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NEUROTICA (EXCERPT)

By

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B.A., Columbia University, 1988

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
University of Montana
1991

Approved by

(Chair, Board of Examiners)

(Dean, Graduate School)

(Date)
HOMING

Dad was late picking him up at the airport, and by the time they found each other, Brian had already picked his duffle bag off the luggage rack and stepped outside. Dad offered no explanation for his lateness, and Brian didn't ask for one. During the car ride home, they exchanged exactly one sentence.

"Sometimes it still feels like Mom'll be standing on the driveway waiting for me." Brian said.

"I'll bet." Dad said.

For the rest of the ride, Brian contented himself with sniffing the air gushing through the window he'd left cracked. Ocean smells. He listened to the typically muted music seeping out of the car speakers. Watched the sunscorched hills and the white convertible VW Rabbits driven by impossibly glowing girls as they hurtled past down the freeway.

He tried to imagine Tara or Perry here. Like most East Coasters Brian had encountered, both of them had such specific visions of Southern California that Brian wondered if they'd visited somewhere else, some other Southern California that he as a native had no access to. Until now. Now he'd lived somewhere else long enough to see what they saw. He wished Tara was here, so he could show her the other San Diego, the more intimate one he knew. He'd been wishing Tara was with
him quite a bit lately.

A few times, when Dad's gaze was directed elsewhere, Brian studied his father in the rearview mirror. Too much studying always made Dad feel cornered, so Brian kept his glances short. The grooves Dad had always had seemed to have suck even deeper into his cheeks, overlapping and tangling, as though taking root there. His hair seemed darker, dyed maybe, and it was definitely longer, creeping way down his neck to his shoulders. Jus unkempt, Brian wondered? Past behavior patterns of the Underwater Dad might suggest such an explanation. Except that it didn't look that unkempt. A stylistic choice? Did Underwater Dads do that?

At home, Dad grabbed Brian's bag out of his lap and carried it for him, and on the way up the front steps Brian decided to hazard a direct comment.

"I think, Dad." he said. "I think I like your hair."

"Think." Dad said. With a tiny, private smile.

Brian waited a few seconds to see if Dad would say any more, then decided not to press. They had three days together. Plenty of time. He took his bag and went downstairs.

All he'd brought home were two changes of clothes, some tapes, and a toiletry bag. Not much to unpack, but Brian dawdled as long as he could. Giving himself time to readjust to his room, and Dad time to recuperate from the first skirmish of this Thanksgiving weekend. The lone eucalyptus
tree outside Brian's window looked pretty much like it looked in the picture of it Brian had on his bulletin board at the Hanging Studio. A thin layer of dust coated the white wood stereo cabinet where he'd once kept his turntable. Not a lot of dust. The normal amount for a room that's cleaned regularly but not used very often. Brian felt a little tickle of nostalgia, but not much. Not as much as he'd expected. Even the photograph Dad had had blown up of Brian and the Ayatollah in the midst of all their tape equipment in the Little Room triggered little more than a smile. He leaned over to his window, looked out over the fence at the same red stucco roofs. Even when he'd lived here, not much had identified the exterior of this street as the spot where he lived, and seeing it again aroused no particular emotion. Just another San Diego development street. Instead of nostalgic, Brian felt alert. Poised for something. Stepping out of his room, he began to wander through the back of his father's house.

The sleek designer-mirror above the bathroom sink looked just a little streaked. As if the person wiping hadn't paid quite enough attention to getting all the windex off. Puzzled, Brian leaned back into his bedroom, checked the bed. Made. With new sheets. But the sheets weren't pulled tabletop-flat. The whole back of the house, in fact, looked less than spotless. As though the usual borderline-anal attention had ceased to be paid to it. Almost as though a
person lived here, not an Underwater Dad at all.

And they'd been in the house a good fifteen minutes, and Dad had just remembered to turn the stereo on. The chirping string sounds of the third Eno ambient record chased through the house. A pretty upbeat choice, Brian thought. If anything, Dad had seemed more withdrawn than ever on the ride home. Not mean. Just not present. Which Brian could understand, given that his son, who he had some tensions with even by phone, had just arrived for his first "visit." Plus the fact that today was Thanksgiving, which meant the whole L.A. half of Mom's side of the family would be showing up around five-thirty to partake of his exceptional turkey. Plus the fact that Dad had always been withdrawn. Always for the last five years, anyway.

But now, the long hair and the lived-in house and the chattering music and the memory of that moment outside the airport a few months ago, when something between them had started to loosen at last, all sang out an unexpected welcome to Brian. An invitation. Flashing a hopeful smile at his reflection in the bathroom mirror, Brian hurled himself up the stairs and into his weekend. Ready or not, Dad, he thought. Here I come.

Dad was basting the bird. When Brian asked what he could do, Dad pointed with the meat thermometer at the tattered yellow swatch of legal paper scotch-taped to the refrigerator.

Brian stared at the paper, then laughed. The Checklist.
They same one that, according to Mom, Dad had used since the first year of their marriage, when Mom's oldest sister Felice and Felice's husband Nat discovered she'd married a man who actually knew what to do with a turkey. Aunt Felice and Uncle Nat had sworn themselves to secrecy, but word soon filtered out through the family's myriad L.A. fingers that someone they were related to wasn't eating corned beef and knishes on Thanksgiving.

The year Mom died, Dad told everyone not to come. And the year after that. But last year, when Brian was away on tour, Dad had suddenly called up Felice and told her to invite everybody. He'd shown Brian the pictures from that evening, bragged about his new turkey sauce. Brian had said he wished he could have been there, which apparently wasn't what his father wanted to hear, because the animation he'd been showing left him in a hurry.

Now, staring at the Checklist, Brian felt a surge of affectionate familiarity. "Want me to make the kugel, Dad?" he asked, knowing full well the answer he'd receive.

"Uh, I'll make the kugel." Dad said, and Brian laughed. An although Dad's face was three-quarters turned away from him, Brian was pretty sure a smile took shape across the grooved cheeks for a second, then drifted apart again, like a smoke signal.

"Why don't you skin the po-ta-toes, Brian?"

"Po-ta-toes." Brian said, mimicking Dad's playfulness and
not bothering to keep the wonder out of his voice. This is going to happen, he thought. Just like Tara had told him it would.

But after that promising start, they spent the next four hours prepping their way down the Checklist and saying almost nothing to each other. Brian tried a few times. He told Dad a Big Martha story, but all that elicited was a soft chuckle as Dad left the room to change the record. Next, Brian tried reciting the Black-i Martineau ordeal, which got two chuckles. Finally, Brian told Dad about walking into Skinslicer Records on Bleecker and buying the whole Eno ambient series used on cassette for ten bucks. That got an eyebrow raise. And when Brian admitted to picking up some J. Greinke tapes too - just a couple, just because they reminded him of home - Dad nodded and smiled and said "God, maybe you really are my son."

By then, they'd reached the first of three dishwashing phases on the Checklist, and with the faucet gushing and the music chirping, distinguishing Dad's murmured answers became too difficult and Brian gave up. He stared out the kitchen window, watching two little girls he'd never seen before play some unfathomable game with a boogie board and a hula hoop and two kickballs on the driveway of the house across the street. Two little girls, maybe eight years old, both wearing french-cut bathing suits and L.A. Gear sneakers. Whiling away the hours before Thanksgiving dinner, California style. I grew up here, Brian thought. Weird.
He finished the dishes, started peeling the carrots Dad had laid out on the counter, and didn't resume the conversation. The music coursed gently around them, swelled, and submerged them both. Brian could feel himself go under, slip back into the old insistent rhythm of not speaking and not quite listening. The Aquarium Sensation, except that this time, in addition to feeling submerged, another part of Brian seemed to be watching himself sinking, watching his body and his father's circle around each other and around the kitchen. Sort of a Visitor at the Aquarium Sensation. Which, he thought, was upsetting him more? Feeling unable to communicate, or watching himself feel unable to communicate?

At five-thirty, the van from L.A. finally arrived, spilling four shrieking kids and three aunts and two uncles and, good God, Marla the Freelance Cousin into the front hallway, and if the house didn't exactly lose the Aquarium feel, at least now it felt like a thriving aquarium. The hugs and kisses parade began, proceeding at its usual meandering pace past Dad, then Brian. Uncle Nat. Aunt Felice, looking a whole lot older. Uncle Sollo and his rabbinical forehead. Aunt Ruth. Aunt Rachel, marla's mom and Brian's favorite aunt, and she gave him a big squeeze and whispered to him to be nice to Marla.

Then Marla stepped up, with her astounding pink hair which Mom had so accurately pinpointed as the color of jelly donut filling, worn straight and shaggy at her shoulders,
makeup-less face a little prettier than Brian remembered it, yellow-green eyes a little greener, lightning-smile a little faster. She flashed the smile once, tentatively, as she looked into Brian's face. Dropped it. Flashing it again. Reached up and kissed him on the cheek, and Brian felt himself tangle up, Marla, now, fuck, he didn't know what to say.

Marla just nodded, stepped past him into the house, and then Brian knew what to say.

"Hey. General." he said.

For just a second, just the first second after she turned back to him, Marla looked confused. Then a smile, not so fast this time. "Got some jeans I could borrow?" she said.

"I'm pretty sure I could dig some up."

"Then you're on. General." Then she winked at him.

Winked at me, Brian thought. The kind of gesture only Marla could get away with. And only because his crush on her had been so total. He could feel the residue of it stirring inside him even now, like embers, flaming up into a blush.

While she changed, Brian began collecting the kids and herding them outside. Marla's little brother Samuel was the only one to complain. Seems someone had told him there'd be a Nintendo at this party. When Aunt Rachel called down to ask where they were going, Samuel answered "I don't know. Brian's trying to make me play something."

"Shame on you, Brian." said Aunt Rachel, appearing briefly on the staircase. "Are you and Marla going to tach
"Yep." Brian said, and smiled at her.

Aunt Rachel smiled back, she was wearing green and she looked a lot like Mom in the Glacier Park portrait. Aunt Rachel always seemed to be smiling, but she rarely seemed happy. Sometimes Brian wondered if his crush hadn't been as much on her as on Marla.

Once outside, Brian told the kids to just run around until Marla came out, then sat down on the cracking, weed-flecked patio to wait.

A flat splotch of sun still hung low over the stucco roofs, surrounded by streaks of orange like a palmprint in a fingerpainting. The ocean wind played with the remaining Eucalyptus leaves and with the part in Brian's hair, disguising its chill with its softness. With some satisfaction, Brian decided Marla would be shocked if she ever met Tara. Because Tara was nothing like her. Neither small nor fragile. Not evasive. No cutesy. Although Tara was certainly cute. But Tara was a grownup, and Marla would never be.

He stuck his head back inside, yelled for Marla to hurry up and to borrow a sweater, too, and just as he slid the door shut he heard Uncle Sollo say to someone "God, it's like they saw each other five minutes ago instead of five ---" Then the door sealed and cut him off. Five years.

Marla the Freelance Cousin. Who'd taught him how to hand by his ankles off the front deck. How to play the Family
Version of Capture the Flag, which they were about to unleash on an unsuspecting generation. When she was eight and Brian sever, she told him what an orgasm was, and it was twelve years before Brian discovered that part of her information was wrong. His partner that wet summer night, a singer in one of the local bands, had laughed and laughed, gentle laughs but she couldn't stop, and finally she'd had to get up off her towel and wander away down the beach for a while. Brian hadn't been able to make love again for over a month, and even then he had to be coaxed like a little kid and he hated that.

At age fourteen, Marla had played him Mission of Burma's "Academy Fight Song," and so in three explosive minutes redirected his whole life.

And then she'd disappeared. Not all at once. Uncle Sollo moved her family to L.A., and the gap between her meetings with Brian steadily lengthened as Marla settled into her new life. But when she did show up, via a 2 a.m. phone call or a long letter that broke a six month silence, she always seemed so relieved to hear his voice, so excited to share with him, that all the anger Brian had been saving up burst in his throat, leaving him with an ashy discomfort on the back of his tongue and a welcoming grin.

After Mom died, Marla managed to show up for all of three hours out of the seven days of Shiva sitting, then almost made up for it by climbing in Brian's window at quarter to four in the morning three weeks later and carting him off to the
beach. They sat together and held hands and watched the foggy sunlight creep over the ocean like a veil. Brian could still remember how small her hand felt. Just a wisp of a hand, really. Barely a hand at all. He remembered feeling uncomfortable holding it, and never wanting to let it go. He remembered her telling him, in a delicious, confessional whisper that brushed across his nerve-endings like a feather, that no matter who he wound up with, she'd be jealous. Until tonight, he hadn't seen or heard from her since.

Her own mother branded her with the nickname, during the annual gossip session with her sisters and Brian during Mom's last Thanksgiving. As usual, Brian had wanted to ask Aunt Rachel about Marla all night, and as usual he hadn't, because having to ask embarrassed him somehow. Aunt Rachel had flipped her own jelly-donut hair up off her forehead with a soapy finger and looked at Mom, propped in a chair with her right arm, the one with the i.v. in it, pressed into the kitchen table like a kickstand. Then she said "Guess who showed up at my house yesterday? Just to drop off a copy of the new L.A. Weekly, which just happens to have her first published article right there on page two." Her strange, anxious smile sketched itself across her lips. "Yep, you guessed it. Marla the Freelance Daughter." And all three of her sisters had laughed, and after a while she laughed too.

Just as Samuel turned toward Brian, the unmistakable glint of mutiny in his slinky brown eyes, Marla the Freelance
Cousin emerged at last, pink dress replaced by an ancient pair of Brian's jeans and a navy blue sweater Brian hadn't seen since high school.

"What'd you do, have a little archaeology expedition in my closet?" Brian asked.

Marla stared at him and didn't laugh. "That's kind of a funny comment." she said.

"Yeah. Broke you up, I noticed."

That got a lightning smile.

With the kids gathered in around them, Marla and Brian began the Rules Recitation. Which was at least as traditional as the game itself, and Brian found himself chiming in right on cue, right where his cousin Veronica from San Francisco had chimed in when she and Marla first performed this ritual for him in, wow, 1977. As though he'd heard the speech ten thousand times instead of twice. Something in this speech seemed to trigger some genetic tripwire in this family's memory. Not one relative Brian knew of, with the possible exception of Uncle Sollo, could read much Trop in the Torah. Not even Uncle Sollo could wind tfillin correctly; Brian had learned that first hand, when he went to a morning service the week of his bar-mitzvah, and Uncle Sollo tried to teach him and wound up with the leather coiling up his shoulder and around his neck like a python. But all of them, every single family member for three generations now, could do the Rules Recitation. In a way, that was how this family practiced
"This game is to real Capture the Flag." Marla began.

"What indoor soccer is to real soccer." said Brian, wondering when that had been added. There was no indoor soccer fifty years ago. Was there?

"Sped up, trashy, fast."

"And more fun."

"And more fun. Your ancestors and mine brought this game from their homeland, but they found tiny California yards. So they changed the game to suit the arena."

"You've all played real Capture the Flag?" Brian asked. Two kids nodded, two didn't Brian ignored their responses. Knowledge of the other game helped not even a little in understanding this one. But the question was part of the ritual.

"As with real Capture the Flag, the object is to capture the other team's flag." said Marla. "But here, the flags - in this case these two old and remarkably ugly shirts of Brian's - remain visible at all times."

Brian smiled. "One flag hands on these steps," he said, "and the other hangs on the fence under that Eucalyptus tree. The only rule is that if you're tagged on the other team's side of the yard, you have to go back to your own side."

"No time outs."

"No biting."

"No scratching."
"No injuring of any kind."

"Can we fucking play already?" asked Samuel.

Marla stared at him. Smiled. "He's on your team, Brian."

"Good fucking sister." said Samuel, but Marla either didn't hear him or didn't react.

Brian suddenly wondered if Marla went by her own house any more often than she checked in with him. Probably not.

"You mean," he said, finishing the Recitation, "you guys don't want to hear the history of this game before we play?"

"Nooo." wailed little Daniel, Aunt Ruth's kid. Right on cue.

"You know, Marla, it's a good thing no one ever answers yes to that question."

"You've never heard the history either?"

"Nope. Neither did my mom. I asked her once."

Instantaneously, Marla's expression changed. Her eyebrows caved in towards each other. Her smile evaporated. She cocked her head, widened her eyes, and Brian realized this was all because he'd mentioned his mother. Christ, didn't Marla know that was five years ago? Didn't she understand how long ago that was?

During the next hour, they played seven rounds of the game. Once, during the third round, Brian glanced up at the house and caught sight of Dad silhouetted against the living room window between Aunt Rachel and Uncle Sollo. Taller than both of them, standing with his head bent forward and shaking
ever so slightly like the tip of a tuning fork. Which meant he was laughing. And Brian shivered. All afternoon, Dad hadn't even seemed a functioning fish in his own Aquarium world. Whereas now, at least from here in the yard, he looked nothing less than lord of it.

Just as Brian brought his attention back to the game, little Daniel shot past him and grabbed the flag off the steps, and Samuel scowled and demanded to be traded.

"Shut up, Samuel." Brian snapped, scowling back. "All right, my team, let's get us some flag." And as he marched his team back into formation for the next round, Brian tried to focus this evening out of the surreal blur it was becoming. Because of Moms absence, Marla's presence, Dad's flashes of color, which seemed to bury themselves whenever Brian was looking.

Brian won the tie-braking seventh round with a spin move he'd learned from Perry that left Daniel and Marla tripping all over each other in his wake. He lunged for the flag, hoisted it high over his head. Samuel ran up and slapped Brian a high five. Laughing, Brian fitted the shirt over Samuel's head, headdress style, for the traditional victory lap around the yard.

The sky had dimmed to charcoal grey now, and even with his sweater Brian felt cold. When Aunt Felice called them in, Brian and Marla ordered everyone to the mess hall, and as they followed the kids through the sliding door Marla slid her tiny
hand through Brian's elbow. A gesture that would have carried a shock of pleasure in other days. Days before Tara. It still carried a little bit of pleasure, he had to admit.

The spread on the dining room table could have been lifted from any one of the previous twenty Thanksgivings, except for the shiny, square black and white plates Dad had designed and made himself for Mom's fortieth and final birthday. Those still felt new. But beside the plates sat Dad's turkey, burnished red with his classic Mexican Dad Secret Sauce. And around the turkey sat stuffing, Dad's kugel, two jellos, and a greenish pumpkin pie from Uncle Sollo, who claimed he would cook but wouldn't eat what he made. Three Challas, a Manischewicz wine for the brachas, two juice decanters. One fancy, fluted, empty juice glass in front of every plate, plus four full ones next to Dad's place at the end of the table: one for his father, two for Brian's maternal grandparents, one for Mom. Those glasses would sit there, untouched, all through the meal and all through the night, and they'd be the last thing Dad and Brian cleaned up tomorrow morning.

The complete Amer-Jewish Amalgamated Holiday, Brian thought as Uncle Sollo lifted a cup of Manischewicz and chanted a quick boray pri. Turkey and jello from American Thanksgiving. Full glasses for the dead, like the Eliahu glass at the Passover seder. Challah, wine, and blessings from Shabbat.
Uncle Sollo broke the bread, made Samuel say the moetzee, and he had just opened his sidur and opened his mouth to say Kiddush when Brian stepped forward and volunteered to sing it.

Uncle Sollo started at Brian, bushy eyebrows creeping well up his forehead. "You can sing Kiddush? The rock star knows Kiddush?"

From where he stood at the head of the table, Dad was waving frantic gestures at Brian. Shaking his head, and drawing his finger back and forth across his throat. Brian smiled.

"Sure. We used to sing it every Friday night while my mother was alive."

"You did?"

"And lots of times, when we're together, Dad and I still do."

"You do?" said Uncle Sollo, looking at Brian's father with a stunned, respectful smile.

Dad just sagged against his chairback. "Yep." he said. Helplessly. Then he looked up at Brian, and shrugged, and smiled. And Brian felt a little swell of pride.

He started to sing, and for the first line of the blessing, the line Brian knew all the words were right in, Uncle Sollo leaned back in his chair and grinned the most blissful grin. He kept on grinning through the next few lines, too, and Brian began to wonder if the version he and his mother and father had always sung, the one Mom had
approximated from memory because none of them could read Hebrew anymore, wasn't closer to the real thing than they'd realized. Dad was grinning too, Brian noticed, but not at him, he was leaning forward and whispering to Aunt Rachel and Aunt Felice, and when he'd finished Aunt Felice giggled and swatted his elbow.

"Go on." he saw Aunt Felice mouth.

Come on, Dad, Brian thought. Join in. Please.

But Dad didn't join in. And during the third sentence of the blessing, Uncle Sollo leaned over to Aunt Rachel and began whispering "What? What language is he speaking?"

Marla flashed Brian a thumbs up. She was laughing so hard she was shaking, and her tiny frame looked like it might fragment and fly apart like a clump of sparks.

Goddamnit, Brian thought. This wasn't for her. She'd been gone too long to matter. As he finished the blessing, Brian felt his voice tremble and begin to give way beneath him, but everyone seemed to think he was laughing, they were all winking at him and laughing with each other, and Brian said "Amen" and sat down blushing.

Uncle Sollo leaned forward and brandished his forehead at Brian. "You have made a mockery of God's blessing." he said.

"I didn't mean it as mockery." Brian said softly.

"You think that's bad, you ought to come down for Hanukkah and listen to us butcher the Mah-oh-tzor." said Dad, and everyone laughed. Even Brian, a little. Although he felt
All during dinner, Brian tried to engage other family members in conversation, so as to avoid talking to Marla. Seeing her laughing, seeing her presumptuous show of comraderie, Brian felt all the old hurt she'd inflicted return to him, and he didn't want to talk about it, but he was afraid he would if she pinned him.

So he asked Aunt Rachel about the dance class she taught, joked with Aunt Felice about the color of Uncle Sollo's pie, explained to Uncle Sollo that he'd intended his Kiddush recitation as a genuine expression of Jewishness as he'd experienced it, even though Uncle Sollo assured him beforehand that he didn't have to. But none of these exchanges became conversations. Everyone looked delighted when he inquired about their lives, then gave him short, summary responses to he could "get back to Marla."

Again, he wished Tara were here. Then wondered what she'd think of all these people. Then wondered when he'd decided she was going to meet all these people.

"God, Brian." Marla said, latching onto his wrist with her hand. "I don't remember you so sociable. So relaxed. You seem great."

Brian sighed.

"How are you, Brian?" she said, leaning in close and effectively screening him off from the rest of the table.

So he told her about the Hanging Studio, and he told her
a few of the "Dickhead Anecdotes" he'd saved up for the Ayatollah about the enchanting characters populating the rock music Biz. He told her about the Grin and Bear It, which Marla, of course, loved. Marla assumed some deep kinship for herself with all things quirky, even though she'd never done a quirky thing in her life. At least, not that she'd shared with Brian.

He tried to tell her about Big Martha, but found himself unable to. Old-cranky-intrusive-hilarious-genuine-philanthropist-boxer-lady just didn't cut it. Big Martha existed outside of language, or outside of Brian's language, anyway. Deep down in some primal New Yorkness that allowed no access to those outside of Manhattan, because they had no reference points to compare her with.

Finally, Brian told Marla a little about Tara. About all the incredible places she knew in the city, and about how she understood him so well and looked out for him all the time, and about how she loved to play in the rain.

Then Marla interrupted him. Tightened her grip on his wrist and whispered in his ear. "Sleeping with her?"

God, Brian thought, this woman had nerve. He didn't want to give Marla a straight answer, she didn't deserve one. An besides, the straight answer tingled somewhere in his throat, near his lungs, one of those tingles a cough couldn't quite reach.

"No." he said.
"Brian? Not once?"

"Not yet. Jesus Christ, Marla, don't worry about it. I'm not." And he wasn't. Not really.

"How many times have you seen this woman?"

"Five times, I think. Is it so strange to you to not have slept with someone in the first month you've know them?"

"How old is this woman?"

"28."

"It's strange."

"Will you lay off, Marla?"

"Sure, Bri." she said. "You just sounded so serious about her."

Bri. No one called him that. Not even Tara. "I am serious about her. Very serious."

Marla's hand stayed clamped around him. Her head leaned closer to him, her eyes searching his, and suddenly Brian stopped feeling angry. For whatever reason, Marla was clinging to him. She needed to do this. And it cost him nothing.

"We kiss and everything." he said. "We just haven't slept together. But you're right, I don't know where it's going right now. I think about her a lot though."

"That's great, Bri." Marla said. And released his wrist. And leaned back.

"Why don't we move on to you." said Brian. "Articles out?"
"Lots."
"Seeing anybody?"
"Maaaybe."
"Whooo?"

"Welllll." said Marla. Smiling a big smile at him. "Remember the Paul Paine fiasco?"

"Yep." Brian said, wishing he hadn't. Her history, this repartee came back way too easily.

She droned on all through dessert, pausing only to reload her plate with Dad's kugel and the smallest piece of her father's green pumpkin pie she could convince him to give her. Brian asked for a bigger piece, and Uncle Sollo once again looked stunned and then said "He's trying to kiss up to me because of his Kiddush," to which Marla replied, "Either that or he's suicidal," and everyone but Uncle Sollo laughed. And then retreated back into their own conversations again.

Marla told him about her new surfing boyfriend, her apartment, an article she was planning on L.A. Jews. Brian listened, joked, nodded. Even squeezed her hand once. Tara had shown him how to do this. He felt great. And Marla just kept on smiling. Finally, when he was sure he could do it without hurting her, Brian stood up to clear the table.

For the next half hour, he washed dishes with Aunt Rachel. They didn't talk at all until most of the work was finished, and the stacks of black and white plates glistened in the drainboard. The breeze sneaking in the screen door
sent pleasant shivers up them both as it filled the room with ocean smells. In just three months, Brian had forgotten how good the ocean smelled. And how much he like standing in this kitchen, at this time, next to Aunt Rachel, surrounded by dishwashing sounds and other-room conversation sounds. Suddenly snug in his own history.

An easy feeling to take for granted, he though, because he realized he hadn't felt it in a long time. Not since Mom died. Not since before that, even. He'd shut himself down for quite a while. But he was back, now. Thanks to Tara, he was waking up at last.

"You know, Brian." Aunt Rachel said as she dried the kugel pan Brian had just managed to chisel clean. "It really is incredible the way you two just picked your relationship right up. You and Marla."

Brian sprinkled Comet onto the countertop, then made a tired circle around the formica with his sponge. "Yeah, well. I think Marla can pretty much pick up relationships in her sleep."

Aunt Rachel nodded, looked down at the floor and didn't say anything, and Brian suddenly realized that wasn't the right thing to say.

"She has so much to offer." he tried. "It's hard not to respond to her."

"Brian, ssh." said Aunt Rachel, and when she looked up she was smiling that unsettling smile. She crossed her arms,
began rubbing her hands up and down the sleeves of her dress.  
"Why does she do that, do you think?"

"I think -"

"You seem different, though, Brian. You know, I used to think you and Marla were so alike, your mom and I used to think so, but now ... what?"

Mom had thought he was like Marla. Talked about it with Aunt Rachel. When there was nothing in the world he wanted more than not to be like Marla. The thought of Mom dying thinking of him that way had set him shivering, and he realized he was staring, hard, at Aunt Rachel. At his reflection in her eyes. He blinked, looked away.

"I don't know, sorry. You were saying?"

"Oh. I was just saying you seem different. So much more ... present, or something."

"Yeah?"

"Oh, year, lots more like your dad."

My DAD, Brian almost blurted out, and while his brain scrambled around confirming that the words "present" and "Dad" had appeared in the same sentence, Aunt Rachel leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek.

"Thanks for not laying into my daughter." Aunt Rachel said quickly. "She really does love you, you know, it's just how she is, I love you too, your Mom would have been so proud of you now," and then she was raising a hand to her face. Before Brian could tell if she was crying or not she was gone
from the kitchen.

By the time Brian felt he'd digested enough of that conversation to follow Aunt Rachel back out to the dining room, twenty minutes had passed, and Uncle Sollo and Uncle Nat had begun reeling in their respective families. By 10:30, the L.A. clan was gathered on the front driveway, tossing goodbyes over their shoulders as they piled into Uncle Nat's van. Brian hugged everyone, tried to give Aunt Rachel a special hug, but she just patted him on the arms and escaped into the van. Lonely woman, Brian thought, and wondered if she'd just think he was looking for a surrogate Mom if he sent her a letter.

Marla, of course, held out the longest, and for just a second, as they stood there smiling at each other, Brian felt a little of the old ache, the why-didn't-she-write-him ache. Then Marla stepped up and hugged him.

"You didn't get mad at me." she whispered.

"What would be the point?" Brian asked. Gently. While squeezing her harder.

"God, I hope you find what you're looking for, Brian. What you need. You really deserve it."

I have found someone, Brian thought, and his smile widened. Yes, this weekend was important, especially the remaining days with Dad, but all of the sudden he couldn't wait to get back to New York. To Tara. He had some crucial things to say to her.
"Write me. If you get a chance."
"You know I won't."
"Yep."
"I do love you, Brian."

She really did, Brian decided. "I love you too." Brian said. And he supposed he did too. And saying it, seeing the shine in her face, made him feel wonderful. I did that, he thought.

With a last wave of her hand, Marla the Freelance Cousin climbed up into the van and slid the door shut, and a few seconds later the van was gone, Dad was back inside, and the street was empty. Brian stood alone on his father's driveway.

A fat full moon dripped pale light onto the houses and the cars and the cactus yards. Most of the houses still had lights on, but all the unfamiliar cars were gone, and the musical, kid-tinged holiday sounds had dissolved into the soft breathy bite of the wind. In the windows of his own house, Brian could see this father passing from room to room, picking up stray glasses, shutting off lights. He'd have music on already. Some piece he used only for post-family get-togethers. He'd go to bed soon, and he'd already told Brian he had to go in to work tomorrow, and Saturday night Brian had to be back in New York to do an extended mix of "The Moon Split Open" with Black-fucking-i Martineau.

Which left tomorrow night. For he and Dad to do some healing.
The next morning, Brian slept late and awoke to an empty house. He ate his Grape Nuts in front of "The Flintstones," wound up staying on the couch through "Gilligan's Island" and fifteen minutes of "Lifeguard Tower," channel 51's low-rent soap, before realizing how little he'd missed any of this in his TV-less Village apartment and slamming the damn thing off.

He picked up the phone and dialed the Ayatollah's parents' house, figuring he would have stayed over there Thanksgiving night. On the third ring his mom answered, and, in a straight, professional half whisper, said "The Ayatollah's office."

Laughing, Brian asked to put him through to His Khomeniness.

"I'll see if he'll speak to you, Brian. Welcome home." his mom said in the same secretarial whisper, and a few seconds later the Ayatollah himself picked up the phone.

"Hey, Brian."

"Hey, 'Tollah. Got Mom trained, I see."

"She knew it was going to be you."

"How'd she know?"

"I told her."

"How'd you know?"

"Brian, I'm tired, and you're exasperating me."

"Ayatollah?" Brian taunted. "Bestest buddy? It's Storyday."

"No it isn't. Go away."
"Hear that voice, Ayatollah? It's your long lost creative self, your better half, and it's calling out to you. Hear it?"

"I hear you, and you're exasperating me. Go back to New York."

Brian smiled. "'Ayatollah,' it's saying. 'Go to the Little Room. Sit under Dog. Make your long lost best friend happy.'"

"Hold on." said the Ayatollah, and without waiting for Brian to say he would, dropped the phone down on his desk and walked away. When he came back, his voice sounded less gravelly, if no less grumpy. "Brian?" he said.

"Right here, buddy. Not five miles from your front door."

"Yeah. Listen. Okay, I admit, it might be storyday. I said might. But we have to do something first."

"What?"

"We have to go out to lunch. The Sand-witch. I'll meet you there, one o'clock, bye."

Just like that, the line disconnected. Brian stared at the receiver in his hand. Laughed. A true Ayatollah welcome, he thought.

Except, come to think of it, that the Ayatollah wanted to go to lunch. The Ayatollah didn't generally do lunch. Not with his friends. He considered lunch a dangerous opportunity for someone to force him to talk for an extended period of
time. The Ayatollah generally made Brian torture him into the Little Room, but he'd always like Storydays, or trips to the beach or afternoon matinees or, probably, getting his wisdom teeth pulled a hell of a lot better than he like doing lunch. I really have been gone awhile, Brian thought. Then he felt himself flush with warmth. Either he'd really been gone awhile, or the Ayatollah had really missed him.

Next, Brian called his father at his father's new office -- wondering, as he did so, why Dad had waited until no one lived with him to get an office -- and asked if they could have dinner together. His father said sure, if he got home in time, then said he had to take another call and hung up in a hurry.

Brian spent the rest of the morning washing his dishes, making his bed, pulling some weeds in his father's back garden. Then he climbed up into the peach tree against the back fence and perched in the branches awhile. There was a Santa Ana blowing in, and Brian found himself plucking his shirt away from his body and gasping in the heavy desert air. No ocean smells today. Between the houses along the street behind his father's house, Brian could see the cliffs that bounded the ravine that ringed Solana Beach. Only the ravine wasn't really there anymore. A whole city of blue-grey cedar-slat three-story condos, complete with zip code, had popped up on top of it in the three months Brian had been gone. Sort of an Atlantis in reverse. An so San Diego went on sprawling.
Defenders of the sprawl said San Diego was fast becoming the more liveable L.A., which Brian considered no defense anyway, but it wasn't even true. L.A. sprawled, yes, and it had traffic and smog and way too many Biz people, but it also had real glamour and real neighborhoods and real energy. While San Diego, at least east of the freeway, kept building real shopping malls. Every time Tara laughed at Southern California, Brian defended it, and he'd go on defending it, because there were things like Big Pritchett's and the beach culture and the La Jolla Museum west of I-5 that were worth defending. But he didn't want to live here anymore.

Finally, at 12:40 on the all-weather clock his father had designed and built and hung on the garage door, facing out like a coat of arms from a fortress, Brian wheeled his old ten-speed out from behind a box of art supplies, oiled the wheels and the chain, and set out for the Sand-witch. All the way down he imagined Tara riding beside him. He imagined pointing out the race track. Telling her about the summer he'd worked there. Grate stories from that summer. Then Tara would say "Race you to the ocean," because Tara loved to play, and she'd beat him by a good five minutes, and he'd ride up eventually and kiss her when they stopped, and she'd say he did that well. She'd told him that a couple of times.

The ride seemed longer than he remembered. Part of that was the heat. Part of it was that he lived in New York now, and the miles he was covering on this trip probably added up
to half the length of Manhattan. Which was incredibly weird. He tried to superimpose a Village block over the beach-houses and condos, so he could judge how much of Manhattan he would traverse by biking this same distance there, but he found he couldn't do it. He just couldn't imagine all those places, all those people, here. From this three thousand mile distance, New York City still seemed every bit as much like a make-believe place as it had before he lived there.

At exactly one o'clock, he pulled into the Sand-witch and chained his bike to the sidewalk side of a NO PARKING sign. The Sand-witch. Favorite lunchtime meeting place for beach days. Brian had been here many times, with Big Pritchett employees or dates or even with his parents, way back when. He couldn't remember ever coming here with the Ayatollah, though.

He didn't go inside. The Ayatollah did punctuality only slightly less often than he did lunch. Instead, Brian sat down at one of the black wire-mesh tables, wiped at least a little of the sweat off his forehead with the collar of his t-shirt, and pulled his chair around so that it was shaded on one side by the Bacardi-and-Coke umbrella in the center of the table and on the other side by an overhanging scraggle of rose bushes. He didn't see the Ayatollah until the Ayatollah banged his sandwich tray down on the table.

"We're sitting right over there." the Ayatollah snapped, gesturing inside the tiny glass-and-cedar shack that housed
"Hi, Ayatollah." Brian said with a smile, and before the Ayatollah could protest too loudly, Brian stood up and hugged him.

The Ayatollah surprised him by hugging back. "Welcome home, 'Dog'-man." the Ayatollah said.

"Good to see you." said Brian, and released his friend. The Ayatollah had never liked this hugging business when Brian left on tours, and Brian couldn't imagine him liking it much now, especially in public. Unless he was feeling as happy about this meeting as Brian was suddenly feeling. "Great to see you."

"All right, enough of that crap." said the Ayatollah, then pointed inside the shack again. "Do you want to get your turkey-mango suprango first, or come meet the surprise?"

First, before he finally registered that the Ayatollah had said "we" were sitting inside the shack and that someone else was waiting for them, Brian found himself gaping at Ayatollah's mention of the turkey-mango suprango. Which was, without question, the only sandwich that those who had tried it ever ordered at the Sand-witch, but how did the Ayatollah know that? He stared at his friend. The strange, tanless face, pockmarked from his endless acne. The new, even-thicker horned rim glasses. The eyes that crouched far back behind the lenses and scowled a lot.

"You look good, Brian. Not as tanned as usual, but you
don't look so scrawny this time. you been working out or something?"

"Playing basketball." Brian said absently. he stared some more at his friend. "Ayatollah, you look --"

"Blinder." the Ayatollah said cheerfully, tapping his glasses. "Go get your sandwich. I'll warn the surprise you're coming."

Brian went inside to get his sandwich. The tables were around the corner, so he couldn't see where the Ayatollah went, but that was fine with him. He needed a second to think. Collect himself. He'd had this afternoon all planned out. A long talk with his oldest friend over turkey-mango suprangoes. About music, and a certain New York lady, and life without each other. Then a quick swim down at Pillbox Beach. Then home to the Little Room for an all-new "Evil-Dog" adventure. He'd even bought candles and all new tapes and set them out in the Little Room after Dad went to bed last night, so everything would be ready.

But now, the Ayatollah wanted to show him something. Someone. Someone Brian used to know, who'd moved back? Good God, he suddenly thought. What if it was Kathy Moreland? Kathy Moreland had been a singer with the first band Brian ever did sound for. She'd had dyed green hair, but not like any other dyed green hair. Not garish, or loud. Lush. Soft. When she sang her long, sad, hypnotic songs, her hair seemed to drift in the spotlight, shine there like the long thin
leaves of a sea-anemone. Brian and the Ayatollah had both been in love with her. She hadn't been in love with eight of them, but she'd been a wonderful friend to them both for a while. Even made a couple "Evil-Dog" adventures with them the last summer of high school. She'd left her band and San Diego behind to go to Berkeley. On her last night, she'd sat on the rocks at La Jolla Cove with one arm around Brian and one around the Ayatollah and cried so hard and so long that the Ayatollah asked Brian if they should take her to the hospital. Neither he nor the Ayatollah had ever found out where all that anguish came from. And neither of them had ever heard from her again. Although she'd sworn, right at the end, that she'd come back.

Kathy Moreland. That really could be it. Courtney, the cashier at Big Pritchett's had written him in a letter that she thought she'd seen Kathy at a show down here six weeks or so ago. Besides, if it wasn't her, the Ayatollah would have told him what this was all about on the phone. He hadn't told him on the phone, because the Ayatollah could never talk about Kathy Moreland. She'd been the closest he'd ever come to a girlfriend, and one night when he and Brian were camping on the beach he'd woken up talking about her and he told Brian he had no idea what she'd wanted with him, and anytime after that when Brian brought her up he just shivered and stopped talking.

As the girl at the counter brought Brian his sandwich,
Brian decided he was pretty sure he was right. He didn't know why her name had popped into his head with such certainty, but he could feel her presence in this place. More, he could feel it in his friend. The Ayatollah had never looked like he looked today, before or since. Only then.

He took one more moment to steady himself, but found he didn't need it. He was, of course, curious about Kathy. But he had his life now. And he was never the one who'd woken up nights talking about her. The Ayatollah had done that. He picked up his tray, carried it around the corner, and for just a few seconds longer, he continued to think he was right.

There was a woman there, all right. Seated with her back to Brian, facing the Ayatollah and in the process of kicking him under the table. She had black hair, but Brian just assumed her old hair-color had washed out of her. Along with her band and San Diego and the two of them. He stepped up to the table, smiled, turned to the woman.

He stared at her for a long time.

"Hi." she said at last. "You must be Brian. I've heard pretty much your whole life story."

"Uh." said Brian, and lowered himself slowly into the chair they'd pulled up for him.

"It's been so long since Brian's had a suprango, the mere presence of one seems to have reduced him to drooling." said the Ayatollah, but he was frowning at Brian. "What's your problem, Brian?"
Somehow, Brian got enough control of himself to pull himself upright, smile at the woman. Why, he wondered, was this such a big deal. It wasn't Kathy Moreland. Just some woman the Ayatollah wanted him to meet. Some woman with short dark hair and a red headband-bandanna and a friendly smile. It wasn't Kathy Moreland. Who had said it was going to be?

"I'm sorry." Brian said, and the act of speaking made him feel a little better. A little more balanced. He'd knocked himself offline for a minute there, but he was back now. "I'm Brian. And I'm not sure just what my problem is."

The woman laughed. Reached out her hand, which Brian shook. "I'm JoAnne."

"My squeeze." said the Ayatollah, but then he started blushing, and Brian realized there was a whole different reason he hadn't talked about this on the phone.

The woman ignored both Ayatollah's comment and his blush, and set about eating her own sandwich. Brian ate too. Warm sunlight filtered in through the floorlength window and the branches of the eucalyptus trees outside it. For about five minutes, they all ate and glanced around at each other. Then Brian began to ask questions. And the Ayatollah, and JoAnne, began to talk.

They'd met, they said, at a bowling alley. In the championship game of the Kearney Mesa mix-and-match bowling league, to be exact. Brian didn't know the Ayatollah had even entered such a league, couldn't remember the Ayatollah ever
going bowling with anyone but him, and he said so.

"Yeah, well. You think all my hobbies just evaporate when you leave?"

"No." said Brian. "I just didn't think bowling was one of your hobbies. I mean, I don't know, it was something we did to fill time."

"Bowl to fill time?" said JoAnne, looking horrified.

"Don't listen to him, Jo, he didn't mean it." said the Ayatollah, and the two of them laughed.

They'd bowled on opposing teams. And every time a bowler on Ayatollah's team lined upon the arrows, JoAnne would suddenly burst into coughs. Allergies, she'd said. About half way through the game, the Ayatollah had jerked an easy nine-ten spare wide because of that cough, then slipped out of the alley without a word to his teammates, ran next door to the K-Mart, bought JoAnne three different flavors of cough drops. None of which, of course, quite stopped her cough. JoAnne's team won by twenty-three pins.

Both JoAnne and the Ayatollah had laughed their way through their story. Smiled at each other a lot. But as they neared the end of the championship game, Brian noticed the Ayatollah stopped talking so much. Then stopped talking at all.

"So after the game, I went over to him." JoAnne said. "Partially to, uh, thank him for the cough drops, partially to do some good-natured gloating --"
"And we've been going out ever since." snapped the Ayatollah. "The end. How are you, Brian?"

"Wait a second --" JoAnne said, but the Ayatollah aimed his most ferocious glower at her, and she stopped. Not out of fear. She stopped because she was laughing.

To Brian, watching this whole exchange and eating his suprango in the hazy sunlight was one of the most dizzying experiences he could ever remember. He ate, he listened, but he couldn't taste his sandwich and he didn't feel balanced quite right on his chair and the voices of his friend and this woman sounded strange, tinny. As though he wasn't really here. As though he was watching the whole thing on television. The sensation had started with the Ayatollah's announcement about bowling, and it had intensified steadily ever since.

"Brian?" said JoAnne, glancing over at him and then the Ayatollah. "Is he sick?"

"You could ask him." said the Ayatollah, using exactly the same grumble he used on Brian, and softened for everyone else.

"Brian, are you sick?"

Brian shook his head. Put the rest of his sandwich back in his tray. Tried a smile. "Stunned." he said. "But you didn't finish your story."

"I was hoping you'd notice that." said JoAnne.

"I was hoping you'd notice that." the Ayatollah sneered.
"What did he do?" Brian said, and for the first time found himself laughing a little. "I mean, you're skipping the most important step. How did you guys --"

"He dared me to go out with him."

Brian stared at her. "HE initiated it?"

"Just like that. He says to me 'Convenient cough you got. Think you're tough, huh?' And I said no, I think we won. And he says 'if you're so tough, I dare you to go out with me.' And I did. And now," and she patted the Ayatollah's hand, and the Ayatollah was still glowering, but he grabbed JoAnne's hand and held it. "Now, we can say, we've been 'going out,' as you so quaintly put it, dear, ever since. Right, Brian?"

Brian had that dizzy feeling again. "Right." he said.

"And now I can go to the bathroom. Excuse me, gentlemen." And she left. She was wearing a short black skirt, not too short, but lots of leg showing. She had attractive legs. Tan. Brian tried to imagine the Ayatollah touching those legs. But he couldn't.

He turned back to his friend. The Ayatollah was looking out the window. And blushing again. "What ..." Brian started, then thought about what he was going to say awhile, then started again. "What does she call you?" he asked.

"What do you think?" the Ayatollah growled, and faced Brian at last. "Ayatollah, same as everyone else."

"What do people at work call you?"
"Ayatollah. Even says it on my office door. Everyone except my boss, he's a moslem and he thinks I'm an asshole even though I told him it was just a joke, so he calls me Bert."

Silence for a minute. Brian still couldn't quite convince himself he was present in this room.

"You asked her out?"

"I asked her."

"Ayatollah, that's ... amazing. That's wonderful. She seems wonderful."

"She doesn't make me be nice."

Brian laughed. The Ayatollah laughed too. They sat silent.

"What does she do?" said Brian.

"Laughs a lot."

Brian laughed again. Although he still couldn't shake his uneasiness, and he had no idea where it was coming from. "Does she work?"

"Grad student. Philosophy."

"Bullshit."

"You're the one who told me I needed to hand around more different people. You're the rock and roll influence in my past."

Whatever the uneasiness was, it was growing. Brian could feel it spreading up him, up from his feet like a chill. He sat and fingered his sandwich. Was he jealous? Maybe. No.
That wasn't it. He didn't mind JoAnne's hold on the Ayatollah. He welcomed it. The Ayatollah needed it. More, Brian just couldn't bring himself to believe it. He kept going over it and over it in his head, amused and afraid at the same time. Like a baby playing peek-a-boo, he suddenly realized. Discovering, for the first time, that life goes on without him.

JoAnne came back, and without a word, the Ayatollah got up and left for the bathroom. She was a pretty woman, no question about it. And funny. And tolerant enough to enjoy the Ayatollah.

"You guys seem great." Brian told her. "You seem great for him."

"Yeah, well, you paved the way." said JoAnne, nodding at Brian without smiling. "You're the only friend that really matters. He doesn't talk about you that much, because it hurts him too much, but it isn't hard to tell anyway."

"You think I need you to tell me that?" Brian snarled, almost more of a shout than a snarl, it was out of his mouth before he even knew what he was saying. He tried a smile to save himself, knowing in advance it was too late. Like throwing a mitt at a flyball you just blew as it sails over your head. "I don't know why I said that." he said, trying to sound apologetic, but even to himself he sounded phony. "This is hard. Strange." That at least, sounded truthful.

JoAnne had ducked back in her chair, and she watched him
and watched him and didn't say anything.

Brian looked down at his plate, feeling panicked, feeling like he wanted to dive for the front door and grab his bike and ride on out of here. Hasta la vista.

After a few minutes, the Ayatollah came back. Stood behind JoAnne's chair, with his hands on her shoulders and his eyes squinted against the sun.

"Storytime?" Ayatollah asked, but he seemed to sense something. His questions was more of a question that it should have been. "I've told Jo over and over about this. About the set up and the Little Room and Evil Dog and everything. I even played her the Halloween tape."

"I, um ..." said Brian, and stood too, so that he was face to face with his friend. "I can't. I haven't really seen my father yet, and I told him we'd spend the afternoon together."

Brian expected the Ayatollah would protest, hoped he would, because part of Brian desperately wanted to do Storytime. With JoAnne there. Kick enough dirt over what had just happened, whatever the hell it was, and bury it.

But the Ayatollah didn't protest. He just nodded. "Well." he said. "Too bad you have to go back so soon. Dickface." And the Ayatollah laughed.

Without looking down to see what JoAnne was doing, Brian approximated his own laugh. He felt genuinely sick to his stomach. He felt like he was going to feint.
"Walk me to my bike?" he said.

The Ayatollah nodded. He squeezed JoAnne's shoulders, stepped around her chair, and stood next to Brian.

"It really was great meeting you, JoAnne." Brian said.

"Yeah. You too." said JoAnne, and Brian couldn't read her expression, but the Ayatollah obviously could, because he stood there studying her with his fierce stare. Then he turned, and Brian followed him out of the Sandwich.

At the bike, the Ayatollah actually reached over and initiated a hug. Just a quick one. A brush of hands on shoulder blades.

"Ayatollah, I'm sorry." Brian suddenly said. "Tell her I'm sorry."

"What the hell --"

"Just ... tell her. Tell yourself. I got to go."

And he was up on his bike, swinging out across 101 and turning left down it, looking back only once to see his friend standing there. When the Ayatollah saw Brian looking, he waved. Brian waved back. His stomach wasn't only upset, it was cramping, and Brian rode most of the way home doubled over above the handle bars.

After what seemed like an even longer ride than going to the Sandwich had been, Brian braked into his driveway and dumped his bike on the pavement without standing it up and sat down against his garage door. All he did was breathe. He didn't think. Didn't anything. He just concentrated on
breathing. Tara had warned him it wouldn't all go right, although she was talking about his father then. She said he had to let himself off the hook, as well as his father. She said to remember to breathe.

He sat there all afternoon.

Around five-thirty, the temperature abruptly dropped about fifteen degrees and a thick, satiny fog appeared in the street, drawing itself up over the roofs of the houses and then down again like a hood. Fog this thick usually came in the morning, not at night. On schoolmornings, and suddenly Brian felt an echo of something ring through him; schoolmornings, his alarm clock tingling at 5:45, climbing out of bed and catching a glimpse of his father disappearing out the front door and into the fog, re-emerging maybe a minute later with the newspaper from the driveway and the dew from the fog on his forehead. Always, always, Dad spent about thirty seconds longer out there than his errand required. What did he do out there, Brian wondered? Just deep enough in the fog that his son couldn't see him? Did he just watch the houses, as Brian was doing now? Did he think about anything? Did he hum to himself, just a note or two to keep him company?

Brian stood up. He could feel the sudden chill probing up his arms like an alcohol pad before the needle goes in. He kept seeing the Ayatollah's confused stare as Brian rode away from him, then telling himself to stop it. He wished Tara were here. Finally, he went inside.
6:45. No sign of his father. Brian called the office, got no answer. Which meant Dad would be home within ten minutes. If he was coming come.

At 7:15, Brian boiled water for spaghetti. He made enough for both of them, but his father didn't come. So he carried his plate up to the living room and watched Dan Rather with the sound turned low. The fog hung heavy outside the windows now, obscuring everything beyond Mr. Congemi's house next door. The chill still stuck to Brian's arms, and no matter how hard he rubbed them it refused to away.

After Dan Rather came the night episode of "Lifeguard Tower," and sometime during the first rescue Brian fell asleep and dreamed about drifting down to earth in a snowstorm, landing on cars and trees and picnic tables and tongues and then melting. He didn't wake up until Dad woke him with a gentle shoulder-shake and a half-whispered "Brian?"

Brian's eyes popped open, focused themselves on Dad's grooved face, wearing its usual distant expression. There was music on, he realized. Pauline Oliveros. Dad had turned the music on before waking him up. Slid it around him in his sleep like a straightjacket.

"What time is it?" he said, and his voice came out gummy.

"A little after nine."

Brian dragged himself upright. Dad sort of smiled, turned, started away towards the kitchen.

"Have a good time today?" Dad said.
"Where the hell have you been?" Brian snapped, and Dad peaked his head back out of the kitchen and stared at him.

"Painting."

Painting, Brian thought. Dad hadn't painted in this decade. "Painting painting? As in painting a painting?" Brian stood up and followed his father into the kitchen. Dad was scooping spaghetti onto a plate. He'd left the lights out, and a smooth coat of shadows covered the counters and the cabinets and the walls.

"Thanks for leaving me dinner." Dad said. "This is great."

"Dad. What are you painting?"

"Don't know yet. Don't want to say yet."

For a few minutes, neither said anything. Dad stood at the counter and ate. The soft, shuddering music lilted on around them. Brian wondered how often his father ate like this. Alone in his house. Not even sitting at his table. Not saying anything.

"Dad, where have you been?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I thought we were going to have dinner together."

"I called a bunch of times. You never answered. I assumed you had plans."

"I was .... I was outside all day. I did the weeding."

"You did? Thanks, Brian."

"And then I had lunch with the Ayatollah. Shit, Dad, I
told you I have having lunch with the Ayatollah."

"No you didn't."

"Oh yeah, I didn't. Because you had to get off the fucking phone so fast." Brian felt his voice rising, rising, but Dad's refused to follow it up.

"What is your problem, Brian? I had a business call."

"I thought you were painting."

Dad signed. "I was. I also got a call. I even made a few."

"And you never thought, gee, my son's home for today only, maybe he'll want to see me?"

Now Dad dropped his fork in his plate and looked up at Brian. But the anger Brian thought - hell, hoped - he'd see on Dad's face was absent. He only looked puzzled. "Brian. What's this all about? I'm here now. What do you want?"

With a yank, Brian brought his voice back down to normal range, but he had to fight to keep it there. It kept lifting up on him, resisting him, like a kite in a gusty wind. "Let's go out for coffee." he said.

"Oh, Brian, I'd love to, but I'm truly tired."

"Please."

Silence. Then Dad stood up, carried his plate to the sink, ran water in it. "I'll get my keys." he said.

The Pauline Oliveros tape came with them out to the car. Music for Inciting Your Son to Riot, Brian thought as he settled back into Dad's Honda's pseudovinyl seats. It had
been more of a struggle than he'd ever dreamed it would be, but he'd gotten Dad out with him. The night could only get better.

Dad asked where they were going, and Brian said "You live here, take me somewhere new." Dad thought a minute and then nodded and smiled and said he knew just the place. That was the last thing either of them said until the end of the ride. The music went on whispering in the void their voices left. To Brian, the sound seemed to emanate from the vents rather than the speakers, and you inhaled it more than you heard it. Dad drove them down to the Coast Highway, hung a left, and off they headed down the Boardwalk, out of Solana Beach towards Del Mar.

At least a dozen beachfires blazed in the firecircles on Rivermouth Beach, and the ocean waves beyond them broke orange with their reflections. When Brian had lived here, he'd never have gone to a beach party in November. Too cold. Winter time. But right now he would've gone.

They came up the hill into Del Mar, past the crowd of Friday night high schoolers spread out along the benches outside Casa De Yogurt. Most of them standing, some of them smoking, all of them oblivious to the cars passing by or the occasional older couples wandering between them. All of them dressed in black or bright, bright colors. Brian had already forgotten people dressed in colors that bright. He didn't realize where Dad was heading until the car veered off the
Coast Highway onto 11th street, then began winding back through the stone and shingle houses towards the beach.

"CoffeePatio by the Sea?" Brian asked.

"You know it?" Dad said, sounding disappointed, and Brian felt yet another cramping in his stomach. Was it really possible that of all the hours he'd spent here in his life, not one of them had been with Dad? That he'd never even mentioned here to Dad?

"I never told you about CoffeePatio by the Sea?"

"I thought it was new." Dad said, and parked the car.

Not much had changed at CoffeePatio by the Sea. Same signless entrance, just an opening in the hedges lining the street. Same cracking brick patio, grey mesh tables, dim gasglobe lighting. Same crowd of UCSD kids clustered around a guy with a headband and a guitar. A few older married couples. A few retirees. All in black or bright, bright colors. Del Martians.

Dad bought them both Cafe au Laits, and he and Brian sat down at one of the center tables. For a few minutes they sat and sipped without speaking, watching the moonlight settle on the waves beyond the cliff the CoffeePatio perched on.

"So you're painting again." Brian finally asked.

"Yep, I am. Painting."

"That must feel great."

"Oh, Brian, it does." Brian waited a while, but Dad just sighed. "It does, it does."
"Want to hear about my girlfriend?" Brian said.
"Do you want to tell me about your girlfriend?"
"I do."

So Brian told him what Tara looked like. Soft, feminine face, girders for legs. He told Dad how gentle she was with him, using pretty much the same speech he'd used with Marla. He told Dad she was even an M.O.T., started to explain that, but stopped when he saw Dad smiling and realized he didn't have to. While Brian talked, Dad sipped his coffee and nodded his head and smiled at the right times, but he looked a little preoccupied. Which was how Dad always looked when he was painting.

"We haven't gotten around to sleeping together." Brian finished, not sure why he was offering that information. A last pathetic arrow shot up Dad's formidable barricade. "Think I should be worried?"

Not a groove twitched in Dad's face. The preoccupied expression remained. "Do you realize," Dad said, after another sip of his coffee, "That you'd been dating Charissa at least six months before you told me her name?"

Yes, Dad, Brian thought. Yes. "Do you realize it, Dad? I want you to realize it."

"I see you trying, Brian. I do, and I appreciate it."

Appreciate it. Brian wondered what the hell that meant. He started to ask, but Dad stood up.

"Come on, let's go. You've got an early flight, and I'm
exhausted."

The hostility Brian felt flash across his face failed to get a reaction from Dad. Probably because Dad hasn't quite managed to look in my face the whole fucking night, Brian thought, shoving his chair back and following Dad back out through the hedge to the car.

As soon as Dad u-turned out of his parking spot, he punched Pauline Oliveros back into the tape deck. Brian let it play about five seconds, then jerked his hand out and smacked the eject. Which once again garnered no reaction, and made him feel like a petulant ten year-old. Without a word, Brian pushed the tape back in the deck. He looked at his father. Was Dad in pain? Painting? Tomorrow he'd be back in New York. An hour from now Dad would be sleeping. Brian felt his chance slipping away, and he didn't know what to do about it. Dad. His dad.

"I'm sorry, Dad." he said as they pulled into their driveway. He said it so softly that for a second he thought his words had been swallowed by the music and the humming engine.

Dad switched the car off, sat still a while. Then he turned and placed his smeared, bent, painter's hand on Brian's head. Slid it back to Brian's neck.

"Brian. You've got nothing to be sorry for."

"Dad --"

"Ssh." Dad said. Stroked Brian's hair. "Listen, okay?
God, what to say? It's just ... been as long time, you know. Today you're back, and you want me, I can feel it and I'm so glad. Makes me feel wonderful. But tomorrow you're going home, and I'll be here in my house again, and ... I do miss you, you know, Brian."

"Dad, I miss you too."

"Yes. I know. But you can't just waltz back in here on your own timetable and wave a wand and fix things."

"I didn't wave a wand. Waltz in. No." Brian's voice was rising again, his stomach was cramping so hard he felt like he might split open, but he couldn't stop. "Excuse me for thinking we had something to salvage."

"We don't have anything to salvage." Dad said. Sadly, though. For the first time, Dad looked sad. So sad. "Nothing's broken. It's just ... the way you and I are, you know? Right now. At this point. Not always, maybe, but now. People don't want the same things much. Not at the same time."

"Maybe, Dad, if you'd come out of there for ten seconds and look at me, we wouldn't have to be this way now. I need you, Dad. I need you out here."

Dad stroked Brian's neck with his hand. Stared out the front windshield. "I know you do." he said at last. Opened his door and left the car in a hurry. Down the driveway, away from the house. Out into the street, into the shadows, and gone.
Brian wrenched his own door open. Thought about following. Didn't. Instead, he turned, raced up the stairs into the house, down to his room and he slammed the door and crouched on his bed under his Kate Bush poster with the lights out.

Soon, he heard Dad come inside. Move around the other rooms. His footsteps made no sound, but Brian could hear him shuffling things. Then he made a phone call. Brian heard him say "B-ball" and "What time?" and "Okay." Brian had no idea what sport 'b-ball' referred to. A few minutes later, the hall light clicked out, and Dad's voice filtered through the bedroom door. Calm. Quiet.

"Night, Brian." it said.
"Night." Brian said.
"I love you, Brian."

Brian stood up out of his crouch. Stood on his bed, until long after Dad's door had shut, until the dark and the silence solidified in the house like concrete setting. Then he climbed down off his bed, slid his shoes off, and in his stockinged feet he eased his door open and wander a while in the empty rooms.

Once, he went to the Little Room and lit one of the candles he'd set up there this morning and stood under 'Dog' until the candle burned out. After that he picked up the phone in the den, dialed Tara's number, then Perry's, but neither of them were home. So Brian called the Ayatollah's
His mother answered, sounding asleep.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mrs. Ayatollah, it's Brian." said Brian.

"That's okay, Brian. But Ayatollah's over at his and JoAnne's. He only graces this house on holidays nowadays."

She said this with a laugh.

"His ad JoAnne's."

"Yes. Didn't he give you the number?"

Brian took a while to answer. "Yeah, he did, but I lost it."

Ayatollah's mother gave him the number. Brian sat with the phone in his hand a long time before he called the Ayatollah. Who no longer lived at home. That couldn't have happened more than two weeks ago, because Brian had called Ayatollah at his mother's then. He felt embarrassed. Lonely. He dialed the number, praying the Ayatollah would answer, although he'd already decided that if JoAnne answered, he'd talk to her too. Not hang up, and compound his infancy.

The Ayatollah answered, and he'd been sleeping too.

"God, you go to sleep early." Brian said.

"Brian? Christ, Brian." He paused, cleared his throat, and when he put the phone back to his mouth his voice sounded sharp and grumpy and like his voice. "What the hell do you want?"

"Don't know. Felt bad about this afternoon. JoAnne say anything about it?"
"Not much. Except it wasn't a big deal, and she hoped you wouldn't worry about it."

That was pretty much exactly what Brian had wanted to hear. So why did hearing make him feel even worse. Goddamn this weekend. "We also never had much of a chance just to talk. Just you and I, I mean."

"So what?"

"I could tell you about my girlfriend."

"Oh, Brian, please, bonk on that." the Ayatollah groaned.

"Why?"

"Because I hate you when you're in love. You get all moony-sweet and ... ugh, just no, forget it, okay?"

Brian laughed.

The Ayatollah grumbled on. "I forgot to tell you. I think I'll come visit you at Christmas. Hanukkah. Whatever."

"Really?" said Brian, while gratitude swept through him. The Ayatollah in New York. "That would be rather groovy."

"Rather groovy. Okay. Good."

"Yeah, Oh, 'Tollah, that'd be great."

"You said that." said the Ayatollah, and then all of the sudden he cackled. :If I have to, I'll meet her then."

The cackling continued.

"Very funny. Proud of yourself?"

"Very. Now. Have a good trip. See you in December. Do not call me back." the Ayatollah said, and hung up.

that the Ayatollah, despite Brian's own efforts to sabotage everything, would make it to New York before Dad did.

Brian traipsed back to his room, where he undressed and climbed into his bed and stared up at his posters and up at the ceiling and waited for sleep. After a while he turned over onto his stomach. Then he lay still. Eyes closed. Imagining some inner massage mechanism grabbing hold of his heart and applying skillful, gentle pressure to slow it down. He tried talking his body parts to sleep, which usually worked for him. Okay, toes, he commanded. Take your last wriggle. Done? You are not asleep. Okay, ankles.

He got all the way up to his waist. Then, without opening his eyes, he raised one fist into the air and smashed it down into the sheets. Lifted it, and smashed again. And again, and again, and again, on really good hits he could feel the whole bed give and quiver, sheet into springs into frame beneath hist fist, sheet springs frame, sheet springs frame. Skin cartilage bone.
On the Friday after Thanksgiving, Tara's last day at the EPA, Joan took her and the rest of the Robin Hood gang to the Kiev for lunch. Tara would have preferred just going with Joan, but she didn't feel she could say that, and so at twelve-thirty she and Joan and Cathy Burgersmith and Dave Ruben and Joan's second-in-command, Tom Fleming, piled into Joan's dented Buick and plowed uptown through the sleet. The waitresses at the Kiev scowled when they saw the size of the group, then bitched to each other in Russian while pushing three of their tiny tables together in a back corner. Tara watched and ignored Dave Ruben's snickering "Are they always so friendly here?" and smiled to herself. Like most Village restaurants, the Kiev catered to alone people.

Much to Tara's surprise, Cathy Burgersmith seemed to have actually been here before, and when the waitress came Cathy dictated out a half-decent lunch for herself. Goulash and kasha. She ordered seltzer instead of compote, a decided error, but Tara still had to give her credit. Dave, of course, perused the menu, asked what almost everything was, and then ordered a chicken-salad sandwich. Everyone else deferred to Tara, and she ordered sauerkraut perogies and kasha and compotes and two mushroom barley soups, mainly because those came with a sideplate of the Kiev's thick, honeyed challah.
"How come your meals have so much more starch than your clothes?" Joan asked Tara in her booming voice, and everyone laughed.

When the waitress had stalked away with the order, Tara watched Joan run a hand through her puffy white hair. Her fingers seemed to pass through it without disturbing a strand, without really touching it at all. Her steel-grey suit clung to her, not with wet, just because it was supposed to. Her eyes made their habitual flick to the watch on her wrist, then up at Tara, then around the walls until she located the Kiev's Pepsi clock on the wall above the pastry case. Tara watched her, and smiled.

The thing Tara regretted most about her decision to take a break from the EPA to do a research-project about fairness and the Superfund was that Joan wouldn't respect it. Joan thought research projects were for "terminal do-gooders," who were at their best when they were out of the way. The people who really cared were out there in the fight. Joan hadn't said that to Tara. But Tara knew. Sometimes, she felt the same way herself.

"No sense wasting time." Joan said. "Let's do what we're here for. Dave, you start."

Dave reached into the pocket of his imitation-Gucci trenchcoat and pulled out a palm-sized plastic box wrapped in green reindeer paper with a red bow on top.

Tara smiled and shook her head. "Even my non-holiday
presents come Christmasized."

"Huh?" said Dave.

"She's Jewish." Cathy Burgersmith snapped.

"So? So am I" said Dave, and everyone laughed.

Tara took the box, tossed it up and down twice in her hand. "Let's see. A Rolex? Folks, you shouldn't have."

"I bet there's not enough money in the Superfund for a Rolex." said Tom Fleming.

"I don't even have a Rolex." said Dave, staring at his wrist as though he thought he might grow one.

"Wouldn't go with anything she wears anyway." said Joan. Affectionately, Tara noticed.

"Who's this from?" she asked.

Dave swept his arm back and forth between himself and Cathy. "Your fellow grunts, and favorite rock-em-sock-em victims."

Tara glanced at Cathy, wrapped as usual in her scowl and her tie-dye, then at Dave and his hair and his new sculpted wire glasses. Her first and only co-workers. Her fellow Merry Men. She signed, and stopped herself from wondering for the thousandth time this week whether she was doing the right thing.

"Thanks, you guys." she said, sounding sadder than she'd meant to.

"Open it already." Cathy grumbled.

Tara removed the bow, split the wrapping paper with her
thumb, opened the box and spilled a red plastic heart with a piece of black string attached to one aorta into her hand. For a second, everyone stared at the heart. Then Tara burst out laughing.

"A Crackerjack toy. You guys know me pretty well."

"Pull the string." said Dave.

"Do what?"

"The black string."

Tara pulled the black string and then gasped as red dye sprayed out into her palm and through her fingers onto the table. Dave had started giggling even before Tara pulled the string, and now Cathy and Tom Fleming joined him.

"Get it?" gurgled Dave. "It's a --"

"Bleeding heart, yes I get it." Tara said, wiping her hand on a napkin. "Is it refillable?"

"Huh?"

"Refillable. Do you have more dye for it?"

"I ..." said Dave, then looked helplessly around the table before giggling again. "Tara, I should have known you'd ask that, but I just didn't think of it."

"You're a lame-o, Dave." Tara said.

"Lame-o." said Dave. "We're going to miss you, Tara."

"And to prove it," said Tom Fleming, reaching into his battered black briefcase. Tara had never really gotten to know Tom, because Tom was usually out of the office staplegunning bad guys. But she'd always liked the Scottish
snap in his voice, the way he broke his consonants over your head like beer bottles. And she liked the way his pale blue eyes sparkled when he spoke. More that the environment, Tom Fleming loved the fight.

"There you go, now." he said, pulling out a strip of black velvet and laying it on the tabletop. "From Joan and me. The complete Environmental Protection Agency Lapel Kit."

On top of the black velvet strip, spaced out in a straight, centered line, lay seven nickel-sized message buttons. Most of which Tara had seen and groaned at many times before. "KILL THE DRILLING." "NUKE REAGAN." But a few of them provided all new groans. The best was dayglo yellow, and sported a carefully phallicized pine tree and the words "CONSERVATIONISTS PROLONG THE EXPERIENCE." Clapping her hands and laughing, Tara lifted the entire strip and pinned it, prize-ribbon style, to her blouse.

"There." she said. "Guaranteed to scare off any and all." Once more, everyone laughed.

During lunch, they sat and ate and told recycled jokes Tara had learned during her two years at the Agency. Jokes about Congressman Walden and his "econo-limo," jokes about Joan and her maxims and her White Hats, the whole series of jokes about Hooker Chemical that played off that company's all-too-appropriate name. And suddenly, the last two years seemed a whole lot denser to Tara than they had before. Like one of those computer-generated cars that turned three-
dimensional when you rotated it. She really had belonged here, she thought. A strange paralysis settled over her, the same numbness in her arms and legs and the dread in her stomach she'd been feeling periodically ever since she'd broken down at her parents. She was sure it showed in her face, in her lack of movement, but on one said anything, and by the time everyone else was done eating, the feeling had eased a little.

Joan attempted to pay for the lunch with her new test-model RECYCLE ME bio-degradable Visa card, but the waitress scowled at the card, then snapped "No cards. Cash."

"Tara-restaurant." said Dave Ruben, and the rest of the table echoed him.

"Tara-restaurant."

"Tara-restaurant."

"They mean it's the best and most original lunch they've ever had." Tara told the waitress, the words seeming to fight their way out of her frozen lips, but the waitress ignored her and went on scowling.

"Cash." she said.

"All right, Jaesus Christ-ee, keep your shoes tied." said Tom, and he and Joan split the bill.

Later, back at the office, Tara began packing up the startling amount of crap she'd accumulated in her desk: paper clips, company phone numbers and addresses on napkins, three barrettes, a green Robin Hood Board visor she'd forgotten Joan
had given her when she first signed on -- "Your first and last perk, enjoy it --", plus pencils, the robots, and a red superball she was almost sure she'd never seen before. She'd all but finished when Tom Fleming tapped her on the shoulder and told her Joan wanted to talk to her. So Tara got up, threaded her way back through the broken desks to Joan's semi-enclosed space near the back windows.

Joan was at her huge oak desk, which actually looked like a decent piece of furniture until you put your arms on it and felt it rock underneath you. She sat in one of the same metal folding chairs everyone else sat in, her briefcase emptied out in front of her, white hair fluffed high off her head like a summer cloud just passing over. Tara didn't knock. Joan considered knocking a waste of precious seconds. She entered, sat down on the folding chair in front of Joan's desk.

After a few moments, Joan dropped her pen and positioned her hands in front of her and lifted her black-stockinged leg against the edge of the desk. She stared at Tara with her harsh grey eyes. And didn't say anything.

Tara felt the paralysis creeping back up her ankles, her calves, as though she was being encased in ice. As though she was hardening. What did Joan want? What had she done? Joan never took this long to speak. Ever. Finally Tara blurted into speech, just to keep the numbness from reaching her mouth and silencing her.

"Last job for me?"
Still Joan stared for another few seconds. Then she shook her head. "No. Although I do need that one you left on my desk this morning proofed."

"A question, then? On that last Hooker Chemical settlement?"

Again, Joan shook her head.

As abruptly as it had come, the numbness melted from Tara, and she beamed a startled smile. "Advice? You're going to advise me?"

"Sort of." Joan said, and the uncertainty in her voice warmed Tara even more. Because Maximum Joan was never uncertain. "I'm going to ask you a couple questions."

"Okay."

"Okay. First. We've agreed to call this a sabbatical, right?"

Sabbatical. Tara hadn't even considered that possibility. True, her grant only lasted until February, but she'd just figured she'd find something else then. Maybe get away from environment work entirely. Maybe go back to school.

"I don't think we've really talked about it." she said.

"Well, it's a sabbatical. February, right?"

"That's how long the money lasts, yeah. But I could get an extension if my research pans out."

Joan waved one hand in front of her. "But February, right?"

"Yes."
"Right. Well just know, right now, that if you want to come back in February -- as the real thing, just like now, an Enforcer, a full-fledged, singleminded, bloodthirsty White hat, not more 'yeah, but is it fair' crap -- you'll always be welcome here. Because frankly, you're about the best White Hat I've ever lost."

"Please don't take this as a personal betrayal --" Tara started, confusion and horror rising in her throat, but Joan waved a hand in front of her again.

"No, no, I don't. I guess. I mean, I understand, I have your doubts too. I used to. No, hell, I still do. But that just makes you even better, don't you understand? That's what makes me want you more. You see it, kiddo, people, planets, the whole mess, and people like you and I are the only ones who'll ever get it straight, if it can be straightened."

Tara was so astonished by the whole conversation that she found she couldn't answer right away. She'd had no idea Joan felt this way about her. About anyone. Joan was Joan. 27 years here and still firing Joan. Finally, Tara stammered out "Joan, I just don't know."

"I know you don't." Joan snapped, in something resembling her normal workday tone. "Figure it out. Next. You like research. You like playing detective and you love salvaging places. But you don't like dealing with people, and I just wonder if you realize how much you'll have to deal with people to get this little project of yours done."
"I don't mind dealing with people." Tara said. "I mind taking their lives from them. Especially when --"

"Tara, here it is, here's my last questions. If you can't take from people, where are you going to get what you need? Even if it isn't fair. Even if you know that what you take will cost the other person dearly."

Finally, Joan stopped. Waited for a response, with her hands clamped down on the desk. Tara just stared at her. Her boss. Her mentor. Right now, her friend. And kind of her mother. This conversation and the one she'd had with her mother last trip home had startling similarities. Except that right now, unlike at home, Tara didn't feel like crying. She felt like hugging Joan. And she was suddenly sure she had to go.

"I'll be fine, Joan. But I'll miss you an awful lot."

Joan's leg dropped back to the floor, and she leaned forward towards her papers. "Fine. Good. That's all. I have more bad guys to grill before I leave tonight, I need to prepare."

Knowing the interview was over, Tara stood and quietly left Joan's office. When she got back to her own desk, she sagged down into her chair and stared a while at her empty desk drawers. This morning, she'd thought today would be a little like graduation day at NYU, a little sad and a lot inane and too long. But it didn't feel like that at all. It felt like she was leaving a job she cared about, and some
people she'd miss. With a sign, she resumed her packing.

Her last two hours flew by. She proofed the report Joan had asked her to, briefed Tom Fleming on its contents, boxed up some old barrettes and the superball and the picture of her parents she kept on her desk. The one from their second honeymoon last year in the west of Ireland. They'd gone there because Mom had always wanted to, for some reason, and Dad had agreed because there wouldn't be Katzen-flatzens there. They both wore wool Aran Island sweaters in the picture, and they stood alone in a plain of purple heather in Connemeara. The first Bens rising up behind them and dwarfing them. Dad wasn't smiling and he had his arm around Mom, and she had her head on his shoulder and her hand in his back pants pocket like a teenager and her eyes locked not on Dad and not on the camera but on something else the snapshot hadn't captured.

They couldn't have been alone, obviously. Someone had to have taken the picture. But they looked so alone, comfortable with each other, standing there not smiling, not even looking at each other.

At 4:45, Tara lifted herself up out of her folding metal deskchair for the last time and started around the office, shaking hands. Tom Fleming swatter her hand away when she offered it and kissed her cheek instead and ordered her to "Be good, now," and to "Remember our poor overworked asses when you get a chance." Tara promised she would, thanked him for the lapel kit.
Cathy Burgersmith offered to "Do lunch sometime," and both she and Tara laughed because that sounded so ridiculous when uttered by an EPA employee.

When she'd circled the room, Tara hefted her box of belongings off her desk and took one last look around at Joan's so-called White Hats buzzing through their dreary surroundings, shuffling papers, making phone calls, being bureaucrats, and for the first time in a long time she felt there was something noble about all this after all. She took a last gulp of the icy, stale air - the only way you could tell the place was heated was by the smell - and held it deep in her lungs. Then let it go.

"Bye." she said softly. And left.

And walked away down the dim hallway, one of the overhead florescents twitching at her as though waving goodbye. Past the elevator to the staircase, because only the very desperate or the very dumb waited for the elevator in this building. Down the stairs, her heelless black boots clicking against the steps, the bannister cool under her gliding fingers, the sleet outside the windows softening now to snow.

She got all the way to the lobby, halfway to the front door, before she heard the elevator cage clatter open behind her and then Dave Ruben's whiny voice saying "Wait. Tara, wait." As she turned, she remembered what she'd thought about the very desperate or very dumb, and smiled to herself.

Up panted Dave. A little line of sweat snaked down from
the bottom of Dave's bangs to his glasses, which glinted in
the grey light from outside. His hair had come unmoussed on
him, and it looked kind of cute, actually.

"What's up, Dave?"

"Well, you were going to leave and not say goodbye."

"I thought our lunch was goodbye, and you weren't in the
office." said Tara, watching Dave's eyes dart back and forth
between her own. "And Jeez, Dave, you and Cathy and I are
going to the Rangers game tomorrow night."

"I know, but ..."

"Yes?"

Dave reached up and smeared the sweat across his forehead
and smiled. "Look. Worked up a sweat in this building.
Amazing, huh? Anyway, listen, I, uh, I know why you turned me
down two years ago, Tom got to you first and poisoned you
against me --"

Tara rolled her eyes, and Dave smiled.

"Saying nothing that wasn't true, I admit. But listen,
we know each other now. Oh look, don't laugh, I'm serious.
Let's go out. On a date."

From the second Dave started fumbling for his words and
clamping his hand to his hip in the Mr. Vulnerable-and-proud-
of-it pose he like to flash at his female victims, Tara had
known what was coming. And she started to point out the pose
to him, make a joke, but she suddenly stopped. Because
something was pushing up through her surprise and her real
contempt for Dave's posturing into her throat. Not attraction, certainly. But friendship. And gratitude. And maybe just a touch of curiosity, about whether Dave could ever change, and what he'd be like if he did. And suddenly, her joke didn't seem very funny anymore, just cruel, and she showered Dave with her best smile and said "Oh, thanks Dave. But I'm seeing someone."

"Serious?" said Dave. "Serious enough to pass this up?"

Tara managed to bite back the easy answer to that one, too. "'Fraid so." she said, wondering to herself why the word 'serious' and the word 'Brian' didn't seem to go together at all.

Dave nodded. Smiled. The real smile he saved for his friends. "Well, good luck with him. Hope he can give you a run in the ring." He made a punching motion. "Guess I should have pressed harder."

"Or less hard."

"Or that." He nodded. "Not too many truly classy women around. You kind of get out of the habit, you know?"

Then, with only a slightly presumptuous stroke of her shoulder, Dave turned and started back towards the elevator. He pulled the cage open, but the elevator had gone, and Tara heard him swear to himself. He turned back and shrugged. "I don't even get a graceful exit." he said.

"You don't need one." Tara said, gently, and no, she didn't want to date Dave, but she wished she wanted to. So he
wouldn't look so lonely, all of the sudden. Someday, Dave's posing would earn him a come-uppance. But not from her. She wasn't the come-uppance type. "Thanks, Dave. I really do appreciate it."

Blushing, Dave doffed an imaginary cap. And Tara nodded and turned and launched herself out of the Fed Building.

As soon as she was out the door, Tara felt a jolt of adrenalin streak down her legs, her lungs. She was free. She'd made a choice, and acted on it, and she was free. Fat flakes of snow swept down between the passing cars and the emptying buildings around her. Snug in her boots and her wool slacks, Tara splashed down the street, enjoying the spray she created. Dave Ruben, she thought. Again. Incredible, and kind of a nice way to go out. What wind there was felt warmer than it should have, and the street smelled slushy and winter-clothesy and clean. On a corner two blocks from work Tara stopped, fished the photography of her parents and the robots and one barrette out of the box, then dumped the box and the rest of the contents of her desk into the waiting trash can.

Instantly, a tiny pink-scarved bag lady shuffled up to the trash can to paw the new arrivals. Tara gave the woman a dollar, squeezed it into the cold, clawed palm and felt the ridge of skin and vein pressing up out of the center of the palm and throbbing there. Reminding anyone who touched it that this palm still belonged to a living thing. The woman looked at the dollar, up at Tara, and made a low hissing noise
through her parched lips. Tara nodded, ached, and walked on.

With the big box disposed of, she no longer needed to go home before the Meredith Monk concert at the Knitting Factory tonight, so instead of entering the subway she turned uptown. Tapping out yet another Blind Joe solo on the sides of her skirt. Dipping her head just a little in rhythm. Feeling guiltily delicious because she'd quit her job, and because Brian was in San Diego and she had a free Friday night to go see music she loved and not go home early to avoid him and maybe call Carol late. Not that Brian would have stopped her from doing any of those things. Brian always wanted to accommodate her. But tonight she needed neither accommodation nor permission from anyone. Tonight belonged to her.

She walked a long time. When she got to the 2nd Avenue Deli she stopped and stared at her reflection blending in between two white-haired men stopped over their coffee and bagels and Posts at the counter, and she felt like she was stealing a glimpse of the next hour of her life and she shivered and thought no, too habitual. She wanted something new tonight, to celebrate her new life, and besides, for the first time in ages, she didn't want a hot pastrami or a pickle. She wanted a hamburger. And the greasiest fries she could find. And oh, yes, she wanted a chocolate egg-cream.

So she turned around, splashed back the way she'd come and cut over the First and then down to the Bowery, and next to a Korean market boasting stacks of juggled apple cider in
the vegetable bins out front she found a coffee shop she'd never seen before. She checked the menu to make sure the shop had egg-creams, then pushed open the door and found herself a booth in the back.

Not a think distinguished this coffee shop from any other Lower East Side coffee shop. Square wood tables, the wood smeared with coffee cup rings and smelling of disinfectant. A textureless carpet underfoot, so dirty you couldn't tell what its original color had been. Three waitresses of indeterminate age who wiped ketchup bottles and chewed gum and didn't look up when Tara came in.

Eventually, one of them wandered over and, still without looking at her, took Tara's order. Tara made no attempt to engage her in conversation. This place wasn't the Kiev, wasn't going to be one of her special spots. Tonight, she thought, she'd be a nomad. Just another city face.

She waited for her food and sipped black coffee that tasted more like the pot it must have sat in all day than coffee and watched her fellow patrons watching the street and sipping the coffee and wincing. One of the waitresses detached herself from the group at the counter long enough to float up to the front and collect the change a tall black kid had left on the table when he left. Then she returned to the counter, started filling more bottles.

When the food came, Tara pushed the burger plate aside and started with the egg-cream, slurping it through the
plastic straw and watching the carbonation bubbles hiss around the rim of the glass and feeling the fizzy chocolate tang lift goosebumps on her tongue like a truly superior kiss. Like Brian's kisses, she had to admit, and then she wondered why every compliment she gave Brian felt like a concession, whether she actually said it to humor not. Brian. What was she going to do about Brian?

She picked up her hamburger, ketchupped it, bit into it. Into the bun, which was too hard, a little stale, down into the meat, which tasted greasy and good. While she ate, she thought about Brian. About why she'd spent most of their dates working so hard to keep him distant. Planning the movie or dinner or Staten Island Ferry ride or Pinetop Perkins concert so that all of the evening got filled, so the date finished so late that Brian never had enough time to do ... well, whatever Brian might do if he had enough time.

Wednesday night he'd almost caught her unawares, almost created enough time. They'd been just passing the Coffee Dive, just reaching the corner where Tara always said goodbye to him, when Brian suddenly leapt past her into the street and stopped a passing cab and pulled her into it. They'd gotten a talkative cabbie named Juan, and Brian said to take them somewhere romantic and Juan said he knew just the place and sped off down the Avenue of the Americas. Tara had felt surprised, charmed, and claustrophobic all at once, she loved how hard Brian tried and she couldn't figure out why it
sometimes made her mad, but then she'd gotten caught up listening to Juan talk. About how, yeah, American girls knew romance, he'd sort of married one the first year he moved here from the Dominican Republic. 1957. He'd met her at a dance hall and she'd taken him to stand on the Brooklyn Bridge at dawn and watch the sun paint the steel red and they'd gotten engaged right then and there. "Still engaged to her." he'd said proudly. "She wouldn't even talk to me, and she never told me her real name, but she never said it was off, so I figure we're still engaged. Don't you?"

And then, after all that, he'd proceeded to dump them outside Carrambas, lower Broadway's prime late night meat-market bar, smiling all the while and winking at Brian and saying "Romance central."

"Men." Tara had said, and Brian laughed as though he knew what she meant. Brian always laughed, whether he knew what she meant or not.

Inside the bar, they'd quickly found themselves elbowed into a corner behind the coat rack, which suited Tara just fine. The relentless purple neon strip lighting didn't sting her eyes quite so much back there. They'd waited twenty minutes for a bartender, then another twenty for the Drink of the Day, which Brian ordered without asking what it was and which turned out to be one of Carrambas' vat-sized margueritas with white swan-shaped straw-twistees floating in it. And for twenty minutes more they sat and slurped the cool, lemony
drinks and didn't talk at all because they couldn't, because the Madonna music had been brain-pummeling even before they wound up face to face with the speaker.

And while they sat, Tara had watched Brian, watched him dip his head forward to drink and come up smiling and frothy like a little kid with a milk mustache, watched him stare around the bar and back at her with his black, unsettled eyes, and she'd felt a sudden surge of pride to be with him and took his hand. Because he didn't belong here, in here where the game got stripped of the words, even, just pick your partner and feint left and feint into each other and feint again and look sexy then look sleepy then look bored while Madonna pummeled you both and the straws in the drinks bit the insides of your cheeks like hooks going in. She'd held his hand the whole time they were there and all the way back to the Coffee Dive corner, where she'd seriously considered going home with him for the first time since their first date. And then left him again.

For all his youth, and his insecurity, there was something wonderfully un-New Yorked about Brian. No. Better than un-New Yorked. In fact, it had nothing to do with New York at all, that was just how New Yorkers described people like Brian. People who still looked up at the big, tall buildings and whistled. People with their bruised arms sticking out towards other people. Tara had considered herself one of those people. Not too long ago.
She wondered what Brian was doing right this minute. Wondered how she could miss him so much and still not want to be with him at all at the same time. God, she hoped his father was opening back up to him, the way she'd convinced Brian he might. Helped convince, anyway. Brian didn't need a lot of encouragement to stick his arms back out there. Poor Brian.

The hamburger devoured, Tara leaned against the back of the booth, lifting the last of the egg-cream to her lips at regular intervals. Two of the waitresses had drifted into the back somewhere, and the remaining one sat on a stool by the cast register with her legs tucked up underneath her and a Robert Ludlum paperback open on her lap. Tara wondered if she'd enjoy a round of rock-em-sock-em robots. Decided she probably wouldn't.

Two students, both male and both alone, sat up front not in separate booths, books on the tables in front of them. Between them and Tara sat a pudgy father and his pudgier pre-teen son, and those two smiled a lot at each other without saying much. One of the waitresses came out of the back, saw the father, groaned. Then she went over to the table and kissed the kid on the forehead and stayed to talk a while. With a jolt, Tara realized that this waitress couldn't be any older than she was.

And all of the sudden, Tara knew what she'd do with the remaining two hours before the Monk show. Something she
hadn't done since Carol dropped out of NYU their senior year. Something she'd never done alone before, and which might just shed a little light on her love-life problem. She'd go Couple Shopping.

Couple Shopping, as invented by Tara and Carol nine years ago, involved nothing more than wandering up and down the street watching couples, preferably couples their own age. Carol had always joked about the patheticness of this game, but Tara had never found it pathetic. Pathetic would have been wandering around watching couples and sighing a lot. Whereas this game was more of a browsing type of thing. Like walking into a travel agency and flipping through brochures to pick your vacation. Somewhere sunny, or somewhere snowy, or somewhere quiet. The more she thought about it, the better an idea it seemed. She'd go do it. After, of course, she slurped up all the excess syrup in her egg-cream glass.

Evening had settled over the streets while she'd eaten, providing the still-falling snow with a glossy black backdrop and muffling the sounds of the cabs and buses grinding past and the people rushing around and between and through each other. Tara turned to her right and had to step over the legs of a black man sprawled on the stoop next door. A few doors further down she saw a kid shivering in a shredded Yankees windbreaker and old Addidas with no socks, sticking what looked like a handleless tea kettle in the paths of passers-by. By the time Tara passed him, two people had dropped coins
in the kettle, and three others had pushed it out of the way and moved on. The kid reacted neither to the coins nor the shoves, he just popped his arm back up and waited. A human turnstile. Toll optional.

Tara didn't given him money. She'd already donated a dollar to the cause today, and anyway, it irritated her that she felt more compelled to give money to this kid than to the sleeping man on the stoop, just because he was a kid. She thought about turning around and waking up the guy on the stoop and giving him money, but she didn't do that either. She just kept walking and turned the corner and saw the next block's batch of homeless aligned in the doorways. Goddamn this place, she thought. And kept walking.

To get herself in a more appropriate mood for Couple Shopping, she began to sing under her breath, one of those slushy but wonderful Blue Nile songs from the tape Brian had given her, "to show you once and for all what grownups can do with pop music." Hardly grownups, Tara thought now. Because they talked too much about what ached. But on the other hand ...

"I look at the colored lights." she sang. "Y-yeah. Breaking the good hearts down."

Now she was in the mood, all right, but she didn't see many couples. None her age. She saw one old pair with matching arthritis-bowed legs shambling down 1st Avenue, their elbows almost brushing and their heads aimed down at the
sidewalk and a little away from each other. She saw whole packs of high schoolers and college kids roving up and down the damp sidewalks, their eyes tearing mockable pieces out of anyone they passed. She saw two middle-aged Hispanic couples sharing knishes from a vendor. Mostly she saw along people, racing their various somewheres.

On Broadway she turned left, starting another loop, wandered all the way down to Carrambas, which was all but empty at this hour. By the time she circled back to Bleecker, she could feel the night chill fingering between the buttons of her cardigan and along the tops of her boots, and she decided to head for the postcard and coffee shops along Bleecker. There were always couples in those places. And central heating, too.

All the way up Bleecker she watched and splashed and hummed. She'd lost the tune of the Blue Nile song, and now all she could think of were Cole Porter songs her mother had taught her and that she'd taught Carol so they could sing them together while playing this game. What a girl I was, Tara thought. "A some-some-something and the wail of streamers, two lovers on the street who walk like dreamers."

At French Kisses poster shop, she pressed between two leather-jacketed men who let her through and watched her down the steps and then resumed kissing each other. One couple her age, anyway. Tara reached the door with the painting of Bogie in his white jacket on it, pushed it open. The expected blast
of heat met her as she entered, along with the expected boombox dance music. But there were no couples. Tara wondered where everyone was.

She amused herself for a while leafing through the old movie stills, lingering over William Powell and Myrna Lay, frozen in mid-drink. Nick and Nora. Now there was a couple. Wouldn't it be convenient, she thought, to believe that real romance was more possible then? That people just liked getting closer? So that women could blame men, and men could blame women's lib, and everyone could blame the Bomb, or TV, or Reagan, or the Age? Brian wanted to get close. He kept sticking those arms out at her. And she kept shoving them away.

She decided Couples Shopping was a total disaster for tonight, left French Kisses, found herself a seat at the Black and White Cafe across the street, and ordered a piece of black-and-white cake and a Greek coffee. Time to stop beating herself up, she decided. She'd dumped her job today. That was motion, wasn't it? Progress?

The only other people in the cafe were the waiters, two sets of older women at tables by the windows, and a scattering of along people with Village Voices. Planning their Friday evenings. Tara thought about calling Carol and inviting her to the concert tonight. But Carol would no doubt be well into her latest date with Jan the cook and his fake French accent. On the phone last weekend, Carol had said she like the way Jan
ate everything with his hands, "kind of delicate, kind of primal." but she hated the way he dropped his arm around her whenever he felt like it. Tara had thought about telling her friend she was just setting herself up again, prolonging something she obviously didn't need, but she hadn't said anything. She'd just be there when the fall came. That was her role with Carol. With most of her friends.

Suddenly, Tara looked up. There. Just entering the cafe. Slipping their coats around the backs of their chairs and lacing their hands together across the table. A real live couple. The male had red hair and smoked and he had a dark, nasty, sexy scar across one cheek. The female had clipped blond hair, and no attractive features at all until she smiled. They could have been twenty-five or thirty-five. They exchanged more looks than words, and they shared one piece of black-and-white cake. Tara didn't notice that the man had tears in his eyes until she crossed in front of their table on her way out the door.

As soon as she hit the street, the freedom feeling blazed through her again, and she wheeled to her right and bopped back down towards Broadway with her arms swinging wide and an uncontrollable smile breaking out on her face. The big bonk for you, Couples Shop, as Brian would say. Nice romantic spirit, New Yorkers. She couldn't believe she'd spent the last two hours playing that game. Tonight, for the first Friday in almost a month, she had no Couple obligations. No
Brian to worry about. No Jan to try and convince herself she liked. No redheads crying across a table at her. Just her, and Meredith Monk, and an endless walk through the city that never sleeps.

By the time she reached Houston, the snow had stopped, and with the wind streaming between the buildings, the moisture on the sidewalks iced over instantly. Twice, Tara's boots almost skidded out from under her on an unseen slick patch. She saw the third patch before she hit it, the glitter from a reflected headlight gave it away, and she broke into a run and spread her arms airplane-style and executed her first perfect standing slide of the season, sailing a good six feet before dismounting with a leap onto dry pavement and dropping her rock-em-sock-em box. If any of the roving high schoolers behind her noticed the skill of her maneuver, none of them acknowledged it. Smiling, Tara breezed into the Knitting Factory, tonight's place of refuge. Her whole life, she thought, revolved around places of refuge. Like any good New Yorker's.

Not as many people recognized her here as a Genaro or Big Martha's. She didn't come here as often. But the black cashier nodded at her as he took her money, and the woman behind the tea bar smiled when Tara bounced into club's main room. God, Tara loved the Knitting Factory. Like Genaro, it felt more like a public living room than a club. Warm lighting, unadorned black chairs and tables crammed into three
tight aisles, not so many costumed people. And the management picked weird, wonderful performers. Like Ms. Monk.

Scanning, Tara spotted a few empty chairs near the front but no empty tables, and she'd just resigned herself to a stool at the tea-bar when her eyes shot back to the front left-hand corner of the room. There. Leaning his chair back on two legs against the side wall, long fingers completely surrounding one of the bulky Knitting Factory mugs, yellow hair coppery in the warm light. Basketball Man. A ratty red sweater stretched across his shoulders, his black 501's almost reaching the bottom of his legs.

What on earth was Basketball Man doing here, Tara wondered. The Knitting Factory didn't cater much to music business people, thank God. Especially not rock music business people. And Tara saw no jacket on the chair opposite him, no second mug on the table to indicate the possible presence of a music-smart date. Could Basketball Man have followed her here?

Then she burst out laughing. All Brian's attention must have gone to her head at last. Followed her here. Because she'd dazzled him so much at their first two Grin and Bear It meetings that he just couldn't get her out of his head. Never mind that she hadn't quite managed to look straight at him either time. Never mind that he looked perfectly content reclining there with his tea and the Voice he had open on his lap, and that he hadn't looked up once since she came in.
Never mind that he probably wouldn't even recognize her out of her gym clothes. Feeling a little reckless, a little mischievous, Tara squeezed down the aisle and pulled up next to his chair.

"Hi." she said, and Basketball Man jerked his head up and almost tipped the chair over backwards and grabbed the table with one hand to steady himself. Then he looked up at her, and he smiled an easy smile.

"Hi." he said.

Tara almost laughed, thinking he was speaking in falsetto as a joke, but she remembered how high his voice was just in time. "Remember Me? Ta--"

"Tara. Of course I remember you. You remember me?"

"I came over here, didn't I?"

"You remember my name?"

"Sure. Basketball Man." said Tara, and both of them laughed.

She pointed at the chair, and Perry motioned her to take it. Which she did, unbuttoning her cardigan and swinging it over the chairback. She could feel his eyes on her, not roving too much but not timid either. Not like Brian's. She sat down and dashed her best smile up into his face, and his big blue eyes blinked twice, as though she'd actually thrown something at them. All of the sudden, Tara was pretty positive he'd noticed her even before now. Even though she'd blown it at the gym, he'd noticed her.
"So." she said. "How does a big boss Rock guy wind up in such a class spot on his own?"

For just a second, Perry's eyebrows dove in towards each other in obvious confusion. He looked older like that, with less space between his features and less of an expanse of unblemished skin. He looked, just then, like someone who might at least have had to worry about something, sometime or another. Then his brows drifted back apart and he nodded.

"Just trying to figure out what you're asking." he said. "You speak in code, you know."

Tara blushed. And felt a little of the old fluster in her chest, in her knees. "Sorry. Um, I know." Then, just like that, the fluster was gone. "It was sort of a multi-part question. You are a Big Rock Boss?"

"Big Rock Boss." Perry said. "That's still code, but I thing I get it, and I'll answer yes."

He had a big smile on his face, all of the sudden. Not a flirtatious smile. Kind of a disbelieving smile, actually. Tara smiled back.

"Good. So we'll proceed to part B. Which is, how does a Big Rock Boss get to a Meredith Monk show? Did someone with better taste offer you a ticket?"

Perry took a few seconds to piece that one together. Meanwhile, Tara let her own eyes rove. Not too far, but not too timid, either. My, Basketball Man, she thought, what big shoulders you have.
"If I understand your questions correctly, you're operating under a false assumption." he said.

"What's that?"

"That Big Rock Bosses have to like rock music."

"You don't?"

"Can't stand it. I like free jazz. Some very contemporary classical, Ginastera, Penderecki, people like that. The occasional Son House or Memphis Minnie song for variety." He was still smiling his strange smile. As if all this was brand new to him. Unlike with Brian, Tara found that very hard to believe, but she couldn't deny its appeal either.

"Pretty snazzy taste." she said. And felt herself smile back.

"Snazzy or not, it's what I like." said Perry. "And by the way, yes I get a free pass to anything I want to see. That answer you question?"

Their smiles locked together across the table and held there awhile. Tara wondered if Perry had meant to sound smug about his free passes. She didn't think he did. For just a second before she spoke again, she wondered just what she was trying to do here. Then her smile was sliding down her face into a yawn, slightly slinky, lips parted.

"Answers one question." she said. "But raises another. If you can't stand rock music, why --"

"Because I love the people."

"Wait a second." She started to mention Brian, then
didn't. "I hear everyone in that business ---"

"I really do love them. All of them. For colorful, inventive incompetence, there's just no other profession. No substitute. I get to play power magnate. I get to pull plugs and make fortunes. I get to administer at least one glorious and truly deserved slap in the face a day, and the slap-ees lick my hand while I do it. And I get to find people like ..." He stopped, smiled, went on. "like the few worthwhile human beings int he whole rock music mess, and I befriend them, and those friendships last like you wouldn't believe because they're manna from heaven and both people know real well how rare it is. Plus I get to upstage my dad and make him nervous. What more can you want from a career?"

Tara stared at him in astonishment. She'd never heard anyone in their twenties deliver so sure an assessment of why they were doing what they were doing. Anyone any age, except maybe Joan. Before she could even digest what he'd said she was smiling again. "Fulfillment?" she asked.

"Get fulfillment other places."

"Right."

"Right."

"I see."

"Good."

The first long silence of the evening floated up between them, and Tara felt fine in it but Perry started to squirm, look away, then look back at her, as though waiting for a cue.
Tara thought about giving him one, but she was too amazed that someone like Perry was squirming in front of her. And it was too much fun watching him do it.

Finally, the lights dimmed down and Meredith Monk appeared on stage. A small woman, wearing a dark dress that reached past her knees and men's black dress socks stretched halfway up her calves. Tara swung her chair around facing forward and felt the outermost tip of the hem of her skirt barely brush the smooth crease of Basketball Man's 501's. If he noticed, he didn't react. And how could he have noticed, Tara chided herself. She'd only noticed because she saw her skirt hem catch and release. And even if he noticed, why would he react? She obviously hadn't meant to do it. Tara raised the tips of her fingers to her cheeks and found that she was sweating, just a little, and that her fingertips tingled when they touched the drops of sweat. She dropped her hand to the tabletop, watched it land a good six or seven inches from Basketball Man's. Then looked up in time to see Basketball Man watching her hand also. Just watching it, with no expression on his face at all.

Meredith Monk was now facing the audience from her bench beside a tiny upright piano. She looked impossibly pale under the harsh spotlight, her skin seeming to reflect the beam back towards its source as though the sleet from outside had frozen smooth across her. Tara had seen her use this makeup effect once before, years ago, in a long performance art piece with
nazis in it.

"Um." Meredith Monk said—sand, and the mike fed back a little. "When I said I'd do this show, I asked for a grand piano. And they said they got me one, but then they couldn't fit it through the door." Her laughter spilled out into the audience and spread through it. Laughter that invited participation. Relatives-at-dinner type laughter. Tara caught Perry's eye, and he wasn't laughing but he smiled at Tara.

Facing the keyboard now, Meredith Monk emitted a sudden sustained vocal trill, drew it out of her throat, longer and longer like a magician's handkerchief, and then settled on the lower of the two tones and softened it. From there she trickled down into the opening of "Gotham Lullabye." Last time Tara had seen Meredith Monk she'd opened with this piece, and the audience had oohed and aahed and clapped like teenagers at a rock concert. This time, at least, no one clapped their recognition, although Tara saw one or two people around her squeezing their hands together and thinking about it. But as the familiar not-quite-soothing chords and near-melodic vocals filled the room, Tara suddenly thought maybe Meredith Monk played this piece to get that reaction. Because where else in her life could she possibly hope to get it?

Nevertheless, Tara was glad when "Lullabye" ended and the expected roar when up and Basketball Man looked at her and shrugged and mouthed "Yeah, yeah."
The rest of the first set was all new stuff, some of which Tara found shrill even for Meredith Monk and some of which she liked a hell of a lot. The last piece in particular, when Monk dropped down out of a piercing soliloquy about shopping for toasters into a low, velvety murmur that kept shaping itself around words and then leaving them half-formed, half-spoken, like a current racing over rounded rocks. The lights came up a little too quickly after that piece ended, but Monk had the good sense to not speak until the last chord had died out. Then she smiled, said "Back in a bit," and vanished into the back hallway.

For a minute or so, Tara didn't even turn to look at Basketball Man. But she was aware of not looking at him, and that irritated her. Why had she come over here? Spoiling her free evening, so that she couldn't even treasure a major new piece by one of her all-time favorite composers. So that she had to sit and chat with Brian's boss, and the thought of Brian flooded her with a guilt that almost knocked her backwards off her chair, then suddenly she was angry, what was all this guilt for, she wasn't doing anything, she could talk to whoever the hell she wanted to. She spun and found Basketball Man just sitting there with his head pointed at the piano and his eyes closed. Treasuring the piece. The son of a bitch. The she saw one of his eyes peek out from under its lid, and knew he'd been watching her the whole time.

"Hey." he said, and started to sit up out of his slouch
and then stopped halfway and sort of smiled.

Tara swung her legs back under the table. Careful to brush her again. Ever so slightly. When he started laughing, she laughed too. "Hey." she said.

"Hell of a piece, huh?" Basketball Man said.

"She moans better than anyone I know." Tara said, and Basketball Man blinked twice and laughed again, but this time Tara didn't join him. She was having too good a time to just let him off.

"Uh, yep." said Perry, straightening up a little further and pulling his legs maybe a quarter of an inch back from hers. Not a safe distance, Tara noticed. A check distance. Tara let him wonder. And wondered why he seemed so unsure of the situation.

Somehow, Tara stopped herself from saying 'I wish I could moan like that.' Enough, she thought. But God, this was glorious. Her fingers toyed with the melted candle wax on the side of the glass holder in the middle of the table. Still warm, not hot, and still sticky.

"So." said Perry after another long silence. "You're a lawyer?"

"Actually, I'm kind of in a cocoon right now. "I'm," and she paused, and considered for a second. "Changing. Into something."

"Into what?"

"I'll tell you when I get there." she said, and smiled.
He didn't smile back at first, he narrowed his eyes and mashed his lips into a flat line, but they flew apart on him into his grin. As though she'd sucked it out of him with her own. Even unsure of the situation, Perry had this wonderful east about him. Like he could handle whatever came at him. A wonderful ease because instead of being intimidating, it was infectious.

"How do you do that?" Tara asked.

"What?"

"Just ... smile like that? Seem so comfortable all the time?"

"Comes naturally." Perry said. He sounded truthful, rather than arrogant. He sounded like her question was one that he'd thought about before. "Having money all your life helps. And by the way, I'm not entirely comfortable just now, to tell you the truth."

Once more their smiled locked. Tara could feel him fingering the other side of the candle holder. The candleflame licked the air between them, turned both their palms red.

"You know," Perry said, "I haven't done this --"

"Done what?" Tara asked, suddenly on her guard.

"This. Had a flirty conversation like this, with this much energy, since about the end of law school, and this I was always scamming, you know?"
"You went to law school?"

Perry nodded. "And now, it doesn't feel like scamming at all, and I don't know quite what to do with myself. Do all you New York women have so much personality?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you're sitting there asking me weird coded questions with a rock-em-sock-em robot box on the table between us and you have about the best smile I've seen in ages. I mean you forget how to do this, you know, and then you come back and it feels a whole lot different."

"A whole lot different." Tara said. And nodded.

Meredith Monk was already all the way back to her bench before Tara swung her legs out, avoiding contact with Perry's this time, and disengaged her gaze.

Tara didn't hear much of the second set. She didn't look at Perry either. She kept her eyes forward so he couldn't see her face, and she thought hard. About Basketball Man's ease. What she wouldn't have given to feel that at ease. Just once. This was disgusting, she decided. She'd practically sat down in his lap, she was soaking him in her smile every chance she got, she hated women who acted like this. Flirts. Ballbusters. Carol and she had had two monster fights about it at college, the second one ending with Tara strapping on a pair of Carol's dark gartered hose and parading around their cinder-block dormroom chanting "What you see is what you get until you try to get it," and Carol had screamed at her and
then laughed at her and then put her head in her hands and burst into tears. The only time, for all her heartbreaks, that Tara had ever seen Carol cry. And the only time, other than with Alex, that Tara had ever felt as disgusted with herself as she did right now.

This was Brian's boss, and boom, there was Brian's face again, hanging around the periphery of her vision. Even his damn memory was tentative. His dark, sweet, vulnerable face, and Tara had to grind her nails into her palm to keep from crying out. She wasn't sure what she wanted with Basketball Man. And she hadn't been honest with Brian once. Not once. He'd taken her on walks, on the ferry, to Carrambas, he'd held her hand and kissed her, he wanted her more than she'd ever dreamed anyone would want her again, and all he asked in return was that he matter to her. And Tara had let him believe he did. Well, he did matter, she cared a lot, but not as much as she had a feeling he needed her to. And she'd led him on anyway, because he was gentle, harmless, because the desperateness in his need restored to her a confidence she never thought she'd regain. Although she couldn't find the faintest trace of confidence in her right now. Which was still no excuse for the way she was acting. Christ, Tara, she thought. Just what is it you're changing into? Or back into?

Onstage, the piece ended, not a stunner like the first set closer, and the audience applauded and Meredith Monk bowed twice and disappeared fast into the back hallway. Tara
clapped until the clapping died out, then took a deep breath. Another. Time, she thought, to put a stop to this.

She swung herself around and there he was, tall, gorgeous, yellow hair, smiling and non-clingy and sure of himself and closer to grown-up that Brian, anyway, and she found herself smiling back at him once more. Wondering as she did so what the hell was wrong with flirting, and why wasn't she allowed, and if you can't take sometimes, how are you going to get what you need? And then, sweeping up out of some trap door in her stomach she hadn't even known was there, a determined calmness took hold of her. Still smiling, Tara slid herself forward and engulfed Basketball Man's legs in her own.

"Aren't you seeing Brian?" Perry asked after a while. With a trace of smugness, or at least confidence, in his voice that almost changed Tara's mind. Almost.

"I'll worry about that." Tara said. "But the answer to your question is, not exclusively." Which was sort of true, anyway. She'd never said anything to Brian about exclusively.

One the long walk up 3rd towards Perry's apartment, Tara kept catching glimpses of herself in dark storefront windows. Waling arm in arm with Perry. It's all right, she kept telling herself. It's all right.

And it was all right. She felt guilty, irresponsible, but excited, too, really excited about a guy who was excited about her, and as they got closer to Perry's, her guilt bled
away into her excitement and made it stronger. Tonight, at last, she was no longer a White Hat. No longer stuck in one of Big Martha's alcoves. No longer all Cleopatra, no grip. No longer Brian's or Carol's or Joan's or Alex's or her parents', and certainly not Basketball Man's. She was Tara, and stronger than she'd ever been before. And smiling, and breathless, and giddy with control.
Even before he reached the gate in front of her apartment building, Brian started counting. Four floors up, fifth window over, and when he saw her light was on he smiled to himself. He'd taken two wrong turns after getting off the PATH train, wandering with his head down while the wind banged granules of ice off his exposed ears and set them ringing. His mitten- ed fingers felt superglued to the paper bag they clutched. His face hurt. But he'd made it, he was here, and boy was Tara going to be surprised.

Cold as he was, Brian stopped a minute by the gate and watched her window. Savoring. For a week now, ever since he got back from San Diego, he'd been waiting for his moment. The first glimpse of her. He'd called her right away, of course, but she wasn't home all day Saturday, and when she finally called him Sunday morning she told him she was sick. Nothing serious, just a cold, but she was going to stay home a day or two. She'd said she didn't want him to come take care of her, that she needed her sleep, and that she really wanted to be awake when she saw him next.

Brian hadn't pressed her. Just called once every afternoon to check up on her. Sometimes she'd answered and talked to him a short while. Sometimes she hadn't answered, and Brian had assumed she was sleeping. He'd thought about popping out here and surprising her all week, using the
directions she'd given him the time she said she'd cook him dinner and then called at the last minute to suggest they go out instead. But by the time he got home every night from yet another day of dueling Black-i Martineau over how much distortion they should leave on the guitars in the final Shining Star master mix, he was just too tired. He too, wanted to be awake when he saw Tara next. Because he was ready to tell her he loved her. Because he did.

In fact, he'd decided last night, while lying awake and listening to the sirens, that Tara might must be the Big One. The one he'd started to believe wasn't really out there. He'd pictured her lying there next to him and smiling her magic smile, talking to him in her musical murmur. He'd thought about her independence, her conscience crisis over Mr. Hargraves the peach farmer, the way she always wanted to go to F.A.O. Schwarz and look at the model trains, and the way she was willing, at least sometimes, to be intimate with him. All the way to sharing. That was the key. That was the signal Brian had been sending out his whole life, waiting like a sonar, waiting for just one soundwave to hit something and bounce back to him.

Of course, he wouldn't tell her all that. He'd learned his lesson about telling too soon. Telling ever. Even people loved the intimacy, loved to show affection to each other, hated talking about it. Verbalization of involvement seemed to scare people more that involvement itself. Tara was scared
too. She'd withdrawn from him after Carrambas on their last
date, outside the Coffee Dive on the date before that, at the
critical moments, and she wouldn't sleep with him. But Brian
could understand that. Getting involved again scared him too.
But the chance to have just one of those magic, shared
moments, like sitting on the beach at four in the morning
holding Marla's hand or watching his father stand up from his
Grape Nuts and decide to give him the portrait of Mom, well,
that was too good to pass up. And with Tara, he thought he
might just be headed for a lifetime full of those moments.
Because she craved them, just like he did.

Up in Tara's window, the drapes swished slightly, and
Tara's unmistakable silhouette filled the window for a second
and then backed away from it. The drapes went on swishing.
As though someone else was up there with her, Brian thought?
Her friend Carol, maybe? Brian felt a sudden stab of doubt
about just appearing here, but he suppressed it. After all,
he was about to tell Tara he loved her. And he'd brought
chicken soup, and an eerie Astor Piazzola tape he was sure she
would love, and a black rock-em-sock-em robot he'd bought on
clearance at the Korean toy stand near the Hanging Studio
because it just had Tara written all over it. How unwelcome
could he be?

Besides, they had more than just their blossoming love to
discuss. This afternoon, maybe five minutes after Brian had
seriously considered standing up out of his chair and
relieving Black-i of one or two of his moth-wing limbs, Black-i had snapped the reel-to-reel off in the middle of a perfect mix and announced, "Brian, I'm going to London in January to record a band I discovered. They're the real thing, I swear. And I'd like to take you with me as co-producer. Consider it, won't you?" Then, without waiting for an answer, he'd flipped the tape back on, and he and Brian went on fighting like they always did until six-thirty. At which time both of them left the studio grinning. Black-i had asked him if he wanted to get some dinner, and when Brian had said he couldn't, Black-i had nodded and stopped grinning and Brian had thought suddenly that this man was forty years old, started to say he had time for a quick bit, but Black-i was already gone, striding off with his combat boots flashing into the snow.

Brian didn't know if he wanted to go to London. He just knew he wanted to discuss it with Tara. Discuss everything with Tara. And no introduce her to Dad, he thought, and smiled at his own petulance.

He took a last look around this quiet Hoboken street before entering the building. Stalling, and steadying himself. The street smelled worse than your average Manhattan street, he thought. Smelled worse, looked uglier, and felt more like a place where people lived. Square cement buildings rose on either side of him, stitching checkerboard patterns of light into the dimming evening. A few windows boasted Christmas lights already, and more than one showcased giant,
silvery menorahs. Grimy Buicks and Chevys slushed past, searching out parking spots. Straightening the part in his hair with his mitten, Brian pushed the gate open and strode into Tara's building.

Even the bare linoleum lobby and the relentless unshaded bulb lighting felt friendlier to Brian than the average Manhattan entryway. On the cork bulletin board by the elevator, little pieces of yellow stick-em message paper read "Dryers out again - everybody call Mr. Slumlord today," and "Anybody seen my daughter-in-law's cat? - Sadie."

Inside the otherwise conventional urine-smelling elevator, Brian found another cork board next to the floor buttons. No messages on this one. Just a scrawl in black paint marker. "FOR A GOOD TIME, GO ELSEWHERE," and underneath that, the signatures and apartment numbers of about thirty people. Tara was there, second row, third from the bottom. A Hoboken Declaration of Independence. Smiling, fidgeting again with the part in his hair, Brian slipped out of the elevator on the fourth floor and marched down the hallway to Tara's door. Where, with no more stalling, he stripped off one mitten and knocked hard.

For a second, he heard nothing. Then shuffling sounds. Slippers on tile. The door opened the length of the inside chain lock, and one of Tara's eyes appeared in the opening. Brian smiled. Tara snuffled, sighed. She pushed the door shut, unhooked the chain, swung the door open and there she
was, Tara and her cozy room and the spill of snowlight from the window unfurling in front of Brian like a handfan folding out. There was no one in the room with her.

"Come in, Brian." she said, her voice thick with mucus and affection and with something else, too, some hint of something Brian couldn't quite identify.

"Howdy." he said, bending forward and bouncing a kiss off her forehead. Bag held out in front of him, he stepped past her into the apartment.

Something about the way Tara's room looked reminded him of how his room at Dad's house had felt last weekend. Not her posters, certainly, all jazz musicians and MOMA exhibits, and not the black vinyl couch, and not the wonderfully coordinated Persian throw-rugs. Not any of the things in the room. More the mood of the room. This place, too, seemed unused to the sudden, extended presence of its inhabitant. Brian wasn't sure what gave him that impression. Possibly the balled-up Kleenexes next to the book on the floor by the couch. Or the rows of Sierra Club magazines on the coffee table mussed into messy diagonals and curves. The pronounced dustlessness, as though a certain bored someone had given herself a project. The pile of Red Apple coupons clipped out of the newspaper, as though Tara would ever keep track of those long enough to use them. Smiling, Brian turned and faced her. She was standing by the couch in her long, shapeless blue robe and dancer's slippers, with her lush hair
ponytailed and swept over one shoulder. The snowlight frosting it. Make-upless, and unshowered, and beautiful.

"You look sick." he said.

Tara sort of smiled. Not her real smile. No yet. "Am sick. I'm glad you're here, though --"

"Me too --"

"Because we have to talk." She plopped herself down on one end of the couch and stared at her knees and then up at him. "We have to talk. Take your coat off."

Instead, Brian cupped his free hand over his mouth and blew three imitation-trumpet blasts. "Lady Tara," he said, "your Brian has arrived. Bearing gifts." He bowed from the waist, then laid the bag at Tara's feet. "I really missed you."

"Brian --" she started, but he stopped her with a wave of his hand.

"Later. Look in the bag."

"Oh, Brian, please."

"Will you stop your snivelling? Jeez, you're mopey when you're sick. Look in the bag."

The shrillness in Tara's sigh surprised him. She sounded like a kettle brought to boiling, and for just a second she looked like she might yell at him. Why, Brian wondered? But she didn't yell. She just watched him a while, and behind the brown in her eyes Brian thought she looked unhappier than he'd ever seen her look. Was she sicker than she'd let on?
"Are you all right?" he asked.

Without answering, Tara bent to the bag. She lifted the soup out, placed it on the end table beside her. And didn't smile. Then the Astor Piazzola tape, and Brian started to say how good that was, but she didn't even look at it. Just laid it down next to the soup can. Last she too out the black robot. That at least, got as smile. A grudging one.

"Where did you find this? This is from an original set."

"I know."

"Brian." she said, and then she took a deep breath and the smile disappeared. She had one hand on the outside of each knee, as though stabilizing herself. "Brian, I can't take this from you."

"Don't be silly, Tara, you'll get more pleasure from it that I would."

Another smile. Which she once again erased as fast as she could. "That's not what I meant." she said, and for the first time tonight Brian detected Tara's customary warmth. She'd just needed a minute to readjust, he thought. That's what all this hesitation had been about. He crouched down in front of her, until their eyes were level. He could feel the heat of her breath on his cheek, smell the sickness it carried. And he smiled. At long last. The person he'd been looking for. From now on, his and Tara's lives would weave together, fuse and lock, become a bigger kind of life. The kind where words carried weight, where gestures and time spent
and love exchanged built on each other, over each other, layer upon layer upon layer like sedimentary rocks, until they formed a pattern and a history that separated them once and for all from the world through which all these lost and lonely people wandered and wanted. Brian had always considered himself capable of loving harder than most people. But right then, he loved Tara more than he'd ever hoped to love anyone. More than he could say.

"God, Tara, I love you." he said.

"Oh, Brian, no ---"

"I love you, I love you, I do. Please, enough with the fear. I know you're scared. I know this is big. But Tara---"

"Goddamnit, Brian ---"

"Tara, please. Just hear me out."

His declaration of love had yanked her to her feet like a waterskier, and she'd stood in front of him ever since, bobbing and wincing in the wake his words created, her whole face clenched in a look of ferocious concentration. Not a happy look. She wasn't ready for this, Brian realized. But how could you ever be ready for this? It just happened, and you either grabbed hold or you didn't. And he knew, he was sure, she would.

"Just listen. Sit down."

Tara didn't sit down, but she didn't say anything, and her features relaxed a little. She looked more resigned that relaxed. But that was okay. He could fix that.
"Tara. The whole time I was home, I'd sit in my house, my Dad's house, and I tried so hard to make it work with him, you know? Tried everything we talked about and it just didn't help, and the last night I shut myself in my room and I felt sick, I mean panicked, in trouble. And then all of the sudden your face sort of appeared in front of me, and just, bang, I was fine. I was happy. Somehow, with all the messes I've made, I got lucky. I found you."

One tear freed itself from Tara's frantically blinking eyes, a parachutist bailing out. Brian looked down and realized she was clutching a little red superball he hadn't noticed when he came in. And he saw the stationary spread out at her feet, with the envelop on top addressed to someone named Rita, and suddenly he didn't feel so close to her anymore. Or so sure of her.

"You're lucky for finding me?" she said. "Me?"

"You." Brian said, shaking himself and wrenching his eyes back up to her face where they belonged. What difference did the rest of her life make? "You. God, Tara, you're so together, it's intimidating."

"Together?"

"You don't understand the effect you have, do you? You don't even realize it. That's part of your charm." As he spoke, he watched her shoulders bend a little towards him. This is my life, here, he thought. This person.

"You're the gentlest person I've ever met, Tara. I'm not
making this up, I really mean it, you are. You look out for your friends. You look out for me. You care about bums on the street and saving the planet and you're doing something about it. You're smart, you have mediocre musical taste but at least you're passionate about it ..." He smiled as he said that, but she didn't smile back. "You make me laugh. You make me happy. You make me feel not-so-alien after all. And you're beautiful and sexy and you're even Jewish. All in one. God, I cam here planning to say all this, and I still can't believe all the incredible things you are. So please. My Tara. Just stand still and let me love you."

And be stood up, and cupped one hand to her cheek. And as he bent forward to kiss her, he watched her not flinch, not back away, and he felt himself shudder with exhilaration. He poured this exhilaration into his kiss. Tara fought just a second longer, squirmed backwards against the couch, then released herself to him. Released a little more. Brian felt her tongue twitch against his. And for one, long, glorious moment, Brian felt the two of them de-solidifying, their skins slipping up like window shades so their liquid inside-selves could reach for each other and recombine, and when she bit down on his lip he thought she was just feeling this too and kissed her deeper while she bit harder and harder and harder, until at last Brian staggered back with a gurgle as his own blood burst into his mouth. Before he could right himself she had a hold of his shoulders and she was shaking him, shaking
him, really hurting him, he tried to get his arm up but as he did she shoved him and he lost his balance and tipped backwards and smacked into the floor and lay still, dazed, while she stood above him and sobbed. Brian lay still some more and didn't think and watched her.

Finally, the sobbing stopped. Tara took a Kleenex out of the pocket of her robe, blew her nose in it. Then she dumped the Kleenex on the discard pile by the couch. When she looked down a Brian, her face revealed nothing at all. But it suddenly looked a whole lot older.

"Now. Goddamnit." she said. "You are going to listen." She didn't kneel or offer him a hand up, and her eyes seems to pin him where he lay. Brian waited. Tara took some breaths. Then went on. "Brian, I don't want this."

Then she breathed some more. Brian waited some more. "Don't want what?" he said after a while.

"This."

"What? Too fast?"

"Yes, too fast --"

"We can slow down --"

"Too fast and too hard and too much --"

"So we'll relax --"

"BRIAN I DON'T WANT THIS!" she shrieked, then clutched at her stomach and started to mumble. "Not again, please, why does this, God, I just want ..." Then she retrained herself with a visible effort. Looked at Brian through slitty,
agonized eyes. "I don't want you."

Brian didn't argue. He just lay there and listened. Tara started speaking again. Eventually, Brian hoisted himself to his feet.

"I can't do it, Brian. I wish I could, because you deserve it. But I just can't be your everything. Not now. Maybe it just, oh fuck, maybe it just isn't in me, I don't understand it either. I hate it. You try so hard, you bring me things and talk to me and kiss me so well, and none of it has made me love you, I don't know --"

His yawn stopped her. Brian had kind of figured it would. He looked at her and yawned again. "Done?" he said.

When the phone rang, neither of them jumped. Or bothered to look at it. They just stared at each other. Two rings. Three rings. Four. Then Brian shrugged and turned towards the door, and Tara bent for the phone.

With his hands already back in his mittens, Brian had to try the know twice before he got it unlatched, which kept him in the room long enough to hear Tara's murmured "What? No. Mom." And something in that murmur stopped Brian in the doorway. Tugged him back into the room. Something subtler than a sign or a tremor, but whatever it was set Brian's ears reverberating, as if she'd pulled some hidden bell cord and rung him. He'd heard that tone before. Lots of times before. In his own voice, and his father's. He pulled his mittens off and shut the door.
"When?" Tara said into the phone. And "Which hospital?" She was standing straight up, leaning on nothing, with the phone jammed into her neck and the phone cord winding and winding in her fingers. Brian slipped his hand into her free one and waited.

"Yes, Mom." she said. "Yes, Mom, I know."

If he had listened hard enough, Brian probably could have understood the chattering on the other end of the line, but he wasn't listening. He was watching Tara. Watching her blink again and again. Watching and waiting. This, this he knew how to do. Because he knew what he had wanted and hadn't gotten. It didn't matter what the crisis was. For once, he was sure of his place in the situation. His job. He watched Tara and waited.

"Yes. Yeah." Tara said. More chattering from the phone. Then "Yeah, he's here. He's holding my hand." And when he heard that, Brian felt a sudden surge of pride. Of joy. He'd mattered enough for her to tell her mother about him. Even when Tara said "Yeah, I told him, he's holding my hand anyway," his joy didn't diminish. For the first time in their month together, he could see evidence of himself etched into her life, her conversations, like a little scar.

"I'm going right now." Tara said, and disengaged her hand to hang the phone up.

"Do you want your clothes?" Brian whispered, and she shook her head.
From the front hall closet she got her overcoat and her boots. Brian watched her dress, held the front door while she exited, followed her out. Instead of the elevator, they took the stairs, two at a time, until Tara stopped at the second floor landing and patted her pockets and said "Fuck." She'd already started upstairs when she saw the Kleenex packet Brian was dangling from his hand. She took a tissue and blew her nose.

"Got them off the end table." Brian said.

"Thanks." said Tara, and coughed twice.

They started down the stairs again. Raced through the lobby to the street.

"Cab?" Brian asked.

"No." said Tara, without stopping. "Train'll be faster."

Single snowflakes spun through the air around them, glittering as they swung beneath the streetlights and then winking out like fireflies. No cars passed them. Almost no people were out. For the first time in ages, Brian felt like he was walking through a suburb, although this didn't look like any suburb he was familiar with. He walked beside Tara. He didn't touch her, and he didn't ask her anything. Just walked beside her. Glanced over at her every now and then. Her cheeks blazed with the sudden cold, and her eyes were aimed forward. At the PATH station entrance, Tara stopped suddenly, shook herself, and turned to Brian. Her gaze no less intense that it had been when she'd decked him.
"Brian --"
"You need a Kleenex." he said, and smiled.
"Huh? Oh." she said, and then she had a tissue out and she wiped the mucus from under her nose with it. "Brian, this isn't your problem."

"Tara --"
"Brian, really. I appreciate how selfless you're being, I really do, and I kind of wish I hadn't said what I said until maybe our next date, but I'm selfish enough to think that way. But I did say it. And I meant it. And you should tell me to go get fucked and leave now."

Brian's smile never wavered. Although he really was getting to hate the word 'appreciate.' "I'll leave you later." he said. He waited for Tara to answer, move, something. When she didn't, he reached out and squeezed her bare hand in his mitten. "And that's a promise."

For a split second longer, Tara did nothing. Then her eyes teared up and her fingers curled around his mitten and clung to it. "Thank you, Brian."

"We're wasting time." he said, and tugged her downstairs into the station.

Inside the packed train, Brian stood next to Tara and continued not to ask what had happened, and even when they were back in Manhattan and had switched onto a Broadway Local that shot them uptown towards Columbia Presbyterian, he left her along. He sat beside her and held her hand. Her warm and
clinging hand, soft against his skin after he stored his mittens away in his coat. Cindery air swept across them in gusts from an open window across the car. The train lurched from one side of the tracks to the other.

Once, and only once as they roared out of 96th street station, did Brian wonder why he was doing this. Staying with Tara. Holding her back from the cliff-edge instead of kicking her over, and his answer was that he cared about this person, loved her, and if she needed him he'd be there. He knew that answer wasn't quite accurate because it didn't bury the question, like a holey blanket it left something showing through, but it sufficed for the moment and allowed him to return his attention to Tara. Who, after all, needed it a lot more than he did. She was crying out of the corners of her eyes. Brian used his mittens to sop up the tears, and she smiled and told him at last.

"My friend Carol. That was my mom on the phone, you probably guessed that. Her mom called my mom, Carol's mom did, she lives in Boston and she told my mom she tried to get me and couldn't, I don't know, I must have been in the bathroom or on the phone or something --"

"Tara, what happened?"

"Oh. Carol's boyfriend. This dickhead she's been seeing attacked her with a meat skewer." she said, and sort of giggled and started crying again. "A meat skewer. Didn't kill her. Yet. At least, she wasn't dead when her mom called
my mom."

"God." Brian said, wiping away her latest tears. No one in the car around them looked up from their newspapers. At one time Brian would have taken that as cruelty, but he knew better now. It wasn't cruelty, or disinterestedness, or jadedness. It was politeness. All these people and their big and little tragedies, all of them had probably taken a subway ride to got to one or away from one at some point, relying on their fellow New Yorkers' respect for their ability to handle desperation alone. The country's most private people, Brian thought, and shook his head.

On the 166th street platform, Brian held Tara back, kept her from charging through the crowds of people funneling through the two working exit turnstiles. He kept their pace steady, kept his hand firmly in hers, and after a while her steps slowed to their natural near-frenetic rhythm, and a few faint splotches of red appeared in her drained and pale cheeks. As they passed through the Emergency Room doorway into the hospital, Brian became aware of a weakness in his own knees, a giddiness behind his eyes, as though he'd just given blood, but he didn't care, he ignored it, and soon he stopped noticing.

He squeezed Tara's hand tighter as they stopped a few feet inside the entrance and stared around at the anemic yellow-white room, the ripped black plastic couches, Chuck Scarborough interviewing someone Brian didn't recognize on a
black and white TV that thrust like a demented cuckoo clock out of the wall nearest the couches, too high up for anybody to watch it comfortably. The fluorescent lights buzzed and twitched. Half-melted slush coated the floor tile. On one black couch, a Puerto Rican kid, maybe fifteen, rolled his eyes around the room to avoid catching sight of the gap where one of his knees should have been. His mother sat beside him, eyes wandering back and forth between her son's leg and the form in her lap that she wasn't filling out. A few couches over from the, an old man with long, spindly legs that seemed to stretch out past his feet like splints had folded himself onto the cushions, and every ten seconds on the dot he cut loose with a cough that sounded like no cough Brian had ever heard before. Like lungs and kidneys tearing. A body shredding documents, leaving no trace of its inhabitant.

Two hopelessly harried nurses bounced back and forth between the kid, the man, the information desk. Brian winced as he inhaled the slushy-sterile smell of the room. Then, when he felt as accustomed to it as he was going to get, he eased Tara forward towards the desk. She was watching the old man, and shaking, and crying again.

For about five minutes, neither nurse asked them what they wanted. Every few seconds one would return to the counter, head down, shoulders up, everything in their bearing begging not to be bothered, just for a second, please. Brian waited until he felt Tara's fingers begin to fidget and jerk
in his own, then stopped one of the nurses with a quiet but forceful "Excuse me."

The nurse stopped, her shoulders sagged, she looked up and her expression was more pleasant than Brian expected, as though she was grateful they'd waited as long as they had. She was black, pretty. Unwrinkled in a way that she suggested she hadn't been at this particular post as long as her obviously competency implied.

"Yes?" she said, in a breathy, hopeless voice that suggested she'd been here plenty.

"I --" Brian started, but Tara broke in over him, sounding thick with mucus but otherwise strong.

"We're looking for a patient. Carol Champlaine. She'd have come in maybe two or three hours ago."

"Through emergency?"

"Yes, through emergency, Christ, she was stabbed." Tara snapped.

The nurse didn't even flinch. Just flipped up the forms on one of the clipboards on the desk. After a few seconds she nodded, looked up Tara, didn't smile.

"Intensive care. Fifth, no wait, fourth floor unit. Take the elevator, through the swinging doors on your right."

Tara and Brian were waiting for the elevator when the nurse appeared again at Brian's elbow.

"Are you family?" she asked.

"No." Tara answered, but Brian answered yes almost as
quickly.

"I'm her brother." Brian said after a long pause. "Carol's brother."

The nurse stared at him. Then at Tara. "Make sure you say you're family." she said. "They won't let you in unless you're family."

"Gotcha." said Brian.

"Thanks." Tara whispered. The nurse nodded, turned, and left them. When Brian pulled Tara into the elevator, he felt her give a little at the waist, bend backwards, like a punching bag with a leak somewhere.

Even in the hospital, Brian noticed, the elevators reeked of urine. He wondered if maybe the smell came with them. Some kind of trademark of the manufacturer. As the doors hummed open, Tara leaned into him and Brian bolstered her by locking his arm through hers.

The nurse outside intensive care looked up long enough to glare at them as they approached her desk. She had peroxide blond hair, and lips with looked twisted together.

"Yes?" she snapped, drawing the 's' out into a sigh.

"Carol," Tara started, but her voice came out gravelly and she stopped to clear her throat.

"What? Who?"

"Carol Champlaine." said Tara.

"What about her?"

"We want to see her, and why don't you drop the asshole
act, I'm tired." Tara said, and the nurse's cheeks twitched, just once. Brian tried hard to contain himself, but he couldn't and he broke into a smile. The New Yorker bitchiness routine, he thought. Even here.

The nurse dropped her eyes down to the papers on her desktop. Dismissing them, it looked like. "No." she said.

"Oh, look, lady." Brian said, but she didn't even look up.

Tara was fidgeting, starting to panic. She was grinding her teeth, and when she spoke again she sounded as shrill as she'd sounded back in her apartment. Only an hour ago. "Brian, what is this, are we in hell, does she want money or something, get this woman out of my face before I --"

"Look." Brian said to the nurse's bent head. "When can we see her?"

"When the doctor says it's alright. And when I get a change to tell you he did. We try to care for our patients more than our visitors."

"Fine. We'll be in the waiting area right over there." He pointed down the hall. She didn't look up. "Could you get us as soon as you know anything?"

Brian didn't wait for the answer he knew he wouldn't get. Instead, he spun Tara around and steered her across the long white hallway.

There weren't any TV's in this waiting area. Two other people waited there, a woman and an older woman who sat
sleeping with their heads slumped together across a metal armrest. The younger woman had an unlit cigarette in one limp hand, and when Brian and Tara stepped around her, she jerked her head up and started the word "Doctor" and then jammed the cigarette in her mouth. By the time Brian got Tara seated a few chairs away, the woman had her head back down and her eyes closed.

Then came the wait. The turning and turning to try to find a comfortable spot against the hard plastic chair-backs. Thirty minutes went by. An hour. Two hours. Once, when he was fifteen, Brian had taken a bus from school to see his mom. After what must have been her very first surgery. Dad had told him the floor and the room number and how to find it, and Brian still remembered the directions. Room 318. Up the stairs inside the main entrance on the right. Down the third floor hall until it ends, then turn left, I'll meet you there. That was what Dad had said.

And Brian had gone where he was told, and he found the room but Mom wasn't in it, no one was in it, and he sat down on a chair by the window. Stared at the unmade bed and the i.v. stand and the coil of clear yellow tubing flopped on the nightstand near the bed like a piece of someone the surgeon had forgotten to put back in, and soon he felt nauseous and panicked so he spun away and watched the rays of blazing sunlight shatter on the surface of the ocean.

Finally, after maybe forty-five minutes, he'd gone back
into the hallway and found a nurse. The nurse was young and pretty and when she found out who he was she said, "Oooh, Brian, there's been a little bit of a problem, you dad's with her up in I.C.U. I take you up there." And she took him there and left him. And after some more waiting, Dad came out looking pale, but smiling, and said "It's alright, she's alright, but it'll be a while." Then he hugged Brian and disappeared back through the doors marked I.C.U.

For four hours Brian waited, and by the end of the first hour, he'd learned how to bite off chewable chunks of time, survive them, swallow them. Fifteen minutes, and he could go to the bathroom. Fifteen more, he could get a drink. Fifteen more, then he'd try a quick jog up and down the staircase, hoping he'd run into that nurse and look devastated and she'd put her arm around him.

And so now, during this windowless wait with a woman who said she didn't love him for another woman he'd never met, Brian bit off chewable chunks of time for Tara. At 8:25 on the black and white dial clock above the waiting area, the public school kind with the minute hand that didn't move at all of fifty-nine seconds, then leapt to the next black dot as though picking its way from rock to rock in a river, he got up without being asked and without telling Tara where he was going and found coffee for them both. When he got back, Tara said the nurse had been by, that Carol was out of danger but not ready to see anyone yet. She said she didn't want any
coffee, but Brian made her sip some, sip some more, and soon she'd sipped her way to the bottom of the paper cup and ten more minutes had passed.

At 9:05, Brian dragged her to her feet, escorted her to the bathroom he'd found on the way to the coffee machine, waited for her in the hallway. She took a long time, and Brian was glad. Good sign. He remembered inventing all sorts of time-wasting techniques in hospital bathrooms. Blowing your nose. Washing your hands and drying them under the air-blower things and standing there until the air-blower shut itself off. When she came out she seemed steadier on her feet, less twitchy. They went back to the waiting area and found the two other women gone, to see their patient or to get coffee or maybe home, and seven more minutes had passed.

At 9:29, a tall, not very old-looking doctor with nasty black stubble on his chin sopped in front of them and asked if they were waiting for Carol Champlaine. Brian waited for Tara to answer, waited, finally realized she'd fallen asleep on his shoulder.

"Yes." Brian said quietly.

"You family?"

"I'm her brother."

"She said she only had a sister. Tara or something. She said her sister would be here by now."

"Um, her." Brian said, gesturing at Tara with his chin. Tara shifted, rolled to the other side of her chair without
waking. "My wife. They think of each other as sisters."

Then the doctor's smile slit his stubble like a razor. Revealing clean, white teeth. "Hey, I'm just razzing you. She'd Tara, right? Carol's best friend?"

Brian thought about how to answer that. Decided not to.

"Look, I said I was just razzing you." said the doctor, and he stopped smiling and yawned and suddenly looked tired. "She's Tara, and I don't know who you are, but if you came with her I assume you're alright, so you can see her now. Remember when you see her, she looks worse than she is. Only real problem was some internal bleeding, which seems to have stopped."

With a gentle shake, Brian woke Tara up. He helped her to her feet, started his arm around her waist and then saw she didn't need it. Her dark eyes shone. She wasn't twitching. She stepped ahead of him, eager to see her friend, and Brian followed behind and watched her walk. Her graceful, strong-legged walk. I was almost good enough for this person, he thought. I was, for a while, she'd say I force it on her but only because she was trying to push me away. He walked behind her, caught glimpses of her face. She didn't look at him once.

Inside Intensive Care, they followed the doctor down an aisle between carefully drawn curtains hiding beds and sick people from passers-by. One curtain hung open far in front of them, a puddle of light spreading out from it, and Brian
suddenly felt like he was in some sort of Twilight Zone episode, that he'd get to that opening and look in the bed and see not Carol but his own face. Of his mother's. And the pretty nurse would smile and put her arm around him while he screamed. Brian shivered and forced himself to wait out here.

Sighing, holding her free hand in front of her as though she thought she might run into something, Tara moved the curtain aside and stepped towards the bed and tugged Brian with her, and there in the bed was not his mother after all but a black-haired woman, one eye open and staring at them, the other eye bandaged shut. The puncture marks on her cheeks looked almost symmetrical. Patterned. Tara gasped, and Brian blinked twice but he didn't gasp, or shiver either. He'd seen worse. He'd seen a lot worse. Somehow, just because of what he'd seen, he'd expected Carol to look worse. Carol's good eye twitched, teared up, and with an obvious effort she lifted the hand that didn't have an i.v. in it, then let it fall back beside her. At Tara leaned over the bed, Brian saw Carol smile a slow, drugged smile.

"Oh, God, Carol." Tara said, and dropped her head to Carol's chest and clutched Carol's waist and lay there a while, lay there until the doctor reappeared suddenly next to Brian. Brian turned towards him, planning to plead for a little more time, and instead wound up staring at the doctor. Who suddenly reminded him of some of the Ayatollah's frat-boy friends from UCLA. Something about the way he stood there
waiting to slide himself into the conversation. Something about his blatantly predatory grin, and why was he grinning now anyway, Brian wondered? And why did people like this always make him feel so threatened?

"You want to show them or shall I?" the doctor said softly to Carol.

Carol opened her eye and tried a smile again, but her lips barely moved. "You better." she said, her words slurring over each other.

Tara raised her head enough to look at her friend's face. "Show us? Oh, God, Carol, are you --"

"Ah, she's fine." the doctor said, and sauntered over to the bedside. Fine, Brian thought. Wonder how you'd do under the ol' meat skewer, Mr. Cook Doc. "Besides. Wait till you see her boyfriend."

Reaching into the pocket of his coat, the doctor pulled out two Polaroids and passed them to Tara. Brian stepped forward so he could see over her shoulder. Feeling self-conscious about the movement, but doing it anyway.

The Polaroids were of a man's face with bruises all over it. Both eyes were swelling, and both top front teeth were absent from the grimacing mouth.

"What ...?" said Tara.

Carol tried another smile, got closer this time. She tried to move her hand closer to Tara, too, but then shuddered in pain.
"Easy." said the doctor.

"Got him with ... the brass knuckles ..." Carol managed, then lay still and breathed a while. "The knuckles ... and the mace. Boom." Then she sagged back even further into her pillow, eye scrunched shut.

"Did you take these?" Tara asked.

Everyone waited for Carol to answer. When she didn't the doctor said "I did."

"Isn't he nice?" Carol whispered. "Already gave him my ... phone number."

Tara's laugh started slowly, but it kept growing until it poured out of her and over her friend. Carol grimaced, and a thread of blood unpooled out of one of the punctures.

"You're spoiling my sutures." the doctor said, thrusting Tara out of the way with his forearm and bending over the bed. After a few minutes he stood back up, mumbled "Sorry: to Tara, stepped back.

"You scared me to death." Tara said to Carol.

Carol's eye open, blinked, focused on Brian. That wandered back to Tara. "Brian?" she said.

In the first moment after Tara's "shush" hissed out of her mouth, Brian thought she was aiming the noise at him, directing him to let her do the introductions. But then he realized Tara was looking at Carol, that she hadn't raised her eyes to him once, and he felt a blush boil out onto his cheeks. Because Carol was surprised to see him here. Because Tara had
discussed this with her, just like she'd discussed it with her mother. Tomorrow, or the next day, Tara and Carol and Mr. Cool Doctor would have a good laugh about him standing there. He mumbled something about meeting Tara by the waiting area and ducked out behind the curtain and walked away fast down the aisle-way. Walked faster. Not quite running, because his footsteps already seemed to rock the whole room like jackhammer blows, the whole space, pretty soon all these sick people were going to climb down out of their beds and detach themselves from their tubing and come out after him and then he was running and running and then he was out, through the swinging doors, gulping at the sweet sterile air like a hooked fish thrown back at the last second.

By the time Tara came out, he'd once more regained control of his breath, and although he heard her coming, he waiting until she was right in front of her chair in the waiting area. Then he faked waking up, jerking his head off the backrest and licking his lips a lot.

"Nnh, hi." he said. "Tara. Okay? Ready?"

"I'm sorry, Brian." Tara said. "The doctor let me stay awhile. He and Carol are pretty cute together, huh?"

Brian didn't answer that.

"She'll eat him alive when she'd not sedated," Tara went on, "but he won't attack her with a meat skewer."

She shivered, then, but Brian pretended not to see it and forced a laugh. Which sounded forced, but he knew Tara
wouldn't notice anyway. Any why would she care even if she did notice? He was just Brian, after all. Someone who wouldn't attack her with a meat skewer. And she was just Tara. Just another person who'd left him.

"Come on." Brian said.

On the ride back down in the elevator, Tara said something about herself and Carol and NYU, but Brian wasn't really listening. He was thinking, wondering which of the little comments Tara had torn into him with today would be the one that stuck. The one he kept goring himself on. He was building up quite a collection of those comments.

Halfway across the emergency room, Brian realized she'd stopped talking about Carol. She was still talking, though. He had to concentrate hard to hear her. Not because she was talking quietly, but because his brain was whirring around and around like a fan, and listening to her was like trying to stick a finger in it. She was talking about him, he realized. Praising him. And she was holding his hand again. And suddenly, Brian had a plan.

"You are literally the biggest person I've ever met." she was saying. "Coming all this way with me. Staying with me. Never moping. Taking care of me. Do you know how long it's been since anyone really took care of me?"

They were now ten steps from the sliding glass doors and the street. Brian began an internal countdown to commencement of his plan. Seven steps now. Six. Five.
"Oh, Brian." Tara said. "I wish I could do for you what you've just done for me. I really do."

They hit the mat in front of the doors. The doors slid open. Two more steps. One. "Maybe we could -- HEY!"

The moment their feet touched sidewalk, Brian ripped his hand out of Tara's and dashed to his left, away from the subway, and he didn't stop until he was three buildings down and then he spun and there she was, just standing there where he'd left her. Her expression couldn't have been more perfect if he'd painted it on her. She looked shocked. Confused. Like she might even cry.

"What are you DOING?" she shouted, her voice cracking as she finished.

"Leaving." Brian shouted back. "Now I'm leaving."

As he dashed off down the block, knowing she would watch, not looking back, it was all Brian could do to keep from throwing his arms in the air in triumph.