through some papers in a drawer. I opened the folder. The first page was filled with
printed Thai script, except where Lonnie had filled blanks with a pencil. The man turned
back and dropped a hand on the folder. I looked up. He shook his head, then put a single
sheet of paper down.

"Names," he said and pointed to a blank spot.

I took a pencil from him and wrote our names.

"Passports," he said, his hand extended.

We offered them and he sat down and began to go over them, examining each
page with a formal expression. When he had finished, he slid open his top draw and
dropped them inside, then waved us to follow him. We walked with him to Lonnie's cell.
Lonnie was standing. The jailer nodded, gesturing toward Lonnie, then returned to his desk.

"Damn, it's good to see you," he said. "'Ell of a way to end a good trip, eh?"

I tried to grin. Shari began crying.

"Now, now, there's a girl. We'll find some way out of this. We will now. Give us a kiss, Shari."

There was another man in Lonnie's cell. He looked retarded. His features were soft and oversized, his cheeks too big, his face too flat, even for an Asian man. When Lonnie leaned forward and met Shari's lips between the bars, the man grinned. He had baby teeth, like little Chiclets, in swollen black gums. When they stopped kissing, Lonnie grinned back at him.

We pretended to talk about ways to raise more money, but Lonnie knew it didn't matter. He raised his eyebrows when Shari wasn't looking.

"Did you have any luck with the cards?" he said.

"Two hundred," I said.

He winked and nodded. "That's something. Can you call the embassy? Dear old dad's still alive. Maybe he can get up for a visit."

We stayed and talked, dreaming of ways to build up cash. Shari and I could go north and try another run, but Lonnie thought the police might know us now. His dad might be able to send us something; Lonnie gave me his address. After thirty minutes the cop came back and nodded his head toward the door. Shari and I stood up.

"Remember, she's a good 'un," Lonnie said. I stared at him and the bastard winked at me again.

The tuk-tuk we'd rode from town was still waiting for us outside, its driver leaning back on his elbows on the front stairs. That night I told Shari I would help her call the embassy in the morning, but after that I was heading north to Bangkok and out.
"I can't leave him," she said. "Not this time. He loves me, he really does."

"I think we can probably get a couple hundred more off the cards in Bangkok. We can get set up as English teachers in Japan, then keep moving."

She looked at me. "I can't leave him."

"Yes, you can," I said. "I'm going tomorrow."

"I'll hate myself and I'll hate you."

I nodded.

We caught a bus in the morning. She leaned into me to keep from jostling a tall boy standing over her in the aisle. An old man with hard, round elbows was sitting between me and the window. Cigarette smoke drifted through the bus like islands or clouds. Shari's fingers traced my forearm. She tugged gently on the hairs. I turned my head and she was looking up at me. I bent my head slowly and we kissed. The skin of her face was moist with the heat and smoke and the last of my valium, but her lips were dry. I thought of Lonnie. I thought of the strong boxy letters that he used to write his name in the file at the jail. Near the bottom, in a blank next to a short Thai word, Lonnie had written *Lifeguard*.

The bus shook like a carnival ride but the valium kicked in and Shari slept against me. I couldn't sleep but watched the palms and rice paddies pass. We slowed for small gray oxen and men carrying bales of bamboo on Chinese bicycles, then picked up speed again as the highway cleared. Night came as we were nearing the capitol and the soft glow of the city beyond the horizon made me feel for a moment like this was the right course and that all I'd left behind would eventually be forgiven me.
Scratching the Surface

They've permitted me this notebook and although the effort to write takes its toll, I've decided to keep an account of the daily progress of the disease from this day forward. Such a text will probably be of little interest to my contemporaries. This is understandable for, as far as I know, I am the first victim of this particular affliction. However, there may be a greater demand for such a record in the future, when I feel quite confident that my current ailment will spread until it is an epidemic on par with the plague or the influenza outbreaks of this century. At that time, perhaps this simple diary will make its way into the great canon of plague texts.

My doctors are mystified by my symptoms, but they seem to readily agree on one thing, I have descended rapidly and horribly from a calm professional to a weakened, incommunicative husk of a man. They have tried topical solutions, chemical injections and psychiatric evaluations, but nothing alleviates my suffering and my descent continues.

Being the first of my kind, I harbor no illusions. Death for me is inevitable, but if I can leave some record, some hint for others, then perhaps later victims will learn from my mistakes and better determine the proper route to our shared and inevitable conclusion.

I find that I'm less terrified now that I've accepted death. In fact, my acquiescence seems to have lifted an opaque lens from my hindsight. Remembrances of once-painful episodes, now actually generate something akin to mirth. Even the memory of the slow painful onset of my affliction is sometimes enough to send me into peals of lau...

I'm afraid I must pause here, and I do hope to return, but I warn you that you should not become overly alarmed if I do not. The reader of the text of one diseased must be prepared for unexpected and abrupt conclusions. Despite the illusion of a continuance created by the thickness of the leaves of this manual, there is always the potential, when
dealing with a creature afflicted such as I, that you will immerse yourself in my scrawl only to turn this leaf to find the next pages to be void of text. Should such an occasion arise, take comfort as I did in the creamy blankness of the flattened pulp. Revere it, search for your reflection in it; it is potential in a physical form, even if it is the walk-signal of my demise.

And yet pause I must, for I require the broad bony curve of a nail that I've cultivated on the largest toe of what I once discerned to be my right foot. The sores and boils are less ferocious today, compared to my earlier grievances they seem a mere annoyance, yet I find that I have come to enjoy the habit of scratching. My readers who are not yet in decline might compare this acquired taste to the reassuring comforts of eating or self-manipulation.

You see I've lost the use of my hands. Forgive the occasional blurred word, I'm writing with my mouth. It occurred some weeks ago, and truthfully, I hardly miss my hands anymore. A careless observer might think that they were merely inhibited by this accursed jacket my caretakers have cocooned me in as if restraints would lessen my scratching and somehow alleviate the tumors that have assaulted my epidermis in the unkindest of ways. It was the disease that disabled my hands long before my caretakers thought to apply this topical dressing.

It is perhaps significant that I hardly noticed when sensation dwindled in these once-prized extremities. I submit here that I once numbered my hands as primary, or very close to primary, among my limbs. I am able to recall a time when I would have volunteered an entire leg or gladly sacrificed an eye to save a hand.

If I concentrate and resurrect those dwindling emotions, I am able to re imagine the delicate protrusion of the knuckles, the narrow speed bumps of skin creased along the length of extended fingers and the small tufts of black hair jutting from the epidermis atop the metacarpus. But now I hardly miss them. This I hope will be of some use to my readers.
Listen closely now. Rather than being overcome with horror at the surrender of my hands, rather than fighting to preserve my once vaunted limbs, the disease distracted me. It infused me with a hunger so abysmal that I did not notice the loss of my hands. So urgent was my need to satisfy the pains in my midriff and the cries erupting from my stomach, that the stiffening of my fingers and the cramped cupping of my palms seemed little more than an annoyance at the time. In fact, I might never have noticed my hands at all if I hadn't needed them to operate the telephone as I sought to order a pizza from Spagos. The fingers had surrendered their nimbleness. They stumbled over the buttons, misdialing again and again, until I was forced to abandon this project and scavenge the kitchen for whatever was available. Luckily my digits were still competent to wield the electric can opener. Evelyn, when she arrived home that evening, was somewhat shocked to find that I had consumed most of our canned goods. Empty aluminum vessels of creamed corn, jumbo pitted olives and baked beans littered the sink and counter-tops interspersed by discarded tins of chunk light tuna, rolled anchovies and deviled ham.

Perhaps it surprises you to hear that a man in my present condition was once loved by another. I caution you to avoid such prejudices. The diseased have loved. We are little different from yourself, dear reader, just a bit weaker, a bit less able to defend ourselves. Oh, you might attempt to blame your ignorance of Evelyn on the author just as I am sure that you have often pointed your finger in the past while carefully denying similar lapses of imagination.

Given more time I think I might convince you to reconsider such notions. But in consideration of my condition, I hope you will allow me to forego the intricacies of such a dialogue and instead simply list a common observation. Imagination is a wonderful thing, to be invoked whenever it seems necessary. Unforeseen lulls in dialogues or monologues, languorous moments on the toilet, and brief ambulatory trips would seem an eternity if we could not fill them with flights of fancy. As wiser men have said: Always
assume. I have no sympathy for those who lack the imagination to expect the unexpected.

Yes I was a husband and quite a dashing lover, something of a Romeo, if I do say so, at least in my prime, before I was stricken.

I was highly educated as well, but not so much as to be unemployable. I was a conceptualist at an agency hired by environmental groups to publicize their various causes. Perhaps you've seen some of our bumper stickers? Perhaps you are familiar with one that reads: *Just recycle and everything will be fine.* Yes? That was mine. I invented that.

Of course, others designed the actual sticker. I was never very partial to the green background, but who am I to say? Those decisions were left up to other artists, to the natural graphics and computer design departments operating in tandem with the printers and adhesive applicators. But the words, those were mine. It was no little source of pride to watch my words overtake me on the highway. Sometimes to comfort myself, I would drive quite slowly in the right hand lane until a car saddled with my sentence passed me by. Perhaps the image of a man who immerses himself so thoroughly in his chosen profession strikes you as odd. I would argue that it is not only normal, but a symptom of robust health. Commitment and pride in one's productive abilities is directly related to one's quality of life. Marx spoke of what occurs when one's pride breaks down. One strikes, one riots, one is unhappy. Besides, it is no exaggeration to claim that my work touched people. Something in my simple phrases, my texts, if you will, spoke to people. Their vehicles bore my words. They found joy in my work. It chimed with their own values. It allowed them to speak out. They registered their enthusiastic support not in the voting booth, but on the bumper.

I loved my job and I was content until the day I spotted my first fraudulent sticker. It was on an antique car, a Datsun, I think. The sight had an enormous impact. My heart raced and I was forced to pull off the road in order to scratch at an inflammation of the
dermatitis on the backs of my forearms. I have always had bad skin. Granted the sticker still bore my words, but they were printed on a blue background! To those unfamiliar with copyright laws or the legalities of artistic infringement this might seem a slight transgression. But to the artist himself, it was as if a chasm in the earth had opened to spit magma in my face.

I alerted the company lawyers immediately and although they confronted the perpetrators and succeeded in bringing them to justice, the damage was done. There was no plugging the hole in the dike of my artistic license. Within six months a beige Volkswagen Vanagon passed me on Highway 90 just north of Meddville. Its rear bumper was adorned with a green sticker that read: Just recycle and the world will be fine. It was a subtle difference: One word. But it was enough to make my scalp prickle. A chemical concentrate applied topically might have had less of an effect. I was forced to pull over once again, this time to attend to the psoriasis that was sloughing off skin cells between hair follicles. They had trampled my words and, in the processes, distorted my meaning entirely. What had recycling to do with the world? They had stolen a sentence that drifted toward the metaphysical -- that hoped to touch God -- and reduced it to a meaningless string of words that deserved only to be discarded among the detritus of human platitudes. My work, the sweat that seeped from my bottom during the working hours of the week, the effort that sapped nearly 2000 hours a year from me, had yearned to equate man's inherent fallibility with his search for a symbiosis with a sympathetic parent, an earth mother if you will. But with a simple key stroke, the merest flick of an accursed finger, a sticker machine operator, a technician, had altered my creation forever. My hands ached.

Perhaps this short explication of my life's work will help you to understand my wife's concern when she arrived home to find the kitchen littered with reusable metals. In my desire to consume, I had forsaken the recyclables pile. When she then discovered me
in a fetal crouch beneath the covers of our queen-sized horsehair mattress, she was understandably concerned.

"Honey, what's going on? Who ate all the canned goods in the pantry?" she asked.

At the time it was an effort just to stifle a groan and eye her cautiously. When she sat on the bed, I fought a deep-rooted impulse to lash out at her. Something in her must have sensed the inexplicable hostility I was projecting, for she studied me from the edge of the bed and didn't lean over to feel my forehead or rub my back.

"Are you okay Adam?"

I concentrated and opened my mouth to speak. My tongue felt swollen. I forced words out, "Cravings, eating, don't know," but they emerged as oblique imitations of themselves and Evelyn crinkled her forehead and concentrated to make them out.

"Oh honey, did you see another forged bumper sticker? I know how that makes you. But honey, did you really eat a can of baked beans and a can of anchovies?"

Each word clawed its way through the chin and cheek bones of my face and caused the broad surface of my enlarged tongue to vibrate softly against the inside edges of my lower molars. Still, I was not so far gone that I wasn't able fight these odd sensations while nodding reassuringly to her.

"Well, you're going to be no fun to sleep next to tonight," Evelyn said and flipped on the Late Show.

I scratched furiously at my calves.

When I awoke the next morning, Evelyn was already dressed for work. I felt nearly perfect. My swollen stomach had been reduced by my digestive processes to nearly normal size and the unsuppressible anger I had felt toward my loving wife was gone. However, as I flipped off the covers and made to roll out of the bed a dull throbbing radiated from my lower legs. Glancing down, I found my shins and calves pulsing with watery boils.
"Evelyn!" I shrieked.

My wife hurried forward, "Yes, dear?"

Then she spotted my legs.

"Oh, honey!" She examined my legs, but I noticed that she was unwilling to actually touch them. "You must have had a reaction to something you ate last night. You certainly ate enough that the chances are good that something could have affected you."

I nodded, but internally I was already at war with the urge to scratch at the swollen pustules. They seemed alive, as if an insect from a tropical land had lain eggs inside my skin and now they were pupating.

"Evie, I don't think I can go to work again today," I told her. "Do you think you could call in for me?"

"Oh, Adam, this is the second time this week. You can't keep this up," she eyed me carefully. "You know we can't manage both mortgages on my salary alone."

I nodded. "You're right I said." Then made a move to get up.

"That's my boy," she said with a glimmer and a happy shake of her shoulders.

I've often told myself that it was her unabashed felicity that I fell in love with. "Now, I've got to run in order to make my aerobics class before work. Oh and I've got a session with Wilma this evening, so I'll be a little late. If you'd like, go ahead and order something in and I'll share it with you. If you're willing to wait," she paused by the bedroom door.

"Please wait tonight, alright applecakes?"

"Yes Evie."

When I heard her car start, I tumbled back into bed. By ten I had given up resisting the urge to scratch my legs. I reached down a forefinger and gave the surface of the most prominent boil on my right shinbone a slim, sideways scratch. The skin was thicker than I'd imagined and the meager attention only heightened the sensation that termites were burrowing beneath my skin. I scratched harder. The round pocket of flesh jiggled, but wouldn't burst. My earlier hesitations were forgotten as I reached down with
my entire hand, crimped with the fingernails aligned in a row, and clawed at the angry boil. I discovered that my surface layer of skin had grown chalky. It flaked off in a cloud of white cells that floated like a dead memory then settled and was lost among the plush carpet. I scratched with abandon until I'd succeeded in rubbing several areas quite raw. A very small amount of fluid wept out, but failed to ease the agony of my desiccated epidermis. Below my physical agony was a the dull ache from having lied to Evelyn. I would not be going to work.

Prior to the onset of the disease, I had only lied to my wife once during our two years of courtship and nine years of marriage. The incident occurred when I was younger, during the springtime of our second year of marriage. I had come home early to find the Mexican gardeners still weeding the shubbery and flowers. I nodded at the foreman, a short hirsute man named Mario who interrupted my Saturday mornings once a month to receive a check for his yard work, and was on my way up the front walk when I spotted a young, dark-skinned woman with a mane of platinum hair that reached to the plump bottom of her torn and grass-stained jeans. She turned from weeding the planters lined along the edge of the front steps and stared at me bluntly. Her chestnut eyes were unshaded above broad gleaming cheek-bones and her breasts, which as a married man I had taught myself to avoid, dangled unbound against the light fabric of her plaid cotton shirt.

I controlled myself, nodding politely as I stepped around her to punch the code into our alarm. When the red light went out, I let myself in without glancing back. Once inside I selected a three-day old Wall Street Journal from the newspaper pile in the kitchen and sat in one of the stiff-backed KessléDesigns chairs Evelyn had decorated the front room with. I feigned reading the paper while shooting intermittent glances through the bay window, trying desperately to catch a glimpse of the female laborer. I saw her once more, slapping clouds of dust from the thighs of her jeans, before the truck pulled away.
During the following week at work, I couldn't concentrate. At the time, I was able to rest on the laurels of my successful *Save the Leviathans* campaign, which was fortunate because I was creatively incapacitated. I saw the weeding woman everywhere. The beehive haircut of a coworker transformed itself into her round buttocks. Curtains near an air conditioner seemed to jiggle with contact from her breasts.

The following Thursday, I kissed Evelyn in the morning, climbed into our Saab and drove to the Dunken' Donuts on the corner of South and 14th. I ate a jelly donut and then a cruller as slowly as possible, then ordered and consumed a dry bran muffin just to be sure Evelyn had enough time to leave for work. Then I drove home and called in sick. I don't know what my plan was. Perhaps I had some fantasy of inviting her into the house, maybe under the pretense of examining the fica plant we had in the upstairs hallway. Perhaps I still harbored the illusion that women were susceptible to tales of my artistic accomplishments. I admit to entertaining the idea that she may have noticed me as well, that perhaps she had spent the week fantasizing about an encounter, just as I had. It seemed a perfect modernist plot, a D. H. Lawrence novel with a title like: *The Conceptualist's Lover*.

The old pick-up didn't appear until two o'clock. Mario slipped from the driver's seat while a handful of his employees, the woman included, dismounted from the wooden slats of the flatbed. The brown bodies, all adorned by plaid work shirts and cheap jeans, encircled the house. I stayed upstairs, but watched her from between the curtains of the master bedroom. She kneeled in the wood chips between the branches of a Rhododendron plant at the end of the driveway and, as I watched, set to work methodically plucking weeds. After a minute or two she ducked her head under the branches and I was left with a view of her bottom protruding from the base of the plant. That moment was enough to declare the day a success.

But I was younger then and I still harbored my fantasies. As I watched, the others in the crew moved behind the house, while she made her way up the front walk toward
the stoop. I crept down the carpeted stairs and waited behind the front door, my ear against its cool aluminum surface. I almost collapsed with fright when her knuckles struck the door from the other side. But instead, I hastily slipped into the coat closet. She rapped again, then tried the knob. I felt myself growing excited. The door knob turned and the door edged open.

"¿Hola?" she said in a voice loud enough to check the house but not loud enough for the workers in the backyard to hear. She stepped inside. I watched her shape slip by through the narrow crack of light between the sliding doors of the closet and I could smell the sweet scent of her, the mixture of lawncuttings and sweat. It reminded me of the days of my youth when my mother, adorned in a horrible pink straw sun hat, would return from tending to her genteel suburban garden. I'm sorry, I do believe I made that up. I never had a mother, at least not one I feel comfortable mentioning here.

The laborer turned the TV on and flipped channels until I heard a familiar voice. It was my wife. Evelyn hosts a popular afternoon talk show. If you've lost faith in me at this point I'd like to reassure you, this is quite true. I managed to soundlessly inch open one end of the closet door until I could see her right arm, waist, and thigh. She was leaning back in the sofa with the tight fabric of her jeans propped up on the coffee table. Behind her I could see my wife's full body and then a close-up shot of a man's face with the words "Likes To Watch" under it in broad Helvetica type.

I imagined confronting the woman and then threatening to call the police while my hands coldly unbuttoned her shirt then slipped in among her loose breasts. I imagined the police arriving and, in a change of heart, scooping her up and racing through a hail of bullets toward an eventful car ride and a romantic but tragic ending. I imagined her thanking me in a warm voice above a blunt earthy stare. Un mille gracias, she said. The idea created such a physical response that I was forced to unzip my fly and exposed myself beneath the cool shadows of our overcoats. As I stroked myself, she let out a relaxed sigh. I bit my lip to keep from crying out.
Five minutes after she entered, the television shut down and she left quietly, pulling the door shut firmly behind her. I took a moment to regain my composure then stepped from the closet. My discharge had reduced my self-induced anxieties and returned me to my sensibilities. I scanned the room furtively, worried that the gardener had stolen something. The clicker was missing. I checked between the sofa cushions. It was definitely gone. I paused before the hall mirror to straighten my shirt and check my trousers for stains, then marched out the front door. Mario was just climbing into the cab of his truck, the others were assembling in the back.

"Mario, just a moment," I shouted. He turned and I explained that I'd been awakened from a nap upstairs by an intruder who'd apparently stolen the remote control unit of my television. He confronted the woman who he'd left alone in the front yard and she angrily denied the incident. I stared directly at her.

"Do you deny that you were just watching the television in my living room?"

Mario translated hesitantly. She responded in curt Mexican Spanish while staring at me furiously. I knew I had her. Mario told me that she had confessed to entering my home, but denied that she had taken anything. I let my eyes trace her body languidly.

"Perhaps you are right," I said. "But I'd appreciate it if you kept your workers from breaking into my home."

I did not demand her termination, but instead generously spun on the heels of my wing-tips and returned to my home. Inside, I discovered the clicker atop the television. That Saturday, when Mario knocked, he wasted no time but immediately thanked me for alerting him to her pilfering ways and assured me that she'd been fired. I nodded and pointed out that I'd withheld his gratuity for my troubles.

And it did not trouble me. There were rules, of course there were rules. This was what they were for. I had not invited her, I had not asked for her, she was the intruder. I had glanced over newspapers, through windows, across carefully arranged shubbery. She was the agitator, not I.
It is somewhat painful for me to recall scenes like this. It seems like only yesterday that I was in the very prime of life, and now look at me, confined like an insane man in one of the West Coast's finest teaching hospitals. Despite such grand claims, the doctors here have had little success with my case.

I was able to fool Evelyn for nearly two weeks before she discovered that I'd been fired from work for unexcused absences. By then, my hands were nearly useless. They seemed relatively fine upon waking, just a bit stiff, but by noon they were little more than unwieldy clubs. Still, I made use of the nails to scratch myself. The boils were intermittent and inconsistent. Sometime I'd awake with my body inflamed from the waist down. Other mornings there was little more than a tingling in an ankle or a knee. Nevertheless, by mid-day, something was sure to pop up.

At first, Evelyn was concerned by the incessant scratching, but after the first week the disease entered a more insidious stage and there were no longer any surface legions or sores to legitimize my itching. So I said little, thrust my hands in my pockets during daylight hours and was content to scratch myself quietly beneath the bed covers while her late night peers distracted us from our troubles.

The evening Evelyn discovered my pink slip in the mail came at the end of a particularly bad day. My wife found me in the corner of the master bedroom balled up behind the entertainment system, attacking my calves and ankles with a car de-icer. The hunger had returned and earlier in the day I'd ordered in four plates of Szhechuan chicken, thirteen orders of seafood pot stickers and twenty-six scallion pancakes. I was a swollen, unkempt mess. When Evelyn rushed in unexpectedly, I was unable to control myself. An instinct I'd formerly been unaware of, or at least managed to keep under control, exerted itself. She seemed oblivious to my state as she stood over me waving the thin notice of my termination. Her furtive actions sent a rage through me that overwhelmed even my need to scratch. With a speed that surprised us both, my muscles
contracted and I lunged forward and bit her. My jaw clamped down on the lower
crescent of her left breast and when I retracted and resumed my shape in the corner, I felt
a swatch of silk dangling from my chin.

Evelyn was understandably upset. She grew more so when I struck at her again.
Some human part of me heard her retreat down the stairs to the kitchen phone to weep
hysterically to her parents in Connecticut. Her father was a gynecologist who had done
his residency at Columbia Presbyterian in New York City. It was undoubtedly his advice
that caused her to bring in professionals. I'm not bitter, not really, it's just that they've
been so damn useless. But I suppose I shouldn't complain. After all, I'm no more
uncomfortable in my current circumstances and I've been able to drop my earlier
pretenses. Also, the doctors were kind enough to grant me this pen and pad. Speaking of
which, I hope you are able to read this script. I've grown more adept at writing with my
mouth, but I realize it must read like the scribblings of an infant.

The itching has risen up my torso quite rapidly in recent days. Today it surfaced
as a red rash just above the neckline of my jacket. Luckily I've grown quite flexible and I
am able to attend to myself using the aforementioned toenail. It affords me little relief,
but these days I am content with the attempt as much as the result.

Evelyn visited yesterday but the attendants worry for her safety. They wouldn't
let her into my small room. She stared at me through the reinforced glass window while
speaking with the doctor looking after my case. He discussed my condition and asked
her permission to make a case study out of me. She consented and told him to let her
know how much interest my case evoked in his colleagues. I know her and I am quite
sure that if my case proves interesting she'll be showing up with her camera crew one day
and my face will appear on television screens across the country with an odd title beneath
my talking head. Perhaps I will be glorified as: Scratching Man or Itching Victim or
perhaps something glib like, Man Who Has Trouble Even Scratching The Surface.

I'm sorry speaking of which...
I'm back now, but they've come for my feeding and I feel I must rest for a moment.

It is later. The sun has lowered now and I just felt my last bony toenail loosen and slip off, torn away by the folds of this heavy garment they keep me constrained within. In the darkness, I am deprived of my only entertainment. It is no longer light enough to peer up through the small window above my cot and count the small delectable sparrows as they flit between the eaves of the hospital and the sumac tree in the circular driveway. The swelling in my tongue has long subsided and its vibrations seem a comfort to me now. It is this organ that alerts me to the arrival of my thrice-daily meals. My eyes are infected by a thick film that the attendants refuse to wipe away. Luckily, my field of vision is not completely obscured, just somewhat narrowed. I have long lost feeling in my arms and hands and I am quite certain that if the jacket was removed no evidence of these limbs would remain. In the cool night air, my skin glows with a pearly luminescence that even my current raiment can't completely enshroud. The epidermal layers around my once-feet have already begun to slough away. I sense that by morning the skin of my torso will have lifted in a similar manner. Although it shocked me when I first understood the inevitable result of my current transformation, I realize now that I was never overly attached to my earlier body. The soft pink epidermis. The taut pinched muscles. The awkward bones and stomping gait. All that will disappear to be replaced by the sleek elegance of my new form. Although future generations may shudder when they feel the first bites of this newest-and-oldest of plagues, I must reassure them during these final moments of tranquil lucidity that I am quite content, happy even. I have slipped from the clay ash of my body to become the thing that once taught us to discern pathways in the wilderness. I am transformed by the disease that has always lain waiting for the unguarded steps of man. In the morning they will find the dried pale husk of my spent human form and they will think me dead, but I am not dead. I will exercise total
control over my length and form. I will own my body and it will slip with a sound like
dried leaves through the bloody soil you bury history with. For I am reborn, I am the
serpent. I am the snake.

And if not tomorrow, well, I'm sure, sometime soon. I mean certainly there's
some explanation for all of this. A diagnosis? Perhaps that's too much to ask for. An
evaluation? Looking up, not promising, doomed. A label, surely a label is not too much
to ask.