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Making Love During the Apocalypse

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Making Love During the Apocalypse
by Richard Jude Goodness

And what I think is admirable, perhaps even hopeful, is that they have managed to do it without going spiritually to pieces. A working man does not disintegrate under the strain of poverty as a middle-class person does. Take, for instance, the fact that the working class think nothing of getting married on the dole. It annoys the old ladies in Brighton, but it is a proof of their essential good sense; they realize that losing your job does not mean that you cease to be a human being. So that in one way things in the distressed areas are not as bad as they might be. Life is still fairly normal, more normal than one really has the right to expect.

--George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*

Because if it's not love
Then it's the bomb
That will keep us together
--The Smiths, "Ask"


As we are a doomed race, chained to a sinking ship...as the whole thing is a bad joke, let us, at any rate, do our part; mitigate the sufferings of our fellow-prisoners...decorate the dungeon with flowers and air-cushions; be as decent as we possibly can.

--Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

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Afterword:**Stephen King and the Putting Aside of Childish Things**

On September 15th, 1981, a boy named Jack Sawyer stood where the water and land come together, hands in the pockets of his jeans, looking out at the steady Atlantic.

I was twelve, myself, when I first read that sentence, the opening one in Stephen King and Peter Straub's *The Talisman*, and while maybe that particular stringing-up of words wasn't life-changing, the book was. Starting from that book, I ended up reading, no, *devouring*--an appropriate word relating to an author who features many characters with sharp teeth--everything King had written up to that point. It took me three years, and by the time I was fifteen I'd read or attempted every single Stephen King novel, short story, screenplay, and as the years went on and he continued to publish, I continued to read.

King himself gives off the impression that he's a particularly relaxed guy, and while I'm sure that his "just one of the folks" demeanor is at least partially a very good sense of image, one gets the sense that he's a hell of a guy to hang out with. He seems the sort who can get along with just about everybody, that he's socially deft, that he knows how to make a good joke at any opportunity, that he's well-read enough to hold his own in conversation with professors and into pop culture and sports enough to grab a beer with anyone on the street. His work, however, consists of one of the most frustrating and inconsistent oeuvres in recent years. For every *It* and *The Shining* and *Bag of Bones*, there's at least one *The Tommyknockers* or *Christine* or *Dreamcatcher*.

It's partially this wide inconsistency which gives King the sketchy reputation that he has in the literary community. Harold Bloom, bloated, approaching irrelevance, blasts King with relish¹. That's not a minority opinion: that's the type of thinking which made me, in college, hide my King novels, only read them in the privacy of my own dorm room.

But like it or not, accept it or not, a certain writer from Maine has been a formative influence on me and my writing. If I hadn't picked up *The Talisman* in sixth grade, if I'd gone to early adulthood without reading any of King's novels and just idly picked one up now, would it have the import for me that it does now? I honestly can't say that it would have. Because while I'll read and devour now--in college I read all of Virginia Woolf's major novels over the course of two feverishly modernist years--I don't think that it'd have the same mythological effect. A friend of mine had influenced me to read *The Talisman*. I remember bringing it to school one day. We had a half hour of silent reading each day in class that year, R.L. Stine's *Fear Street* series was popular at that time, I remember, we were reading a lot of teen novels, myself included, but that day, I'd gone through maybe 30-40 pages the night before, and I remember taking it out of my bag, and everyone going wide. I'd taken the book out from the library and it was a hardcover, I hate hardcovers nowadays but back then I thought they were impressive, and it was. I

In the same article, he magnanimously names exactly four living novelists who are "still at work and [deserving of] our praise": Pynchon, whom I hate; Philip Roth, whom I hate; Cormac McCarthy, whom I hate; and Don DeLillo, whom I hate. One is awed and impressed by Sir Nicholas Greene's--I mean, Professor Bloom's, sorry!--open-mindedness and willingness to accept new movements in--but perhaps I am expecting too much from the old? One also wonders why, if Bloom has such a low opinion of King, he is credited with editing a book of critical interpretations of King, published in 2006 by Chelsea House, ISBN 0791093174. Assumedly Bloom has changed his mind, he's desperate for editing work that he'll take on any project, or he's become franchised and is not really paying any attention to the work that's done in his name. Either way, it makes his article impossible to view in anything other than an interesting light.

was reading an honest-to-goodness Grown-Up Novel. And there was a lot to shock me in it. There was swearing, and drug use, and sex, and bad things happening to characters left and right—gory scenes, gruesome, scary things happening. Yes, there were murders and deaths and scary things in the *Fear Street* books, but they were all very b-movie stuff, very cartoony, we didn't take it seriously. The elements of terror in *The Talisman* had something much more primal to them, something which made it much more real-seeming. It didn't hurt that, at its core, the story is about a boy who embarks on a darkly magical journey to cure his mother's cancer. My grandmother had passed away from cancer not even a year before I picked up the book, and I remembered how everyone, in my family, around, prayed for her to get better, prayed for a miracle. *The Talisman* is, in a large part, about miracles.

But in a large part it's about the loss of childhood innocence, too, about seeing that underneath what you know as The World there's a larger, darker version that you learn about when you become a man--that everything is sunshine and smiles when you're a child, and that as an adult you come to know pain and suffering and death and all of that. It's fitting: I was twelve when I read the book, about to go through my own period of a loss of innocence, and rereading the book for me now is almost like grieving. I cannot separate it from that period of my life.

King is, ultimately, at his best when he's writing about that loss of innocence, that transition from childhood to adulthood. This is a man whose career began with a scene of menarche: the ultimate symbol of a young woman's puberty. And his--in my opinion--most accomplished novel does not take loss of innocence as a mere sub-theme but makes

it front and center: the whole novel is *about* growing up and about how adults view their own childhood.

IT is the story of Derry, Maine, and of a nameless shapeshifting creature which dwells beneath it; it's the story of a group of friends who fight the monster in 1958 as children and in 1985 as adults; it's about how people deal with the darker side of human nature. But mostly, growing-up is the main focus.

The characters at the center of the novel meet as children and forge a common bond due to their outcast nature: one is Jewish in a predominantly Christian town; one is black in a predominantly white town; the sole female is poor and abused by her father; one is a stutterer dealing with his brother's death--all of the characters are somehow flawed in a way which separates them from the mainstream but allows them to be accepting of their fellow outcasts. The deaths and disappearances of other children in the town go only vaguely noticed by the adults; it is the children who realize that something more sinister is at work here. The Losers--as they call their group--investigates and ultimately discovers a creature who has been living in their town for generations. As children, they partially defeat it; they grow up and all but one of them leave the town and ultimately begin to forget their adventures. The creature lies dormant for about thirty years and then awakens, prompting another series of murders; the member who has left behind summons his former friends back to the town to do battle with the monster again.

Between chapters, we get excerpts from the diary of Mike Hanlon, the one outcast for racial reasons, now the town librarian--a position representing education and authority, as well as reason--which show his attempts to chronicle the darker side of the history of the

town. He is writing at the time between when he realizes that the events in town are starting another cycle, but before he calls his friends to come. In it, he very explicitly lays out one of King's major themes:

It had only to wait until the act of faith, which made us potential monster-killers as well as sources of power, had become impossible. Twenty-seven years...It is the same, but a third of our lives has gone by. Our perspectives have narrowed; our faith in the magic, which makes magic possible, has worn off like the shine on a new pair of shoes after a hard day's walking....And now, now that we no longer believe in Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, Hansel and Gretel, or the troll under the bridge, it is ready for us...*Come on back and we'll see if you remember the simplest thing of all: how it is to be children, secure in belief and thus afraid of the dark* (894).

For a child, morality is a relatively simple thing: Good and Evil are clearly defined things. Growing up is, in a lot of ways, the teaching of grey areas. One learns, as a child, that telling a lie is Wrong and that telling the truth is Right--as simple and clear-cut as that. Growing up introduces complexities, the concept of White Lies, of concealing aspects of the truth for a greater good. It is in this grey area that the evil of the town gets its power. In direct narrative terms, the inability of adults to believe in monsters allows a monster to act without suspicion: a string of child deaths is impossible to ignore but must be chalked up to real causes—a literal human serial murderer, for example, or a simple string of bad luck.

It is not just children that the creature is responsible for murdering; we see a larger swath through the town. Most notable is the story told in the novel's second chapter. It is the story of a young gay man named Andrew Mellon who is murdered in a homophobic attack. The narration becomes almost police-procedural in this chapter: we see the cops interrogating the suspects, playing good cop/bad cop, picking the weakest member of the

group and forcing a confession out of him. Were it not for a strong mystical element to the attack--the human killers, it is revealed, beat the young man and throw him, still alive, over a bridge; the town's monster catches him and delivers the deathblow. Except for that one detail, the story becomes mundane, realistic and dull: a group of young toughs get offended at the sight of a gay man; they beat and murder him, invoking the gay panic defense. As Scott Amedure, Matthew Shepard, and Gwen Arujo--as well as countless others--can attest, this is not an uncommon occurrence, though admittedly it is not often this dramatic.

Throughout the novel we are told that Derry is home to more murders, assaults, rapes, and other violent crimes than is average. It is clear that It is the explanation for this: that Its presence heightens the perhaps natural and universal vestiges of violence in the people who live there. The clear lesson of the Mellon murder is that his killers were acting under the influence of the evil which emanates from It. But it is wrong to assume that this is a problem native only to Derry. Mellon's boyfriend continually asserts that Derry is not like other places--that it's somehow worse there--but while he probably correctly points out that there is a deep-seated culture of homophobia in the town, he does this a paragraph after he describes being beaten in several cities. Derry is no different from other cities; it is merely a place where this is Allowed.

The cops investigating the murder are clearly on the side of the law--they suppress the part of the story where It appears in order to ensure the success of a conviction². But this

² We are told, incidentally, at the end of the chapter, that while all the killers are convicted for their crimes, all of their sentences are appealed. While, of course, the novel makes it clear that It has delivered the deathblow, it does not allow us to entertain the possibility that they are not to blame. Beyond the police officers seen in the chapter, no one in the legal system knows of the supernatural side

is the only difference between them and the criminals. They make it clear both in their language--they are perfectly comfortable calling Mellon both "queer" and "fag" among other things--and explicitly--we're told that one "had no liking for Derry's small gay community--like every other cop on the force, he would enjoy seeing the Falcon [the city's gay bar] shut up forever" (24). While they all agree that the murder ought to be punished--for it is indeed a bloody and heinous crime--they don't much care for the victim. Their desire is to somehow punish the guilty while ignoring the victim. Such is the nature of the evil in the town. The main characters are able to look beyond and through issues of intolerance in order to band together.

In several instances, characters are being chased by the monster and manage to stave it off through the use of language. While being attacked at one point, Richie, the comedian of the group, mimics the voice of an Irish cop and yells at the monster to back off; It runs away as if wounded. In another point, Stan, who has a hobby of birdwatching, shouts off the names of several birds from memory, which likewise seems to harm the creature. By keeping to their childhood interests, they are able to save themselves. Or, as Jeanne Reesman puts it in her essay "Riddle Game: Stephen King's Metafictional Dialogue":

to the crime. The fact that obviously guilty men are allowed to walk free--they are noted to be often "girl-watching or playing Penny Pitch...not far from where Mellon's torn body was found" (39)--shows that here is a culture which rewards heteronormative identities with a carefree life while punishing and ostracizing its outsiders. The note--and there is perhaps a further irony to the tenor of the statement if we emphasize that they are *girl*-watching--serves as a setup for the Losers' situation. None of them are gay, but as the novel makes clear, they find themselves on the receiving end of the same type of sanctioning violence many times from other human characters.

What proves to be the antidote to such an overpowering voice? The answer, like all solutions to riddles, is simpler than anyone at first imagines. It is happiness expressed through simple laughter--*shared* laughter. This feature of the novel seems to emphasize the idea of the need for children to have contact through group dialogue....In large part simply *being* children, with children's beliefs and games and sense of wholeness, is the avenue to escaping [the monster.] (165-66)

Childhood, then, has an intense power to it; in accepting childhood and the beliefs that it involves, is the power to defeating evil. These beliefs are some of the things that adulthood takes when one reaches it. A lot dies when one leaves childhood behind.

There used to be a used bookstore in my town. It closed when I was in college; I went there about a year before it closed and noticed that there was really nothing there. But growing up I used to go there a lot, would have a few dollars in my pocket and would pick up as many books as I could with the money. And when I read them, I would take the ones I was never going to read again, hand them in for credit, and use it to buy even more.

I bought a paperback copy of *It* there and by the time I was finished--because a thousand-page book when you're twelve takes a long time to read--it was in tatters, the cover practically torn off. Nowadays, if you buy a copy of the book, it's got a horrid-looking cover: it features a blue-filtered scene of a paper boat--one of the initial images of the novel--and part of a clown's face cropped by the edge of the cover. It's a dull image, it conveys nothing of the novel. The cover that my copy had was much starker. It

was a dark sidewalk with the paper boat floating towards a sewer grate--and the claws of a Something poking out from the grate. It's a much more mysterious image. Since I was still young, I was still able to draw, and I remember copying out the cover onto a sheet of notebook paper.

The bookstore itself seemed like something out of Derry--a creepy place, dark in spots, shelves forming a maze. I remember wanting with a thrill to be one of the characters in the book--probably Ben, the one who's ostracized because of his weight, I was heavily overweight growing up. I remember wanting this group, wanting a group of friends who was willing to fight alongside me to the death. The evil of ostracism was of course known to me--a bookish, overweight kid, of course they were. While I didn't understand the adulthood sections of the book as much, while it seemed almost impossible to forget childhood, I found myself identifying with the childhood sections.

I still remember the book's ending, I practically know it by heart:

He awakens from this dream unable to remember exactly what it was, or much at all beyond the simple fact that he has dreamed about being a child again. He touches his wife's smooth back as she sleeps her warm sleep and dreams her own dreams; he thinks that it is good to be a child, but it also good to be grownup and able to consider the mystery of childhood...its beliefs and desires. I will write about all of this one day, he thinks, and knows it's just a dawn thought, an after-dreaming thought. But it's nice to think so for awhile in the morning's clean silence, to think that childhood has its own sweet secrets and confirms mortality, and that mortality defines all courage and love. To think that what has looked forward must also look back, and that each life makes its own imitation of immortality: a wheel. Or so Bill Denbrough sometimes thinks on these early mornings after dreaming, when he almost remembers his childhood, and the friends with whom he shared it. (1138)

I was in my desk in my seventh-grade classroom when I read that, when I finished *It*. It was our free-reading time and I had just finished reading my first book over a thousand pages. I remember going into the bathroom, which was empty, and weeping. Weeping because the effort had exhausted me, weeping because I had just seen a group of characters end mostly happy, weeping because at the time I would never write any paragraph that good, but--and this is possibly an adult interpretation on a childhood act--weeping because I was recognizing the first pangs of the death of my own childhood. In a little over a year I would be entering high school, and at that point childhood must officially end.

Reading it now, I weep for the same reasons, and add to that the fact that even though I'm much younger than the adult characters in the novel, I have forgotten my own childhood, I have forgotten how to be a child myself.

It is the fact that childhood ends which makes it precious. But, as the novel mentions several times, children do and must act as if immortal--must act without any knowledge of death. It is knowledge of death which makes one be an adult.

It is awareness of life which allows one to be a child.

We ask why I write. I write because I recognize my mortality like an adult. I write because I act in spite of that like a child. It is somewhere between the two that the point of life is to be found, I think.

Or maybe it's simply because I'd go crazy if my characters kept climbing into my head and yelled their lines at me until I finally wrote them down.

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My Iron Lung

He doesn't let me smoke in the room, seeing as he's a nonsmoker and all of his housemates are nonsmokers, so, for a compromise, because I don't feel like traipsing all the way downstairs--that would involve getting dressed and putting on socks and underwear, and I can't even find my shirt, let alone something small like a sock, though thank God I could find my pants, because my cigarettes and lighter are, or were, in there--and, frankly, because he doesn't particularly want me to get dressed either, which is a blessing because it means he gets to stay naked too, and he looks fantastic when naked--he's short, which I like, broad-shouldered, one of those guys who's muscular but not defined, so he's got a gut, but it's hard, and when his cock is hard it sticks out perfectly straight, not curved at all, long and fat, and slightly flattened, so it's not so much circular or cylindrical as it is an oval, which incidentally feels fantastic inside me, and it's well-formed too, a nice skin tone, no mottling or excessive veininess, and that extends to the skin in general, darker than me, olivish, I guess you'd call it, and he's covered in fur, some of it matted around his stomach, like mine is, by the mingled semen we'd both expelled onto each other, and further mixed by clinging close after the second time we fucked each other, staying in that position for a few minutes so it started to dry and pulling apart from him was slightly painful, like ripping off a bandaid, the way we had started to become glued to each other, but in other places, his legs, his ass, his chest, his hair has nothing stronger than the earthy residue of his sweat--and a tentative licking had confirmed that he indeed tasted as good as he smelled--so it was still soft, perhaps softer

with the damp of our aerobics, and burrowing into his armpit and chest to curl up felt like digging into some dewed moss, or a pile of leaves, or some spongy clay--we've set up this position that I am in now, which involves the window opened all the way, a towel placed on the sill so I don't get cold from the metal there, me on my stomach, lying on the bed, elbows on the towel, head and the majority of my torso hanging out into the night, the towel/sill cutting into my solar nerves, my elbows constrained a bit by my weight, a blanket placed over my backside, but half pulled off by him, and with the way he's pressing up against me as he lies next to me, it seems like he's bursting to rip the blanket off and fuck me again, just sliver inside me, and I'm dying for it again because I haven't been fucked like this in I-can't-remember-how-long, but he'll still be there in a few minutes, and with the way my ass looks in this light, his hardon will still there--and here he moves to play with himself, and I slap his hand away, playfully, a smile on my face, "Wait for me, babe," on my lips, and a frustrated smirk of a growl from his chest, and he can fuck me a good two, three more times if he's up for it, and Lord knows I plan on fucking him a couple more times tonight as well, because tonight feels like a good night to break some records--but I've got to finish this cigarette first, because it'll be burned down to the filter in a few minutes, because it won't wait for me, and anyone passing by on the street below would see me, hanging out the window, obviously naked, and for all intents and purposes I might as well not be a man but a flag waving in the breeze, shouting out, announcing in bright colors, I got fucked, I got fucked, and for a brief second I consider screaming out to the street and the trash cans and the stray cat napping outside, "This guy has a man's cock! this guy can fuck all night! this guy is hot

beyond belief! this guy knows what the hell he's doing!," and for a brief second I consider it seriously, because I need to tell someone and the wind is the best candidate to hear me and not carry it along to everyone who knows me (although I seem to remember a folk tale about a barber who knew the Rajah's secret--that he had big ears--and told a tree which was made into a flute which played a lively song whose lyrics told everything), but I don't, because he has to live on this street, so I say nothing, just smoke and smile, delaying poking my head back in, partially because I know what the room must smell like, musty and musky, like--and it's obvious and unsurprising why--two guys had had pretty intense sex several times, that fecal, semenic, sweaty smell, coupled with that ingangible something more that sex adds to the room, that hazy, parensic, crystalline sheen of ointment that the air gets when you've rubbed sex onto it, but I'll get used to it again, I know, and at very least the scent was the scent of two guys going at it passionately, animalistically, which is kind of funny considering the tentative nature to the beginning of the night, this being the first time we've slept together, which meant we were both nervous--strange, given my past history, the notches on my belt, the fact that you would think that casual sex would be nothing to me, but we approached it innocently, staying in his kitchen for way too long drinking the bottle of wine I'd brought--a cheap Zin, classy, I know, but one that wouldn't break the bank and in any case would get us drunken and horny--and chatting about nothing in particular, with the strong subtext of is it okay to kiss him, does he want to see me naked, our hands casually and oh-so-innocently brushing against each other, until he cocked his head to the side, like a young puppy, and said, "Would you like to see my room?" which we both knew was the least

subtle way possible of putting it--like inviting someone for "coffee" or something like that, I mean, we both knew he wanted to show me his unclothed body more than the room in which he slept--but for the purposes of polite fiction, which we were still sticking with because we weren't yet sticky with each others' fluids, I pretended he and I were more interested in going over his bookshelf and CD collection instead, and in fact we did that for way too long, him showing me his terrible taste in music and his terrible taste in novels, until finally I just turned to him and placed my hand on his shoulder, facing him, and we stared at each other for a second, and then I kissed him on the cheek, and he smiled, and kissed me on the lips, and I said, in case my messages were mixed, which would make sense if they were, "You know, I don't really, uh, see you as someone I want to be my boyfriend, you know?" and he laughed and said, "It's mutual--I mean, I like you and all, but I'm not looking for a relationship right now, but that doesn't mean," and here his hand was on my ass, and my cock was starting to get hard, and his was too, and I put my hand on his ass and tilted his pelvis towards mine so we were rubbing against each other, and we were kissing each other and slowly and then quickly taking off each others' clothing, and then we were at the bed, and three orgasms later I was here, at the window, and what else was I supposed to say, that I've been thinking about you for weeks, ever since I met you, really, something like that, I mean anyone could find problems with us, I mean it's not like we didn't have differences between us, I mean, hell, he's still in college, you know, I mean, hell, aren't I looking for someone who can support me and take care of me, right, isn't that what I want, so it can't work between us, I mean, he's certainly got this innocence to him, yeah, innocence, apart from the dirty things we just did to each

other, the horribly wonderful things we just did to each other, he's got this innocence, I mean, here I am, and I've had the druggie boyfriend, the relationship based on alcohol abuse, the boyfriend who didn't really give a damn about me, the boyfriend who took all my money, the bipolar boyfriend, the boyfriend who thought that taking me out for dinner once a week counted as a relationship, and here is this young guy, he's relatively unspoiled, no stranger to the bedroom but can he honestly have been in a true relationship, has he ever had a guy beat the shit out of him, and not in a good way but in a very bad way, I don't think he has, so really, what could I possibly want from him but a good time, I mean I want to look at him and just wallow in that innocence, not naivete specifically but something purer, just a general lack-of-cruelty he has, the fact that even though I don't know him very well I know for a goddamn fact that he would never hurt me, never could hurt me, he's the type who could never hurt someone, even unintentionally, could never hurt me, I mean maybe he'd only act like a perfect gentleman to me, but could I take that chance, and maybe I can even fake nobility, say that here's a guy that I like too much to date, very Dorian Grey, I mean I'm at a turning point here, I know that, I could go to him, I could stay with him, forever, and act like I'm ready to settle down, but he's never had the alcoholic boyfriend, he's never had his heart broken, he's never been cheated on, he's never been driven to cheat on someone, and I don't want to give him any initiations, I don't want to show him the ropes, what if I hurt him, fuck him up more, he's just a kid, really, just a damn kid, a young smile and an uncorrupted-- no, wouldn't be right, wouldn't be the sort of thing I'm used to doing anyway, so is that it, I just, I mean, do I leave him for a few weeks, do I pretend to hold the pretext of

friendship, do I just find myself being busy and unable to see him, do I leave tonight, do I stay the night, do I keep with him for the weekend, I guess all these options are open to me, and here he is rubbing my back, and it feels great, and I've never had a guy give me a good backrub before, and my cigarette's almost out, so I take a drag, feel the heat, it's next to the filter and is starting to taste bad because of that, so I let it drop and hit the street below where it lands, hopefully, in a puddle, and I shut the window. And I turn around.

Good Wombs

theres fennel for you and columbines

he checks his watch

--almost

--great

and he goes to open his bag

--wait

he stops and leans in

--come on

sehnsucht versteckt sich wie ein insekt

and since its practically required fucking listening

--gimme a second ill go back to my room

and i guess a little slut like her wouldnt have heard of them but thats not the point its sexy

in its way and i need a bit of an aphrodisiac so i go into the room i mean i leave her room

and i go to our room and i open the door and hes there with a girl already i mean its an

odd coincidence if you think about it

the weight of this sad time we must obey

he laughs

--how brokeback mountain of us we can do this every year you know if we want to

and i laugh

--i wish i knew how to quit you

--but you found some way or other

--leaving for my career and so my kids could grow up in

--leaving because your bitch of a wife

--shut the fuck up

and hes contrite

--hey im sorry its just she was never really nice to me and its been two years and you barely call me any more and shit vodka i miss you

--why do you keep calling me that its stupid we were sixteen and were not kids any more

--jesus i didn't realize

theres rue for you and heres some for me

and he flashes me that smile you know the one all the papers should have cover stories on that smile the ten dollar one and yeah its the one that won me and everyone else the one that i cant help but want to be near has he ever smiled at anyone the way he does at me

--dont pull this shit

and hes angry but hes never angry at me so hes not angry at me now

im schlafe merkst du nicht dass es dich sticht

and what a tableau we make me at the door she is on her back and she does not even see me cause her back is to the door but he is on top of her and hes not even missing a beat of the thrust and for a second i dont even think he even sees me but he looks up not even missing a beat and he winks at me and its at that point that i just run the fuck out of there

its been too many times that i walked the line with you

--im gonna give you a nickname

ilaugh

--why

--so we can talk about each other without anyone knowing who were talking about

--oh are you ashamed of me

--no not at all i just think it would be cool

--fine whats your nickname for me

he thinks

--vodka its perfect for you

--just cause i like the stuff doesnt mean im a fucking drunk you know

we may call it herb grace o sundays

--gimme a second

and here i am actually shaking you know shaking like a fucking leaf i knew id be shaking

like this

--if we dont do this then were gonna get caught its either this or nothing and you dont want to be in jail

--right we cant pull out now can we

--weve spent a year you know we cant

--my mouth is dry

--so drink some water

speak what we feel not what we ought to say

--no i snapped at you im sorry but you have to admit it wasnt the best time in our lives

--hey

and hes serious now

--i mean what if wed gone through with it

--i dont talk about that any more its not the sort of thing i reminisce fondly about

--vodka you pussied out on me and we were goddamn lucky we were able to take it all out without anyone seeing us or anyone finding it or anything going off you pussied out on me and i mean now you dont even call me any more

--maybe theres less and less to say

--and now look at us

glücklich werd ich nirgendwo

i get back to the room upstairs but really it would be so lame

--i couldnt find it

--well you couldnt have looked too hard well it doesnt matter lets

and we would and itd be good i guess but i really dont feel horny at this point so fuck her

i mean not fuck her fuck her but just you know fuck that so i go for a walk around the campus to clear my head never called her avoided her when i saw her and i never saw his

girl again anyway so i guess it all worked out in the end

the oldest have borne most

and right he hasnt shaved in days and hes finally got a good medication but hes gained a

ton of weight

--we wouldnt be here talking if wed done it i mean eric we were fucking kids we thought

we were gods or something you know i mean i thought i was something more than human

--we had a fucking pact

--we had a fuckign stupid pact

and he shuts down at that point not completely not the way he used to in college but

enough that i notice

--hey why dont you come and stay with us for a while everyone would love to have you

--fuck you i need to be something to you but i dont need to be that to you

--whats wrong with you

its been too many times that ive had no choice but you

--no no i mean yes but its got your initials you could capitalize the d and the k

--hey thats actually cool

--now give me one

--easy rebel

--like our fucking mascot

--well sort of i mean no one else is like you

--maybe you

--yeah but still here we have everyone calling themselves rebels who go to our school but

you are the only real one so i will call you that

he thinks

--i like that

we that are young shall never see so much nor live so long

--vodka i am not going to be your fucking mitzvah i am not going to be your charity case

and im sorry i wasnt a success like you

and he pounds his fist on the table

--we would have been on everyones lips for years we would have made a fucking difference we would have gotten someone to listen to us you know i mean we might have stopped what happened to us from happening to other people

--what we were gonna do was wrong

--but its all we could have done and now look at this this is all we are to each other

he gets up

--dont leave

--just hope your kids have it good is all im saying watch them you know what kind of shit kids can get up to is all im saying

and he walks out

o you must wear your rue with a difference

--i want this as much as you you know

--i know that

and i kill the water and i crush the bottle

--okay

--feeling better

--yeah

--good

--you remember what to do

--am i stupid

--no

--then i remember

--okay

--its time

--all right

and he bends half over but then he gets back up and looks at me

--good luck man

and he smiles and i smile back at him and we open our bags

Bangs and Whimpers

Could they have been evacuated?

1.

I doubt that, he said. I mean, someone would have warned us. They would have called the rooms, or set off an alarm, or something.

My father and I were in California for a funeral, sleeping, when it all went down. My mother was back in Jersey because she couldn't get away from work, and anyway it was a relative of my father's that she never particularly got on with, and since I've never been off the East Coast in my life, I accompanied my dad. We'd shared a hotel room--cheaper that way, and I could deal with his snoring, so all in all it was expected to be a nice few days. We'd go to the funeral, then take a trip up to Salinas to see the Steinbeck house--my insistence--and then take another day and visit Disneyland--for fun--and then plane back home.

Talking about it afterwards, we both remarked how little fanfare there had been, how we both quietly and calmly realized the gist of what was going on. You'd expect there to be freaking out on both ends, wouldn't you, both of us trying to calm the other, but it was pretty low-key. After combing the hotel, we moved to the streets; after a few hours of combing the streets, I turned to him.

Could they have been evacuated?

I doubt that, he said. I mean, someone would have warned us. They would have called the rooms, or set off an alarm, or something.

Well, you were snoring loudly. Maybe we didn't hear it.

Funny. But no, I don't think anything like that would have happened. Besides, if there was an evacuation, I think there'd be military in the streets, you know, making sure everyone's out by now. You hungry?

Yeah, now I am, now you mention it.

So we went into a grocery store—also deserted—and grabbed some things: fruit, vegetables, pre-made sandwiches, some cheese, bread, deli meat, a few cookies, bottled water. The power was still on at this point--wouldn't go off for another few hours--and everything was still cold and okay.

We going back home?

Of course. And we got outside, and he hotwired a car—with difficulty, like he was out of practice, but I didn't know he knew how to do that. I passed some food to him while he drove, and ate myself; after I was done, I felt kind of tired, so I dozed off.

He was listening to the Beatles, Abbey Road, when I woke up. Hey, I said. This is my favorite Beatles CD. I skipped to You Never Give Me Your Money to his protest. Hey, it's not like there's anything great on the first side. From this song on it's brilliant, the first bit is kinda crappy except for Come Together, I don't like it. I mean, Maxwell's Silver Hammer? Oh! Darling?

You used to like Octopus's Garden.

I still do, now that I think on it. Yeah. You used to sing that to me as a kid, I remember. He laughed. I think about that sometimes, I mean, you and mom, you'd just sing Beatles songs, songs that you listened to when you were young, you know, songs

that you knew well. You always sang me Octopus's Garden and Mom would always sing If I Fell. Sometimes when I'm listening to music I'll try and think, what songs of these would I sing as a lullaby for my kids?

He smiles and begins to sing a lullaby version of Bullet with Butterfly Wings.

Hey, quiet, I haven't listened to The Smashing Pumpkins in years.

We smile; I root around in the back seat, grab two sodas, offer him one; he declines, but I put it in the cup holder anyway, open mine, and take a sip. Suddenly: Hey, did you check the radio? Is there any news?

Nope, already tried it. Just static.

Damn. But there was power. In the grocery store.

That'll go away. I'm sure it'll only stay on for a little while longer, if it hasn't already. Things run out and break down without people to maintain them.

We drive for a few minutes, saying nothing. The second part of You Never Give Me Your Money comes on, the bit that goes, *out of college, money spent, see no future, pay no rent*, that bit, the part of the song that, when I'm listening to it in my car, I'll blast and sing loudly along, the bit that, and I know how this sounds, but this is the part of the song that I'm convinced was written for me. It's exactly what my life is: nothing particularly special happening, nothing scheduled any more, I had my entire life up to college planned, I knew I'd get good grades, go to a university, study English, and--but I forgot to figure that part out. The song's my song. Fuck Janis Joplin--I can't stand her anyway--this is a song that gets *freedom* right. It's nice to have my whole life ahead of me--to

have my roads open, so it were--but it's scary. It's fucking scary. I turn to my father. Let's get some new CDs, if we see a store someplace.

I've become consistently amazed over the years at my relationship with my father. He's not the one I would have picked out of a list to spend the end of the world with, I'd have originally chosen a good friend or a lover, but this seemed right. And where many guys I know have a relationship with their fathers that's ambivalent at best and openly contentious at worst, I've always had a pretty good one. I've always been honest with him, moreso than with my mother, I guess because I somehow thought I'd get in trouble for asking her certain questions, and moreso because I had a similar body to him, so it would always be to him I would turn with questions about certain rashes or pains that I'd have, it was to him that I called, crying, when I had my first hangover. And I've always been physically affectionate with him, I always used to hug him hello and goodbye, when I was a kid he'd always grab me and tickle me and tease me, and this amazed so many of my friends growing up, some of them couldn't remember ever being hugged by their fathers.

My father was always calm and collected--I remember him getting angry exactly twice in my life, and both times were terrifying, he was not the sort of person you would want to drive to fury, and I don't remember the circumstances either time, I just remember the hot rage emanating from him, I visited a stunt show at Great Adventure with my parents once and there was an explosion, planned, part of the show, that sent a torrent of fire into the air, and I remember being blasted with the heat for just a second, as

far back as we were sitting, and that's what being near to my father's rage was like, you could feel it as a physical presence--and always one to sit back and think and analyze. And when I was a child, since he was my father, he knew everything, and that feeling never really seemed to dissipate.

So I guess what I'm trying to say is that if I had to deal with the end of the world, it's best it was with him. I trusted my father to be the type to be able to lead me properly, I knew he wouldn't get lost driving back, that he'd know what to say to calm me down if I got nervous or whatever, that he'd know what supplies we needed at any given time. I guess that where I'd be lost with anyone else in the world, I was pretty lucky that the only other person, barring a confirmation about my mother, that seemed to be left was him.

In a bookstore, passing the religion section:

Maybe the rapture's happened. Could that be it?

I doubt that, Dad said. That's way too farfetched.

Well we're the only ones left on the planet. Any other explanation?

The rapture's always been the least likely scenario. You really think God's so selective as all that?

Well I don't know what else to think. There hasn't been a nuclear attack or anything. I sincerely doubt everyone evacuated the country in a couple hours without waking us. As far as I can tell, everyone just blinked out of existence, and that sounds like the rapture to me. I know, Catholics don't do that whole rapture business, we're not weird like that, but doesn't it seem *likely*?

Look, he said. If there's one thing I've taught you to have, it's faith. It's that state where, against everything giving evidence to the contrary, you still know that the world is how you know it to be, how you say it is. And I have faith that this isn't the rapture. Anything I've ever believed has told me that that whole Left Behind thing is just bullshit. That's not how God works. To say that a group of people are perfect and the rest are just, I don't know, deserving of torture and punishment, I mean, that says that God doesn't know what he's doing when he creates us, that he makes mistakes. All I know is that the Bible, Revelation, it tells us of the power and the love of God, that's what I see, and a god of wrath and anger is not the kind of god that I have experienced. Whatever happened here, it's not the Rapture.

So should I look out for Langoliers then? We're the only two people on earth.

We don't know that. We haven't been anywhere outside this country, and we haven't even seen all of it. We just know what we experienced, and that's only so much. Look. You're willing to believe that everyone in the world but for two people was plucked from the ground by a brand of god that you don't even believe in. You can't make a stretch and think that more people, other people than us, have stayed, that we're not about to begin the Great Tribulation? If the Rapture's all you can think of, well, that shows a lack of imagination. A willingness to accept too literal, too misanthropic, too hateful, too easy an interpretation of things.

I have nothing to say to this so I keep silent.

Look. You wanted a book and a few CDs for the road. Go and get them.

He grabs a magazine and sits down, leafing through it, leaving me to go to the music section.

Maybe we've died, I said, and this is the afterlife.

You think?

I just can't tell if this is heaven or hell. Possibly it's purgatory. That'd make the most sense.

Why?

Well, on one hand it *could* be heaven--here we don't have to work, we just live off the fatta the lan', and all that, but things are too weird, I always thought that things would be all explained for you if you got to heaven, you know, for certain you'd *know* you were in heaven. Hell, well, things are kinda bad here, but there are worse people I could be stuck with, I mean, if I have to be stuck with someone it might as well be you.

Well, thanks, I'll take that as a compliment.

And besides, all it is is there's no one else. You know? No torture. No air made of acid. No flaying and all that.

Some say that hell isn't physical torture, that all that--fire and brimstone and red-hot pokers--that's just a metaphor. The true punishment of hell is an eternal separation from God, the inability to connect with him any more.

Do you feel that's where we are?

Not particularly. I mean I think you'd know if that were the case, right?

So maybe we're just in purgatory and we died.

I wonder. Some people seem to think that part of purgatory is that it *looks* like an eternity, you know, that it looks like you're going to spend forever there and that you're never going to make amends for your sins, that it looks like hell. Some people think that's part of the nature of the purgatorial fire. So maybe that's it. Maybe we've died and we're in purgatory making up for something or other.

Do you think that's what's happening?

Not particularly. I've never been of the opinion that you're not briefed, you know? If you tell someone they're in punishment for eternity, they're gonna lose hope, they're gonna curse God. I think hell is the only place without hope. That's what makes it hell, you know? I think in temporal punishment, you're told that it'll end. Maybe not exactly when, but you'll know it'll end.

I'm just looking for an explanation, you know? I want to know what's going on here.

Honestly, and I'm gonna level with you. I don't think we'll ever find out, at least not for a very long time. There's no one around to explain to us what's happened, and so any speculation you make is just going to take you around in circles. You'll never come to a real answer.

Does that mean I shouldn't even bother to think about it?

No, that's not it. But just don't expect to get an answer. You know? I say we're at a point, I mean things could be much worse. But we've found some grocery stores and gotten enough food from there, we've got enough CDs and books to make the drive a little more bearable, we've always managed to find a house to bed down in for the night, we've got a series of cars stretching across this great nation to get us where we need to

go, I'd say we're doing pretty okay. We'll be back in Jersey soon, and things will be back to normal.

I hope so.

I pulled over into a gas station, kept the car running, got out, filled the tank. The car was a silver BMW—an indulgence. A silver Beemer has been my dream car for years--a luxury I'd never be able to afford back in the real world. In high school a girl I knew casually had one bought for her for her 17th birthday by her father, who had money, and I convinced her to let me ride in it once, and it was great, I loved it, I knew I wanted one, it was just the type of car that seemed to fit.

My father and I had been driving a perfectly good car, an Olds, a blue one, quite nice, and we parked in a different gas station in a different state so we could fill up, and I saw the car, the silver Beemer, in the lot of a strip mall across the way. Dad!

What?

That car. I want it.

We have a fine car here.

But that's my dream car! It's the car I've always wanted! It's a silver Beemer!

Since when do you like BMWs?

Since, like, ever! I remember, in sixth grade, one of the girls in my class, she had a little astrology book that had writeups of your personality and things, and it also had little things like what kind of car you should be driving based on your star sign, and mine it said BMW, and I have wanted one since then.

Just because you're a Capricorn and a book said so?

No, that's not it at all!

I don't believe in horoscopes.

Please, Dad, I don't need a lecture right now. I need that car. I need it! And what's stopping us? It's not like we have to pay anything for it, or anything like that. It's free for the taking.

He smiled, shrugged. All right, fine.

When we got to the car, the door was unlocked and the keys were in the ignition. A Nirvana CD was in the player. It's like this car was ordained specifically for me, like it was a gift from God. And the ride was smooth.

What I haven't been able to get used to is the quiet. The way the breeze had been blowing, the way that's the only sound--I don't hear the bustle of people, I don't hear animals, or birds, or anything, there's just that cool breeze, and the rustle of trees, it's kind of disturbing. I grew up practically in the woods, you know, the woods were right behind my house, and my friend who lived down the block, he had woods behind his house, and every day during the summer we'd be in either one or the other, playing. And even in the early fall, when we'd go to the woods on Saturdays, before they got too snowy to explore properly, when the leaves started to die, the woods were always so full of life, there was always the sense that around us were thousands of insects and squirrels and birds and raccoons and groundhogs and maybe even bigger things such as bears and deer--we'd seen plenty of both of them--and there was further life in the fact that we were still in the

middle of suburbia, that there were houses and people all around us, and we knew that in the midst of everything there was tons of life all around, there was the life of nature before us and the life of civilization encompassing us, and even when it got to be almost dark and a little scary, we knew we weren't totally alone. My father was asleep in the car, and I know, he's right there, and we've got each other, and maybe he's right, maybe my mother is still at home somewhere, making herself some lunch, or taking a nap or something, he certainly seems to think so, I say we can get anywhere we want to in this country—and if we're determined enough, and it seems we've got nothing but time, we could even learn to fly a plane and I could see Paris, I could spend months in the Louvre if I wanted to, I could camp out and sleep underneath the Oath of the Horatii if I wanted to, get a pillow and blanket and wake up—but he was determined to get home. We'd called home enough times, of course, and there was no answer, but he insisted. And it would be nice to get some of my own clothes, to get back among familiar things, to get back to my own books. If I've got nothing else in this world it's that. We'll be okay when we get home, he'd said. You'll see. Everything will be back to normal.

You sure?

Positive. Faith, remember?

Everywhere we've been there's been no one. No signs of anyone passing through.

Just trust.

We built a fire by the side of the road to get an actual hot meal. I started it with my lighter, did a pathetic job of keeping it going, but managed to get some water to boil for

some pasta. I made some sauce in a little pot. It wasn't the greatest dinner I've ever made, but considering my circumstances I hacked out a good job. We ate, and I smoked. Before this I'd never smoked in front of my dad; I figured I wouldn't get a chance to sneak off by myself, and figured, what's the point, so I get lung cancer, at least I'm enjoying this at the moment.

We'll probably be home tomorrow.

Good. I'm tired of the road, I just want to crawl into my own bed and sleep for a long time.

Yeah. It's been a rough trip.

Too bad we don't know how to fly, we could have gotten here much quicker.

Well it wasn't a bad time. And the weather's been fine. And there wasn't any traffic, of course.

I smiled. Of course.

So would this be my life, then? Would I have to spend every day with my father? Or would we eventually go our separate ways, me off to Paris, him still in Jersey, with or without my mother, whom he was convinced was still there? Did this mean I'd never talk to another human being for the rest of my life, never get laid again? Or is it just America that's been affected? Or was, as he seemed to believe, Jersey untouched by it all? Or did six billion people genuinely just disappear, overlooking my father and me?

In New Jersey, if I didn't find any answers, I guess I could at least have a better base of operations from which to find them. I'd have my own car, for one. I could drive up to Canada or down to Mexico, and can't you drive from Mexico to South America, can you

do that, what with the Panama Canal, is there a bridge there? I could go down there anyway, visit Tikal, see the sunrise from a ruin, hang out in the rain forest, discover shamanism and lead a religion of one. I could. There's nothing stopping me, really.

When we got into New Jersey, my father was driving, he was holding the wheel steadily, there were no other cars on the road, and a sign stated that we were to be welcome to New Jersey and that it was the first state to ratify the Bill of Rights. Is that true?

I have no idea. I don't know.

Well it's on the sign.

Then it must be true.

We'll be home soon, Dad. What then?

Can we get there first? Let's just get there. Okay? Two hours. It'll only be about two hours.

He was going fast at this point, and I guess that was okay since there was no traffic. We were silent until we got to our town.

On a good day my town had 7,000 people in it. While we had a main street with shops and things, there were no major commercial centers, nothing really to go to: it was a nice *safe* place to go to, but one with nothing to do. We'd see at most two dozen people through the entirety of Main Street, and that's in the middle of a weekend with nice weather. It was the type of town you never felt at home in: there was nothing keeping

you there but the fact that you spent the whole of your life there. My town was never a community: we never knew anyone but our immediate neighbors, and those only halfheartedly. We didn't know anyone in the town, and as far as I could tell that was a universal case, or at least a very common one. Life in my town was lonely; I never felt the weight of a single other person until today, driving through, knowing instinctively that every single house we passed was deserted, realizing that there were no squirrels running out into the road, staring at the oncoming car, and running back, realizing that there were no kids playing by the park. He slowed down. We were a few blocks by the house.

Home, I said. Only a couple blocks. I have to pee badly. I'm glad to get there.

He stopped the car, pulling it over. There's no one in this town.

I know, Dad. That's how it's been.

I guess I thought-- His voice trails off.

It'd be different here?

Yeah.

He drove a little more, stopped in our driveway. I got out, started to bound up the steps, noticed that all our cars are in the driveway, started to get to the door, noticed he hadn't gotten out. I went back, got in the car, sat down. Hey, we're here.

Yeah.

You wanna go in.

He looked at me, and his eyes weren't his, his eyes were another man's, dilated and glassy. What do we do? I mean--seriously, what do we do?

Look, I said. She could have just gone out to get some food. If she's not there. Or maybe she went cross-country to find us. Or maybe she's in there, watching a DVD or taking a nap or something. But we went here because it was what anyone would do. And more importantly, because we know it's going to turn out all right. You know that too.

He looked at the ground. Maybe, I mean, I really thought it'd be different here. But, I mean, they're gone here too. Maybe I just expected it to not touch this town.

Look, I said. Faith's the state of, against all evidence, knowing that the world is how you say it is. We're gonna go in there and Mom's gonna be there. You know it.

He said nothing, continued to look at the ground.

I'm going in whether or not you come with me. I'd rather you did.

He looked up. Okay.

I got out my keys and walked up the stairs; he followed me, slowly. I unlocked the door, entered, announced that we'd come home.

2.

Going down this particular street was a markedly surreal experience. Here was the café I used to write in--the coffee probably long stale, and anyway the door was locked--the park where I'd take girlfriends to on dates--starting to get overgrown--and the Blockbuster I most likely still owed fines to--but of course there was no one to collect them, and I didn't have any money anyway. I wanted to make this stop to my college, before I made my way to Tikal.

On campus was a spot that was sacred to me, had been since my second day, during orientation; I needed to visit there to prepare. I'd enjoyed my first day--it was a day which felt like freedom. I made friends, smoked cigarettes whenever I felt like it, ate when we decided it was time to be hungry, not when my mother decided it was time for dinner. On the second day, part of the endless series of programs training us against discrimination and touring us and all of the crap that you learn anyway during your first week so why bother budgeting the program, our small group leaders--mine was an enthusiastically unlikeable fratboy looking for a resumé builder who seemed like he'd never had a day of confusion or depression or low confidence in his life--put on a little play about the sorts of problems one faces in college. One guy developed a drinking problem (and for a period of time during my junior year, I almost did too, but at that point I'd completely forgotten the advice the play gave). A girl didn't watch her drink and ingested a roofie (something which never happened to anyone I ever knew, and in fact I'd

read a story that most of the women who claim to have been drugged simply drank too much). And in one sketch, a guy got very homesick.

I hadn't thought of my parents since they left me in my room, was too distracted with the excitement, but they came to my gut with a vengeance. The loneliness hit me like a dart and I felt everything just well up, just swell up inside my throat. Like Ma Parker in that story by Katherine Mansfield, I just needed a place to cry. The guy in the skit had solved his problem by calling home more often, but both my parents were at work. I needed to cry it out, to release something which would help me deal with the freedom. Tucked around the corner of my dorm I discovered a tree secluded behind some bushes and the building, and I curled under it and wept. I'm not the crying sort, ordinarily, I normally can't cry unless I'm so drunk I'm suffering, I've tried listening to the saddest songs--Johnny Cash's version of "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" gets me the closest--but it hasn't worked. That time, freshman year, two days in, under the tree, is the last time I remember being able to, naturally, and it was a great cry, a healing cry, it watered the tree and got out everything I needed to. I went back to my room, showered, took a cold shower, and visited some friends and felt better. In the excitement I ended up not calling home until the weekend.

I kept goldfish all throughout college. I never flushed a single goldfish in my life--always buried them as a kid--and I kept up that practice when they died. I buried them at the foot of the tree, put them in empty Sucrets boxes and said little prayers. During bad breakups, finals weeks which were particularly rough, the random petty crises of university life, I visited the tree. I never made it a regular habit, to be sure, I guess there

was something in that which gave it whatever power it had, you know, like if I went there weekly it'd be too familiar. I always liked to feel surprised when I went there. I'd kneel, pray, smoke cigarettes, think of my fish, and just breathe and relax.

The four years I spent there I didn't tell a single person about the tree. That was part of its mystique, too. It was a tree. There was nothing special about it. It wasn't particularly beautiful or interesting, it was just that this is the only tree in the world that's been watered by my tears and that's what made it important, and I don't know if anyone else would realize that.

Right before I graduated, when it became clear that I wouldn't be living in this place any more, I went to the tree for the last time, and here was a patch of grass that I wouldn't be shringing any more, that no one would be, as far as I knew no one else on my campus knew of the tree, had ever been there--I'd never seen anyone else hanging out in this corner of campus in all the times I'd been there, it was that dusky part of May where everything's orange and hazy, and I took an X-acto knife I'd swiped from a friend who was an architecture student and I carved my initials into the trunk, deep.

That was two years ago and I haven't been back since.

Late summer nights are normally deserted on my campus anyway, so it didn't seem any different as far as a lack-of-people was concerned, it was the same old campus, but there was something different in the lighting. The moon was out and it was bright enough, but the artificial lights, the streetlamp type things, those were gone, those weren't there, and it felt unnaturally dark, it didn't seem like this was the natural state of things, the way things were supposed to be was with lights and people and all that, that's how a

campus is supposed to look, not this deserted thing, not this. The grass was growing thick, it had been raining, and my feet snagged in the grass, and I'm sure mosquitoes and all sorts of creatures were making meals of my ankles, but the tree was there, and I saw it in the distance, and I knelt in the grass, and it brushed my arms.

This was not the tree because my initials were not on there. But this was the tree—I knew this tree. I knew if I dug there would be a series of Altoids tins with rotted fish in them, this was my tree, and it had somehow healed over my initials, it had grown over that. Nature has a way of erasure.

On this campus there was nothing keeping me here, and I guess that's the deal with a blank slate. You get to do whatever you want, but everything you've ever done doesn't mean anything. I'd go to Tikal, then, cause there was nothing keeping me here, you know, there was nothing like that.

3.

In Tikal I live as a psychonaut for a couple of months. I eat datura and morning glory seeds and reject all the experiences. I spend a month as an ascetic and eat only enough to keep me conscious. I meditate and begin to eat again.

One day I follow an ant back to its nest, now that I'm the only human left these ants are the only agricultural society on the planet, fucking brilliant, you know, here we have an entire civilization in contact with itself, and look at the human race: its two members don't even talk any more. The ant carries a leaf in its jaws and I carry leaves in my hands as an offering and I journey with it at its pace and go back to the nest. I lay the leaves next to it and say a prayer that it makes good fungus.

In the night La Llorona visits me and I feel her hot breath on my face. She pins me down with her hands, touches her nose to mine, like a lover. ¿Mis niños? she asks. Her hair brushes my face. It's slick with mud, wipes off onto me, dirties my cheeks.

I shake my head. Just me here.

The dress she's wearing was white at some point, when she bought it or made it, but it hangs in tatters, there's a rip right down the center that shows off her navel, and everything's stained with dirt and blood. She has no eyes, just something gelatinous in the sockets. Against my will I'm hard.

¿Mis niños? she asks again. I shake my head.

They're not here. It's just me.

She glances towards the stone basin near where I sleep, where I've put water, then glances at me. I shake my head. No. You don't want to do that.

She smiles.

You've lost children, I say. Welcome to the world nowadays.

She goes by the basin, lets her dress slip off a shoulder, baring a rotting breast, and I want her more than I've ever wanted anything. I do some of my meditative breathing, and feel better. Not tonight, I say. Never, really. I'm not going to do that. Find another lover. And she leaves in frustration. When she's gone, I masturbate.

The next night the hairs on my arms and my entire body stand on end; I feel someone around, but it's not her. It's El Trauco, cigar in his mouth, looking very much like Ulysses S. Grant, come to pay his respects.

I feel nauseous.

Sorry about that, he says, noticing that I'm turning green. I have that effect on men.

Dude, I say. You've gotten more play than anyone I've ever met or heard of. What makes you so special?

He shrugs, takes a drag of his cigar. I guess women just love me. He reaches into his pocket, takes another cigar out, offers it to me. I decline, at first--I consider it a good rule of thumb to not accept carcinogens from magical creatures, and anyway I haven't had a cigarette in weeks--but he's insistent, endearingly so, and I think he seems to consider it a peace offering for the revulsion he's causing me, and it'd be rude, so I accept. He lights it, I inhale. It's the best fucking cigar I've ever had, and I tell him so. He smiles.

How long you been here?

Hard to say, I tell him. A long time. Months at least.

You're from?

New Jersey.

So what are you doing all the way here?

I don't know. Meditating. Taking a break from the world.

You're alone now?

I don't know. I might as well be. My father's back there.

Well, it's good you're alone. I don't like crowds.

Hey, I say suddenly. La Llorona visited me yesterday.

Did she? He looks me up and down, impressed that I managed to fight the temptation.

She's beautiful, isn't she?

Yeah.

He blushes. She always makes me hard when I see her. Like, that. He snaps. It's a shame what happened to her, of course. But she's insane. Crazy girls make the best lovers. They know how to just let go of everything. They're animals, you know.

Something's just more primordial about them. I love it.

She keeps talking about her children.

I know.

You're virile, you know.

He smiles. Thanks. It's what I do.

Well, I mean, why don't you show some pity, take her as a lover? Give her a child?

You've done it enough times, I think she'd appreciate it.

He chokes on his cigar for laughing. Hey, you think I've never done that? You think a guy like me could resist the temptation? I've been her lover on and off for years.

So what, then?

He stares me straight on; I hold back the vomit. She's barren. Has been for a long time, maybe forever. I'm not sure. Maybe those children weren't hers to begin with.

I don't really have much else to say to this, and we smoke our cigars mostly in silence. I try to talk about the ants, but he's only vaguely interested. He complains about the lack of nubile young ladies, to which I agree. We finish our cigars.

I've got to head home, he says.

Yeah, I understand that.

You gonna be around for a while?

For the immediate future, I say. Hey, it was good to meet you. Why don't you come by another time? I could use the company. I smile. It gets kind of lonely here.

Of course! He smiles at me. I'll bring more cigars.

But a few weeks go by and he doesn't come back. I still can taste the cigar some times, if I think hard.

4.

What terrifies me--absolutely fucking terrifies me--about going to Paris is not that I won't be able to fly the plane, that I'll crash into the Atlantic or something and die. I mean, it does bother me, that possibility, it's a very real one, but what the fuck do I care about dying at this point in my life? I mean I've got confidence in myself, I'll make some short solo flights first, until I know I'll be able to make it the whole way through, I know I'll be able to land at Charles de Gaulle fine enough. What terrifies me is that things are going to click over and be normal again.

I'll be questioned when I land, people, guards, will meet me at the plane. And my French will be off, I'm sure my English is getting rusty from lack of use, but we'll manage to understand each other. There's no one in America, I'll say.

Ridiculous, they'll say. There's nothing wrong with America. And they'll show me news broadcasts, they'll put me on the phone with everyone, my parents, who will be worried sick about me, no one will know how I managed to sneak a plane out. And maybe they'll put me in prison or a mental hospital or something. Or maybe there'll be no trouble and I'll land quietly. Or maybe America, North and South, of course, is the only place to be affected and the rest of the world is going about its business. I could milk the fame, really: last survivor of unknown catastrophe.

But I'll set myself up in the country. I'll get a job at the Louvre, I'll work the information desk, I'll tell people all day where the Mona Lisa is, and they won't care that

it's the size of a small cat, that it's not impressive at all, that it's the same damn picture they've seen millions of other places, that they won't even really get to see it because it's under glass and there are always thousands of tourists in front of it taking pictures and you won't get close enough to see the brushwork, but they won't care, they won't even know what the Oath of the Horatii is. I won't get to sleep underneath it but on lunch breaks I'll go and stare at it and wish. There'll be a bench that I can sit on to look at it, a comfortable one, one that'd support me nicely, but I'll just be able to sit underneath it. You know it'd be a secret dream to destroy the Mona Lisa, you know? Just to ruin something that doesn't matter. I'd get friendly with a coworker, and I'd say, I'd like to wipe my ass with that fucking painting, and she'd cover her mouth and giggle. How cool would it be if we were the only ones here, I'd say. And she'd say, yeah, it'd be awesome. We'd be able to destroy that painting if we were, you know? I'd let you break the glass, but I get to burn it. She'd nod solemnly and say, yeah, let's do it.

I'd stay on at the museum, do some writing, get drunk at cafés, and she'd finish up her doctorate and teach at the Sorbonne. I'd write my first novel in English and translate it slowly into French and have her mark up my mistakes; there'd be fewer in my second novel, and my third would be written completely in French. Somewhere in between the first and second novel we'd move in together; in between the second and third, we'd have a child, and after the third is published we'd get married.

I'd want to name my son after my father, that much would be obvious, and she'd object at first, but I'd insist--I left him back there, and it's the least I can do. He'd grow up, leave

home after I finish my sixth book, and start a family of his own. He will not name his son after me.

I will never quit smoking and will get drunk on wine and eat rich foods, and I will die in a car accident. I will go on to greater fame after I've died: during my lifetime, my books will be minor commercial successes which will allow us to live comfortably alongside my wife's salary; the critics will discover merit afterwards. One of my wife's colleagues, a younger professor, will begin to teach my fourth novel in his class--it will be the first time worldwide that I'll be studied in a formal academic setting. He won't know that he works with the author's wife until she introduces herself to him; he'll be somewhat thrilled with the idea of a lover twice his age and will fall for her; she'll eventually reciprocate his feelings and will die, years later, next to him, in her sleep, happy, having lived a good life and died what could arguably be called a good death.

This terrifies me greatly; I know it's just a perverted fancy but it's the reason I haven't bothered to learn to fly yet. The devil you know is better than the devil you don't know. I'm fine with the way my life is now, and I might have met the devil in Tikal. She wasn't that bad.

5.

If I am indeed the last man on Earth, it is then my duty to either die or repopulate, so in Tikal I make a woman out of the earth. I knead the soil until it becomes pliable and start with the feet. I move on to the legs and move up. I spend a week with the as-yet-uncapitated woman out of some kind of fear. I'm no sculptor and no god; I don't know how to make organs or anything like that so I'm afraid it won't turn out well, that I'll have created a woman whose insides are made out of dirt and nonfunctioning. I fear that all that will happen will be an agony, and that she'll open her mouth and insects will crawl out instead of the screams she wants to make. But I get over it, I hope that I trust it will turn out properly, I finish the head. I add flowers, wrap it in leaves and grass to form skin, apply moss to be her hair. And sometime during the night she nudges me awake and smiles.

She is a dirt-woman still, she is an animated mass of soil and plants, but she is able to speak and she holds me. And I hold her close and she says, "Not so hard, I'll crumble." It is the voice of fantasy.

I do not name her Eve, or Lilith, or anything at all, and she sleeps on my chest. We awake and some of her fingers and toes have fallen off. "Don't worry about it," she says.

"Can I stand? I want to take you around this place, show you where I live."

"No." She averts what must be her eyes--the wounds representing pupils that I carved into the lumps where her eyes ought to be. "I can just stay here." And she's on her back.

I bring her some water, but she's not sure whether that would help or harm and opts not to. "Are we going to make love?" she asks. "That's what I'm here for, isn't it?"

I hold myself on top of her; she smiles and part of her lip breaks off. I enter, and by the third thrust she has fully collapsed and I am left with a pile of dirt and leaves in the shape of a woman.

I sweep up and put the dirt in the garden, plant some seeds. It's unusual to have plants not thrive in the rain forest, but the seeds fail, and eventually the whole garden dies. It's slow at first—I first notice a strange taste in the fruit and things--and eventually, overnight, all my plants die; the ants refuse to go near it. It spreads very slowly out from the garden; my worry is that it will spread like a vine across the whole country, the continent, the world, a shock wave of mortality. It's at this point that I prepare to trek back to Jersey.

6.

This happened my senior year of college: my friend knocked on my door. I was lying on my back in the process of debating whether I should nap or read. The nap would have been useful--I wasn't sleeping well in those days--but I was notoriously behind in my reading. Come in, I said, and she did. She was smiling. I stood. Look, I said. Entertain me. Distract me. I'm bored out of my fucking mind here. I picked up my book. Thomas Hardy. Jude the Obscure. For my 19th Century Brit Lit class. Young lovers rebel against society and fuck out of wedlock, shocking everyone. I think it's going to end tragically. I say just shut yourself up in a closet somewhere and don't tell anyone, but what do I know?

She went over to my bed and sat down. So, she says, I was in the cafeteria earlier--it was between classes--I was hungry, I decided to grab a slice. And I'm eating, and--you know the pizza tastes like shit here, you know that, I can't tell why we're not all anorexic--anyway, I'm sitting there and I'm like, this is bullshit. And I look at everyone and they're happy and I'm not jealous for once. I'm not jealous that they're happy and I'm not. I just--I feel bad for all of them. Because, like, this is bullshit. Can you really be satisfied with this? She waved her hand in a vague gesture. She was out of breath, had spoken in one exhalation. She took a moment to compose herself. I'm making a jailbreak. This is not what I wanted. You have a car. We're going. We're getting the hell out of here.

She stood up, went over to my dresser. I fit in--this, and this, and this-- She grabbed a few shirts of mine that she liked, some underwear, some socks. She held a shirt to herself. What do you think?

Well, it would make your boobs look awesome.

I'm more than my *boobs*, you know. But she was smiling, and she put the shirt to the side, to take.

Don't you have some of your own stuff in your dorm? I don't mind, I mean, take what you want, I'm just curious.

She shook her head. I can't go back there. My roommate's gonna to bug me with something, or she won't understand--I know you're the only one that this would make sense to. I have everything I need, now that I've gone through your drawers. Look. She took her purse and emptied it upside down on my bed. She had cigarettes, her wallet, tampons, a CD booklet, her journal, a copy of something by deBeauvoir, two condoms, a few pens, her cellphone, a little bag of chocolates, a hairbrush, some makeup, keys, a bottle of tylenol, chapstick, a couple of safety pins. I can survive for the rest of my life with just this, she said. As long as we stop for food every now and then we'll be great. I have money. I've been saving for years for no particular reason. Let's go. She went to my desk and grabbed my keys, threw them at me. We're gone. We're going to be so out of here. Drive south. I want to go where the weather is nice.

The weather is nice, though. I pointed to my legs as proof--I was wearing short.

I want to go where the weather is nice all the time. She was being stubborn but I was used to it so I shoved all the clothes and underwear into a shopping bag while she

gathered her things and put them back in her purse. I took her into the car. I opened the sunroof. I opened the window. I drove off campus and hit the highway. South.

This is nice, she said. She leaned her seat back, hanged her arm out the window. We're pioneers, she cried. The open road, it's ours! She put a cigarette in her mouth, cupped her hand over it, lit it. Yes, this is the life.

It was a gorgeous day, really. It must be in the 60s--the 70s, even. I felt the wind blowing into the car, ruffling her hair, making it go in crazy dirrections.

Her boyfriend called after we were on the road a while. She dug her cellphone out of her bag. Hey, sweetie, she said. She took a drag. And to me: Where are we? I tell her. We're going to the end, she said, to her boyfriend now, and we're going to find a highway that connects and we're going to continue until we've reached Mexico. Look. I'll call you back. My cigarette's running out and I wanted to smoke some of it. I love you. She hangs up. Then, to me: I said I love him out of habit. I don't think I meant it.

I know what you mean. I rolled up my window. Light me a cigarette, will you? She did, and I took a drag. It had been a while since I quit but this was a good day to start again.

Later: We have to go to Mexico?

No, I said it to freak him out. I don't speak Spanish anyway, and he knows that.

We could go, I said, if you want.

I'll think about it. I don't want an agenda right now. I just want to just drive.

We went to a diner. We ordered hamburgers, both of us. I don't eat these, really, she said, and wiped ketchup off her mouth. I just kind of wanted one. I'd ordered mine well-

done and she'd ordered hers rare; both were pink and slightly bloody. We ate quickly. The food was decent. It was understood that this was utilitarian eating. We ate everything--the fries, the coleslaw, the pickle--because we didn't know when we'd eat again.

We got back on the road, Amy driving this time. She was a bad driver but I gave her the benefit of the doubt. She drove close to the wheel, chain-smoking and swearing the whole time. Cocksucker, she screams at a van. Jerkoff, to a Saturn. Asshole to a Jeep, then, seeing that a woman was behind the wheel, changed it to, Stupid cunt!

I answered her phone when it rang; it was her boyfriend. He and I had never particularly gotten on. Lemme talk to her, he said.

She's driving. You don't want her to get in an accident, do you?

Where the fuck are you two? We were supposed to go out tonight, her and me. Did she forget?

I don't know where we are. We've left the state line by now. Hey, I say to her. You had a date tonight. Did you know that?

Shit, she said, but this may have been because a car had just cut her off.

She doesn't seem too broken up about it. You want a postcard from Mexico? I'm sure we'll be able to afford it. She has a credit card. I think the plan is to live large until they cut her off. We don't plan on paying it off, I don't think.

Motherfucker. What the fuck did you do to her?

I was bored with the conversation so I tossed the phone out the window. We were driving too fast and it was dark by this point so I couldn't see what happened to it, but I

pictured it smashing into pieces. The hell did you do that for? she asked. She lit another cigarette.

Hey, it's the past, right? We're getting the hell out of here. Burn it and throw it away. It certainly can't be good to keep it.

She thought for a minute. Turn this song up, it's my favorite. A few hours later she pulled to the side of the road. We were in another town we didn't know at this point.

What's wrong?

She laughed, pulled the seat all the way back. I'm tired as hell. I've always wanted to pull over and sleep for the night.

I pulled my seat back as well. I'd never done this, either, and I didn't know what the procedure was. One can just go to the side of the road and--sleep? On a highway? No one will come? I was nervous; I wasn't going to sleep so easily. She curled up and lay in the crook of my arm.

I had a good day today, you know that? She was starting to fall asleep already.

I did too.

Let's live like this for the rest of our lives. All we need to do--we need to escape, far away--we'll get fake IDs so no one can find us, and we'll need some more money, let's get a job we can deal with--a cool job, a fun job--something not menial--something that makes a difference--something we don't need a degree for--or we could always forge a degree or something. But we'll live how we want to. She was slurring her words. We'll be out of this whole--system--we'll escape it--we'll be the first to to escape--and then we'll come back and let everyone else out.

She was asleep. I kissed her forehead and moved her gently to her own seat. When I woke up she was smoking and reading. I'm hungry, she said. Let's get some food. She offered me a cigarette, and I almost declined. We drove to a diner. I ordered an omlette; she ordered a bagel. The omlette was slightly undercooked, and the bagel was burnt. It was a disgusting meal. We choked down a little and she stubbed her cigarette in the rest. I went to the bathroom to wash my face. When I left, she was at a payphone.

Yeah, I know. You didn't have to worry about me. I was safe. I am safe. To me:
What state are we in?

Does it matter?

He just wanted to know. And to her boyfriend: He's not sure. We did drive a lot. Eight or ten hours, at least. We just got on highways and went south. I'm sure we're not lost. If we wanted to get home, we'd just go north. I'm sure we'd eventually find it. Hey, it was an adventure. I'll take you on one sometime. I miss you. Yeah. I love you too. She hung up. And to me, noticing my look: I figured, he was probably worried as hell about me, you know?

I nodded. We paid and went into the car. She rummaged through the clothes we'd brought. I know I brought a light jacket here, she said. Your shirts are too tight for me. She indicated her chest. I feel like I'm popping out here. She blushed, and found a flannel workshirt, put it on. You want to drive or should I?

I shrugged. I'll drive. I got in the car. Where am I driving?

She shook her head. Pick a direction.

I adjusted the rearview and started the car.

7.

This time, when I pass the Welcome to New Jersey sign, it's almost unnoticeable. The grass and trees are overgrown; it looks like a jungle. But I'm used to navigating jungles by now--certainly more used than I am to driving a car. The first car I stole--no, liberated, no, took--felt absurd, frightening. I'm at least fifty pounds lighter than I was when I left Jersey, certainly, all bones and lean and muscle now, but I was not about to walk all the way from South America back home. Cars were then necessary. A couple of cars that I took broke down and ran out of gas, and that wasn't a big deal--I simply walked until the next one. I've seen pure sunrise and I've seen stars long enough that I know how to find my way home, roughly, without a compass. But the cars are a welcome rest.

I'd passed my Beemer where I'd abandoned it. This time I didn't even bother trying it: I'd left it with less than a quarter tank, and it seemed impractical. It made more sense to get cars left at gas stations; those were more likely to be filled or close to it. All in all, between hacking through the rain forest, walking through states I never set foot in during the time before, and breaking into houses to sleep in a bed for once, it takes me a few months to get back home. But I'm in no particular hurry.

My front lawn is overgrown and some animals have made their home there, most likely an entire ecosystem is in there, and possibly by now the ants here are as developed as my leafcutters back in Tikal, or at least on their way. These ants might develop

language or some other animal will, writing, maybe, civilization as I understand it, and maybe I could learn the language and be an outsider but accepted for the novelty. But perhaps it's wrong to use terms like that. Maybe it's more important that they do well as far as ants or whatever go. The overgrowth in my yard makes me junglesick, makes me long to just wade through; nearly-naked as I am, the insects would be free to feast on anything they wanted on my body, and I'd let them, but I opt not to, and go up the steps. The door is not only unlocked but ajar (when is a door not a door?)

Dad?, I call, entering.

And perhaps he's gone out to get some food. Perhaps he's gone to Tikal to find me. But he's not here.

I'm here a week before I think to check the backyard, and it's another week of combing through the grass before I find the body.

It's more a skeleton by the time I find it, and so it's impossible to tell when or how: suicide? heart attack? a month ago? a day after I left for Tikal? I wrap the body in a sheet and take it to the only place I know where to bury things: my tree.

When I dig I dig up a Sucrets box and against my will I open it. There is a clump of rot inside, what remains of my second fish, and I wonder: are all the bones of history's dead are still in their coffins? Were those taken when everyone else disappeared, or did they not need them where they were going? Is my father's body the only human corpse on this earth at this moment? I don't know where anyone is, I never did, I don't know if I can say that they're dead or alive, but isn't being dead just a state of not being present on this earth? If it wasn't simply their souls that were taken, there would be bodies piled up

everywhere if that were the case, but that's not what happened when the Rapture or whatever happened. Six billion people effectively died. I am burying number six billion and one, and one day--tomorrow? years from now?--this planet will be graced by the corpse of number six billion and two. I stopped believing in Hell a long time ago, shortly after I stopped believing in Heaven, years before The Rapture, and the biggest deterrent against suicide for most atheists is so their loved ones don't have to go through the hassle of going to a funeral. If my father's death was self-willed, it must have been after he decided I was never coming back. And hadn't I said as much when I left? At this point, it by rights is my privilege to decide when to turn out the lights; I can make that decision as soon as I decide I'm done.

And finally, after years, the tears do come, hitting the half-dug grave, I'm trying to make it six feet but I don't know if I have it in me to dig all the way, I'm actually honest-to-God crying at this point, and even though I'm hidden I don't need to be. I could be in Times Square crying and no one would notice me, I could be in any room in any house in the world, any street anywhere, the tears would come and it wouldn't be a problem. I'm crying for my father and I'm crying because I can cry anywhere I want to. I'm not looking for a place to cry; I'm looking for a place where I'm unable to. I'm looking for a strange glance or someone to take pity on me or someone to look at the snot and tears marking up my dirty face and grimace at me. And I guess that's the problem with the world: it either gives you too few places to be by yourself, or too many.

I wipe my face on my shirt, not caring that I'm smearing dirt and making mud, and pick up the shovel and start digging again.

Haze

There is regularly a shaft of light which filters through the window at some point between eight and nine in the morning. His bedsheet is dark green but where the light hits, a kind of triangle, a thin triangle, a lightening: a lightening of the green, a mixture, yellow and green and white, a mixture, a stain. It plays on his legs, his backside, his hip, his spine. He is a virgin king and the light will not penetrate him, at least not today, not yet. He is on his back now and a haze seems to squat over his chest, a sleeping smile, eyes closed, a haze.

And eventually he wakes up from the haze and he swings himself out of bed, and he walks into his hallway and into his bathroom. And while he's in there he urinates and turns on the shower and lathers the haze away. He throws on a pair of jeans when he's done--no underwear and no shirt. It's not like he'll need them at the moment, and there are other, more important things to do: breakfast.

He's attempted to fry eggs in the past but he never got that knack: he's a good cook but he always burns eggs and that makes the apartment smell. Instead breakfast consists of cereal: dry. Orange juice: pulpless. And coffee. He brews his coffee strong but he puts sugar and cream, so it all balances out. Perhaps it's like he never drank coffee at all. He eats quickly and takes too eager of a sip of his orange juice and it spills onto his chest, mats the hair. It dribbles down to his stomach, pools in his navel. He screws up a napkin, inserts it, lets the napkin soak it up, turn orange. And wipes his chest.

He watches television for a little while but it's more a vague flipping of channels: The Price is Right, old reruns of I Love Lucy, morning talk shows, soap operas, an actual

honest-to-God Metallica video on MTV, not a band he's particularly interested in but it's an early video and MTV doesn't really show videos any more so he watches idly, and he's keeping an eye on the time. And maybe around noon he makes a phone call.

He smokes cigarette after cigarette and puts on socks, shoes, a somewhat clean shirt. And when she comes over they don't waste time, they get right down to undressing each other. They're in his bedroom and there's still the shaft of light from his window, but he's moved, it doesn't play over her back or his back (depending on their position of the moment); it is perpendicular to the bed.

He lies on his back and she reaches over him and grabs a cigarette from his bedside table, lights it, and begins to think of a list of slurs against homosexual men. She starts with the obvious ones—fag, faggot, queer—and goes to more colorful ones—pillow-biter, cocksucker—and begins musing over Dante: "Wouldn't they *enjoy* being buried, their heads in the ground, ass sticking out, to be sodomized by...?" He sticks a cigarette in his mouth, grabs hers, lights his off of hers, blows out a smoke ring, two, three.

"When I was in high school," she says, "my mother wouldn't let me wear this one skirt. It was short, I looked great in it, but she said I looked like a slut in it. I did, that's why I looked great, you know? But she made me wear pants and when I went to school I wore pants but in school I went to the bathroom and wore the skirt. I was popular."

She laughs after a moment: "I'm kidding. I lied. I went to a private school. I had to wear a uniform. I wore a skirt anyway. It was the uniform. But I rolled it up. You could see me when I bent over."

He gently grabs part of her. "I once showed this one boy in my class my cock," he offers. "He paid me a dollar, and I wanted a soda, I didn't have any cash on me."

"Were you hard?"

"Not at first, but then I was."

"What happened?"

"I told you, I showed him my cock, he paid me a dollar, that's it."

"Where was this?"

"School," he says. "Underneath the bleachers."

She laughs, peeks underneath the green bedsheet. "Thanks for not charging me."

"It was a cherry coke, the soda."

She laughs; she's starting to get turned on a bit, she's slightly wet again, and if he's not fully erect he'll be in a minute so she gets on top of him and grinds, and he finishes her cigarette while she's on top of him, and when it comes time to put the cigarette out she points to a spot to the left of her right breast, and he puts the cigarette out on her. She doesn't expressly get any sexual pleasure out of this, pain isn't her thing, but it's not *as* painful as she thought it would be, and she doesn't stop so all in all it's not that bad. At the very least it's something to remember him by. She's reminded maybe of the small-bosomed Mata Hari, who would keep her padded bra on during sex. "A lover of mine bit my nipples clean off once," Mata Hari would say, and she wonders if she'll hide the burn in the future, or if she'll parade it: *Men like to fuck me so much that they'll even do this.*

When he comes she leans back, balancing herself on her elbows, still around him, and it's bending him a little too far than he'd like but he's starting to be less hard so he just

bears it. She asks for a bandaid, possibly some ointment, something to treat her wounded breast, but he doesn't have any so she gets dressed and leaves, and he's kind of tired at this point so he takes a nap. When he wakes up the haze is there and the room smells like sex: musty, dejected, fecal. There is a reckless gleam in his eye and he makes another phone call, a different one, shorter this time, to a different person. And again he showers the haze away--perhaps he feels that his lovers aren't attracted to it?--and wears a different outfit. The sex smell is gone from his bedroom, and he remakes the bed--but what good timing, for the doorbell is ringing again! And he opens the door, and he kisses the man behind the door, and the two get down to business--after he asks for a glass of water. So this is foreplay--more than she had, certainly. He pours him a glass of water and he drinks it, his moustache soaking up the water like a sponge.

He puts the glass on the table and grabs his hand and leads him into his bedroom. He's had a tough day at work, it seems, and he talks as he thrusts. He talks about his boss, what a bitch she is, makes an unflattering remark about her ethnic or racial origin and possibly the abilities of her gender, a little harder, each thrust, as if he's raping his boss, possibly a little blood, her head back as his hand muffles the sounds of her cries--or would that be moans, would she submit to him, would he be so powerful as to swoon her will, would he overtake her emotions and seduce her and get promoted, share an adjoining office for ease of conjugation and communication? He knows he's thinking this, a little, that he's thinking of his boss and not him, but he doesn't mind. He's getting what he wants, and *he* for one is concentrating on the moment rather than a concocted erotic revenge--on reality rather than on fantasy--so perhaps he feels a little superior. He

doesn't smoke afterwards this time because *he* doesn't smoke because he's allergic or asthmatic or something-or-other, some condition marking him as weak, and perhaps he feels superior to him for this reason as well.

He tells him the story of the bleachers and the dollar and the cherry coke but he's got a story that tops this and he doesn't feel so superior any more. "I got propositioned by a football player. I was taking a photography class and we were staying after school to develop some film, and we were alone, and the lights were all red, you know, cause it's a darkroom, and he turns to me, and smiles, and unzips himself, and says, 'Okay, go.'"

"And did you?"

He's kind of offended by this. "What do you *think* I did?" And he turns to the wall, but he can't get comfortable so he takes the opportunity to get dressed and leave. And he's still in bed, then, and the room still smells of sex. Or, rather, he's in bed *again*, then, and the room *again* smells of sex. A different smell, to be sure: a different type of sex, a different partner, a different time of day: a different smell.

At this point I can't take it and I pick up the phone and he sounds almost saddened, almost defeated by the sound of my voice. "I miss you," I say, and there's the sound of breathing, his and mine, a trading of breaths, and I imagine that it's winter and we're naked in the snow facing each other, him and me, trading breaths, smoke leaving our mouths.

"I haven't been sleeping well since I left," I say, and I know he feels the weight of my words, physical weight, physical strain on him.

"I think this might all be a phase I'm going through," he says, sometime later. Just something I'm going to pass through." And when someone asks him to elaborate, either she of the short skirt or he of the cock in the darkroom, I can't hear their voice distinctly, he says, "I don't know, I just want to perfect it. You know? Like every fuck, it's just a preparation for *the* fuck. There'll be one time, it'll just hit on such a level, and then I won't need to do it any more, and I'll be content, and I'll move on."

"You're okay with that?" I ask them. "You know we're just steps on the ladder," but his finger is on the earpiece and they can't hear me through the phone.

"You shouldn't have called," he says. "It's not a good time for me. You know that."

"I want you back," I say. He looks out the window, hand under the blanket. It's sunset, the sun is dying, and I think he's masturbating. It's the effect of the sun, and the smile on his face makes him look like one at rest.

The Broken Mirror and the Fallen Flower

After a while Jeff learned that if he concentrated hard enough, willed it hard enough, he could see and hear me. He'd talked to me a lot prior to that, when I wasn't good at staying in one place, you know, just drifting like I was, before I could be with him for long at a time, you know, I'd occasionally catch him in the middle of long tirades, either at me for leaving or at God for taking, you know, shit like that, railing at the stuff you can't control. I assume he did it more often than I saw, unless he was unconsciously or consciously summoning me during those periods, I didn't have much control at first, so maybe I was there for all of it, I never asked him, maybe I ought to have, but I didn't, and I don't necessarily feel the worse for not knowing, you know, because that was his business, railing against me and God, I've never met God, I still don't know if he exists or not, they don't give you a manual about these things, it's not like there's a light or a guide or anything like that, anyone who tells you that they've had a near-death experience and said there was a light and that they saw their aunt holding out her hand, they're fucking conning you, they're just trying to sell a book or something like that, that's not how it is at all. It's mostly like the deep oblivion of a dreamless sleep. Really that's what it is during the off moments, and that's all it's like at first, it's something you're only aware of later on, you don't realize it at the time, there's none of this shit like floating up out of your body and looking on and seeing yourself crumpled and useless, this wet sack, this pretty piece of flesh and blood and bones, all of which are broken and not in their respective places, hemorrhaged and avulsed and spilling out and impossible to put back together.

You don't rise up, you don't see it--or, and I must make this clear, I guess--I didn't rise up, I didn't see it, I couldn't even see my own body because it was long buried by the time I got there, the headstone was there, and you know, it wasn't freaky or anything, it didn't disturb me to see the name and the dates, though I would have preferred cremation and a scattering, it didn't disturb me because it's not like I didn't already know, though I wasn't aware and I wasn't the first to know, of course, I did kind of have an idea--I mean, hell, I made the trip up to the grave specifically for that purpose, it wasn't like I just happened upon it or anything like that, it was specific, it took a lot of overhearing and following people to find it, so I wasn't shocked or sad or melancholy or anything like that, it was more--not even a resignation, like a kind of relief, like it was almost like seeing your first dorm after months of seeing the room number on the slip they mail you at the beginning of the summer, and you basically know at that point what a dorm room looks like, you've seen more than one of them during tours, and empty they all look the same, but during the entire summer you wonder, what *does* it look like, and then you *finally* get there and you see it and it isn't surprising at all, two beds, two desks, two dressers, two wardrobes, and a door leading to the bathroom, and you knew all of this, and you had a pretty good idea you'd get the bed next to the window anyway, you knew all of this, but something in you says, okay, that's it, that's what it looks like. It was kind of like that. It was with my mother I went the first time, to the grave I mean, although she did take me to the dorm as well, it was my mother I followed to the grave, and she was carrying a palm cross, I've always hated those, I wasn't a good enough Catholic to warrant one, and I remember noticing that she didn't cry. She'd always been one of those people who, I mean she

always came off as this slightly hysterical woman but really, in a crisis, she'd be the most level-headed one, from what I've gathered it was she who called the police, that she'd been there and that she'd actually witnessed it, assuming my information is correct, and she'd been totally calm through the whole ordeal, Jeff had told me that at the funeral he'd heard a lot of people talking behind her back about how bad that was, that she'd been calm. I always envied her calmness. I mean it's obviously totally obvious that it was one of her defenses, you know, to keep her cool in an emergency, I mean she'd probably disassociate a little, you know, shut down the bit of her brain that made her think and feel and just totally react, you know, she handled crises like a pianist, not thinking, just letting the crisis flow through and her fingers dial of her own accord and breath move through her vocals, so even though she wasn't saying the words, my son's dead, I think, and you ought to call an ambulance, even though she wasn't saying the words or thinking the words or trying to make the words through any conscious effort they were still coming, she was moving her lips in all the right ways and I don't even think that it was her idea to do it, I heard she moved like someone in a trance, though I can't really trust that, I mean it's not like there was anyone who knew her there at the time.

I guess the best way I could describe it is like coming out of anaesthesia, you know, how you get into it and you're waiting and the guy puts a syringe in the IV and you say, okay, when's it's going to--, and then there's a little card that says SCENE MISSING and the next thing you know you're fuzzy and drugged and it's a few hours later and you don't even realize it, and you drift in and out, and apparently you say things that you don't even remember, it's kind of like that. I mean you're in one place and one time and you can't

really focus in on it, like everyone's talking through vaseline, and the next you know it's a little later and a little further off and there's Jeff, in all his glory, outside, smoking, in the woods, outside, railing against God between drags, he's picked up the habit of your cigarettes, which you'd always, you know, warned him against, he told me that he went into my room shortly afterwards and I'd left my cigarette case in my bedroom that day, there were three cigarettes in there and my lighter, the cheap little lighter I'd bought at Quick Chek, the one with the picture of the racecar on it, on a plastic label like the ones you use to wrap Easter eggs in, he'd used my key to get in, this was before they took everything away, you know, he'd sat on my bed, grabbed a cup for an ashtray, and smoked all three cigarettes, one after another, without coughing. He told me he'd cried into the cup before he did it, to make it wet, to soak up the ashes, to put the cigarettes out into, but it sounds like one of his inventions, one of those poetic little details he was always making up to keep the magic alive, that was his phrase for it, to keep the magic alive, he said he was one of those guys who could put romance and magic into everything. If I'd been in control at that point I would have gone to see him then, I would have stretched out next to him, and maybe he'd have felt the bed sink underneath my weight, or maybe he'd be too busy grieving me to notice me lying next to him, I'd move the cup to his stomach, press my head against his chest, hold the cup there, on his stomach, let his cigarette arm curl over my head, listen to his heart beat, I always loved listening to his heart beating and sometimes I would pretend that mine and his were beating at the same rate, at the same time, like how when we'd make love and put our faces together we'd alternate breaths for a little bit, perfectly, like whenever I would

exhale, he'd inhale, and we'd breathe the same breath, pass it back and forth until the lack of air made our heads turn away, and maybe it would be one of those rare occasions where the world would be so in sync that we managed to come at the same time, onto each other, feeling it hot against me, like blood.

They say that the human body holds five liters of blood and you could have seen most of it if you'd cared to look that day, and I don't know if I should have regretted that, had I had the whole floating-up-thing happen to me, you know, had I seen the blood spilled out, wondering what little dregs are hiding, clinging to the walls of the veins, or in an unused bit of the heart, I don't know if I should have regretted it or felt sad about it or anything like that, maybe I would have even laughed, you know, even found it interesting, cause I'm sure it's interesting, you know, to see just what happens when the heart stops beating, empty and hollow, a thud, a slightly wet thud, that hollow sound. He summons me at work sometimes, in his office, sometimes, he usually leaves the door open but when he wants to see me he'll close the door, he'll turn his head and I'll be sitting on his desk, leaning on my elbow, absurdly, smiling. "Give me a cigarette," I'll say, and I won't even need to wait for a response, I'll lean over and slip my hand into his pocket and grab out my cigarette case, grab one, light it. "You should quit," I say. "I'm serious. This shit'll kill you." He usually puts his cellphone headset in, at these times, pretending he's talking on the phone to someone, he has an office but he's still young so it has windows overlooking the cube farm, people can see in, they don't trust him yet, he's young, he'll close the door and anyone passing by will think that he's on the phone, sometimes he'll even pretend to be typing something, a report or whatever, and

sometimes he won't feel like speaking and he'll just type while I sit in his lap and whisper things into his ear. "I still love you," I'll say, and he'll write back, *I still love you too*, and we'll laugh, because we're aware of how lame and how sad it all is. "Do you think anyone else misses me?" I'll say, and he'll shrug. "I guess it doesn't matter, does it?" That's my conclusion. If he can remember me then at least someone does. You know, at one point I used to swear that if asked I'd lay down my life for him. You say dumb things when you first fall in love. I'd probably still do it. It's worth it to be able to spend time with him. He used to cry the first times he'd close the door of his office, or the first few times he'd wake up in the middle of the night and see me lying there with him, but hey, I'd say, don't be like that. No need to be. I'm here.

"I think I'm going crazy," he'd say.

"Don't be like that. Why would you think that?"

He'd laugh. "I'm white. I'm a man. When one of our loved ones dies, that's it. We don't see things like you. We can't communicate with the dead."

I'd get on top of him during these moments, let him feel the weight. "I'm certainly here," I'd say, and I'd kiss him. I think the kisses were unfulfilling on both of our ends, the substance without the taste, the scent without the color, but it'd be better than nothing, certainly, I mean, it's really nice to relive those moments, how he'd masturbate and so would I, and I'd feel the warmth without the stickiness and he'd feel something like a breeze on his hips and stomach. It wasn't bad sex. It was a slightly different feeling. A stopping point between lonely masturbation and mindblowing lovemaking. A station that we tried to hang out.

There isn't a guide for what you do in these cases. You don't really know whether or not you should be On Your Way To Something Else, like you're allowed to say your goodbyes for a little bit and then you've got to float on towards the horizon, or if, you know, this is it, and if someone doesn't want to forget you then So Be It, you kids have fun. I mean neither of us wanted to take the risk that he'd find someone else and forget about me, and maybe that was selfish on my end and stupid on his end, but whatever, that's how it was so let's just figure out how best to deal with it. I know it seemed a good move at the time, certainly it did. What would you have done? But you aren't handed a manual. No one writes self-help books. You're your own guide. I know I never met anyone else who was dead, I tried to, I hung around graves for a while, hung around accident scenes, hospitals, the bad part of town, the beach, the tops of buildings, which reminds me, would I have saved a suicide had I the opportunity, would I have broken a jumper's fall?, but I never met any other wandering dead, I mean, Jeff and I used to always say we were the only ones in the world to feel the way we did, you know, I mean it was stupid romantic kid-shit sometimes, we'd look at the relationships of our parents, our friends, the parents of our friends, the friends of our parents, anyone we could think of, and was it really two souls corrupting each other and mixing together like ours was, did anyone else feel exactly that, because really, how the hell could this world have survived had that been the case for everyone, it'd be completely different, if everyone could feel the way Jeff and I did, well, that'd be a whole different story, we'd be *guarding* this shit, we'd be bottling this and *selling* it if we could, I mean it'd sell better than anything, it'd be good old Heroin Product right there, it'd advertise itself, people'd *beg*

you to buy it, I mean you'd have the ache of separation but you could get back to that any time, I mean we'd not have to work any more, would we, if everyone just *knew* what a night of Jeff and me together was like, I mean it'd be horrid to get out of bed, me to work, him to class, eventually we'd just give up, the entire world would, and we'd stay in bed every day, not just Sundays, we'd sleep late and snooze, wake up, the yellow of early afternoon gilding us, I know how fanciful this sounds but *you must bear with me*: I'm the only one who's survived on after death because no one has ever loved anyone else the way Jeff and I did. You've got to realize that fact if you are to realize anything. I couldn't leave and he couldn't let me go, and that, as they say, was that. I can't be making this up. No one else could have possibly felt this way before. I have never seen the intensity I feel represented anywhere else, I look at every love story and I say, *amateurs*, as in, you don't know what you're talking about, gimme a call when you're a little older, a little more experienced, I mean I'm adept in the arts of love, I've always known that, Jeff is too, and that's why I couldn't leave. Did you know it was an ache, love, I mean? Did you know that? Cause no one told me that. No one told me that it'd feel like I was ripped. Should I be telling you this? Is this knowledge you can be told, or maybe no one's said it before because it was secret, like a koan, if I just tell you it will you find it confusing or stupid, is that it, will you just Not Get It and tell me to fuck off, maybe that's it, maybe you shouldn't be hearing this, maybe I should just say, come back later, live a bit first? Baby, there ain't no guarantees. I lie six feet under. I should know.