

The Laws of Average

Trevor Dodge


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WATCH
ME AND THEE
WE ARE ABSENT
ANOTHER
GENESIS
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IN
The Laws of Average
Trevor Dodge

the laws of average

Praise for

The world in Trevor Dodge's *The Laws of Average* resembles a Donald Barthelme fever dream: a woman drives a Yukon Denali equipped with after-market rear and front-mounted surveillance cameras, so she can look both behind and ahead of herself at the same time, a lube both numbs the body and makes vigorous intimacy possible, a narrator takes James Frey and Oprah to task for introducing the concept that memoirs should have Terms of Service. With these stories, Dodge has managed to pull realistic fiction back from the brink of destruction. *The Laws of Average* is essential reading for anyone who wonders what happens next in the story of American Fiction after Lydia Davis, Ben Marcus, and George Saunders.

—Matt Briggs

Though literature is usually the most conservative of art forms, a book sometimes appears that offers exciting, new possibilities. Trevor Dodge's *Everyone I Know Lives on Roads* is one of them: with the smooth surfaces found in new-painting, with the understated riffs of new-music, the stories collected here are as lean as they are savvy, as savvy as they are funny, as funny as they are connected to the thought, life and paths of our present moment.

—Steve Tomasula

The Laws of Average

Trevor Dodge

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Previous versions of these stories first appeared in the following publications, whose editors, staff and readers are way above average:

Altered Scale: “13 Ways of Looking at Obscenity”

Dirty: Dirty: “Lessons My Grandmother Taught Me”

Fat City Review: “Siren”

Fiction International: “Tonight on 48 Hours”

Gargoyle: “Careless Whisper”

Golden Handcuffs Review: “Fortress of Solitude”

Natural Bridge: “Dear That Lane Bryant Girl”

Notre Dame Review: “Ransom”

Perceptions: “If Only”

Spilt Infinitive: “Apartment M”

Submit Magazine: “Always Driven to the End”

and “Proper[ty]”

Sleepingfish: “Iota”

The Bacon Review: “We Always Just Say Catastrophic”

Unfinished: “Authorization Declined”

Western Humanities Review: “Unsolicited Advice”

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For. Wendy.

siempre, siempre, y no importa lo que

You can't live and write at the same time.

—Alison Bechdel

Discontent

Unsolicited Advice
Fortress of Solitude
Here
If Only
Dear James Frey
When You’re Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want
Unsolicited Advice
Mother’s Day
13 Ways of Looking at Obscenity
Jar of Bees
Proper[ty]
When You’re Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want
Unsolicited Advice
Rules of Consent
Tie Goes to the Runner
Home
Plausible Deniability: A Parable
When You′re Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want
Unsolicited Advice
The Promise
We Always Just Say Catastrophic
Esmerelda
Always Driven to the End
When You’re Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want
Unsolicited Advice
Careless Whisper
Ransom
Choose the Right
Space
When You’re Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want
Unsolicited Advice
Iota
Kirby in Dreamland
Tonight on 48 Hours

Dear That Other Trevor Dodge
When You’re Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want
Unsolicited Advice
Walking Out of the Darkness
Bertie’s
Lessons My Grandmother Taught Me
Reapersession
When You’re Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want
Unsolicited Advice
Planking
Know No Better
Dear That Lane Bryant Girl
The Show
When You’re Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want
Unsolicited Advice
Ontology
Death Do Us Part
Authorization Declined
Saint Fred Rogers
When You’re Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want
Unsolicited Advice
Siren
The Pearl of Great Price
Apartment M
Miracle
When You’re Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want

***Life* IS NOT MEASURED BY THE BREATHS YOU TAKE, BUT BY THE *moments* THAT *take your breath away*.**

Unsolicited Advice

Upon finding yourself in a room with Them, low ceilings, and needing a fresh coat of paint, and one hands to another a firearm, and it is immediately apparent that they discussed handing this object off well in advance of right now, but quite obviously never contemplated discussing the particulars of such an exchange, if you were in the room at the time, in that situation, it is perfectly understandable that you feel panic. You must not do this. There are no specific suggestions or recommendations as to how you avoid this, by the way, only know that you must.

Fortress of Solitude

His uncle, the unconvicted child molester, wanted to go and didn't care that they wouldn't be spending any time together. All the nephew really knew and cared about was she would be there without parental supervision. Because she lived on the city's power grid and water system, she could walk to the open air stadium without much time or trouble. Because he was living on irrigation streams and a septic tank, he needed a ride.

The old Chevy pickup was a sorry sight to say the least, and even worse on the interior, with his uncle hunched over the cracked plastic steering wheel breathing through his teeth. The factory-installed upholstery had long given way, replaced by a matted quilt the nephew thought was once a pack blanket for his grandfather's mare, the one he'd hauled all the way to hunt moose in British Columbia in a thin sheet metal trailer which bounced dutifully behind his grandfather's power-stroked Ford. His uncle was his uncle by marrying his aunt, who was a decent enough bowler to go on self-financed tours to places like Cleveland and Buffalo and Kansas City but not nearly good enough to be on TV. This was just as well, really, because his aunt was the furthest thing from telegenic and had a bulbous pear-shaped body that earned her the nickname "Mudflaps" in the local Bowladrome, a name she turned to her advantage a surprisingly high number of times all things considered; a lot of the league guys found it nigh impossible to keep her gigantic ass out of their sleeping patterns. Mudflaps spent big swaths of her 30s and 40s flitting around like an awful butterfly in a trash heap. Her husband shared a little house with her on a state highway but little else. She hadn't let

him touch her for a good decade at least, and he couldn't stand the thought of doing it anyway.

When he was forced to spend time in their presence, the nephew definitely preferred spending it with the uncle, which, of course, isn't at all saying he enjoyed the time. The first time he saw a porno mag was at their house, when his uncle handed him one.

"You like to *read, I* hear? Here, take a look at what *I'm* reading."

The nephew flicked through the glossy pages, littered with couples sporting perms, handlebar mustaches and overgrown pubic hair, all of them in various stages of sexual congress, all of them paired up across the gender divide, mouths agape and eyes penetrating each other with intense stares.

"Gets your 'lil pecker hard, don't it?"

The nephew was confused. There were no ciphers to interpret on the slick paper. His Hooked On Phonics program was totally worthless to him here; no clue what a "pecker" was, let alone what could/should/would make it "hard."

He was 5.

That was 10 years ago, though, and through more visceral interactions than this one over the years, he grew into a fuller understanding what his uncle meant back then. But still, a story for another time.

The uncle pointed the Chevy towards a parking space and pulled all the way against the concrete berm. The engine sputtered to a stop and the nephew slid out the door. As he went to close it, his uncle barked for him to "lock 'er up" by depressing the chrome-plated knob just below the window, which was stuck open at least a full fist's width at the top. The nephew didn't think twice and did what he was told. The uncle did the same on his side. They walked along a freshly-trampled ribbon of grass, an impromptu path making clear the fastest way from the parking lot to the stadium rising up, a massive tower of bleachers. The uncle pulled two dollar bills from the wallet chained into his belt loop. The nephew flashed

his activities card, the one with his picture from the previous school year.

She was already waiting for him at the base of the concrete ramp which trickled into the bleachers, jeans cuffed and rolled tight against her calves, Keds impeccably matched to her lipstick red T-shirt screenprinted with the word “CUBS” in a fat white Helvetica font, sweatshirt strung around her hips and secured by its own intertwining arms, hair primly brushed and ribboned above her forehead, eyes radiating through the shamrock green contact lenses she’d been wearing nonstop all week and keeping shut behind her eyelids every night despite her optometrist’s warnings.

She was, without question, The Most Beautiful Thing On The Planet.

She wore the two-toned necklace he’d given her, the one full of jags on the left hand side, a half-coin with half-heart and half-bibleverse stamped into it. She’d arranged it to lay perfectly flat against the top curve of her chest mere seconds before the nephew and his uncle walked between the chain-link posts and up to the ticket stand.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

She hooked her thumb under the gold-plated chain and gently jerked it up, cocking her eyebrows into her forehead as she did this. He didn’t say anything, but thumbed the exact same luster and gauge of chain buried into the fold of his neck. A half-coin with dovetailing jags on the opposite side as hers surfaced from below the depths of his own red T-shirt, a hand-me-down ¾-sleeved prototype of the one she was wearing. He grimaced as the entire line of chain emerged at once, biting into his neck when he spun it around for her to get a good look.

She nodded her head and released her thumb, the pendant spilling back onto her shirt, a wide grin on her face as she laced his fingers between hers and yanked firmly on his arm.

“Up top,” she said. “Come on.”

He swiveled to see where she'd pointed into the bleachers, just underneath the rickety pressbox where a man powered a microphone one short phrase at a time, his device wired into a tinny PA system. The uncle was already at the farthest end of the bleachers, front row, right behind the green team —"BEARS"—but separated by more chainlink fencing. He'd wedged himself between a pair of clover-colored stadium chairs, the kind with folding metal bars and foam backs. Clover-clad occupants. The green cheer team was already ramping up its rendition of "Be Aggressive" while the red cheer team politely watched and waited its turn to do the same. The nephew felt inclined to wave at his relative in the distance, but the uncle was already in full fever, yelling and spelling every letter ahead of the green cheerleaders, absolutely and irrevocably gleeful, fully and unmistakably himself in his old smelly jean jacket with the musky wool collar.

And, besides, she already had control of the evening's agenda, sweetly but firmly guiding him through the waves of feet and elbows as they climbed their way to the spot she'd marked inside her own mind when she'd motioned towards it with a little shake of her head and slight wrinkle of her nose. She'd learned The Move when she was still a toddler, and it had a 99% success rate with every human male within her periphery. Her first deployment of The Move came when she knocked a three-gallon bladder of Kool-Aid out of the refrigerator and yet still managed to finagle a snickerdoodle cookie out of the disaster while her mother and grandmother and aunt tried their damnedest to keep the linoleum floor from staining into the permanent splotch of scarlet that was still in front of her mother's fridge until The Great Remodel erased every trace of the incident. She used The Move not because the nephew needed convincing but because she wanted it absolutely clear where his attention needed to be at all times, framing herself constantly in his vision, hoping he was taking mental snapshots of her to last a lifetime: the angle of her sweatshirt around her; the thin trace of her brassiere across her back; the whisps of chocolate hair loosening under the ribbon across her scalp; the bend of her knee as she climbed the bleachers; the way she balanced her ascent by jutting her

unoccupied hand out at her waist, spreading her fingers to catch enough air between the digits so as to correct her center of gravity; her quick glances over the shoulder at him; up and up and up and up.

When they reached the highest row, she turned 180 degrees, right there in the stairway, before he'd had a chance to come to a full stop with his feet. His shoes washboarded over her toes and he took two hard steps down on them. Her face flushed. She broke her hold on his hand and gasped a small mouthful of air. The nephew's reflexes kicked in to pull his feet back and she fell away from him. He grabbed the loose arms of her sweatshirt and her balance immediately reversed, her face pitching full into his face, forehead to forehead, smacking there, his own arms now braced behind her back and the thick cotton ones taught against her front.

"Gotchoo," he smiled.

Her eyes sunk back in their sockets and she quickly closed her lips, heart throbbing hard against her lungs.

"You okay?" He punctuated his concern by pumping the small of her back with his knotted hands when he sounded out the last syllable. She blinked a big blink and drew in a full breath, the lungs pushing back and slowing the bud-ump bud-ump bud-ump radiating out of her rib-cage. He pumped his fists again.

"Say something." The smile fell off his face and he narrowed his eyes enough to make out the edge of her contact lenses against the outermost membrane of her eyes. As she exhaled she slid her own arms around his waist, their limbs crossing over another in perfect symmetry before forming right angles to one another when she flattened her hands against his shoulder blades.

"Are you looking for a reward, *hero?"* The smile he'd lost reappeared on her face. "Oh, you're so *strong* and have such *quick* reflexes," she said, nose twitching. "Are you *Superman?* You know, I didn't come here with Clark Kent."

He raised his eyebrows to exaggerate the smirk on his lips but remained silent.

“Do you think my boyfriend’s going to be jealous?” She scraped her toe playfully across his shoe.

“Stop it,” he said.

“Make me.”

He looked at her and she looked right back, their eyes forming a horizon.

“Or am I your kryptonite, Mister Kent?” He blinked. “I *know your seee-cret,”* she sang, in full-on The Move mode now, her mind mapping the chessboard of their conversation. The smirk relaxed against his cheeks and they traded thin caresses on each other’s backs. She squashed her smile into a pout and he remained silent.

“Oh, don’t be that way, you big baby.” He blinked. “You know I’ll make it up to you.” She slid out of his arms and rejoined his hand with hers before they scooched to a clear spot on the long pine bleacher board and sat down.

The nephew could see the back of his uncle’s head, now on the opposite end from where he’d just seen him. The red team careened into its own take of the green team’s cheer; the girls sporting the capital letter Bs stood with their hands crossed in front of them, trying really really hard not to be impressed. The uncle tried to hide nothing, and for the duration of the first half he made a nuisance of himself, uprooting and uprooting again until his temporary neighbors on both ends of the long front row finally just got up and left their prime viewing seats, passive aggressively snapping their foam-backed seats together and climbing the stairs up to where they wouldn’t be interrupted every 5 minutes by worn wool and halitosis.

By the time each pair of the uncle’s spurned neighbors made their respective ways to the top of the stadium, she had long coaxed the nephew down from the heights, claiming to be scared even though she knew he knew she was competitive in gymnastics, and he knew she knew he was the one truly terrified.

The red drill team had its halftime performance—a glowstick routine set to Bon Jovi’s “Livin’ On A Prayer”—

cruelly postponed when the pressbox cassette player ate the tape right at the moment Richie Sambora climbs into his wicked guitar solo. The pair of them long gone from the stadium and its huge suns of floodlighting. They slid into the stadium's big shadow where it was ten degrees cooler, where the last of the sunset was still smearing the horizon, where the sweatshirt clung to her shoulders, chest and forearms, where he had his hands shoved in his pants pockets, where the harvest moon made no pretense about its creep into the purpling sky, where the clouds had already turned in for the night and the stars were taking their spot.

The sounds around them softened to a murmur. He extracted his hands and rubbed them together; the seams of his pockets formed a pale band over the backs of both hands, the denim stretched too tight and cutting off the circulation. She instantly reached for them and wriggled the cuffs of her sweatshirt over his cold hands, holding the tips of his fingers above her thumbs. He clamped down and after a few seconds she freed her own fingers just enough that she could work them up to his wrists, then to his forearms, and eventually all the way up to his elbows. His hands released, slacking within the cocoon of cotton. The air between them and the night around them thickened. She slid her hands up and down his arms a couple of times before looping one of her index fingers and a tag-along middle finger over the thin bones and veins in his wrist. His pulse leapt to the surface of his skin to meet her fingers there. He looked into her face and she looked into his face.

"You don't intimidate me, Mister Kent," she said.

They'd played this game before and the rules were simple. Be the first to blink and know it and own it.

She sterned her brow and pretended to be serious, her chin locking into her jawline. He said nothing, did nothing.

"Go," she said, already fixated on his eyelids before uttering the sound. This was her cheat, her hack, why she always won: the illusion she was looking all the way into his retinal wall and he simply couldn't tell the difference.

He held her gaze for a full 10 seconds before pulling his eyes away, first to the right and then up above and into the air, where the night had scoured out the last pesky bits of daylight.

“Gotchoo.”

She smiled. He said nothing, but she felt the muscles in his arms tighten and she instinctively pulled her hands away. The cuffs of the sweatshirt deflated as he withdrew. His gaze remained overhead, his hair angled in near parallel with the ripening moon.

“Oh, don’t pout because you lost again,” she said, her eyes still aimed into his sockets. She gave The Move a good try but he remained silent and motionless, neck arched up and away from her. She flattened her toes into the ground and went up on the balls of her feet, bouncing on them, trying to snap back into his frame of reference. It wasn’t working.

“Hey space cadet,” she said, her voice a lower gear of serious. She waved an arm of the sweatshirt up in the air, raking his chin with a soft blow that was more petulant than playful.

“Stop.” He gripped her arm. Her face fell into a real frown. She lowered herself back to the grass and stood flat-footed again as he continued to hold her arm. She watched him raise his other arm and drag his index finger through the night, past the tip of her peripheral vision, pointing almost directly behind her.

“Look.” He released her arm.

She turned and raised her eyes, scraping his shoe as she went about, and stumbled a bit. She reached behind her to touch him quickly to make sure he was still there. She said nothing as she panned across the sky, its big field anchored by the plump orange moon and well-meaning twinkles of stars.

“You see it?” Arm and finger rigid like a clock hand, motoring across the curve of the night, a dull yellow streak. She raised her own arm and pointed her own finger, pushing his out of the space around her.

“Oooooh.”

She traced its path with her eyes and moved her shoulder to keep pace; she could feel the slow burn in the sky replicating itself in her deltoid. The nephew dropped his arm and watched her do this: the creep of her arm and slight twist of her torso, shuffle-steps with her red Keds in the green grass, hips rotated, her hair and face and ribbon defuzzing back into focus. The extended arm landed softly on his shoulder and the other flew up to rest neatly on the opposite side. She locked her fingers together and stretched a big stretch. He saw she wasn't looking up anymore.

"You *saw* it, right?" he asked. The sweatshirt enveloped him, chest to shoulder blades.

"Saw what?"

Little shake.

Slight wrinkle.

Lean forward.

Hold breath.

Close eyes.

Feel.

On their rides home they said nothing, did nothing but scour the night for the trace of that moment, streetlamps splashing against their windows as they strained to see that they were merely passengers.

Here

Here is the beach and here is the car and here is the face that brought the other face here. Here is the wine and here is the glass and here is the glass and here is the clink of them together here. Here is the chair and here is the chair and here is the shrinking space between them here. Here is the candle and here is the candle and here is the candle and here is the candle and here is the candle and here is the candle here. Here is a red rose and here is a red rose here.

And there is the haystack of rock swelling into the sky. And there is the sky muscled over in cloud. And there is the cloud blurring the horizon. And there is the horizon all around us. And there is us.

If Only

Even though it was July, she chose black—head to toe, under and over—for the occasion. She spun a big bracelet over her right wrist, one segmented into white and black triangles shot through with an elastic cord to keep it all together, thin steel flourishes trailing off it like signal flares between the thick vinyl chips. The shirt she'd chosen flowed freely down the shoulders to her elbows and framed the top curves of her with a wide net lace.

She wanted to be sure she wouldn't give off the wrong impression, but she wasn't necessarily opposed to the idea. Because if that were the case, she wouldn't even be up yet, and she certainly wouldn't be dressing in the med closet.

She slid her contact lenses into place and blinked vigorously. The supply room washed into focus, its sunlight-bright overhead lamps burned the space completely free of shadows. This is why she preferred doing her makeup and hair and finer touches here rather than in the dim recess of her master bathroom, that and the fact she owned—not leased—the building in which she stood, her floral-print sandals firm against the thin industrial-grade carpet. Ten years ago she'd temped here as a receptionist. Five years later she returned with an SBA loan and MSPAA license and literally took shit over, the real way, the way it matters. Ownership society. All that.

Authorizing the office's satellite radio subscription was her first official act of legit responsibility, and all country all the time every since, the more pop stuff, the less jangly-twangy stuff, the stuff marketed with music videos and Stetson hats

and designer jeans and lighting rigs, shot with RED cameras in the absolute highest high-def, shoulder-shrugging models lip-synching in front of empty amusement park rides or in vast stretches of meadows without even a whisper of human population. Outside: her parking lot, her asphalt, her rectangle marked in bold yellow lines, her gunmental gray GMC Yukon Denali towering above it all. Climate-controlled seats. Speed-sensitive volume control on the Bose stereo. Power everything. Tailgate camera wired in closed-circuit to the thick LCD screen always hovering just in front of her. Her past all about the future, and the future right here, right now.

Yet. If only.

See, it could have started like this: a memory triggered inside a hope chest stored in the garage, separate from the house and the pebbled concrete of its driveway, the one spilling over with stuff and never big enough and the family fleet parked thereupon or perpendicular to the concrete curbs just beyond. The chest an army surplus grenade crate, shallowed out and kept shut with thick metal arms, banal keylocks on the handles about as secure as airport luggage. This is where she'd deposited trinkets from her grade school days: doll clothing, plastic snap barrettes molded into benign animal shapes, ballet slips and toe shoes. From her teen years: small clumps of cartoony characters overstuffed with cotton filler and sewn shut, smears of ink on the backs of wallet photos from her old boyfriends and randomly curated hand-scratched notes from various whomevers. From her first wedding: dust. From her second wedding: a wristlet corsage of plastic callalillies set against bulbs and sprigs of green somethings. All of the above so reactionary and lacking a master plan and really just forgotten.

She was meeting him for lunch in an hour, just a couple blocks away from her asphalt and her med closet and her employees and her employees' paperwork. It was one of their jobs to deliver the labwork blood sealed up tight in plastic vials, in turn sealed up tight in a vinyl bag clamped shut with a yellow and black biohazard sticker that upon closer look resembled the snub nose point of view of the .38 she carried in her purse, its chambers always open and breathing back at her

at the practice range where she was a crack shot. She really did pay someone else to do this delivery job, someone who didn't drive a Denali, someone who didn't own asphalt. Someone who wasn't her.

She spun through the restaurant parking lot, the bag propped up and chilling in the huge temperature-controlled seat next to her. She had to see. Parked at a 90 degree angle at the very back of the lot, nose pointed into a fence. The LCD lit up and she watched intently for any movement behind her.

Once, she'd hoped, she'd be a superspy and double-agent herself. But the only movement in her secret camera was a delivery man unloading giant metal barrels onto a handtruck and disappearing behind the restaurant's small service door. The door the employees had to enter after walking from all the way across the parking lot—the *other side*—the one "reserved" for them because they were forbidden to park closer to where they spent a healthy chunk of their lives every day before returning home to rest up just enough to return the subsequent day and park there all over again.

One of three cellphones twinged in her purse, stirred by its jangly-twangy ringtone. Because she knew the first notes so well, she didn't even bother to reach for it. Toby Keith. She'd been married to him for 14 years so there wasn't anything she needed to discuss with him. Not during daytime. Not right then for sure. Toby knew better and Toby had his own asphalt to watch over and Toby knew better and Toby had his own pretty power-stroked vehicle to rev and Toby knew better and Toby had his own employees to tell where to park and Toby knew better and Toby knew better.

Once, she'd hoped, she'd be a famous singer and record companies would have a fierce bidding war for her. But then all the record companies got greedy. And then there weren't any records anymore. And then there weren't any singers anymore. And this meant there wasn't any point anymore. In that fateful year when *American Idol* jumped the shark, she watched with the volume turned all the way down, studying the models' choreography and how they gesticulated to the carefully-filtered crowd around them, their flat renditions of

other models' songs and other choreography, toggling the mute button only when Paula Abdul effervesced with her myopic pandering-praise; Paula Abdul, drunk or high or both; Paula Abdul, ogling the beautiful boys out loud and crushing on the rocker chicks in secret; Paula Abdul, backstage both before and after the show, with hugs that always lasted just long enough to get uncomfortable.

Once, she'd hoped, she'd be a dancer, and her instructors taught her okay enough, but they were far more interested in her parents' monthly tuition payments than being honest in the way that mattered. The day she realized that was quite possibly the worst day of her entire life.

Yet. If only.

The first time Toby painted her belly, it was already too late. They had been married for at least a decade and she'd birthed three of their children. To say it didn't mean anything would be a lie; to say it didn't matter was much closer to the mark. For weeks Toby wore the T-shirt he'd used to clean her up with, day after day, wore it like a crown of achievement, faint lines of his stain bleeding through the purple cotton. She had washed and rewashed and rewashed the filthy thing and thrown it away at least four times, but Toby retrieved it from the garbage each and every time she tried to dispose of it. Once, she'd hoped, she'd be an actress. But not this kind. She just couldn't pretend hard enough when her sister-in-law pointed at Toby's chest and drew a big circle around the stain with her index finger and then crossed an X with her fingernail right through it, slashslash, yelled "SEX MARKS THE SPOT!!!" so everyone at the family reunion could hear her, just like always. Toby grinned widely before hoisting his PBR into the sky with the other hand, other fist balled and already above him, arms stretched all the way up now so the hem of the shirt bisected his big navel, exclaiming at precisely the same volume of his sister "AND I HAVEN'T WASHED HER SINCE!!!", his pronoun usage deliberately slack so as to carry the full weight of what Toby had imagined to be *the* double-entendre of the entire weekend. And, of course, he wasn't wrong.

In her LCD screen she watched two primly-dressed people slip out the employees' entrance and pop the doors on the matched pair of convertibles parked at slant angles to both each other and the door, a man and a woman in argyle sweatervests and pastel golf shorts, each disappearing inside their vehicles to simultaneously ignite their fuel-injected engines, each making the same tight left turn around and then away from the restaurant, then making the same right turn onto the busy boulevard. When they rode off her LCD for good, she turned and looked out the big glass window all the way at the back. They weren't there. She wondered if they were ever really there at all. Trust but verify, her mother always told her. Don't believe it just because you see it. Her mother practiced these things for real, and even 38 years later, at no point did her mother not know where she was at any given time, what she was doing, who she was with. It had always been this way and always would be; it was the reason she and Toby moved in right next door and filled that corner of the block with grandchildren, SUVs, fifthwheel trailers, ATVs, jetskis, snowmobiles, seasonal swimming pools and patio furniture. See you later: Trust but verify. I'll be over soon: Trust but verify. I need to pick up *x* at y: Trust but verify. I can't, I have yardwork to do: Trust but verify. He is leaving me: Trust but verify. I am leaving him: Trust but verify.

Her purse tipped over when a different phone rang inside, spilling her lipstick and emery board out on the floorboard amongst its other whatnottery. Her second official act of legit responsibility was to purchase this particular phone, and that's what necessitated her answering it. She cradled the handset in the crook of her shoulder, craning her head into the face of it, simultaneously reaching between her sandals to retrieve the bowels of her purse. The lab. It needed its blood if she was going to deliver on her promise of same-day results, the one she'd personally made to the teenager with the weeping eyes, the one where she said she understood, the one where she made an exception to the whole parental consent thing. Trust but verify. Once, she'd hoped, she'd be an OB-GYN, or at the very least a birthing nurse. She would, she thought, see the other side of this just for once.

Yet. If only.

She put the phone back in her purse, straightened the biohazard bag on the seat next to her, sighed, snapped the big triangles on her wrist one-two-three times, sighed again, and brought the Denali back to life with the slow flick of her wrist. She selected R and the metal strands of her bracelet clinked against the steering column. The LCD faithfully attempted to powercycle and refresh itself but she quickly flicked it off. She pushed her head around and away, stared back through the big glass window again, and slowly crept back into what she already knew to be true.

The third phone, the one FedExed to her office from out of state, out of time zone, outer space, she left it on the floor ringing. When she didn't pick up, its sender from far away understood and didn't attempt a second call, let alone a third. Or thirtieth.

Once, she'd hoped, she'd have had the nerve. And it could have started just like this.

Dear James Frey

I just found out you and your publisher worked out a deal with readers who are pissed about your novel *A Million Little Pieces* not being a novel. Apparently you will be giving refunds for the full cover price to anyone who claims he is the victim of consumer fraud by purchasing your book.

God. I just totally fucking hate you.

But before I get into that, let's talk about Oprah Winfrey. What's she like in person? And by "in person," I mean in front of a daily national audience of 40 million? Because I saw you on her show apologizing for your novel not being called a novel but really being a novel anyway, and I couldn't help feeling sorry for the two of you. I was especially sorry for the way both of you had to sit there and explain this like you were Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky copping to playing peek-a-boo with the cigar, frowning and sighing and shifting in your chairs and wringing your hands. It's not too often we get to see Oprah apologize and actually mean it. And I'm wondering if that was your sense of the situation. I mean, she really *looked* sorry anyway, when she rumpled up her face and stared into the camera with those big, liquid eyes. Don't you think?

Now let me explain where I was when I heard about this consumer fraud settlement thing of yours. My wife and I were watching *Supernanny* on the Tivo, and there was this stay-at-home mom whose major problem was she smiled too much. According to her, people who smile all the time are usually trying to hide how miserable they are. During a break, a teaser commercial came on for a local morning talk show, and one of the topics was going to be how you and your publisher pulled

this shit about giving people their money back. I googled it and sure enough it was true.

It's important to know where I was when I caught wind of this. Tivo is supposed to enable me to block out or fast-forward through teasers for TV morning shows, but it's not a perfect system. Sometimes the programs don't start recording at the exact time they begin. A lot of times, they stop recording before they're supposed to. When fast-forwarding, it's easy to overshoot the section breaks of the program I'm watching, and I end up seeing things I don't want to see. And when I see things I don't want to see, I get incredibly upset. I work way too hard to waste my money and time on things like Tivo that don't do what I want them to do. That isn't the America I grew up in, sir, and I'll be damned if it's the America I pass on to my children.

Because in the America I grew up in, authors don't apologize for writing their books. That's the primary reason for writing a book in the first place. Or at least it used to be. If people who write books now have to be held accountable for what they write, well, that just ain't American.

Because in the America I grew up in, if you bought a book and felt ripped off, well, tough shit.

In the America I grew up in, writers didn't write memoirs. Only the greatest Americans got to write memoirs, and they sure as hell weren't faggy-ass writers. Chuck Yeager. Lee Iacocca. Sam Walton. I'm looking at your bio right now on Wikipedia and I don't see anything comparable. I do see that you spent five hours in jail and went through drug rehab. I googled it.

I really didn't write this to pile on. I wrote this to make a larger point, and that point is this: books don't have warranties. You and your publisher are setting a dangerous precedent by asking readers to tear out page 163 from their copies of *A Million Little Pieces* and mail it back to you along with a sworn affidavit. More than that, though, you're underscoring John Grisham's argument about *Natural Born Killers*, the one where he argues for suing producers, directors and studio executives for the films they make.

He argues this, of course, having made a lot of bank from—yes—film adaptations of his books.

So if you do nothing else, you should remove yourself from the likes and company of John Grisham. You and I probably don't agree on much, but the one thing I'd like to think we *could* agree on is how John Grisham is a complete twat. Let's at least try to agree on that.

I mean, right?

When You're Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want

Leave cheerios on the counter for days and days, swimming in their ceramic bowl of yellowing milk-bath and getting puffier and puffier. No one will dare clean them, especially if it's the last thing you touched before you expired, the spoon still sticky from your lipstick.

BE YOUR OWN KIND OF
beautiful

Unsolicited Advice

Ex is already aware of all side and back entrances into every space you share with Sig.Other. If the space used to be shared by Them and you are new to the floorplan, it is a big waste of your time to familiarize and attach yourself to the regular patterns regular people would take to move in/ out/through that space. It is an even bigger waste of time to make issue of these patterns; and yet, even even bigger to make issue of those people who are merely repeating these patterns. Try to remember that these were established well before you, that your speaking to them only reinforces this fact, and that doing something about any of it is completely beyond your agency. Unless you are an architect, home-builder or interior designer *and* you yourself designed the ingress/egress of the space—and of course the chances of this are obscenely remote—you simply have no other play than to keep your steps slow and stay out of the way.

Mother's Day

She celebrated by raising both her legs into the air mere inches from their pictures but far enough away from his rusty hips not to knock over the big metal frames into the landing strip of their revenge; spotlights burning down from the ceiling to form elongated coins of white on his back and her forehead; the carpet dirty and well beyond need of a good scrubbing and shampooing job; the room filling with the smell of clammy latex: on and off and on and off again; the taste and sting of the pre-packaged lube numbing her tongue and throat just enough to let his perfectly-timed explosion slide down like a snotty sniffle after being out too long in the rain.

An hour prior to that dropped them off with backpacks and color-coordinated overnight bags. She was always scooting him out right around their bedtime, having breathed the same air-freshened air with him in her car for the better part of three hours while she worked him into a frothy mess. Her bold moves to coax him away from trolling eHarmony and Zoosk and Ashley-Madison on his laptop for an afternoon of coffee somehow worked, the big teeth of him half-framed in his profile picture by the computer's pinhole camera, his thick rectangular lenses perched on his numbingly average nose, thick waves of orangish nicotine-stained hair filtering his lips and nostrils in a wide mustache which spilled around his mouth and pooled under his chin, the same way her father's did when he was also in the naval reserve, the same way her soon-to-be-ex-husband's did when he let his grooming habits go slacker than slack, and this, of course, was something her soon-to-be-ex-husband let happen beginning in the 5th year of their marriage, something she finally stopped complaining

about in the 9th or 10th year, and something she gave up entirely before the whole thing toppled without so much of a breath's resistance.

The hour prior to that she was in the movie theater with them, nodding in and out of sleep as the high definition projector blasted millions upon millions of color combinations above their heads, the walls dripping with sound synched to scenes from the pretend places that had flooded their entire fields of view.

Two hours prior to that she purchased the largest-sized popcorn along with the largest-sized box of Milk Duds along with the largest-sized Coca-Cola along with the largest-sized Sprite along with another of the largest-sized Coca-Colas along with another of the largest-sized Coca-Colas.

One hour after that she cupped her hand over the screen of her cell phone, trying to dampen its bright haze amidst the one 2-second stretch of total dark and quiet in the entire 136-minute affair, checking her bank balance in direct response to the nightmare she'd just woke up from, the one where she snapped a plastic card out of her purse to pay for this or that and said card was violently ripped from her hand with a heavy sigh and even heavier scowl, the one that had started somewhere in the depths of something truly blissful—a memory of the sky blue cloud of cotton candy her daddy always bought her at the September fair, maybe—but inevitably turned to thunder and wind and nastiness. You know, like bliss always does.

13 Ways of Looking at Obscenity

((1)) 2) 3) 4) 5) 6) 7) 8) 9) 10) 11) 12) 13)

She shucked the corn, spilling its silk into a brown paper sack balancing itself on the floor at her feet. The other woman followed her lead.

"He won't even discuss it with me," she said. The other woman bent her cheeks into a frown but said nothing. "He probably even wrote it into the will, I'll bet."

The other woman held the positions and muscles of her face. "So…you can't *ever again*, really?" she finally said.

"Nope."

"Never?"

"Nope."

"Jesus."

"Not him, either. Not a single touch." She chuckled and the other woman followed her lead.

"But that's just…mean," she finally said.

She smiled. She didn't know what else to do.

1) ((2)) 3) 4) 5) 6) 7) 8) 9) 10) 11) 12) 13)

Little Orson was told from the time he could remember being told things that he was a genius. His mother repeated this nearly every day and because his father didn't correct her, he said it nearly every day as well, only in slight nods and

looks that weren't as stern as they should have been. When he was nine, Little Orson slowed from hearing these things and when he was 10 it stopped completely. That's when he ran away with his sister and worked the streets for money. The rest, as they say, is history.

1) 2) ((3)) 4) 5) 6) 7) 8) 9) 10) 11) 12) 13)

The child threads the tiny screws into their tunnels one at a time, pinching them with a thumb and index finger, held fast by the fingernails, drops just one more no more, swivels for the tiny screwdriver and fastens the hinge by turning and turning slowly, careful not to strip the metal or flange the plastic, careful not to bend the arms too far back, careful not to crack or smear or scratch or dent or bend or damage in any perceivable way, no matter the cost. The child learns what it means to be an adult. The consumer, having already learned what it means, patiently waits in his cage of birch and stainless steel.

1) 2) 3) ((4)) 5) 6) 7) 8) 9) 10) 11) 12) 13)

The professional athlete, the person who gets paid to play, took the game ball home and wrote on it in big loops with a permanent marker. The professional athlete, the person who gets paid to play a team sport, sealed the game ball away in a special room with hundreds of other game balls written on in a similar fashion with a similar instrument. The other professional athlete, the person who no longer gets paid and no longer plays a team sport, unlocked the room one game ball at a time and auctioned each off to the highest bidder. That professional athlete—*that* one—had never felt such joy.

1) 2) 3) 4) ((5)) 6) 7) 8) 9) 10) 11) 12) 13)

He'd had a few before he got home that night. She was watching television but not really watching, her laptop balanced on her legs, fingers clicking and swiping, its molded plastic form hinged open in front of her and glowing. He made a move on her and she responded. He made another move and she responded to that one as well. She closed the device with a thin snap and stood up. She smiled and walked in front of him and he followed her and this is how it all ended. Except the

next move was hers, the both of them naked, her hand there, and he did not respond. She made another move with another hand on another there and he did not respond. When she stood and reached for her clothes he finally responded, but not that way. The other way.

1) 2) 3) 4) 5) ((6)) 7) 8) 9) 10) 11) 12) 13)

It was purely electronic. They agreed to never meet in person, conducting their romance totally in bits and bytes, framing their world one email, one text message, one status update, one profile pic, one like at a time, an intricate weave of emotions they would never express inside the same physical space. Their world became The World and everything else atrophied. A beautiful mess.

1) 2) 3) 4) 5) 6) ((7)) 8) 9) 10) 11) 12) 13)

The father orders the granite one, the one with custom laser etching, and chooses a picture of her holding a teddy bear she was handed to hold by the minimum wage photographer at Sears. She never loved the bear and the father never loved her. Not really, anyway.

1) 2) 3) 4) 5) 6) 7) ((8)) 9) 10) 11) 12) 13)

She lassoes him around the waist, on purpose, so her arms are out of the way.

“Really.”

No reply. Wide stare.

“I want you to.”

He thinks his thoughts while she watches him think. She doesn’t quite get it.

“Don’t make me beg you.”

No reply. Wider stare.

His eyes roam the rumpus room, scurrying along the felt of the billiard table and making invisible tracks in the light white dust atop the TV. He moves his hand to the top curve of her. The cup of silk.

She’s always owned such pretty things.

1) 2) 3) 4) 5) 6) 7) 8) ((9)) 10) 11) 12) 13)

This is your swimming pool you wanted him to fill for you; your hand-terraced steps dug out with a wooden-handled trowel and minimal cursing; your bricked driveway with the special red grout he had to drive 236 miles round-trip to get; your concrete water fountain shaped like an angel or fairy or dragon or what the fuck ever; your bleach party in the camp trailer to catch Just One Mouse; your That Way; your Like This; your Please…Don't; your surprise and your shame and your regret.

The smell of charcoal briquets stains him now. Sniff from the stopsign here and smell it from all the way down the block, taste it against the teeth.

Kneel.

1) 2) 3) 4) 5) 6) 7) 8) 9) ((10)) 11) 12) 13)

First!

You wouldn't bee-leeve this shit she does!

Twice, even!

Oh yeah well that was before I didn't know.

No really. It's not like that.

Okay so it's a little like that.

No hard feelings right?

I mean, right?

We're good?

So…anyway…Twice!

1) 2) 3) 4) 5) 6) 7) 8) 9) 10) ((11)) 12) 13)

When that girl at the family practice hung up on him, he knew what needed to happen. And when the police pulled onto the asphalt in that bright heat, their patrol cars aflame with light and sound, all of them also knew.

1) 2) 3) 4) 5) 6) 7) 8) 9) 10) 11) ((12)) 13)

Dear Back In The Day,

I have a list of complaints. In no particular order:

1. You are a cocktease.
2. I don't remember you the way you remember me.
3. X doesn't cost Y anymore. It's exponentially more expensive. Damn you for not telling me the price.
4. You are about one inch away from being a complete fiction.
5. All things eventually get damaged, all things ultimately get broken. Stop pretending otherwise. It's pathetic.
6. I hope you are writing one of these yourself. I can't wait to read it and then ignore you the way you're ignoring me.
7. There is a love I have for you but I will not allow you to have it. You simply want it too much.

1) 2) 3) 4) 5) 6) 7) 8) 9) 10) 11) 12) ((13))

Dear Wherever You Are,

I only have praise for you. Don't you dare try to resist me.

1. There is simply not time like the present. Cliches are cliches are cliches. And they are that way for very good reasons. Grow up and accept that.
2. I only have memory. That's all there is. Nothing more than you can touch now.
3. The cost of everything is everything. And so is nothing. There is no difference between everything and nothing. Please try and understand.
4. Bliss isn't ignorance. Don't change the subject now. You are so so close to getting this right, you don't even know.
5. You need to laugh some more. And cry some more. And Some More some more. Even more, even.
6. I have written all that needs to be written. Except one last thing.

7. You could never stop me. Not that you wanted to. Not that you tried.

Jar of Bees

Hold up a second. The phone and doorbell are ringing.

At the door is a bill collector from Waste Management. I am silently sliding my open window closed and drawing the blinds.

The letters “WASTE” are blinking on the wall-mounted caller ID box, the “W” hovering over a phone number with a (713) area code.

Surely these simultaneous events couldn’t be coincidental. As he cups his hands around his eyes and peers through the thin strip of glass running parallel to my front door, the bill collector—let’s go ahead and call him Bill, since he’s the most serious kind of creditor, the kind who comes to your door *without* a nametag or business card, who parks a completely non-descript 4-door sedan with out-of-state license plates in your driveway—can surely see the lime green flash from the caller ID box, just as surely as he can see me looking back at him from my comfy vantage point back on the living room sofa, laptop obediently purring, balancing on the caps of my knees as I type this very word and then the next and then the next, the slats of the blinds fanning themselves slowly behind my head.

I am waving at him.

I used to think Bill came here to collect the past due amount I currently owe on my garbage removal, which I haven’t paid in decades. Which has to be tens of thousands of dollars now. Or should be. Much like the weekly service his company provides, Bill faithfully appears at my door on the 5th of every

month, rings the bell, cups his hands against the glass, and quickly returns to his car. He does all this in the matter of 25 seconds; he never appears angry or threatening in any way. I attempted to pay him in the earliest days of this, but he politely refused.

“Oh, I don’t handle payments,” he explained then, his eyes brighter, cheeks higher, hair thicker then than now. “I am merely checking that you are still in domicile here. And so you are. Have a nice day, sir.”

Apparently, in our country, I can get away with not paying the garbage bill for years on end, but if I’m only a day late with my car payment, a thin woman chaperoned by a tow truck always appears in my driveway by the end of the next business day. This has never made any sense to me, nor does the woman ever come to the door.

Waste Management is a publicly-traded company based in Houston, TX. In April of 2006, they announced 1st quarter revenues of 3.2 billion dollars, marking a 6% increase over the previous year. I’m guessing Waste Management doesn’t need my money, but obviously they are in the making money business. Have you ever heard of anything so strange?

Maybe they’re just happy I’m doing my fair share to create higher disposal volumes during this never-ending string of warmer springs and drier summers. Maybe the voicemail they are leaving me right now is a generous thank-you from the home office, maybe offering a gratis block of shares. Maybe it’s a call from CEO Dave Steiner, inviting me down for a weekend of golf and a fat sirloin steak the size of my head. Or maybe I’m the statistical anomaly Waste Management tallies into its obscene profit margins.

If so, what do I do next?

See, things are just slightly below average. I am sorting my loose change into scattered piles of silver and copper before divvying them amongst a strange assortment of coffee mugs, mayonnaise jars and potato salad crates. Listen closely and you’ll hear the scrape of pennies, nickels and dimes against textured melamine, the occasional splash of errant, defiant

coins as they refuse to go quietly into that good container and bounce against the vinyl floor.

This sorting process is something I'm doing more and more, and coming up with less and less each time I do it. I'm also finding fewer and fewer quarters. I used to think my personal shortage of quarters had some connection to the U.S. Mint's 50 State Quarters Program, that a small subculture of junior numismatists were hoarding all the new quarters and taping them into their die-cut cardboard maps.

When I visited my son's school one afternoon, though, I noticed pockmarks on such a map that was obviously the classroom map. Meaning it belongs to the class. As a whole. The entire class.

The teacher told me all of the quarters from the Eastern Time Zone states disappeared within the past two weeks; at that rate of evaporation, he predicted by the end of the school year, only the Dakotas would be left.

The more I think about this, the more discouraged I get. I don't want to believe the nation's children to be so greedy as to steal quarters from a classroom map anymore than I want to believe the nation's largest garbage removal company to be so generous as to give its services away for free. My sensibilities are too firmly stuck in that infinite loop between Rousseau and Locke for me to believe something like this about children, and too corroded by National Public Radio to believe something like this about a major North American corporation.

The only road out is to begin discussing my role on this planet as an adult, isn't it? I don't play golf but its operative metaphor—the mulligan—is mightily useful here, and most definitely the product of a child's mind: try; fail; try again; fail again; try yet again. Make the mistake; correct accordingly; move forward. It would be lovely if adults could grant each other the same kindnesses and do-overs they used to afford one another as children, and to do so without wearing garish, goofy clothing while brandishing long, thin weapons of brushed titanium. So many interests. So many penalties. Far too many grudges.

Proper[ty]

The man stood naked in his own kitchen, drinking his own milk from his own stubby glass originally purchased for drinking his own scotch. Exactly 37 minutes prior to this scene, the woman sat in her own naugahyde recliner in the adjacent room and declared that the man should accompany her upstairs. This almost always meant he was to sit in their own bed, fully clothed, and navigate the DVR which drip-fed their small television perched atop her own dresser; the woman called this ritual Running The Remote, and it entailed the man carefully trimming the woman's daytime soap operas for commercial interruptions while she listened and made her attempts to sleep. The man pretended to loathe these duties but had come over the decade to rely on this nightly routine to anesthetize the woman.

In summertimes the man and the woman shipped their children to another timezone, where an older man and an older woman lived on 10 acres of high desert scrubland. Here the children assembled model rockets and launched them into the clouds. They delighted at the puffs of white when their rockets reached apex, popped their hollow plastic nosecones off with a gentle plop 500 feet overhead, the coardboard tubes always spinning beneath the twirl of a plastic parachute held taught by thin strings and newspaper-grade rubber bands, floating and drifting and dodging the rows of Russian olive trees and quaken aspen trees neatly marking the older man and older woman's property. The children had surveyed most of the northwest quadrant with one of the older man's four-wheeled, gasoline-powered motorbikes when an errant rocket blew its nosecone so forcefully that the rubberbands emancipated

themselves from the cardboard tube body, and two pieces descended back to earth instead of just one. Although never directly instructed as such, the children implicitly understood that they were not to return to the older man's and older woman's house without both pieces in their possession, no matter how long it might take them to scour them out of the flush of thistle and puncture weeks carpeting the NW quad. of the older man and older woman's property. They had, after all, all summer to complete the task.

Back in the other time zone, the woman laboriously climbed the stairs of the house she owned with the man. Where it was clear the kitchen was the man's domain, it was not clear whose province the stairs were. Individual rooms were quickly claimed, but the paths of egress/ingress—hallways, staircases, doorways, thresholds, etc—were never clearly marked. So far as the upstairs/downstairs staircase was concerned, the man easily doubled the amount of daily trips taken up/down as the woman; however, the woman easily tripled the amount of time spent actually ascending/descending the stairs as did the man. Because the man and the woman never articulated which was more important—trip frequency vs elapsed time—this particular part of the house was effectively a demilitarized zone, travelled but not controlled, an area of mutually-assured protection.

The woman suffered from sharp pains located in her lower back, caused by extended hours sitting in a pneumatic chair arched just enough to aggravate the bottom-most vertebrae buried beneath of her wide, thick skin. The woman owned a business which connected hospice nurses to hospice patients, and thus had complete control over the purchase and replacement of the office furniture. This was a point the man routinely brought up when the woman complained about the pain, and because he brought it up so frequently, she refused to replace or even adjust the chair. The woman, above all, prided herself on being a person of principle, and the principle clearly exercising itself as she lumbered up and down the stairs was that she would rather suffer chronic pain than have the man tell her what to do. The man found this principle trite and predictable. The man's own mother had raised her own son to

defer when an argument ground down into second gear and showed no signs of immediate resolution. The woman's own mother had raised her own daughter to shift all the way down into first gear in similar situations, and to keep the option always visible that throwing it all into reverse could happen at literally any moment. The woman's own mother perfected these techniques on five different men; the older woman her own skills on the older man for over fifty years.

The children had just become pattern-recognizant enough to see how the man and the older man were son and father, how the man and the older woman were son and mother. The older man loved them as much as an older man can probably be expected to love his own son's own children, but the older man had already spent an entire lifetime locked inside his work-life balance-rhythm, one measured so much in overt morning coffee and secret afternoon cigarettes that the older man found himself frequently short of patience when dealing with his own son's own children and their trite and predictable problems in varying degrees of needing solved. The older man saw every human action connected not to tissues of cause-effect, but problem-solution; human beings communicate, he was taught, because they cannot acquire something they desire, and construct fancy ways to attempt acquiring that something through the simple expression of their desire for it. Thus, silence to the older man was a homeostatic zen, in which humans were content with what they already possessed, and with whom they possessed it. So when the children returned to the older man and older woman from the NW quad. of their property with two separate pieces of a model rocket which had been joined as one not even an hour prior, the older man's reaction consisted entirely of grumpily snatching the nosecone and cardboard tube out of the children's own hands without saying a single word.

The older man did not believe in anything commonly called body language, and this is something that made him an easy mark for the older woman so very very long ago. The older man purchased a pachinko machine for the older woman as an engagement present but she never played it, not even once, because she considered it a sexed-up slot machine, and

this is something it most certainly was. Small steel pebbles with strange hieroglyphs carved into them bounced around a maze of pegs; the only difference the older woman could see between this design and others she had seen in international airports was the latter used actual money, and the former seduced its player into believing the steel balls had no value whatsoever. The older man was not sure what the older woman thought about gambling at the time and place of his purchase, and it would be hard to say that he was actually thinking about the older woman at all, because it was in a split-second utterance at the customs desk that he even gave the purchase an official narrative.

The man as a child flipped the outside lever on the thick, spring-loaded launcher resting inside the tall sheet of glass, over and over and over and over without ever loading a single steel ball into its chamber. The older man kept the steel balls sealed in a coffee can somewhere else in the house, somewhere the man as a child would not discover until much later, in a moment when steel and glass was the furthest thing from his mind, and the older woman had successfully reversed the older man into getting rid of the garish thing once and for all. The painted decoration on its pegboard featured an arrangement of small, symmetrical cylinders shaped like lipstick tubes, radiating out of a plump explosion of violet, tangerine and scarlet, at least a hundred tiny rockets taking flight from a common center but each ascending into its own orbit, paying no attention to the gravity which exerted its heavy will upon everything else not painted or nailed to the pegboard's surface. The man as a child marveled at the orange plastic basket at the exact epicenter of the spectral bomb. How it opened up towards the sky with its tulip mouth, flattening its sides after a miracle steel had passed through a lucky strike of the flipper below the 12-volt battery powering a flashbulb fireworks show behind the sheet of glass to the simultaneous peals of a real brass hammer striking a real brass bell. Then the rush of hieroglyphed spheres showered his little hands in the payout tray, wave upon wave upon wave of them, like an ice cream headache right before the pain takes grip at the back of the throat. The man as a child never failed to be amazed at how the lucky fortune of a single pebble was instantly

celebrated by the whole quarry, and how the finessed flick of his sticky thumb had made it all real.

The woman, at the top of the staircase, beckoned again for the man to join her. She closed her own bathroom door inside their own bedroom as she always did, making sure to push with just enough force that the man would hear it plop against the doorframe. The woman devised this part a long time ago, back when she could (but didn't) take the stairs two at a time and could (but didn't) offer herself to the man twice in an evening. Before enacting the door ritual, she spent too many moments waiting for the man to climb the stairs and join her in their own bedroom. Moments without a clear signal of some sort that she was in fact already in their own bedroom. Wasted in her waiting for the sound of his fingers gripping the handrail on the staircase. The groan of the iron brackets inside the drywall that echoed and amplified in the ascending tunnel of air. Sighs when he at last let go of whatever insignificant tasks that were preoccupying him in the bowels of the house. To join her at last upstairs. The man was the one to always shut the door connecting their own bedroom to the hallway, as reassurance to the woman that he was present in her presence. Although she was still behind the door of her own bathroom, she enjoyed knowing that she wasn't alone in the larger nested doll they called their own bedroom, and furthermore that her companionship did not require the man's physical appearance in her line of sight. The man and woman had once enjoyed sharing a bathroom and all the shared privacies of such a space (the speckle-spatter of another's toothpaste on the gargantuan rectangle of mirrored glass that somehow floated above their double sinks; the errant pubic hair of the other's body (flattened and dried against the ceramic tile of the shower's high backsplash; the clumsy stacking of half-dispensed rolls of toilet paper atop the porcelain lid to the fixture's engorged and sweaty water tank), but they gradually tired of watching each other perform the banalities of civilized hygiene that were required of them to even consider living in their own neighborhood.

The man timed his bedroom entrance to the narrow sliver of time before/after the woman's closing her own bathroom

door a second time, so as to be already in their own bed, overhead lights off, outer bedroom door closed, staircase light off, television on, DVR remote laying still in the trough of his outstretched hand, armed and thumb on the control like a missile commander waiting for the launch code.

The woman appeared. The man rose. The children sat. The doors locked.

All fast-forwarded through the night, rewound and readied for the inevitable day.

When You're Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want

Turn the television to a static channel, the volume all the way down. Whomever turns up the volume will be next to die. Whomever turns off the television will get a telemarketing call within the subsequent 24 hours, with the surprisingly-soft voice on the other end asking specifically asking to talk to you and only you. Whichever of these acts inspires the most crying and regret is something you totally get to decide.

always KISS ME GOODNIGHT

Unsolicited Advice

The Internet seems like a useful tool on the surface, but it is completely your enemy. It is an objective repository for shards of the truth, and lends itself far too well to deductive logic—in most cases, leaps in pattern recognition are necessary to make anything there useful, and be mindful of your own tendency towards jumping to conclusions. If you use online banking services and/or pay any of your utility bills electronically, you must immediately and forever stop. Scribbling out paper checks for arbitrary sums and mailing them anonymously with no return address so they can be randomly sorted and opened and processed by silent machines once they reach their destinations is a tried, tested and true method of keeping your relationship nice and sedate. It worked for your grandparents, after all, and everyone knows how doe-eyed happy they were all those years.

Rules of Consent

1. My choice.	1. There is no ownership.
2. One at a time.	2. There is no guilt.
3. No means no.	3. There is no jealousy.
4. There is no obligation.	4. There are no games.

The married couple took on a lover, someone neither of them knew, but someone who knew her from afar. The lover was shorter, better manicured, better goateed, better spoken, bluer-eyed and obsessive in his preparation. The husband bought everything they'd need but the lover brought his own everything.

The underlying rule to override all other rules was simple: she was the center of it all. Anything which transpired first and foremost was about her and her comfort level and her desire. This was never spoken or written down or directly communicated in anything other than body language and the body was hers. She didn't share well and this was also an underlying principle: under no circumstances whatsoever should the two of them do anything to force her to choose. Headgames and guilt were specifically forbidden.

The trial run went like this: the husband was to set everything out in the hotel room they'd secured for the weekend and then promptly leave. And to leave not just the room and not just the floor. The husband was afforded an

allowance to go downstairs and play table games and instructed to keep his cell phone on him at all times. She wore a bluetooth earpiece specially programmed to dial his number and his number only; a quick touch of the finger below her temple instead of breaking stride to reach for the purse where she kept her fancy things like the device to which the earpiece was paired. They worked out a code system in advance so they wouldn't have to actually speak to each other, a certain number of rings negotiated for a certain whatever. He could not, in any circumstance, accept the call and go live with her on the other end. This was something they both insisted upon because they weren't sure how they'd react to each other's breath in those first picoseconds of the exchange, and he disabled his voicemail to make absolutely certain his receiver stopped ringing precisely on the number of rings she wanted it to.

As she preened herself in the big mirror directly opposite the room's king size bed, the husband and the lover stood in the bathroom, struggling to keep their voices down. The lover smiled a little too wide for the husband's liking. The husband had been in the room far too long for the lover to initiate anything; still fully clothed, the lover scratched at his chin and repeatedly motioned towards the door. There was too much of the phrase "my way" for the husband to feel comfortable leaving their conversation just yet, and there was too much of the phrase "but that isn't what we agreed" for the lover, who kept correcting the husband's pronoun usage. Anytime he used the word "we" he made sure to correct it to "she," which made him even more uncomfortable, and which made him even more resolute to keep doing it. Then there was the conversation about how he wasn't an employee. And then there was the exchange about how she's allergic. And then there was the taptap-taptap on the wall that neither of them made. And then there was the unmet glance when the husband finally pried himself through the doorjamb and she pretended to adjust the earpiece he clearly saw already wedged securely into her ear, the big towel she'd used after her shower still riding her chest.

The lover scrunched past the husband and unlatched the security chain on the big door with one hand, the DO NOT DISTURB card in the other. The husband stood and waited. The only sound in the room was trickling out of the television set, craned out on a metal arm from its veneered cabinet so she could see it at the incredibly precise angle she preferred. The lover flicked the laminated card with his long finger after he turned around in the little hallway, his eyebrows raised nearly to his hairline, eyes bouncing around the room.

She was the center of it all.

The door clicked behind him and the hallway opened up to reveal more click-closed doors, each marked with a doorplate embossed with thick numbers in Arial font and inset braille. He had to wait for the elevator to take him down the 60+ floors of glass and steel. He drummed his fingers against the contour of the phone in his pocket for a good three minutes before the torpedo-shaped car opened behind the brushed metal doors. He dragged his feet past the threshold and silently acknowledged the young Brazilians already in the car, blinged out and shaded up and speaking fast in a language he didn't understand. Their thick cologne stained the air he was breathing into his lungs. None of them returned his quick nod. He was invisible to them, sealed away in his own little curve of the torpedo, silently watching the numbers on a red diode fall away, the torpedo pausing only to let more bodies fill the thinning foot-space. In the lobby he slinked through the arms and legs of the crowd, and made his way to one of the $5 craps tables, where a miniature swarm of the same crowd he'd just made his way through/behind/over was buzzing around the elliptical pond of felt and clay chips. He fished one of the hundred dollar bills out of his wallet and placed it on the table, waiting patiently for the attendant to stack him with green, red and white chips. The husband took his time transposing them into the wooden grooves below his thumbs and fingers on the padded railing. He selected a single red chip and placed it on the Pass Line; he had enough money in his wallet to play like this for a week, if he had to. He took his phone out and placed it in the drink holder that was molded into the rail. An overhead camera spun and whirred silently in its large black

bubble and the husband's face fuzzed onto a monitor in an unmarked office somewhere on the colossal property. Someone pulled a joystick and fine-focused the camera to pull in and zoom on the cell phone; Another Someone scrunched in to take a close look, over the top of Someone's shoulder; Yet Another Someone squinted before pulling a phone handset out of its socket and speaking something to Still Another Someone, all the way on the other side of the property. The emulated ringtone kept ringing. She was the center of it all.

The door clicked behind him and the hallway tunneled into the back of the room, where she sat upright in the bed towel draped up top, the big fiesta-patterned comforter pooled down below. He waited long enough to hear the footsteps disappear outside the door and into the elevator lobby before he cracked the door open again to loop the card's cut-out notch around the door handle. He pulled the door tight, refastened the brass security chain and drummed his fingers on the doorjamb before turning back towards the room. He watched her for an uncomfortably long time; she never so much as exhaled in his direction. When she did move she fiddled with the towel or canted her chin towards the window, which was hidden beneath two enormous black-out curtains; the room dripped with yellow light. The lover slid back into the bathroom and slicked cologne on his neck with a rough swipe of his hands, cris-crossing the bigs of his fingers over his throat. He didn't meet his own gaze in the mirror as he did this. When he reappeared in the little hallway she was looking in his general direction but hadn't turned her head enough to make full eye contact. She flinched her shoulders and then didn't move them beyond the shallow elevating action caused by her lungs, the motion so largely out of her control. Because if she could stop all of her internal organs at once, perhaps she could actually enjoy this the way the husband swore to god she would, and to this she wasn't at all philosophically opposed. The lover slinked to the far corner of the bed, breaking her perpendicular gaze with the television. She did not meet his eyes, even when he bobbed his head around and mugged and made slapping sounds with his hands on his sides. He made a big arc between them with an outstretched arm and a fist unfurled, fingers cocked at perfect angles to one another as he scraped the air

for her attention. He lowered his arm and stood there without any pretense, his eyes scanning the small bowl at hair atop her head, her thin torso, matchstick legs and unpainted toenails. He felt she could tell. Just tell. The digitally-emulated telephone tone kept ringing. She was the center of it all.

Tie Goes to the Runner

In the bottom of the eighth in Orange Slices vs. Juice Boxes, Kenny's perfectly-timed relay met Grady at first base, a no-arc dart that hit him square on the tip of his nose. Grady's mom, who had been prepping the next two batters by straightening their hats and tucking in their shirts—the small boys wobbling around with their aluminum wands mostly parallel to their legs, the oblong chalk circle surrounding them like an enchantment or glyph or landing pad for a futuristic teleport apparatus or something—instantly dropped her clipboard and ran full stride, cottage-cheese asscheeks at full ripple in her workout pants, pushing past the pitcher's mound (Casey parked on it again, naturally) and arrived at 1st base a good two seconds before the bad news of pain had even registered in her son's skull.

It wasn't so much that he felt it, either, because he was already injured via two external stimuli: 1) Kenny's mitt umbrellaing over the purple canvas of his Juice Boxes cap, perpendicular to his bare hand extended full-fingered over his gaping mouth; 2) The overpowering stench of his mother's chamomile body lotion wafting over him, a dense suspension-fog of dirt and perfume.

Grady had been through this before and knew to fall the ground. His mother always preferred him to begin wailing before this action, but his timing had been thrown off by the simple fact that he had actually *made contact* with the ball. His temporary disbelief at blooping the ball (just through Casey's feet again, naturally) to where Kenny was standing, scratching his black Reebok cleats in the dirt while knocking two

knuckles against the hard plastic cup strapped against him underneath his tighty-whiteys, had given Kenny just enough time to drop his free hand from his groin and pick up the spongy synthetic leather ball between his outstretched middle and index fingers, cock his shoulder ("LIKE A GUN!!" — Coach Noah), step forward, and hurl the orb towards Grady, who had just arrived on the base to claim his stand-up single. Twenty years later, during his first flirtations with Eastern philosophy at a third-tier state university, he would write it all up as karma, but for this moment he knew to do just like his mother said.

Coach Noah was planted in the outfield wearing his matching Juice Boxes cap and Juice Boxes sweatshirt, amongst his Juice Boxes players. He stretched his arms above the mostly crabgrassed field and spread his fingers wide. Out here, where the Juice Boxes outfielders couldn't see the drama playing out beyond the pale dirt boundary between them and the base paths, Coach Noah's players took this motion as his signal for them to lock their ankles into their shoes right where they stood.

"READY, COACH!!!" The little voices dogpiled on top of another to form one big booming voice in this, his one measurable achievement after many many weeks of Saturday morning practices where, after usually showing up 20 minutes late (and, occasionally, more than a little hung over), Coach Noah drilled them to take their defensive positions and exclaim the prescribed exclamation. A brief, unfamiliar wash of shame overcame him.

"No, no. I just mean stay here."

Coach Noah trotted towards 1st base, where by this time Grady's mother had already forklifted her son out of the chalk-dirt sift and up into her arms, the lip of her workout pants straining to hide the fact that she was (still) wearing the fuschia thong her Secret Someone had given to her earlier in the week with the implicit instructions not to launder them until such time as they saw each other again later in the week. Grady's crying deepened in pitch when his mother slung him

into her chest. She adjusted his weight by jerking his body between her biceps and forearms.

"Is he okay?" Coach Noah acted legitimately concerned. "Is he hurt?" (Coach Noah only ever saw Grady on game days and had no idea the kid couldn't register pain because he was always asleep by the time Coach Noach drifted through his parents' house like a thin breeze, Grady's father slouched into his overstuffed leather recliner in the basement, TiVO shifting gears between *Law and Order Criminal Intent, House M.D.* and *Law and Order Special Victims Unit*). Grady's mother shot Coach Noah a quick glance as he stood in front of her, trying to come across as Genuinely For Real Concerned.

He repeated himself. She repeated her glance and then looked past him towards the chalk circle where the on-deckers were still spinny-dizzy, oblivious at first to all the Grady Drama, but before too long the bouncing orange mass with way too many arms and legs hanging off it at grotesque angles came clearer and clearer into focus, trundling directly at the ondeckers with enough speed and inertia that they couldn't have gotten out of its path even had they been paying attention from the first fat plop of the ball against Grady's nose. The clashing sound the chain-links made against their own fence posts sounded far more like the great smashing of a giant sheet of glass as the orange mass piled through, arms, legs, hats, cleats, aluminum and underwear all gnarled into the most twisted twist of metal, flesh and polyester that rivaled some of the worst waking images among the thin contingency of war vets sprinkled among the onlooking audience.

It was the untanglement of all the above that resulted in the net 65% loss in Grady's vision (over the coming weeks) and 100% unraveling of Coach Noah's years-on-thin-ice marriage (even faster, remarkably) to someone named Becky, Beth, Jen, Karen, or some other name dominated by a soft-E vowel. No one in attendance would ever understand why Grady's mother blamed the Grady Drama on Coach Noah at all, let alone so immediate and loud. Not even Grady's mother understood this.

But Coach Noah understood. He'd felt the same fever in the palms of his hands and tips of his fingers that now burned

on the peak of her nose and on the hills of her cheeks, the grip and contraction of her from the inside, the build and release and spill that was no more. Yeah, he understood it perfectly: her machine-gun texting, the nightstand still in tremble for hours after he'd holstered his phone on his hip and left for work; her swimming the parking lot in a constant, slow, awful circle; her gerunding her way into his daytime and his defiant resistance extending permanently now into her nighttime. It hadn't always been this way, of course, and Coach Noah was okay with it. Grady's mother, though? Not okay. Largely unfamiliar with okay. Pretty much never touched okay, and on the rare occasions she had, she totally pushed it away. The surge of drama a rollercoaster inside her, up and up and down and down. All the okay boys bored the hell out of her, never did even as much as smell her. And Coach Noah was so beyond the threshold of okay—his stature, his goatee, his construction-ravaged jeans—well, the spin of him left her wrung totally dry.

So when they called the game right then and there, and all the people slid-stepped back to their cars, and the fruit snacks and granola bars and rack of weird little bulbous water bottles remained absolutely still in the back of Coach Noah's pickup truck, not a single Juice Box scaled the big tires to hop over the side. Not a one. No one had to instruct them otherwise. Some things, they learned that day, are absolutely clear and require no sound.

Home

And then, one afternoon, they sat on a squat set of metal bleachers and figured it all out. Everything that had gone wrong and why, every disappointment and hurt feeling tallied, every argument and curt exchange in the entire history of their relationship scored and settled like an accountant's balance sheet or itemized list of charges on the monthly phone bill. All disputes settled, all whys and whatnots aired and retired. They looked one last time and breathed. The aluminum underneath them absolutely quiet as neither shifted weight even the slightest fraction.

"I hope it was worth it to you."

"It wasn't."

"So what happens next?"

"What do you mean?"

"Next. Where are you going after this?"

"Home."

Her eyes widened but she said nothing. She just stared.

"Home."

"And where is that now?"

"Nowhere. That's gone."

"No it's not."

She turned her wrist and unlatched her elbow from her side, so she could move both at the same time.

"Stop it."

The aluminum groaned one last time before his tinny footsteps pittered away.

Plausible Deniability: A Parable

(with Wendy Peterson)

He sat one spring afternoon munching on his lunch. He had to run an errand to Boise and he thought he'd stop by Del Taco and grab himself a Chicken Macho Combo, mostly because it was the only drive-thru burrito to use the word "macho." He looked at the bible on his dash and chuckled. The book was always within easy reach on his dashboard to pass time during the push-pull of his commute or for quick reference when the kid or the girlfriend or the other girlfriend were acting up. Except that day. That day required some explanation.

It was a winter day, if he remembered right, the first time all that torridness happened out in the hangar, out in that slutty little town just north of Bliss; his hometown; someone else's secretary. It was in the pickup, the big red Dodge, the one on permanent loan from his dead father, with the extended cab and short bed, where the seats lay back just enough to get a woman to arch her back in just the right position. He kept the book at the ready to pull out when he needed that extra special verse that he just couldn't quite think of to remind the ex-wife, the kid, the girlfriend, the other girlfriend, the new girlfriend, about how knowledgeable he was in the whole God and eternity thing. It never left the dash except to open and close, his fingers like fleshy butterflies, cradling the delicate cocoon of belief inside its shell. It never asked to go inside his little apartment and spend the night on the water-stained nightstand next to his bed, the one ringed and ringed by the same stubby glass over and over again, roaming and shifting on the buckling and peeling paint. Things that happened next to the

nightstand in that broken down old bed were not acceptable for it to be witness to. It would no doubt erupt in protest just stepping up to the threshold of his apartment, unable to comprehend all the things that it might see or overhear while marking the path of the sun on the nightstand. This bible, after all, started out as an innocent boy's way to fit in all those years ago, given to him by his grandfather before his death. The boy had asked specifically if he could have it, remembering seeing it every week tucked under the rigid old man's arm as he walked into the church, the one without the cross on the steeple.

But there is another book in this story. The one he borrowed from his ex-wife, the one she thought she still had in her grandmother's bible bag that was in her hope chest but wasn't because he had it. And make no mistake: he had to have it, as a totemic piece of her. So there it was, hidden, stowed in the center console of his pickup, that little piece of her that he carried with him everywhere he drove. He knew he wasn't supposed to have it but he couldn't help himself. Temptation took over. It was the bible given to her in high school by one of her friends who was trying to convert her. It really wasn't a bible per se; it was a rendition from the church she had attended as a young girl. The church that he had grown up in, and was, as he routinely professed to her before/during/after their marriage, "valedictorian" of.

And just as the one bible on the dash didn't go in the house to lay on the nightstand, the other bible didn't go into the center console; they were kept separate. The one wasn't allowed to see what the other was allowed to see, and neither were allowed to see what the nightstand was allowed to see. All of these things were kept separate from each other. Just as he had kept separate the wife and kid from the girlfriend, the girlfriend from the other girlfriend, the work from all of the above.

Later that night of the one day, he swore he had made sure to cover the dashboard bible up as he always did with whatever happened to be in the truck that day, usually work orders for the sleepy little lumber company he worked for. When all the

heavy breathing and moaning had stopped, though, he noticed the bible peeking out of the papers.

After it was all said by someone else's secretary to his then-wife, that one day cost him his marriage, cost him his family, cost him his home. And the bible watched it all and never saved any of it, and he wondered why. And it was the very fact he could still wonder at all which led him to realize that that one day had not cost him his faith. It was a for-real revelation. The new girlfriend, the one he allowed everyone to see and find out about but not ever give up, she was the one the bible didn't get covered up for.

Rephrase: she was the one the bible wanted to see.

Maybe the dashboard bible knew in hindsight that it couldn't save either one of the people that were in the truck on that one day. Which was something the console bible almost certainly also knew. And maybe since neither bible saved him, his marriage, his family, maybe it was their fault. After all, this was what his grandfather taught him about faith, in the stilted phrases the old man used: "pray on this," "sincere heart," "clear intent," and "truth of all things."

Fuck you, bible, he thought to himself, making sure not to say it out loud, where it would be harder—but not at all impossible—to deny he had said it in the first place. Maybe the bibles had been talking after all, he thought, and he instantly felt the satisfying warmth of conspiracy rush through his head, ways that maybe he could convince someone else it wasn't his fault. Maybe that would work, like it had so many times before. I mean, valedictorian of seminary had to be an important title, and you don't get called something like that for nothing.

When You're Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want

Have as many or as little children as you like now. There is no more worry about financial, social or ethical responsibility any more. You are dead. Your dead children were born dead and will remain dead for their rest of their dead lives. This isn't anything to be sad about in the ways that living parents and living children are sad, or are supposed to be sad, or whatever. Fuck them. They are living. And all living people really ever want to do is fuck anyway, you know, so let 'em have that, and let 'em deal with the consequences of all their fucking.

ENJOY THE *little things* IN LIFE FOR ONE DAY YOU MAY *look back* AND REALIZE THEY WERE THE *big things.*

Unsolicited Advice

When an unexpected gift arrives and it doesn't have your name affixed to it, you must resist scratching the impossible-to-reach itch dead center in your back that this event/ object will inspire. Try practicing this by preordering something small on Amazon.com, like a yet-to-be-released DVD or book or whatnot, and the longer a gap between when you order it and when you receive it the better, so as to maximize the reliability of your experiment; destroy immediately all proof that you ordered the item at all, and make it impossible for yourself to uncover later that you did so. Put Sig.Other's name on the package, and strengthen the test by electing to have it gift-wrapped, in relatively expensive wrapping paper with a high mirror finish and the largest red velvet bow the shipper/handler offers. The extra expense you incur here will totally be worth it, by the way, granted you can restrain yourself from opening the package when it arrives in the future, and granted, also, of course, that you haven't already bungled things past the point of no return, and if you think this (meaning: the bungling, not the opening) might even remotely be possible in your situation, it's probably best to order something that's really for yourself, so when you fail your test and open what you weren't supposed to open you will have a for-real Silver Lining Moment, or, at the very least, something new and shiny to cling to when you probably need it most.

The Promise

Roy grabbed Mary's keys and moved toward the screendoor.

"If you're really going, at least pick up some cigarettes on your way home!" she barked from the back of the house, her voice pushing through the dim hallway. Roy didn't turn around or slow a single step. Mary's daughter was already perched in the driver's seat of Mary's Thunderbird, hands at 10 and 2 on the leather-wrapped steering wheel which was at least two full shades of red darker than the rest of the behemoth's sticky interior, sweaty from the 100-degree temp.

The girl grinned wide at him as he picked his way through the broken concrete of an otherwise perfectly serviceable sidewalk, thick tufts of broadleaf weeds and crabgrass anchoring themselves into the gaps and cracks. The previous winter's cold had already done its damage, freezing every speck of precipitation the area had been lucky enough to get. And now it was the summer's turn, evaporating every drop of precipitation the area had been lucky enough to get. The piano-black paint on Mary's T-Bird had long given up to the inevitable creep of oxidation, which was long before Mary's T-Bird belonged to Mary, which was just about the time Roy belonged to Mary.

Roy creaked the car's big door open and sat down. He passed Mary's keys to the girl.

"Same as last time, Roy?"

Roy didn't answer her as he fumbled through the glove-box, unearthing a rumpled pack of cigarettes, shrinkwrap still intact. He slapped the box down, just to the left of a large

crack which ran all the way across the dash and had begun carving its way past the airvents above the push-key radio, the plastic gapped just far enough for the foam to show, an orangey sponge-crust drying and hardening with each successful rotation of the sun. He sighed loud enough that only he could hear.

"Yeah," he said without looking back at the girl.

"Same way, Roy?"

"Yeah." He made a mental mark on the dashboard, noting the exact position of the box. "Two right turns."

"Same *deal*, Roy?" The girl turned square and leaned towards him a little bit, more determined to turn his eyes towards hers. Roy sighed louder this time, making sure the girl could hear him pull the air full cycle, all the way from inside the car and past his long nosehairs and down into his charcoaling lungs and back above his yellowing chin.

"I 'spose," he said. Mary's daughter jingled the keys in the ignition, her jaw a full sentence of smile punctuated by shiny white teeth.

"But," Roy said, now turned perpendicular to the girl who had no interest in matching his eyeline to hers. "Them smokes move even a creep towards that crack, you stop. And I drive. And you walk."

Mary's daughter had heard this instruction set before. Had walked before, too. Keep the car moving straight but slow to the stop sign, and turn sharp but slow through the right-hand turn that took them past and away from Mary's house on 6th Ave E, straight but slow through the next two intersections, and turn sharp but slow one more time, straight but slow a final blow, to The Beacon Pub + Grill where Mary bought cigarettes a pack at a time because she was always two stogies away from completely cold-turkey. If the girl successfully navigated the course without sending the pack flying across the dash of Mary's T-Bird, Roy drove her to Some Boy's house on 8th Ave W, where the girl was allowed a five minute porchstop visit. Mary didn't know about the Some Boy part; Roy figured he was tempting fate enough as it was just

teaching the girl how to drive. And the girl, well, unfortunately for Roy, the girl was as smart they come. Moreso, even.

Mary's daughter lit the engine up with a big turn of her thumb and index finger and the car shook awake, grumbling and yawning until settling into a low-rumbling idle. The red leather seats massaged their inhabitants, and the coardboard pine tree vibrated below the neck of the yardstick-long rearview mirror, the boxy aftermarket kind inset with mirrored squares pitched at awkward angles, promising a panoramic view of whatever the driver was constantly leaving behind (but always failing to deliver on said promise). The girl pushed her flip-flop into the brake pedal and paused for a second to check her reflection in one of the mirrored squares. She pouted her lipstick-less lips and flashed her big chocolate eyes back at herself. Roy didn't pretend that she was merely checking her 6.

"Really look before you put this bitch in gear," he growled. The girl ignored him but went through the motion anyway, checking the framing of her bangs she'd spent the better part of 45 minutes brushing and spraying with Mary's giant can of Aqua-Net. Roy watched her glance back up at the rearview mirror; he couldn't be sure she had actually looked but she'd played the part well enough. When she gripped the steering column's shifter, he threw his head back over his seat anyway.

"Clear."

The car jerked with a fat, forward motion, its nose opening into the little street. The girl kept her vinyl sandal firm against the brake pedal and shot a full-on look to the box on the dash. It hadn't moved.

"Eyes on *the road,"* Roy said. Mary's daughter rolled her eyes up the dashboard and onto the windshield. She kept her hand on the shifter and slowly raised the arch of her foot up and off the brake. Mary's T-Bird crept forward as its transmission slowly turned the back wheels no longer held tight against their rusty discs. When she touched the thinner, longer gas pedal with the same foot, the engine surged and she instinctively brought the other sandal down where the previous

one had just been not even a full second prior. The translucent red needle sealed behind the thick plastic of the tachometer throbbed as the engine revved, yet the car was no longer moving.

“Yeh can’t hold both pedals down,” Roy said. “Let off the brake.”

The girl eased her foot back from the gas pedal and the tach needle drooped. She hadn’t even thought about it.

“I said *brake.”*

“I *know!”* Blood rushed into the round cheeks of her round face on her round head. She didn’t look up into the mirrored squares to check, either. She could feel it, warm under her skin. Roy reached his arm towards the steering wheel, fingers spread into a web as he aimed them for the the dull knob on the shifter.

“I’ve *got it*, Roy!” She stared hard into his face and clenched her hand tight around the knob, her arm locked where it latched at the elbow. Roy drew his hand back into his chest and met her eyes. She wasn’t even remotely fucking around.

There are three accounts of what happened the rest of the afternoon, but only one of them made it back to Mary. The one that didn’t mention Some Boy on 8th Ave W. This was the same one Roy narrated to Mary when he arrived back at the house sans Mary’s daughter, the frame of Mary’s T-Bird bent where the girl had cut the corner onto 2nd Ave N too sharp and thundered over an ornamental lava rock decorating the empty parking lot of an insurance agency. This is the one where the girl was hysterically upset and terrified about Mary’s reaction and had begged Roy to deposit her at a friend’s house and that she would return to Mary’s house after Roy explained what happened because the girl needed to calm down first. This is the official account, and its facts are uncontested.

The second account of what happened the rest of the afternoon is the one Mary’s daughter’s friend told Mary’s daughter’s friend’s father, the one which included all of the facts of the official account but adds the slight bend that

Mary's daughter needed a lift over to 8th Ave W because that's where the car was going to be towed and then Mary's daughter would snag a ride home with Roy in the flatbed, or something like that, because Mary's daughter's friend's father neither paid much attention nor cared, which, of course, was the entire reason Mary's daughter cajoled her friend to cajole her father in the first place. This is the same account that wrankled Mary's daughter's friend's face because (A) she knew it wasn't true and (B) Mary's daughter absolutely bajillion percent protested her friend even so much as thinking she would tag along.

The third account of what happened the rest of that afternoon is the one which matches pretty closely to the plan Mary's daughter had all along, the one where she took the corner at 2nd Ave N too fast on purpose and with great aim.

This is the one where her friend's father pulled away with her friend still in the back seat because Mary's daughter wouldn't even let her out of the car to take the seat she had just vacated in the white Subaru, afraid that if she so much as cracked that back door, her friend would spring free like an excited puppy and the girl would never get her back into the car.

This is the one where the girl resumed crying as soon as the Subaru made the right turn onto 3rd St, crying even harder than she had in front of Roy after bricking the car to a stop there in the furthest full lane of 2nd Ave N, the pack of cigarettes having sailed all the way into the back bench seat of Mary's T-Bird—a perfect shot, really, even better than the one's she'd practiced in her mind dozens of times before drifting off to sleep in Mary's house.

This is the one when she pounded the lead door knocker on that monstrous house on 8th Ave W lined by equally monstrous hedges, the girl's sandals sticky on the painted porchboards, her eyes flooding, cheeks burning when the screen door snapped behind her and she stood inside. This is the one where Some Boy pulled her into him with his thin arms, the hallway shrinking with his breathing, and the buddump-buddump-buddump-buddump under her ear, the cartilage pressed all the

way into his T-shirt, the outside world muffling and fuzzing as she pressed hard into him, trying to ignore the datastream pouring into her brain from the other ear until Some Boy tipped her temple towards him and cupped the open ear with his hand, sending her into a stereophonic blur of warmth interrupted only by the voice imploring her to *"Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh."*

This is the one where the girl led their hand-holding processional up the large wood staircase, a tiny parade of flip-flops and bare feet up into the empty room in which Some Boy slept and dreamt of Mary's daughter, the empty room in the empty house filled with their meager shuffling even though there was no need for quiet, because this was all part of It, and the girl was all the way inside now, sitting him on the foot of his own bed, closing the door they'd just passed through, the grainy floors groaning softly under her steps as she kicked off her sandals—1—2—and they slapped against the mopboards.

This is the one where Some Boy sat absolutely still, shushed by the girl's index finger balanced perpendicular against her lips, the girl's sign language echoing Some Boy's words from the hallway now a full story below them, her other index finger noodling her thin poplin shirt apart, the skin of her neck fading from the summer's bronze, the gradient bleeding into the same shade of notebook paper Some Boy used for scribbling endearments and affections to her, her belly a puff of cotton.

This is the one starring Some Boy inching towards her when she dropped her arms, scooching his knees forward with thin bursts from his calves until the tips of his toes discovered her shirt on the small creep of floor between them.

This is the one playing out in her mind, an opera.

This is the one of no turning back. This is the one.

The only.

We Always Just Say Catastrophic

I didn't come here with her, nevertheless she is slow-dancing me above a gymnasium floor freshly sealed with acetane two days ago and definitely still reeking of it. Bon Jovi's power ballad "Never Say Goodbye" is thundering its way through the other couples here on the floor before shattering against the bleachers where other color-coordinated pairs of people are either arguing or not trying hard enough to conceal their clumsy groping of one another. There are also a few singles sprinkled amongst them, but the loners mostly sit in the front rows of the bleachers, where the couples have dibs on the higher planks, higher and further back at nearly a 45 degree angle overhead. By the time the sound waves get here, they are thin, watery, and a bit shrill. This, despite the fact that the Z-103 sound crew (comprised of only one dude, a lone radio DJ who calls himself Logan Tusow (aged 46) and has arguably the area code's thinnest beard (b/w matching moustache that doesn't touch) and rents to himself his rent-to-own PA system on Friday nights (divorced three times, currently engaged, no children) to all the junior high schools) has the bass jacked up so high that the large framed photos of basketballers in short-shorts are rattling against the brick wall to which they (the photos—not the basketballers nor their short-shorts) are affixed, as are the shoegazers underneath who don't feel like bleaching it, who instead park themselves at L-shaped angles against the walls surrounding the entire area, so from way up above (assuming you could actually *get* above, that is), if you were to look through the roof as if it weren't actually there

(another fairly large assumption, obviously) and stare down, it would almost seem like the borders of this room are constantly infected with carpenter ants. Occasionally glances rise up to make sure the photos buzzing overhead aren't ready to crash down on them when they aren't looking (which is never) or in some way expecting it (ditto). Because that would just be their luck, they think, and it would confirm their reticence to come in the first place, so, in a sense, there are a handful actually wishing for it to happen, so they could later tell their respective whomevers (from the dreamscape fog of a hospital scene played out over and over again in their minds bent by watching far too many Hollywood sap films and mid-afternoon soap operas) I TOLD YOU SO, and soak deep down into their self-deprecation. But for the majority of them (and, quite likely, really, ALL of them, even the ones praying for the catastrophe from above that will never come), the longing to be part of the central scene on the dance floor—to be only of of the legs of those stiff compasses lumbering and spinning around one another—well, that longing simply overwhelms them.

Case In Point: Lucy Walker, cajoled into coming by her friends Monica and Shawneen, who purposely didn't tell Lucy they were meeting Terry and Tracy Franks here, and who, upon seeing aforementioned Franks Brothers, squealed in complete syncopation as if they had rehearsed the precise tone and octave (they had) for the last two weekend sleepovers at Monica's house (these, too, Lucy had not been informed about nor invited to, for now-obvious reasons).

Case In Point: Graham Nelson, whose mom begged (and ultimately bribed) him to come tonight for the official reason that all his friends from this new school would be here (all zero of them) and he wouldn't want to regret not going to this some 20 years later, but for the unofficial reason that Graham's mom was meeting Graham's dad for a roleplay session at the Purple Sage Motel just down Kimberly Road, and she couldn't miss her chance (again) to play Daddy Warbucks in their Little Orphan Annie Routine.

Case In Point: Cindy Barker, who didn't go home after school today, hiding in the shower room until the Sadie Hawkins

affair tonight started taking shape with its folding tables screeching across the gym floor and the early-arrivers arrived early sporting their identically-paired/colored/sized/stretched/embroidered Izod polos; Cindy Barker, who took Angee Feltman's threats all week to "beat" her "ass" as true and unalterable fact; Cindy Barker, who had blown the points curve for all the pre-algebra classes all trimester, five straight tests and six pop quizzes in a row.

Case In Point: Angee Feltman, who is totally unaware of Cindy Barker's breath, scent or smell here along the wall, but even if she were, the plain truth of the matter is that Angee wouldn't make good on those earlier promises to "beat" any portion of "ass" because she is here waiting for Val Talaander and Katrina Ailes to show up. And they aren't going to. And Angee hasn't started to realize this just yet, so she is perpendicular to the wall, just left of the double metal doors propped open-open with matching metal folding chairs, her toe touching the same wall where Lucy, Graham and Cindy currently reside, Angee pretending that she is only temporary here despite the fact she isn't rocking an Izod, the embarrassing truth still waiting to reveal itself while she queues for Val and Katrina all evening, because what it all really boils down to is everyone here is just killing time until their parents roll into the parking lot at 9:30 to corral them all like farm animals. It just seems that some of them—the wallflowers especially—are more aware of this fact than the others.

I am aware of this only because as she continues spinning me around (she always leads) in her half-circle steps, the scene on the wall refreshes in my view every five seconds, and virtually without exception the figures and faces remain motionless and changeless, a fleshy mural interrupted only by the shift of an arm or the deep heave of a chest when its owner takes in a big breath to immediately push the air out, thin mouths with lips gapped into half-sneers as the pale rush of popcorn breath floods the room. See, she is left-handed—more like left-bodied—and is out and out militaristic about exercising her southpaw tendencies (see above). She not only writes left, bats left, throws left, but leads-on-the-dancefloor left (she always

leads), so our combined orbit is always counter-clockwise, and about every 10th step I fumble my own left foot either too near inside or too far outside the narrow fulcrum we've created between our feet to pivot around, breaking the nervous rhythm nearly every time I do this. She shifts her leading arm (she always leads) to compensate for the break, to wit I respond with my own compensation with my trailing arm, so the total effect is something like an airplane's propeller sputtering and wobbling immediately after ignition. And she always notices the sputterings, keeps mental count of them for each slow song, tabulating them at the end of the evening into some karmic algebra that will help her formulate her next move in our 36-minute old relationship which started beyond the double metal doors, taking me largely by surprise.

Like I said, I didn't come here with her. Didn't make plans to meet her by the pay phones or outside the bathroom. Didn't write her a legal paper note in purple ink to slide between the chevron slits of her locker. Didn't meet up with her in the lunch line to plan the whole evening out, in between the lunch ladies piling our molded brown trays with various shapes and thicknesses and smells of carbohydrates and fat.

I for reals and truly just didn't.

I did, however, do all of those things with Natalie Boxnard, whose name does an adequate job of describing her, moreso really than I could do or want to. Natalie is pretty much the girl version of me, especially in the fact that she's hopelessly right-handed, passive-passive aggressive, and considers any Friday night exciting in as much as it contains viewing either of the Patrick Swayze classics (namely, *Dirty Dancing* and *Point Break*) on videocassette. These are the evenings of her clad in her United Colors of Pajamaton, her father's athletic socks scrunched down on her ankles, quite possibly the world's largest bowl of unsalted/unbuttered popcorn strategically positioned on the couch between us to ensure it totally kills any potential for something even faintly resembling a romantic mood (Natalie's flood insurance-selling father has used this tactic for a long long time, having perfected his libido-crippling concoctions on Natalie's three older sisters; suffice to say, Mr. Boxnard knows his stuff when

it comes to flatlining his daughters' emerging sexual proclivities, and most definitely keeps better tabs on teen hormonal swings and the flavor-of-the-week androgynes adorning the covers of Tiger Beat, 16, etc. etc. etc. (bold pastel-colored blocks of lettering floating over naturally curly hair: "Justin Dreams of You!", "Inside Kirk's Dressing Room!", "Taylor-Joey-Taylor Throws The Best Pool Party EVER!", etc. etc. etc.) than he (Mr. Boxnard) does when it comes to whatever particulars flood insurance salesmen are supposed to keep track of (if any). I know the popcorn routine far too well, and have endured it far too many times than is reasonable for a completely harmless boy like myself).

The very fact I did this as long as I did reveals this simple, serious truth: girls completely own me.

Which made what happened 36 minutes ago fairly effortless, really, for her, because despite the fact Natalie and I had been Going Together for 3 months and 11 days, Natalie and I are quite easily the two most passive people in this room (note: the KMart brand polos we're wearing, that stale unsalted/unbuttered shade of white) and our relationship is way more one of acquiescence than attraction. I have never thought Natalie is pretty. Far from it, actually. Her mouth is barbed with dental braces; she wears cat-eyed, pink-framed eyeglasses with thick, oblong lenses to correct what apparently is one of the longest ongoing cases of early onset astigmatism her opthamologist Dr. Schiel has ever seen; despite having just turned 14, she is already cursed with her mother's gourd-shaped figure (more like a bowling pin come to think of it), her widening hips showing little sign that they will ever swing back in a graceful S-pattern; her short hair is the color of Cheerios left too long in the morning's breakfast bowl, a bloated yellow fading into a more bloated yellow fading into an even more bloated yellow, like the hair of airline stewardesses who simply wait too long to do something else with their lives and so will pretty much always be thought of as airline stewardesses who have their runs down so pat they can literally do their eye makeup in their sleep (and most mornings, it's near impossible to tell); Natalie's eyelashes are so colorless as to appear clear upon first glance, their lack of

hue only magnified by the huge honkin oblong lenses held perpendicular in front of them, the blink of her eye like a fly skittering quickly along the bottom of a wet drinking glass as its user tips the last drops of whatever into his/her mouth; and just past the lashes are vacant spheres of pale blue, irises constantly flared wide open, thin trickles of red blood vessels crisscrossing each other with no particular place to go.

And I have never thought Natalie is smart. Because if she is, she never would have dated me in the first place. Natalie and I started as payback for how Mindy Etters returned her half of the sterling silver Mizpah necklace when we broke up for the third time six months ago. Mindy took the right half and I took the left half and we swore to wear them even in the shower. Natalie has never seen it, but she knows I still have a green spot on my chest left from the chemical reaction. Natalie and Mindy aren't currently best-best friends, but they were for a long time, and they will be again before the night's over. Mindy has ruby-tinted contacts which she trades out for tangerine-tinted ones which she trades out for canary-tinted ones which she trades out for shamrock-tinted ones which she trades out for cornflower-tinted ones which she trades out for fuschia-tinted ones. My dating Natalie was Jake's idea. Jake and I are currently best friends, and have been for a long time, but we won't be forever. Mindy had Jake give me her half of the Mizpah, tucked inside a note she wrote on lined paper with the jags still hanging from where the spiral binding bit down, her vowels as big loops in blue ink. I don't know whose idea that was. One thing I do know for certain: neither Mindy nor Jake are here tonight.

And in about 13 more minutes, Natalie won't be either. Her mother is already en route, having received word of it all, the news already engorged by a game of telephone, the news of the shit she just pulled (she always leads) 36 minutes ago billowing with enough despaired distortion from each successive retelling of aforementioned word to get Natalie's mother to remove her avocado green dishwashing gloves, pluck the communal keys to the mudstained Honda Accord off the pegboard, heave the vehicle into the street after a thick grind into reverse, and commence rescue operations inside her

daughter's chest cavity. It's important to note that Natalie did not place the originating call into her parents' keyhole-shaped neighborhood from the thin trio of pay-phones outside, nor did she relay, follow-up, prank, phreak, hack, jive, cajole, or in any possible way rebroadcast the sad sad news; furthermore, it is largely impossible to monitor the total number of pulls she will take from the Ipratropium Bromide inhaler vised between her index finger and thumb and scraping back and forth against her dental work during her mother's crucial ETA, the seconds ticking silently away below the Accord's digital speedometer, because Natalie's new best-best friend Erline Sadler has never seen anything like this up close before, and certainly doesn't know the drill when it comes to slowing Natalie down with her pulls, and—besides—is too busy plunking one quarter dollar after another after another into the three coin receptacles as fast as her fingers can handle.

At least that's what Katrina Ailes' report says from the hallway where she can't really see what's happening too much past the steel-plated firedoors, and she's pretty much considered a pathologic liar despite being confused all the time for her twin sister Katherine, who everyone always believes for no good reason whatsoever. But more than that, just about everyone feels the same contempt for Natalie that I do, so the hard brutal truth is that pretty much the only one who might be even remotely interested in Katrina's report is right here in front of me (she always leads). And this isn't the first time she has hijacked me like this, so I would be lying if I said that I am surprised right now. In fact, pretty much the last thing I am right now is surprised.

She is not looking towards the hallway or the double metal doors framing it or the chairs propping them open or the bleachers or the short-shorts or the floor. Because when she stepped between Natalie and I during Logan Tusow's tinny spin of Sheriff's "When I'm With You" 36 minutes ago, she has not looked anywhere but directly into my eyes and she simply will not stop.

And this is the part I can't see coming. And the truth is I simply don't want her to stop.

Tears are skimming the mascara from her big chocolate eyes, pooling and draining into the creases of her lipstick-less mouth frequently enough to probably say she has been crying this entire time, but only in the most technical sense of the word; the thick cotton of her crayon-purple Izod splotched and spattered with hollow, inky rings in the drop zones below the thin rivers of black staining her cheeks.

I am unlocking my hands from the small of her back and raising them to her face, my thumbs extended. We are stopping our feet in the last place where they stepped, spaced apart so we both have our balance. She is blocking my hands at my wrists, and her gaze burns through my optic nerves. Logan Tusow is mumbling into his rent-to-own PA system, and all the bleacher bums and wall warriors are already past the firedoors, spilling into the parking lot. The fluorescent lights in the ceiling are stumbling awake. We are swaying; she is digging her little fingernails into my wrists; I am following; we are stopping. Stopping.

She pulls her gaze away to bury her face into my shoulder. My shirt bruises instantly there, mascara and navy eye shadow.

This is how we've said it, Jon Bon Jovi be damned.

Esmerelda
(with Bonnie Dodge)

At first a silence looking skyward: three Ponderosa pine and Douglas fir. Clouds bruised purple and gray float eastward, the sharp smell of pine perforating the sky. The air, the world around you. The aspen flutter dainty dances in the freeze following the morning rain. Soon a fire will throw flames high into the air like breathing dragons and we will roast our marshmallows and toast our hot dogs and drink our wine. And nearby you'll hear the South Fork boiling over in its bed of smooth stones, the ones spat out by that wicked machine that came scraping through, looking for the real thing but finding only fool's good, its skeleton stuck in the sandbar and quiet for nearly a century now. Listen. It still grumbles about the errand, the impossibility of its single purpose, like a lung refusing to inflate, leaving the body to gasp and heave and panic for any sign of attention.

But this isn't that. This is entirely fueled from within, like the trees swaying along the banks like a church congregation: slow and electric. Sometimes when you're walking over the river rock, feet slipping on the polished stone, you will find a button, a pin, a metal can, some hapless, hungry miner left behind or the broken shoe discarded like the stones in his search for glory. If you listen you can hear all their banter in the Abbot Ghost Town. Here is where they slept—a rusted wire bedspring, a coil of wire. They called this place Esmerelda, setting their machinery loose upon the valley, gobbling rock, tree, river.

That was in the daytime, and that was what they called work, and that was what they were paid for, and that was why

they came in the first place. But in the night-time, with the sky pitch black and punctured with little white dots like a million pin-hole cameras, the oil and smoke and growl all quietly quiet, the men muddied and cut and bruised, their work finished and their loved ones always far far away, at night their minds couldn't drown out the noise of their dreams, the aches and muscle memories of their lovers and children. At night—and this was every night—they had to convince themselves it was all worth it, and this was something required of them, and this is why some of them returned to find their families not families anymore. And yet they came back, spring after spring, leaving late in the fall sleep-deprived and horny and unable to calm themselves in the civil ways you and I can.

But here's the secret: they didn't return for the fool's gold, or the smoke, the bars or the whores. They returned in search of their spirits. Because that's what they found under the rock, the sand of the river, the echo of the wind in the trees. A force there is no name for. No maria. No mother or father. When they are still it creeps into their bedrolls and keeps them company on those sleepless nights when looking at the inky river they wonder why they can't stay away. They taste it in their food along with the fine grit and charred meat. They taste it in the water, cold and sweet. They breathe in the air at dusk and think there is always another stretch of the river to dredge, another day to do it in, and another night to contemplate a routine that if contemplated too much will lead its contemplator to do little else but dream mediocre dreams into compromises, and we all know there's no need to venture past our own doorsteps—let alone tackle the force of a young river—if all we ultimately do is settle on settling and dreaming the dreams others have told us to dream. And that is why I brought you here. Do you see?

Or, rather, can you feel it there, like a feather—a tickle just short of a laugh but more than a whisper? Can you see it, the way the sun splits the sky into a rainbow of color, a dewdrop on the head of a pin? The black squirrel chatters and we laugh thinking he is scolding us away from his dinner. What he is really saying is: Beware. Be careful of what you wish for because you can certainly find it here.

Always Driven to the End

This is the speed limit marked not out of ceremony but as a real and legit warning.

This is the skin of the asphalt. It does not forgive but it has no memory and thus does not forget.

This is the curve of her. Look closely now.

This is where they engraved his poem into the stone for her. It's the one he wrote as a prayer because he was too broken to say anything else that might matter. It's for this reason religion even exists: the beautiful lie.

This is the wind constantly blowing and it does not follow your rules or expectations, so just stop it.

This is the way her childhood friends are trying to remember. But they are incapable of knowing the past because they are persistently trapped in their own present tenses, just like everyone, and especially so many years later where memories are manufactured for the occasion. See how they are holding hands and embracing and breathing deep. That, too, will go away and become something else.

This is the dress she was wearing before she wasn't wearing it. Pay attention, please. This is important.

This is a picture of her. And another. And another. And another. She was loved by exactly four people and she had a bigger family than that.

This is her favorite cassette tape. She put the music on it herself and at least half the songs make references to things

you'd probably just assume about her anyway. But that's because you're a hypocrite. Shame on you.

This is her report card from 2nd grade, when she was a G & T kid and read at a 10th grade level and could work algebra and would have had perfect attendance if her father would have just let well enough alone.

This is where you park your car if you want to visit her. In the periphery you will see horses and hear the pasture sprinklers click-clack-clicking. It's hard to know how she'd really feel about this, by the way. You should at least consider that before you show up unannounced. And make sure to watch where you're walking.

This is regret and shame, is what it's supposed to feel like. Maybe you understand. Maybe you don't.

This is a rumor about her. And another. And another. And another. They all outlived her. That's the essence of what we mean when we say mean.

This is something she wrote for you but never sent it.

This is the very last thing she heard. Or so someone else said. Or maybe it was this thing. Or that. Or another someone else. It may not matter, but she definitely heard something.

This is something she *did* write and *did* send, but it wasn't for you. How on earth did *you* get it?

This is the other dress she was wearing, the one she gave to the friend the day the friend got married. It was complicated, to say the least.

This is the end. It always was.

When You're Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want

Read your James Joyce and your Henry James and your James Franco and your James Brown. Anyone with the given or surname James. James Frey. Yes, even him. Maybe especially him. More than anyone, you should most definitely be reading James Frey. Right now. Drop everything. Because the veracity of things and people and events and memory is all behind you now. Don't pass up this opportunity your recent death affords you in this regard. Smile, you mope, you miserable bastard.

Life* ISN'T ABOUT WAITING FOR THE STORM TO PASS… IT'S ABOUT LEARNING TO *dance in the rain.

Unsolicited Advice

Try your absolute hardest not to be swayed or comforted when Sig.Other says It's Not A Competition. Because it is. And when this is said, keep in mind Sig.Other has already processed and maneuvered the thoughts around the obvious. That's how Sig.Other ultimately feels confident saying something like this in the first place, don't you know.

a) Quick-hits for how to handle the sometimes painfully obvious truth that it *is* a competition:

—Humor is your ally, as is clever/timely character assassination. Use both.

—Update your resume and/or curriculum vitae.

—Don't update your resume and/or curriculum vitae.

—Chrome up. Obviously for worst-case scenarios, but nonetheless effective. As of writing, handguns are still legal to own in the U.S. If you aren't a convicted felon or mentally incapacitated. In the case that you live in another country, are in The Cut already, or are under the direct daily supervision of a clinical psychologist, you have no business reading this anyway.

b) If you have been convinced beyond any doubt that it really, truly and could never be a competition, you simply need to wait. Before too long a situation will present itself to corrode your confidence on the matter, usually involving a cellular phone transmission of some kind. It's important not to go looking for this and create/force a situation that will almost certainly result in a conversation/confrontation that will operatively have absolutely nothing to do with the larger,

underlying issue(s) which provoked/created it, and this is always a conversation/confrontation that you will certainly lose.

Careless Whisper

It really was just as simple as the woman needed redeemed in her own mind, her well of willful ignorance run dry and the neighborhood crammed full with the wreckage of her turning a blind eye for far too long. She realized this as she mowed her own lawn freshly staked with a realtor's FOR SALE sign, as she checked her own dipstick and saw the oil line caked over in a rusty flaky crust of something almost animalistic, as she streaked the glass in the screendoor over and over again in the July heat, her papertowel just dirty enough and the surface just hot enough to ensure it could never come clean. And heaven knows she wasn't about to break off a clean new piece from the Brawny roll her mother had given her just this morning, because god forbid she use something actually designed to be used.

The teenage boy across the street had his bedroom window cracked open just enough for her to hear him practicing on the dinged-up saxophone her father had given the boy a couple of years ago as a sort of thank you for assisting with the block's garage sale. That one Memorial Day weekend, when the boy was just a toddler, the boy's father played Wham's "Careless Whisper" so much the steamy notes grafted themselves onto the soft flesh of his inner ear, so deep the boy honestly felt the song was being channeled to him by God.

And by God this was the one neighborhood of all neighborhoods where neighbors still believed in God, the stake center and grade school and high school all within easy walking distance, not to mention a Kiwanis-funded public park only a 100 yards away from her front step (105 away from her

parents') named after a lead-crystal bowl of Christmas-colored ribbon candy.

As the notes squeezed through the little squares of the screen meshing of his bedroom window, she began humming the melody without even thinking or having to think about thinking. The boy's father used to play the song on his boombox over the sound of him and her taking deep breaths together, back before there even was a boy or a garage sale, and but also *after* there was a boy and a boy's mother and a garage sale, but that's a story for another time.

The story for this time begins with a fight. The real kind, at a real bar. Not with fists but with words. How he doesn't deserve her how she doesn't deserve this how she is beautiful how he is abusive how she is caring how he is selfish. Same she, different he. How she is. How he is. The chorus and refrain lines identical, and these are them: I'm Not Afraid Of You. The car ride home was only a matter of blocks but it took years, their perpendicular stares crossing each other again and again, scissoring the silence into little scraps that heaped onto the floorboards and spilled out onto the driveway when she cracked the passenger door open and its rusted hinges screamed out into the dim neighborhood. The boy's dog barked a two-noted response before the boy's father barked his own, and the night's thick shush instantly rehealed. They carried their stares inside and the boy's father remained. Longer than he should have.

That brings us to the middle of the story, and there isn't much here that can't be derived from all that precedes this very sentence. What happened in the middle was special but not unique. This was especially true for the woman, and much less so for the boy's father. That's why the middle wasn't the end, and why middles are never ends. Why they are big, fat middles.

The end of the story also begins with a fight, another real fight, but not a bar fight and not a driveway fight and not an inside fight and not an outside fight. An under fight in the early morning hours, after the texts and phone calls trickled to a stop and didn't restart again, her windows shut and locked

against the curve-ball breeze swirling outside in small circles, every knife, fork and spoon accounted for in a rental truck now hundreds of miles away. Guilty feet. Got no rhythm. A fight under the surfaces of their skin, beyond and beneath the places they were able to reach each other.

Ransom

Here is my list of demands.

Pay careful attention because I will not repeat myself.

I've been trained to want things, and not only things like physical things but things like abstract things.

I am supposed to covet these things.

Have you ever noticed how close the words "cover" and "covet" are?

Luckily, I've owned a fat, leather-tooled dictionary since I was six years old, so I know the difference between the two.

Where's your dictionary?

Get it out now.

I'm not joking around here.

We're going to do this like they do in that Mel Gibson film, by the way.

You're going to come to a point where you refuse to pay me.

You're going to come to a point where you yell at the top of your voice.

Notice I didn't say "lungs," I said "voice."

You were expecting me to say "voice," weren't you?

If you don't know the difference between your lungs and your voice, you are truly fucked here.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, so let me articulate what I want first.

I want you to pretend that you're holding a letter from someone you love.

I want you to think something nice about that someone.

Like a kiss.

Like a pinky ring.

Like a mole on a big toe without any hair growing out of it.

I want you to want to finish reading the letter you're holding, so please try to concentrate.

This is important.

I want you to tell that someone something for me.

I want you to tell that someone you won't be taking their phone calls.

I want you to tell that someone you will only communicate with them through notes on a napkin the next time the two of you have lunch.

I want you to tell that someone you can no longer be a hostage.

So that's the first thing.

I know you're disappointed that this is continuing, but if there was only the one thing, this wouldn't be called a "list of demands," would it?

Stop it.

Right now.

I want you to know that this won't last forever.

Everything else, on the other hand, will.

I want you to consider what drove Verlaine to publish Rimbaud's poems.

The ones his mother and sister begged him not to publish.

Think long and hard about that.

I want you to consider what drove Poe to trash his own novel, calling it his "silly little book," refusing to pay it any attention

or tuck it in at night.

Spend as much time as you like on that one.

I want you to consider why Alisha Klass tattooed Seymore Butts' name above her ass before she ever met him.

Now consider how that name later transformed into a dolphin.

If you're not already googling Klass, don't bother. The moment has passed.

I want you to tell that someone something else for me.

I want you to tell that someone there is no such thing as freedom of conscience.

Make sure you put as much stress on the first syllable in "conscience" as you possibly can.

Come on, don't be like that now.

We're just about to get to the good part.

I want you to tell that someone there is neither a thing called "freedom" nor "conscience" that is worth fighting for.

Scratch that.

I want you to tell that someone there is neither a thing called "freedom" nor "conscience" that is worth dying for.

Because having a conscience is predicated on having a choice.

Because having a choice is predicated on being free.

And I don't mean "free" the way Amy Goodman and Rush Limbaugh mean it.

And I *certainly* don't mean "free" the way that someone you thought about earlier means it.

I mean "free" the way Gil Sorrentino means it when he says that plots are absurd.

I mean "free" the way Bill Burroughs means it when he implores us to raid the prisonhouse of language.

I mean "free" the way Ted Adorno means it when he argues art is a social antithesis to the very society which produced it.

It just kills me having to spell this out for you, by the way.

Let me back up a second.

What did you think I meant by “free” in the first place?

Perhaps we’re getting ahead of ourselves here.

Perhaps we’re trying way too hard to get to the end of this.

I can hear you sighing.

Fine.

Just fine.

Go on now.

Go ahead.

Before I change my mind.

Again.

Choose the Right

With her gourd-shaped body, wire-wrapped mouth, and equally sensually-problematic attitude to match, she was a classic middle child with the curse of an older, prettier, sexually active sister a full four years ahead of her, and the blessing of a younger, awkward and wholly unintelligent brother plodding five years behind. She was officially reticent but in reality curious, with a good helping of subtle deviousness that comes standard being raised in a Mormon family, bred in mind and soul not to give audience to the body's cravings until someone winks the formal wink in her sealing ceremony.

Her panties were always cut high on the hip, tucked inside elastic-waisted dancing sweats, black and crinkled. On purpose. Her mother liked these particular sweatpants because she thought they obfuscated her daughter's figure with their zigzags and bunchings of spandex, that somehow all that designed noise would disrupt the big lines and slow curves of her.

But the mother was wrong about that, just like she was wrong about a great deal of other things when it came to dressing and undressing the human body. Things like when it's appropriate to wear a T-shirt to bed instead of a nightgown, and things like when/if said T-shirt should be removed even for the few minutes it always ended up strangling her around the neck and chafing her chest when her husband came calling for her monthly tithing. Like her daughter after her, there was a moment in the mother's youth when she was pretty and energetic and even a bit sexy; unfortunately, also just like her

daughter after her, the mother had already eclipsed that moment by the time she'd turned 17, and the rest of her life she'd spend servicing whomever was just asexual enough to have her help him achieve the Celestial Kingdom. To steel her daughter for this, the mother took her to a Shopko when she was 8 and bought her a thin steel ring topped with a simple emerald shield cradling three uppercase letters: "CTR."

The girl was instructed to have a visceral antagonism towards not just her body, but all bodies, no matter their sex or how they gender-performed. And saying she was simply embarrassed or modest or a bit shameful about her own body would almost certainly be to overstate what was largely was true: that she was apathetic towards her own sensuality, and this was a real, real shame.

The most vivid memory I have of her testing herself is the one I formed while driving her back home on a late school-year Tuesday afternoon, me in the driver's seat of my 1973 VW SuperBeetle, her parked beside me in the place girlfriends are expected to sit as their boyfriends grind through a manual transmission, showboating their menial skills in throttling the vehicle with the clutch and shifter that is always sprouting up from the floorboards like a little beanstalk. The left-hand turn lane onto the boulevard from the avenue, three cars ahead of us queued to make the gentle sweep to the left, her acid-washed jeans just baggy enough in front for me to flip the brass button fly out and work it past its double-stitched crevice, flaying the fabric open almost like one does when dissecting a frog dead on its back in a biology tray.

She was wearing hip-huggers again, green and white striped ones, the bright lines of color long ago faded from all the hot water and bleach her mother cycled through the household's underwear literally every single day. I pressed my palm against the bottom berm of her stomach and slid the tip of my middle finger underneath the elastic lip which always drew itself so tight that it left red and purple railroad tracks in her skin for what seemed like hours to her after she changed them out for new ones or showered or what have you. She certainly never slept completely naked, and especially not on the bottom. Her mother had terrorized her at a young age

about the potential infective invasion down there when girls are fast asleep in their beds and surely dreaming of how to make the perfect jello or macaroni salad at a moment's notice, or simply impress a gaggle of cousins visiting from across the state line. As my finger trundled along, I felt the crazy wires of her hair, long and grainy and big shades of orange-red, the color of a campfire well-fed with oxygen and fuel and heat.

By this time the cars ahead had pulled away and so I had to jerk the car into motion using its first gear. There was no way I intended to move my shifting hand, but it wasn't clear to me if she was into this at all, so I asked her to help me shift into second. She obliged and I wanted to think she attempted a smirk, queuing for the engine to hit that sweet spot with its RPM before I buried the clutch pedal into the floor, allowing her to effortlessly slide the beanstalk into the next gear. I underhanded the top of the steering wheel and spun the tires so the car could make the curve, simultaneously plunging that middle finger of my shifting hand through the firey-wiry hair and arriving at the tip of her clit, soft and unsure like waking from an inadvertent nap on a cold and rainy afternoon. I whined the engine up for her to shift into third, and again she did it seamlessly.

I would love to narrate something fantastically meta-phoric for you here, but the simple, brutal truth is that when the car hit fourth gear she was staring straight ahead without a single emotion on her face. Me telling her to please leave her pants that way only led to me changing my mind as she resigned herself to my request, flatly and without word or motion. Grade schoolers extract their math books with more desire than what surfaced in her at that moment, and I instinctively knew that although she had never had a shred of anything to feel shame for in her 15 years on the planet up to that moment, I had just given her something to change that for her. And I joined her in that feeling.

I parked across the street from the brick house she lived in, the one that always had ample parking in its expansive driveway and attached carport. The engine spun down and she relooped the denim over the fat brass fasteners below her stomach. She smiled the vacant smile she had seen in practice

inside the house on the other side of the road. I must have grimaced. But if I didn't, I am now. Whatever that's worth. Choice is such a beautiful thing.

Space

It probably should have ended with an argument like the one that was their favorite and most frequent, the one about which size fork she preferred with her apple pie, which of course differed from which size fork she preferred with her swedish meatballs, which of course differed from which size fork she preferred with her spinach salad, but was exactly the same size fork she preferred with her ice cream, which of course baffled him because he always forgot this part about the ice cream and served it to her with a spoon enough times that their second favorite argument was about which size spoon she preferred with her tomato soup, which of course differed from which size spoon she preferred with her oatmeal, which of course she occasionally ate with a fork to make sure she didn't get a huge mouthful of the mush because he never microwaved it to achieve the right temperature, and that was an entirely different argument altogether, one which most certainly wasn't frequent or ferocious enough to rank in the favorites list, because there was potential for real hurt and pain in that one, and they never argued a single second about anything that lasted.

But it didn't. It ended like this.

After she'd finished her fourth crossword thingy and tenth sudoku whatchamadoo and sixth anagram-a-bob, he figured it was safe to drape his arm along her side as she faced away from him, the mechanical pencil still dangling between her index and middle fingers, the little crumbs of its eraser clinging to the sheets and her skin like a stubborn snow. She was sleeping and he knew it; the television buzzed in front of

their bed, quick shadows strobing against the textured walls, constantly flickering into new shapes just at the moments the old ones became identifiable.

He bled his left hand across her hip and she instantly raised her same hand to staunch his movement. She was sleeping and he knew it. She said it.

“Space.”

She talked in her sleep and they used to argue about it, back when they still cared enough to argue. Back then, he would wake her up and demand instant context and analysis right there in the moment of utterance, but she could never recall saying anything at all, let alone understand why she said it. It wasn’t fair but he had stopped believing in fair a long time ago, before the children, before the relationship, before he even knew about relationships. Fair, as far as he was concerned, was a fiction. And this thing with her was so far from a fiction, so so very very real, that fair left the planet a long long time ago.

In moments like this he used to try and keep his hand as still as he could, pretending he hadn’t put it there at all in case that she actually woke up, caught with his digits spread across her hip in the way she knew he loved to do. But she never did wake. All she ever did was talk.

And she never woke on her own. He always had to wake her, which was another argument entirely, and not one either of them would consider a favorite. That was the argument where he became convinced what she said in her sleep was directly connected to how she felt about him, no matter how much she protested or implored him to understand. It was both of the arguments about The Respect and The Privacy, vivisected by a bit of The How Dare You; she never used that word in previous arguments, and most certainly never from the cocoon of her sleeping state, but now she was using it.

“Space.” She was sleeping and he knew it.

He pulled his hand away and rolled over, onto his other side, their backs in instant parallel. Her hand, which had been frozen mid-air in front of him since her first utterance of the

word, slowly thawed before falling on top of her own side. He watched the shadows pile up by the hours as he lay perfectly still, himself not yet asleep even as his entire body had long gone into that beyond-numb place when a limb loses circulation. How he got up the next morning he spent the rest of his life trying to understand, his feet crashing to the floor, his shins knifing through the boards, his knees burning the carpet as he trudged his way forward, down, and ultimately out into the daylight. Beyond.

When You're Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want

You'll be tempted to settle old scores and new scores and medium-aged scores. Choose only a few, say 5 or 7, but no more than 9—you want a good, odd number and you want to keep it under 10. NO MORE THAN 10!—and settle these scores efficiently. Don't drag them out. Don't feel the seduction of haunt. You can be trapped there forever. Like you were when you were alive. Remember? You have a world now literally beyond time, it's true, but you simply don't have time for this kind of foolishness. Make your death matter, for Christ's sake, even if—and especially in the case that—you don't believe in Jesus.

SOME PEOPLE DREAM OF SUCCESS… ***while others wake up and*** **WORK HARD** ***at it*****.**

Unsolicited Advice

If you aren’t already a drinker, don’t start.

If you are already a drinker, don’t stop.

Lota

It's a hot, heavy sick in your stomach, like you've just been force-fed a bowling ball greased in cayenne pepper. Your first instinct is to grab on to something rooted in temporal space, anchored down with shanker bolts and the lead quality of your thoughts. This primordial grab replaced by the fever rushing up your face like boiling water in a drinking straw, the heat crowned by a fierce headache.

Welcome to It.

For months on end you saw this moment coming: you, with your desk arranged neatly, your pictures of Whomever tacked in a checkerboard pattern immediately above; you, with your monitor freshly squee-geed, you with your own personal monitor squee-gee, bought with your own personal monitor squee-gee money; your jacket hung neatly over your desk, the jacket embroidered with the company logo, the jacket They gave you when Times Were Still Good®.

This moment is here now, It is, dropped in the middle of you.

She's standing in front of you with an empty copier paper box, emblazoned on the sides with the thick green letters that spell out "Boise." You've worked here long enough to remember when these same boxes said "Boise-Cascade." A few years ago the same boxes started showing up without their Cascades. You thought nothing of it. No one did. Back then, you and your chair spent way too much time smelling like Scotch-Gard.

Now She's handing you Boise-sans-Cascade. She doesn't have to say anything; you've seen how this Cascade drill works.

Just yesterday it was three Cascades; the day before that it was four; the day before that was Sunday, but one lowly Cascade got a phone call on Friday, telling him that his Boise was waiting for him. Last week She had to order an extra pallet of copier paper, just to make sure there would be enough boxes for this.

She's still handing you Boise-sans-Cascade. You know you have five minutes to collect whatever shrapnel of your life fits into Boise before They will be here, the They whose embroidered jackets have an extra word—SECURITY—sewn into them, right above the heart. They will escort you away from here. They will ensure you don't take anything or anyone out with you. Later They will wheelbarrow your work-station—freshly squee-geed monitor and all—down to IT, where an unpaid intern named Scott or Kevin or Brian will scour all the porn and MP3 files you downloaded.

Rephrase.

Scott/Kevin/Brian will encrypt and burn personal copies of them first. Before you're even to your car in the parking garage, a select few of your favorite anal scenes will be locked in a password-protected Dropbox folder, the one She has IT keep for her, the one She shares with the Consumer VP of They on Friday nights, when all the Cascades have left and the building has been locked down.

She pays particular attention to which items you grab first. She has been trained to do this, fitted with a security pager that They will answer in less than 30 seconds, chuffing down the hall in their Rockports, pistols strapped and tasers snapped to their hips. They drill on this all the time, you'll find out. Later, you'll balk at how much money and time you imagine has had to go into this. But for now you're intent on pulling down your pictures of Whomever and stacking them neatly into the box. You pause briefly to consider calling Whomever to come pick you up, as if They weren't who They were, as if They were actually your elementary school principal and teacher, and They had just told you your grandmother had just died, and your dad was on his way to come get you. She looks at you and you decide. Bad idea.

On the way down the hall you notice that no one is noticing you on the way down the hall. Your life is a palindrome. There is no witness to the memory branding itself onto your mind right now. It is yours. Yours alone.

When you come to the elevator, you notice it's empty. She and They and Boise-sans-Cascade stuffed with images of Whomever fill the thin rectangle. You also notice the absence of Muzak. At least, you think it's missing. Maybe it was never there in the first place. Maybe the elevator never had its accompanying elevator-Muzak. You dig through the jukebox of tunes stuffed in your head, but can only find a trumped-up version of Edie Brickell's "What I Am." Upon staggering back to your apartment later tonight after six Jim Beam and 7s, you'll have a moment of revelation that you were right about the Muzak-less elevator, and that Edie Brickell's EP *Shooting Rubberbands at the Stars* was the last CD you bought before They hired you. If this were a story being filmed, you would cry at the realization of this. But it's not, so you won't. Instead of crying, you'll feel and do what everyone else does in the same situation: absolutely nothing.

The elevator shudders to a stop, spills you onto the freshly-waxed floor. She lightly pushes you in the middle of your back, cowishly prodding you to keep moving forward. In training for this moment, She read case study after case study of Desperation-Risks, those Cascades who like so many labmice turn mindlessly back towards the elevator and beg for a lesser-paying job. 93% of the time, the simple touch on the back can break a D-R's train of thought just long enough to get them out the door; 4% of the time a D-R breaks out in hysterical sobbing; 2% of the time a D-R passes out right as the door swings open. It's that one percentile She has to legitimately worry about, and it's the reason They are here. This is also the same reason She keeps the second button on her pager pre-programmed to 911.

You, of course, are in that bottom percentile, flopping through the door and squinting at the sky, as if you have somewhere important to go right now. And, of course, you don't.

Welcome to It.

Kirby in Dreamland

Jack was 12 years old when he caught his own reflection in his grandmother's medicine cabinet. Because he was at a 90 degree angle to said cabinet, the thin side of the door and its accompanying hinges could only hold his facial expressions and the occasional drip of his blonde hair as he bobbed up and down, in and out of the cabinet's line of sight.

At first he kept his head down, eyes tracing the Fleur-de-lis patterns sculpted into the bathroom rug below him. This rug was one thing of many that distinguished his grandmother's bathroom from the two in his parents' house across town, both of which were sealed in the same sick burnt orange linoleum featured in Cindy Sherman's "Untitled #96"—the famous photograph of the suburban girl with flushed cheeks who is laying flat on her back while stroking a handwritten note in her right hand, her left hand folded neatly into a fist against her head as she stares up and out of the camera's frame at something incomprehensible and invisible; that famous photograph from Sherman's series of stills from a series of films never filmed, like Brian Eno's soundtracks from still more unfilmed films, symphonized in notes that must have been composed on other planets in other galaxies or entirely other realities—and it would be several decades later before Jack would think how strange it seemed to him that someone in his extended family would ever consider installing wall-to-wall carpet in a bathroom. Coincidentally, this would be just about the same time Jack would discover Sherman's work while Yahoo!ing the internet circa 1996 for images of Cindy Crawford, but that's a different story altogether that is almost certainly less true than this one.

Jack had seen his reflection plenty of times before. The first time was when he was barely a week old, sleeping on his back in a hand-me-down wicker bassinet that had been refreshed with a new coat of pearlwhite spraypaint in honor of his arrival. Jack's older brother Will snapped their mother's makeup mirror *open-closed-open* a few millimeters above his nose. And while it's true Jack's virginal eyes at the time could, at best, only relay scattered blobs of light to the little cerebral cortex in his still sponge-soft skull—thus rendering his first live encounter with his own visage as a spectacular non-event of the highest order—as it was something he simply could not see despite the fact it was right before his eyes, it's still none the less true that his reflection was quite indeed there to be seen, irregardless of his young eyes' complete inability to bring that image into focus. And it's even more true that even if his eyes were somehow (undoubtedly by a truly freakish physiological accident…) capable of transcoding said blobs into said reflection, it is almost certainly impossible to imagine that week-old Jack's week-old brain would be able to comprehend that week-old Jack was looking directly back *into himself*.

It's been theorized by more philosophical pediatricians than the ones Jack and Will had that during infancy, the human brain intentionally dulls its sensory faculties to help the new being acclimate to its post-utero existence. Sounds, smells, touches, tastes and sights are experienced as if filtered through cheesecloth. The underlying assumption is that without such filtering, the barrage of sensory stimuli outside the womb would cripple the infant's ability to discern perceived threats from real ones. This is why the best method of putting a fussy baby to sleep is to wrap a receiving blanket so tightly around its body that the arms and legs are literally pinned against the torso. If the child is particularly irritated, blocking out all light and eliminating oscillating noise is usually necessary; in the most extreme cases, providing a loud, monotone audio source can help pacify the infant.

No.

Pacify is the wrong word.

The correct word is *Immobilize*.

The method assumes that an infant whose arms and legs are not secured will kick and punch at the grey blobs and noises from distant planets. The method further assumes that sleep is the infant's desired state of consciousness, where it assumedly dreams of smirking cartoon farm animals in gender-neutral greens despite the fact that it can neither see nor comprehend such things.

In other words, if not immobilized, secured and/or tranquilized by its own brain, the child will fight back.

When Jack was six months old, his mother asked the latest philosopher-pediatrician in charge of him why the infant would cry for four or five hours on end.

"There is no reason for this," she said, eyes sunk deep into their sockets. "He's always full and changed when it starts. There is simply *no reason."*

"There usually isn't," the philosopher-pediatrician responded. "Don't take his crying personal. It's not about you."

The philosopher-pediatrician smiled and patted Jack's mother on the shoulder as she sat slumped on the courtesy bench in the exam room. The smile did not budge. She could only look down at the floor and grimace.

Later that day, when Jack's grandmother came over to pay her regular visit, Jack's mother stole the philosopher-pediatrician's word.

"They call it 'colic'. It's a pretty common condition I guess." Jack's mother stole the philosopher-pediatrician's smile, too.

The grandmother scowled and stood. She walked towards Jack's mother.

"That…"

Jack's grandmother leaned forward.

"…is *bullshit."*

The scowl did not budge; Jack's mother could only look down at the floor and grimace.

At the next check-up several weeks later, Jack's mother paraphrased what the grandmother had said. The philosopher-pediatrician provided lots of smiles and shoulder pats, as well as a cheerful suggestion for Jack's mother to turn on her vacuum cleaner and leave it in the room while Jack slept, so as to provide a constant monotone that would drown out all other auditory stimuli. Jack's mother was skeptical but did her best to keep her grimacing in check.

"What about a clock radio?" she asked. "I could tune it to a dead spot and let the static play. All night if that's what it takes. The vacuum seems *so…extreme."*

The philosopher-pediatrician smiled.

"Let me ask you something." The philosopher-pediatrician patted Jack's mother on the shoulder before sitting next to her on the newly-reupholstered courtesy bench. Thick, diamond-tucked leather. "Have you ever listened to your clock radio at night?"

"Yes, of course."

"No, I mean really *listened?* And I mean *all* night?"

James' mother shifted her weight on the bench, using her left palm to lean slightly away from the philosopher-pediatrician. Before she could pull her hand back into her lap and neatly interlace her ten fingers again, the meat of her palm untethered from the black leather. A loud ripping sound erupted in the little exam room.

"I'm not sure what you mean," she replied.

The philosopher-pediatrician continued smiling.

"Ever notice how you can pick up stations that are sometimes hundreds of miles away, especially in the wee hours of the morning? Say, 1 or 2 o'clock?"

Jack's mother simply stared back into the smile. Blank.

"See, radio waves travel farther and in greater intensity at night because the air is cooler and there tends to be less

interference. If you tune the dial to a patch of static in the afternoon, by midnight it's entirely likely that your radio will pick up a programmed frequency at that same point on the dial that it couldn't decode before."

Blank.

The philosopher-pediatrician returned Jack's mother's stare. The smile silently spilled onto the floor.

"You've *really* never noticed that?"

Blank.

And so later that evening, after wrapping Jack into his makeshift straitjacket and laying him down to sleep and praying The Lord his soul to keep, his mother kicked on her Kirby upright and clicked the door shut. She shuffled down the stairs, leaving her faithful machine to drown every note that dared make a sound, draining the trace of every kiss from his dreams.

Tonight on 48 Hours

I invite you to sit down in front of your television set…and keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that you will observe a vast wasteland…When television is good, nothing—not the theater, not the magazines or newspapers—nothing is better…But when television is bad, nothing is worse…You will see a procession of game shows, violence, audience participation shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, Western badmen, Western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence and cartoons. And endlessly, commercials—many screaming, cajoling and offending. And, most of all, boredom.

—Federal Communications Commission Chairman Newton Minow, 1961
address to broadcast industry

Brandon hates his name because no one in the Professional Football Hall of Fame is named Brandon.

No one of consequence anyway.

Brandon realizes he's living before the internet in an apartment that will be wired for cable modem service in approximately thirteen years.

The phone jacks in Brandon's apartment are yellow; there are two of them; both are disconnected because Gena still hasn't paid the phone bill since she moved out.

Paying phone bills isn't Brandon's thang.

Gena moved out because Brandon occasionally likes to fuck Terry.

Sharing Brandon isn't Gena's thang.

Brandon's job is okay for now but will get worse faster than he thinks.

Terry comes over to Brandon's apartment because Gena still hasn't paid the phone bill since she moved out.

It’s easier that way.

Brandon isn’t sure if he should like football; all he knows is he does.

Terry doesn’t like to wear shoes; Brandon, on the other hand, does.

This is part of the reason why he fucks Terry only occasionally.

Brandon has exactly $335.86 in the bank right now.

Gena used to drive a Ford Escort.

Black with red pinstriping under the door handles.

No air conditioning.

She carries a business card from a Van Nuys locksmith in her purse.

Brandon always accuses Terry of not listening to him.

This is part of the reason why he fucks Terry only occasionally.

Brandon doesn’t know that Terry suffered from *otitis media* as a child because Terry doesn’t think his childhood influences anything he is/does as an adult.

Brandon doesn’t know that Terry suffered from being a little girl trapped inside a little girl’s body; given what you know about Terry already, this shouldn’t be surprising.

Gena doesn’t want to know anything about Terry, not one goddamn thing.

Gena doesn’t like surprises.

Nobody who has to drive to work in Inglewood does.

Terry grew up in Ontario, OR, in love with KMart.

She liked the shiny floors there because her mother would take her there every Saturday and let her try on shoes in the dressing room and open the big bags of socks and snap purple barrettes in her hair and her mother would tell Terry she was a princess and that someday Terry would Be Loved By Someone Really Special.

KMart is now “Big K.”

Gena’s father used to wear nice ties and went to a nice job and came home to a nice wife and nice children and always shopped at Woolworth’s and Osco Drug and Food King.

In that exact order.

Now Gena’s father wears old ties to funerals and only shops at Big K.

Gena had breast reduction surgery when she was 15.

They were Soleil Moon-Frye big.

She was the first 16 Or Below girl to go under the knife in her area code.

Before her surgery Gena’s mother used to mail order Gena’s bras.

Now Gena’s mother uses the internet to order Gena’s mother’s bras.

Brandon used to have a crush on Soleil Moon-Frye when she was Penelope Brewster.

“Punky.”

NBC.

Sunday nights.

Dan Rather served as anchor and managing editor of the *CBS Evening News* from March 9, 1981 to March 9, 2005.

Terry’s father liked Dan’s hair before CBS started combing it the opposite way to boost their Evening News’ ratings.

Shallow ploy.

It worked.

After Gena’s surgery, boys stopped calling her.

Dan also anchored and reported for *48 Hours* when it premiered on January 19, 1988.

On November 22, 1963, Dan broke the news of the death of President John F. Kennedy while calling collect from area code 214.

Brandon actually prefers Playboy over Hustler but doesn't know Larry Flynt called Gena personally before she went under the knife.

Terry finds sex confusing and generally painful but the only way he can maintain a relationship.

Brandon's mother remembers exactly where she was November 22, 1963: doing her first three way with the television on, Brandon's grandparent's bedroom, cousin Kirk and his friend K.C., strange yellow stains scrubbed and bleached by Brandon's grandmother as she watched the funeral procession and listened to Cronkite's voice crack.

Terry's mother hid a bottle of peppermint schnapps under the passenger seat, right under Terry's dangling feet.

Brandon has made a lifetime pledge never to drink anything clear and will be really pissed off when all he sees in the stores is Crystal Pepsi.

Lucky for him, it won't last long.

Lucky for him, most things don't.

Gena can have pretty much anyone she wants.

Gena is frickin gorgeous.

The locksmith drives all the way from Van Nuys for free.

Never charges her.

24/7.

Gena is infected sore inside, cold cream outside.

Brandon fucks the shit out of cold cream outsides.

This is part of the reason why he fucks Terry only occasionally.

Sheila is 36.

36 year olds can't be gorgeous unless they're on TV and made to look much much younger.

Dan was born October 31, 1931 in Wharton, TX.

Devil's Night.

When people still believed in The Devil.
Dan doesn’t look a day over 1945.
Wouldn’t you say?

Dear That Other Trevor Dodge

It's beyond time we clear the air, sir.

But first some history. And not history in the sense of some story. I'm talking about the real deal truth here, things that have really happened and the whole whatnottery to go along with that.

Back in 1999 I was living in an apartment complex in Boise, ID. I had just figured out how to rip CDs to my computer's hard drive, and I thought Yahoo! Messenger was the shizznit. Apparently your mother did, too, because she IMed one afternoon. She didn't believe me when I told her I was really living in Boise, ripping CDs. She believed that I was living in an apartment complex, though. At least I think she bought that part of it. At any rate, we had a short but pleasant conversation, and I was ultimately able to convince her that Boise was in fact a very nice city to live.

The following year, you attended Clackamas Community College and set a bunch of track and field records. I Yahoo!-searched you and everything on this. There's that guy whose mom I talked to a few months back, I was thinking at the time. How about that, I was also thinking.

The following year, I moved to the Portland area. By the following year, I was teaching at four different colleges in the area. Clackamas CC was not one of them.

By the following year, I was still teaching at four different colleges in the area. Clackamas CC was still not one of them.

By the end of the following year, I had taught at five different colleges in the area. Clackamas CC not only was one of them, but had given me a full-time teaching position. How about that, I was thinking.

When the college issued me my ID card, my name was already in the system. That makes sense, I was thinking, because I had been hired a few months before actually getting my ID card. The first time I used said ID card at the library was when I tried pulling a copy of Neil Gaiman's *Sandman: Preludes & Nocturnes* off a reserve shelf and claimed faculty privileges to do so. The librarian at the checkout desk swiped my ID card and told me I could do no such thing because I was a student. I turned the ID card around and showed the librarian my picture on the front and FACULTY printed above my picture on the front. How about that, she said, and she swiped my ID card again, and again she said I was a student. You should get a new ID card, she said, because there's already someone in the system with your name and you're not that person and that person was a student and you're clearly not a student. Right, I said. I'm too short and too fat and too old and not nearly photogenic enough to be a student. True, she said. No offense, she said. None taken, I said.

About a week after that, I met the college's athletic director for the first and last time. I shook his big hand and told him my name. How about that, he said. We have a bunch of track trophies with your name on them over in that building over there, he said. But I'm too short and too fat and too old and not nearly photogenic enough to have track trophies with my name on them, I said. True, he said. No offense, he said. None taken, I said.

It's now nearly five years later, Mr. Trevor Dodge, sir, and I live in the Portland, OR metropolitan area. One of the biggest daily pains in my life is having to drive US Highway 26 to/from just about anywhere I need or want to go. One of those anywheres includes Clackamas CC. I spend a lot of time on this stretch of road and I have been very lucky so far not to be maimed or killed while driving it. I am always thankful for that last fact, by the way.

Lately, however, one of us hasn't been very lucky as far as that last thing goes. Just a couple weeks back you were in an accident on US Highway 26. I Yahoo!-searched this and everything. *"After swerving to avoid collision with an errant driver, Trevor ran into the median, totaling his vehicle. Trevor ended up receiving only a few minor bruises and lacerations, with no risk to life or limb,"* The Internet said.

I am tempted, of course, to say How About That right now, but that would be crass and insensitive and I really really really want you to like me. I am also tempted to be all clever and solipsistic, of course, and to falsely claim that I was that errant driver who forced you into the median and made you total your vehicle, but that would also be crass and insensitive; not only do I really really really want you to like me, I am *dying* to know (figuratively speaking of course) what make of car you drive. Because if you were to say a Dodge, well, frankly, that would leave me totally speechless.

Yours,

Trevor

When You're Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want

Go to the grocery store. Open/peel/use anything you like as you ski its aisles. Your children are dead so you don't require them for the distraction you normally had to make to accomplish this. But feel free to bring them along and share the bounty, the heaping of wrappers and sticky floors. After all you've put them through, they deserve to finally see you happy.

DON’T JUDGE EACH DAY BY THE *harvest you reap*, BUT BY THE *seeds you plant*.

Unsolicited Advice

Do not underestimate how much local law enforcement absofuckinglutely wants nothing at all to do with anything even remotely related to any situation ending with you and or Sig.Other pushing the talk button on a grimy intercom terminal that's been pop-riveted permanently into the chipping brick facade of your closest police station, whereupon you and/or Sig.Other have to catch your breath and lean in close enough to kiss the star-shaped pattern of small holes in the metal plate and taste your blood in your lungs and begin uttering the possessive phrase "My Ex."

a) Do not underestimate the number of times you think local law enforcement has heard that same possessive phrase. To be even in the neighborhood, you need to take your highest possible number and at least quadruple it. And that's just since noon yesterday, since you're almost certainly finding yourself in a situation where you're considering taking the trip over there to the cop shop when it's already evening, and quite likely deeply so.

b) Your local law enforcement personnel are trained and drilled and retrained and redrilled in very effective modes/methods of communication with impaired people of all forms of impairment. They are professionals. They are very good at being professional. Just because you and Sig. Other watched through episode 3, season 4 of *The Wire* doesn't mean shit, and doubly so if you are white, college-educated, and have set up a trust fund for your child and/or drawn from one yourself.

c) If you are legally separated or divorced, keep a copy of your decree/agreement/court order on your cellular device so that you and/or Ex and/or Sig.Other can literally read it and weep when situations present themselves. Do not assume that you have this document Memorized, Every Fucking Word Of It, because you most definitely do not. And you especially do not if you were the sole author/editor/ notary of said document.

d) If you are not legally separated or divorced, you, too, like the mentally incapacitated person, have no business reading this. If you cannot prove to yourself, Ex, and/or Sig.Other that the former relationship isn't legally severed, you stand no chance. None. The only thing you're lacking is someone to explicitly say this to you. So this is someone saying it to you. Right here.

Walking Out of the Darkness

I'm writing this from a place you haven't even the faintest clue exists, let alone think possible. This is a place where the life you know is unraveled all the way down to the thin cardboard tube where it has been spooled for years you can count but no longer can feel. You don't know the specifics, but you know what I mean, so you are compelled to trust me and there's just no getting around that. So please pay careful attention now and really read what I have to tell you.

I just came in from a long walk in the darkness out at your parents' place, the one with the quarter-mile driveway, just walked it with nothing but starlight and a rusting sliver-moon. You have been walking this exact same stretch in the daylight while you are house-sitting for them. You walk it every morning to grab their newspaper and check their mail, before you water their plants and mow their big floods of lawn on a spritely John Deere riding mower. This has been your routine since they left, and also since your wife left before them, and also since your children left after them. You have spent immense and deafeningly quiet stretches of time by yourself here, time that has thickened and slowed not only because you are writing again, but because you are using that writing in part to try and explain to yourself why you think you are where you are and who you are. But more specifically, trying to come to an understanding of just who the fuck you think you are and what the fuck you think you are doing thinking about these things in the first place. Because the fact of the matter is that you have simply never done this. I don't have to go into specifics. You know the thoughts you're having. And let's leave most of them at that. It won't be as messy this way.

But let's talk about something that does need a little specificity. In a little over 24 hours you will sit across from her for the first time in over 20 years. This is something you already know, because you know you are about to do this. What you don't know is you will leave this utterly and forever changed, and you will spend the next two years free-falling through/into possibility spaces that will smell and wrinkle like dreams when you first touch them.

That's right. I said touch.

Touch dreams. Read extra careful here. Don't mistake what I'm saying here as metaphor. I'm dead fucking serious.

It will happen instantly, by the way, when you see the years on her and reach for her hand anyway, in a kinetic moment that precludes any rationality whatsoever. You will be afraid of how she interprets this, and you will worry, and the two of you will talk through it, and there will be more moments that defy rationality, more moments than you can imagine, moments that build an entire castle upon an entire world that precludes the very act of thinking.

Because the two of you will fall desperately in love.

You will leverage everything. And in doing so you will lose everything, and in doing so you will also win everything. This will be the most exhilarating time of your life and it will also be the darkest. You will know beyond the shadows of doubt what possibility really is; you will wonder about things you don't want to wonder about; you will find you are largely alone and powerless; you will find you were never completely alone at all.

These aren't promises or rewards enticing you, no more than they are predilections or warnings discouraging you. I'm talking about things that *are*. This is simply what *is*.

I'm going to explain myself more clearly now. Look carefully. This is a picture you haven't seen for decades but can recall the tiny details of without prompt or prodding. *This* is *her*.

Wait. Let me back up a step because I need to be careful here: this is your favorite *image* of her. I know this because I know your past as well as I do, but I also know your future. And the next two years of your future will involve knowing a great deal about her, yet knowing sometimes very little. You will learn about the twinned natures of fate and faith, at times spun together in threads fine as cotton candy, that taste just as sweet and evaporate just as quick. It is not right to say that you will have her, because you cannot truly possess another person. Nor should you even want such a thing.

But this *image* of her, you can have it. And you will. From my vantage point, it very really hangs on your wall. You in fact possess this image, the original printed saturation of inks onto big, thick paper that recorded the way she bent the light all around her on the day the shutter of the camera paused just long enough for the moment to crawl inside its machinery and live there forever.

Just like she did inside you so long ago. I'm talking about the crawling inside and living forever part. See, you don't *know* this yet, but you can probably sense it, and I say that with such confidence because 24 hours from where I am, the three of us will join hands and bring a dream to full and real life. Crawling inside and living forever. Where the darkness meets the light, and the driveway recedes to a simple structure built of petals, wood, and hope.

Bertie's

Pepperoni and Olive?

At Bertie's Brick Pizza Oven, the servers sail through the open floor seating like wobbling frisbees, carrying spun metal trays with quarters and halves and sometimes whole spheres of fresh-from-the-brick pies, shoveling a slice at a time onto the melamine plates in front of their customers' eyes and stomachs, the dirty tables stacking with rows of partially-bitten crusts and carcasses of slices past, the road kill of carbs and red pepper flakes and parm cheese strewn like the wreckage of a traffic accident.

Ranch Cheese?

Here they come, entire armies of families and co-workers, shuffling feet and eyes across the floor as they queue to pay their entrance fee, the magnificent shame of the all-you-can-eat gimmickery of it, all of them prepping to gorge and forget. This is the grand mastication, the literal chewing of the literal fat, two full floors and over 10,000 square feet of hollow metal-framed chairs parked in front of the dining tables that are fashioned like short prep stations, the chairs deceptively light, tubular aluminum like a racing bicycle, the walls aflame with plasma televisions and neon bar signs, the entire $6.00 wonder of it all.

Chicken Bacon?

The servers do their best to divide the space into columns, each responsible for a rough "I" which covers just over 3,000 square feet of each kill floor, three Is on the main and another three below, separated by a steep carpeted staircase fenced

with real wrought iron with real spikes on the poles and fleur de lis snaking between. With a full crew, Bertie's brick oven can belch out a fully cooked pie in just under three minutes, and within another three minutes that pie will have traveled approximately 25 frisbee rotations through the serving area until all its pieces have been claimed by the crowd, forever waiting for that One More Slice, that magic one that injects the endorphins straight into their bloodstreams, pushing to their mainlines, up into their pleasure centers floating above all the grinding and swallowing below.

Ranch Chicken Bacon?

The kitchen team keeps a short rotation of the most popular pies rolling, but sexes up the menu with wild combinations of vegetables, carbs and proteins that surprise new-comers and keep the regulars guessing.

Buffalo Chicken?

Dustin is the shift manager. He works neither inside the kitchen nor outside it, neither upstairs nor downstairs, neither behind nor in front of the cash register. He is both everywhere and nowhere; the owners trust him implicitly, which is why he's paid $1.50 more per hour than anyone else in their employment. Dustin looks more 31 than 21, and his servers more 26 than 16; this is going to matter someday in the future, especially to the owners, and especially a lot more than $1.50.

Ranch Chicken Cashew?

Aimee, Trina and Veronica are the downstairs I's tonight. These aren't their real names. Dustin calls them these names and always assigns them to work downstairs together if he can at all accomplish it. Dustin makes the schedule. That's what the extra buck-fifty is for.

Sauerkraut?

Aimee, Trina and Veronica. Dustin calls them ATV collectively because the calendar isn't big enough to write their full names. The owners always see the schedule but don't know what ATV stands for and aren't terribly interested anyway; this is going to matter someday in the future,

especially to the owners, and especially a lot more than $1.50. Dustin's friend is named Jef. Jef tried working at Bertie's for exactly 9 minutes and 14 seconds. Jef doesn't need a job and never has. Dustin, however, does and always will. Jef is actually the one who came up with the ATV thing, by the way. He is also downstairs tonight, but not as an employee or a paying customer. Dustin let him in through the service door right before the dinner rush ebbed its always predictable last big hiccup.

Hot Mama?

Bertie's least requested pie is called "The Hot Mama." It's a blend of linguicia sausage, pepperocini and jalapeno peppers. It is neither spicy nor digestible. The only reason it is even on the menu is to appease the owners, who both find it tasty and an aphrodisiac. If Dustin knew this they would pay him an extra $5 per hour, no question. Even though the overwhelming majority of Hot Mamas return to the kitchen like tweens in an orphanage, the owners require one go out at least every 20 minutes, just in case they drop in unannounced and feel the desire to feel the desire. Neither of the owners are named Bertie. Bertie is the name of a miniature bi-plane bolted high up into the rafters above the kill floor, which before becoming Bertie's Brick Pizza Oven was a storage barn for the Union Pacific railroad, whose rusty line of steel and pressure-treated ties ran just to the south. The reason Jef didn't last a 15th second past his nine minutes is because he just so happened to be in Bertie's cockpit at the perfect timing and angle for the owners to stride in and have a go at each other. Needless to say, a Hot Mama didn't go out for at least an hour that night.

Ranch Idaho?

Bertie's most requested pie short of the pepperoni-based staples is a potent combination of cheese, fried hashbrowns and oregano layered on top of a hand-tossed thin crust slathered with Hidden Valley Ranch salad dressing instead of the conventional tomato-based sauces served on their other offerings. It is no exaggeration to say that 1 out of every 2 people in the establishment tonight will either steal or

scavenge a slice from an abandoned plate or the neighbor's table. Jef calls this pizza something else. He calls it Sex In The Field. On the night Jef "retired" from Bertie's, Dustin brought two gigantic boxes of Sex In The Field to Jef's retirement party. A totally trashed 15 year old gave him a blowjob in the trailerhouse's bathroom for a slice; it was just the beginning, Jef said later, of something beautiful.

Raspberry?

The final wave of dessert pizzas are starting, huge sugary cookies with entire cans of pie filling spilled and smeared over the top, thin spokes of whipped cream radiating out their centers. These come fast and furious, and at this time of the night, are the Bertie's equivalent of dimming the lights in a department store, that nonverbal yet completely clear communique: you need to pack up your children, dust the crumbs off your shirts, and waddle the fuck out of here. Right now. I mean, please.

Cookies and Cream?

Dustin is making sure the last pies are on their way around and the ovens are ramping down and ATV have enough side work in the darkening columns to keep them busy until the last customer plods through the door.

Butterfinger?

Jef is double-checking the service door's outside lock and pulling the big metal rectangle back towards him until the full shape and weight of it clicks. He is rolling a keg of light beer in front of the doorjamb. An ounce of prevention. Yadda yadda yadda.

S'mores?

The kitchen is dim. The only energy is the residual heat from the ovens. The upstairs crew let loose surprisingly soon by Dustin, who is already on his way down the stairs after silencing the televisions and latching the partition gate where the kill floor meets the carpet. That's Jef's cue and he cuts the lights, giggling. He and Dustin fumble for bodies in the black, their voices in stereo:

Ready To Ride?

Lessons My Grandmother Taught Me

#1: Never trim your mustache while holding your sig.other's favorite dildo. But if you absolutely can't help yourself, make sure to sit down first.

#2: That man hunkered into the booth may have been served two plates of salisbury steak, but you can rest assured I am not eating one of them. Not tonight.

#3: If you do not drink whole milk you are not only a commie pinko fag but kicked out of the family. Do I make myself clear?

#4: There is no proper way to chew tobacco, but if you must, do it the way great-grandmother did it: with a hickory-handled knife and an old tin can.

#5: He. Is. A. Monster. Just lie still until I'm home.

#6: When the Foot Locker denies your credit card, it is imperative you use their phone to call the bank right then and there.

#7: Glen Campbell is a great lay. You don't need a copy of *Playgirl* to tell you that.

#8: Keep your typewriter and sewing machine in the same room, and keep them both covered at all times.

#9: Cable television will rob you of your soul. The Food Network is the only proof I'll ever need to back that up. Have you seen *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives?* I worked at the Depot Grill for nearly 40 years and no one ever filmed jack-shit

there. The closest thing I ever saw to a camera there was when Mister Soran brought in his Polaroid Instamatic, but you're not nearly old enough to hear that story.

#10: Officially, your grandfather died of a heart attack. I guess.

#11: Your uncle David used to wait up for me when I went out on dates. He wanted to make sure I always made it home okay so he would sneak into my room after Mom put him to bed and thought he was asleep. You remind me a lot of him even though…well…you know.

#12: When someone says "I love you," you have their implicit permission to beat them within inches of their life. Seriously. Watch and learn.

#13: I've spent a lot of time in my kitchen, and that's why I'll never cook a frozen pizza. Listen carefully to how I say that word, by the way: *PEES-ah*, with an S instead of a Z. I don't have your fancy-ass education, remember? But I still have standards and I won't serve that garbage. Not even to your grandfather.

#14: Never write anything long-hand except grocery lists and the checks you use to pay your bills. Nothing else is so damn important that you have to show yourself naked like that.

#15: Coffee isn't good for you. Neither is reading. I've always chosen the lesser of two evils, even if it's the more bitter.

#16: Go ahead and pick out anything you want in the house. You can have it after I'm dead and sell it or whatever you like. I am having you do this now because I need to know how much you think you value me. C'mon now. I have to get to work.

Reapersession

They would have had a torrid night that night but it was the middle of the month, the bank accounts probably overdrawn four figures, got credit cards all maxed, so they skippin they usual hotel and just stay at her place instead. And last night the bank fax in. So I was there, 3 am, engine humming and heater full blast, knockin the snow off my boots before I climbed into the cab of the tow truck and drove off with that flashbulb white Intrepid spinnin its wheels counterclockwise, headlights pointed in the opposite direction, like some kid gettin drug to his bedroom by a fed-up parent.

But first, out the door, that was a hims. And it's almost always a hims and the hims always, I mean *always*, come out. It was so very obvious he didn't want to be out but there was really no alternative, and even though he had zero chance of talking me out of hooking it up, that was his only play. And I'll give hims credit, I mean, really give hims credit, because me hooking it up is one thing but hooking it up with this other thing goin down? Oh daddy.

You wouldn't believe how honest and real people can be in these moments, you really wouldn't. Would never say I've heard it all, but I've damn well heard plenty. This hims, this night, he says way more than he should. Which isn't unique because they always do that, especially the hims. He says…

…No, hold up. I do *not* judge these people as individuals. I do *not* know they individual situations. But I do judge them in general, in stereotype, in sweeping categories. I am not a moralist, and I could give two fucks about them paying they bills, so that ain't even part of it. I mean, how could it be?

Because if they pay their payments on time and in full, I'm somethin else for a living. Somethin else I don't enjoy doin' nearly as much as doin' this. Somethin that don't afford me such rich opportunities to study what it really means to be a human.

I should take back that part about not judging them as individuals. Here, I take it back. And I take it back because I do in fact judge them individually. You know what I judge them by? The shoes. Kind of shoes they wearin. If they wearin shoes at all. This hims with the Intrepid? He shirtless and pants-less and socks-less and hat-less, but he had on a tight pair of Jordans so vintage and so fresh they looked once-a-season worn. Retro AJ2s, I figure them, but in the pitchy, cold-blurred night maybe they was original. Maybe even deadstock. Like the hims busted these out in a hurry because a person's shitty shoes are never on instant recall. No one can remember where they stash they shitty kicks. But those precious kicks, that they know, and where they at. This hims, he couldn't find so much as a pair of sweatpants or T-shirt in his girlfriend's apartment, but he knew damn well where those deadstock Jordans were. Probably a present from her, maybe from his wife. This hims, he come out bookin in those AJ2s when he probably had a ratty old pair of Air Force Ones right there at the door. Which don't ingratiate this hims to me one bit mind you, because a man who can treat a pair of kicks like that—leave em on the stoop of a porch for a fall-spring cycle in this part of the country? Shit, man. That ain't no man. Definitely a hims, but ain't no man.

It's not all hims in these situations, either. This needs to be said. And I'm not talking about last night couple. Back to generalities, then, you could say. The hers in these situations, they the ones you have to for reals watch out. They the ones once they realize you ain't gonna lower the stinger no matter what, it all goes six hundred and sixty-six degrees of sideways. You see these movies and TV shows where the hims are all wearing wife beaters and camo shorts and come out all chromed up. That just ain't what it is. At least not what I've seen. The ones wearing them beaters usually a wife themself, or about to be a wife, or just got done being a wife, and

something ladies these parts learn early on is before you get yourself any kind of line of credit, you go get yourself a carryin piece to guarantee it. And they learn it from their mommas, not their daddies. And the bigger the credit line, the bigger the piece.

I hooked it up outside a family practice once. The hers there was a nurse practitioner. She came straight out the front door, past all her patients waiting in the waiting room, a big blue-barrelled .45, shell casing buried in a ring of my towing chain, the hers all in white coat with the hers' name embroidered into it right at the tit, same name on the early AM fax whose beep-beep-whir yanked me awake and got me to the hers' office hours before she pulled in. That hers, I heard she lost the job there, lost the house down the way, lost the license to diagnose and dispense, so she started up a daycare, and you cannot even begin to count how many I hook it up outside them daycares.

So the hims from last night. The one rockin' the AJ2s. He ain't strapped so the hims just lay it on real thick about how I got to unhook that Intrepid, how it ain't about the car, how it really ain't about no car at all, how it about the end of reality and the beginning of a dream. The hims is scared of the dream he says. Scared of what happens when the hers in their house across county wakes up in two hours and the hims's not there and the Intrepid's not there. Not scared out of fear. Scared out of happy excitement. Scared out of getting what he wants and getting it for real. Scared how none of it costs money even though the hims spent every dime he had getting to the place where it could be for real. This is hard to explain, the hims said.

Now I don't never say anything except what's got to be said and it goes something like this: I don't want to take it believe me I don't want to but I have no choice they ordering me to they tell me come hook it up so I do that and give you this number to call so call it.

But to the hims, I say this instead: it's not that hard and it's not to explain because I see it. You see what, the hims said. I say this: it. He doesn't say anything, so I say this again: it. And then I say this: you need to call this number you need to go

back inside and fall down next to her and close your eyes and wake up way after I'm gone when the light is new in the room because you haven't seen that yet have you? The hims still doesn't say anything. He doesn't have to and I've probably said too much but the fact of the matter was that I most certainly did see it. The past given flesh in the present. The lettin go of it all.

And that right there is something that can't be seen anywhere else. To be right there when the hims and the hers finally find they ends and their beginnings but they haven't quite realized yet. Do you have any idea what it's like to be in the presence of something so pure? That's the part you can't judge. Gaze through they window tonight after all the hims' phone exhausts itself, and peek under they sheets. That's the real ends, the real beginnings. The stuff of dreams.

When You're Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want

You're going to be terribly disappointed, but it should probably be said up front how much you'll come to understand that the most productive thing you ever did alive was to decide your stance on masturbation. It was far more important than your education, your employment, your family. It's possible you've already realized this, though, so do your best to consider something else that will never take its place. Yes, you get to do what you want now, but you no longer get to feel gratification. Or grace. Pretty much nothing that begins with a "G," really. This probably already makes sense to you. If it doesn't, though, just wait and see.

LOVED YOU YESTERDAY,
Love You Still, **ALWAYS HAVE,**
ALWAYS WILL

Unsolicited Advice

It is technically possible that you will be able to forge a potentially respectful and even friendly relationship with Ex. But it's very important you understand the distinction between possibility and probability. If you do not understand the distinction, re-read items 5), 5a) and 5b). At least three times. All the way through. Right now.

a) In the highly improbable but nonetheless technically possible situation that you have forged a respectful and/or friendly relationship with Ex, here is a short list of absolutely forbidden topics in both considered and casual conversation:

—Sexual intercourse: frequency

—Sexual intercourse: ferocity

—Sexual intercourse: culmination in orgasm (yours) (real)

—Sexual intercourse: culmination in orgasm (Sig.Other's) (real)

—Sexual intercourse: culmination in orgasm (Sig.Other's) (fake)

—Sexual intercourse: culmination in conception (real)

—Sexual intercourse: culmination in conception (fake)

—Sexual intercourse: culmination in disease (no distinction)

—Sexual intercourse: duration

—Sexual intercourse: triangulation

—Sexual intercourse: diminishing returns

—Home furnishings: all, but especially that of master bedroom

b) In the highly improbable but nonetheless technically possible situation that you have forged a respectful and/or friendly relationship with Ex, here is a short list of approved topics for considered conversation only:

—Children's extra curricular activities

—Comparative current market prices for self-serve 89 octane unleaded gasoline

—Pro/con analysis: fat free milk or 2%

c) In the highly improbable but nonetheless technically possible situation that you have forged a respectful and/or friendly relationship with Ex, here is a short list of approved topics for casual conversation only:

—Recent experienced and/or forecasted weather patterns

—Status of employment (only if Ex can be considered "technically" so and also you can be considered "gainfully") (less likely)

—Status of Ex's tax, welfare and/or health insurance scams (more likely)

d) In the highly improbable but nonetheless technically possible situation that you have forged a respectful and/or friendly relationship with Ex, here is a short list of approved topics for both considered and casual conversation:

—That Goddamn Obama

Planking

That one night, he got so drunk that he actually wanted to make up with his wife, so he went into his shop and made her a board. He pulled a nicked and gnarled piece from the kindling bin, a board from a discarded pallet that had carried so very many things in the dark cool of a freon-refrigerated long-haul trailer, a board because he didn't keep paper in the shop but he did keep pencils, a board, he figured, because paper was just a flatter, fancy-pants form of board anyway.

So with at least half a dozen shots of Wild Turkey still gobbling in his belly, he scrawled the following prayer in the plank with the big, flat, coarse carpenter's pencil he kept sharpened with a box knife:

Lord, I should not be blessed with this miracle you call a women.

I should not be blessed with this ladie I call my wife.

I should not be blessed with such an angle you have given me.

I should not be blessed with someone so close to my own heart.

But I am and I am very happy.

P.S.: I AM NOT GAY

Upon presenting this to his wife (whose name he had scrawled on the back in parentheses, just in case Jesus/God/Whatever couldn't—or didn't want to—remember giving her to him), he was shocked to find out she wasn't impressed. And thus he was able to slip the noose of her anger and

disappointment over whatever she was angry and disappointed over in the first place by blaming her for not being appreciative.

This was a clever and near fail-proof strategy he used for nearly 20 years on her, until one day it just stopped working. Literally in one day, when she met someone else who preferred to communicate on fancy-pants boards instead of pallet planks, and the next day she left him and the next day he moved out and the next day they were divorced.

Not too soon after that, he unearthed his great artifact of rhetorical genius and deliberately leaned the sacred plank against her thin stack of garage sale items, to wit the only rational response she could muster was to break into his rental house and nail the thing not even five inches above the headboard of his bed where he slept and fucked someone else whose name had already appeared in at least two other sets of parentheses.

That, of course, was the moment he felt inspired to practice his own special brand of appreciation, the kind evidenced by the miraculous, crystal-clear recall of birthdays, anniversaries, favorites, first-times, last-times, and all significant times in between that he could never bring to surface before without her assistance or provocation. She later described his mind becoming a steel trap in this phase of things, but she eventually got over that. He, on the other hand, kept whittling at that terrible pencil until all his fingers were bloodied and the lead plumb done run out.

Know No Better

I'm sitting here in your back yard, looking at what remains of the shop you tore down, the one I never completed for you, the one I would run and hide in when you were mad at me, where I drew on scraps of wood and misspelled tender words that I knew were coming too little too late but you accepted anyway, carved them into the walls with the flat rectangle of my carpenter's pencil, deep grooves against the grain of the pine slats I never covered in sheetrock because you never stayed mad at me long enough to warrant it.

Sitting here at the metal and glass table you purchased at Lowe's where we used to walk on other days we were arguing about this or that, you a good five full steps ahead of me and never looking over your shoulder at me but catching my eye when you turned the corner. You always turned lots of corners there, it seemed. Because by the time we left the store, you'd usually have spent a couple hundred bucks and almost always ended up matching my steps back out to the truck, you and me walking in parallel over those big yellow eggcratey speed bumps with our cart shuddering like your legs on our early Sunday mornings with the door closed and the kids still hazy in the huge bowls of milk they'd poured themselves with flecks of cereal floating on top.

Sitting here in the mismatched chair, the one you didn't purchase at Lowe's, the one left over from one of your mother's yard sales, the one with the arch on top that looks like half of a wagon wheel, the one with aqua and fuchsia and flamingo pink plastic webbing in big thick straps, the one I used to sit in before with my shirt off—when I still sat around

you with my shirt off—and when I stood up the straps slicked with sweat had left their marks on me, wide fleshy ruts.

I'm not sitting in the other mismatched chair, the speckled plastic one molded into the shape of a giant hand, some colossus with its four fingers and one thumb all reaching up but holding at different angles to each other. Remember what I told you? It was Mother's Day. Or your birthday. Or our anniversary. Or something. Don't Never Say I Never Give You A Hand. I didn't know what a double negative was when I said that, but I know what one is now. No, I'm not never sitting in that one, and I don't have to say it no more.

Because I'm here for dinner and it's my birthday. You remembered, like you always did. You went to the store and bought everything, like you always did, brought it all home, like you always did, cooked it up, like you always did, lit the candles, like you always did, sang along with the kids, like you always did, held your breath and clutched your own hands as I blew, like you always did. When we got married you said I Do. Present tense. I said it too, but after you. I didn't know what verb tenses were when I said that, but I know what they are now.

Barbecued pork ribs. That's what's for dinner. Ones that must have been too big to stay on their bones because that's the way you bought them, no bones in sight. Big boneless rectangles of meat, boiled first on the stove because they never cooked through when they were just on the grill. Grey and pale orbs when you pulled them from the depth of the pot, the water they cooked in chunky and greasy with the parts and pieces that had fallen off. Dead meat made more dead.

Then they got slapped to the grill, each one paintbrushed in that honey and molasses sauce you make in that glass bowl, the one that looks like an upside down UFO. The sauce is stuck to everything around it, especially your fingers, stuck so good it doesn't lick off on the second or even third try. Stuck so good you have to scrub it off. The kids get it everywhere, leave trails and globs of it on the staircase handrails, on the bathroom lightswitch, on the toilet seat, on the big mirror

above the sink, on the faucet handles, and all over the towels wadded, piled and left on the floor.

The kids, they stay in there a long time. You don't say anything and I don't say anything. Your fingers are still sticky with honey and molasses, grey and pale underneath. It was one of the children—don't remember which—who called me this afternoon, but I know it was you who invited me, whose idea it was, so I came here. I came here because you still care, and because I want you to still love me. And I want you to say this to me, over and over again. Never stop saying it, like you always did.

I'm saying this because the last time there was a chance, you told me just to be honest. So I'm going to be totally honest and tell you that I won't reciprocate any of this. But you know that already. That's why there had to be a last time in the first place. I'm doing exactly what you told me you want, and some of what you don't tell me you want, probably way more of what you don't tell me than what you do tell me. This is me still trying. This is the most I can do, the best I know how. I'm sorry. This is who I am. For years that was enough, for me to be who I am. Now it's not enough. Now I have to be someone else. I'm being honest here because that's what you told me you wanted, not because I care about honesty. But you know that already.

That's why the last time was the last time. Because being honest wasn't the only thing you wanted. Your fingers are still sticky. Grey and pale, they still taste sweet. Come here, I want you to save me. Just one more time. You know, for old time's sake. The children, they're still upstairs. It's all right now.

Come on. It's my birthday.

Dear That Lane Bryant Girl

Years before you, I was a loyal customer of your employer. I always made time to spend my money in their stores. They rewarded me by having managers and clerks call to tell me about the latest sales and affirm that Lane Bryant loved me. They backed up their words by recognizing me when I visited, offering tissue while I tried on clothes, stuffing hand-fuls of those promotional Real Woman Dollars into each bag before sending me cheerfully on my way.

We were all so happy.

I first saw you six months ago, wearing a midnight blue hoodie in the Early Fall mailer. They had you buried in the back, crammed between the sweaters and bras. All of the other Lane Bryant Girls had multiple shots with multiple outfits. You, on the other hand, were buried beneath thick folds of velour, your face and hips covered in shadows. I barely noticed you then, like the early stages of an ingrown hair. Before the itch.

As the weeks wore on, I began seeing less of the others and more of you. Within two months' time you had crept out of the depths of the mailers and into the bright splash pages of the mid-seasonal catalogs, clad in everything from business suits to lingerie. When I visited, you were hung from the ceilings in large sheets of slick paper and stuck to the windows on even larger chunks of screen-printed vinyl. Without word or warning—let alone a telephone call—you became the company's curve.

Before I go any further with this, there are some major things I need to explain.

Major Thing #1: You Are Not Real

Lane Bryant's Real Woman advertisement scheme always seemed harmless enough until you came into the picture. When I visited, I was rewarded for being me, and a big part of these rewards took the form of Real Woman Dollars. Real Woman Dollars were essentially rebate coupons, and functioned as legitimate currency in every one of Lane Bryant's 700 stores. Spending any given 100 dollars earned 25 Real Woman Dollars; in my case, the ratio of real dollars to Real Woman Dollars was even higher. Store managers lined my pockets with them when I visited, and I got to know them very well. I bought a separate wallet, custom-embossed with the letters R and W so I could identify it by feel from the depths of my purse.

You're a young girl, so you probably don't know a whole lot about the history of things. Real Woman Dollars historically were printed on ivory cardstock with a black scripted font. Their elegance was both in their simplicity and in what they represented: the holder of a Real Woman Dollar was, in all essence and detail, a real woman. Unlike real U.S. dollars, which are printed with patent green ink on a delicate weave of cotton and linen, Real Woman Dollars bore no images of graven men, let alone images of women. Holding a Real Woman Dollar allowed me to define for myself what "real" meant.

This changed, of course, when you started appearing on them. The decision to strike your image onto each and every Real Woman Dollar was without precedent. As much and as often as I have asked, no manager has ever been able to explain this to me. Being as young as you are, you probably can't understand the ramifications of this. I'll return to this point later.

Major Thing #2: You Are Me, I Am Not You

I did some research on you. You weren't always a size 14. Less than two years ago you were a size zero model,

struggling with self-imposed anorexia. Your daily diet was a slurred rotation of lettuce leaves, fat-free Pringles, and high fiber cereal. You kept a daily workout routine of swimming, stairclimbing and freeweights. You weighed 98 pounds, ate 900 calories a day, and burned 1200. You wanted something badly enough to starve yourself for it, and just when you thought you had it, you collapsed into an overstuffed Barnes & Noble reading chair in the midst of a 10-hour shopping spree, during which you had ingested only a small bowl of steamed carrots custom-cooked for you at a Panda Express. You said to yourself that if you wanted to live, you had to give up caring about calories. So you did, and you gained 65 pounds, and now you're a plus-size model for a bigshot agency in New York City. You seem overwhelmed by what you surely perceive as some high irony, namely, that in your choice to eat again, you gained both weight and the success you so desperately craved. You've made a lap on the talkshow circuit. Featured in Glamour, Vogue, the whole shebang, all before turning 18. It's a Lifetime or Oxygen Channel movie-in-the-making, a brave and honest story of whatever we'll do to ourselves for This, That, or Whatnot.

Well whoopteefreakingdoo!

Now don't get me wrong here. I think it's great you're no longer dying, or whatever you want to call it. That you can live your particular lifestyle and not put yourself a through the figurative cheesegrater to do it is something to be commended. Hooray for you. Really.

I've enclosed a picture of myself when I was your age. The similarities are striking, aren't they? The faint feathering of our hair as it streaks the sides of our shoulders. The mustardy quality of our smile. The bell curves of our waist, smoothing to an S just before they jut out at the hip. The twinning of our pouting stare.

Fast forward now. Imagine yourself thirty years later: hair dulled, curves straightened into the shapes of illegible letters. How will the Future You regard the Past You? Will the two meet for a weekday lunch and silently judge each other's choices, in between stabs at tomatoes and spoonfuls of cottage

cheese? Will they pick up the check for each other, or will they insist on separate bills? Which one will be the first to grab a toothpick from the metal carousel next to the cashier's till? Moreover, who will be the first through the door, and the last to say a hasty, parking lot goodbye?

Major Thing #3: I Am Married to My Husband

He is a squat, balding man who has recently started talking too much. He says things that are on his mind, and for the most part these are things worth talking about, but it didn't used to be this way. For years he found ways to circumvent conversation; then, matters worth discussing were What's For Dinner and When Will You Be Home. He likes to eat carbs and drink big classes of whole milk right before he comes to bed, so the night air above us frequently smells like cheese and peanut butter sandwiches (this has been perfectly consistent, by the way).

I spend a lot of time away from him, and not necessarily because I want to. We live in a suburb of a city that is a suburb of a larger city. My home, naturally, is nowhere close to where I work, so I am what some call an "extreme commuter." I leave the house before five in the morning and rarely make it back much before eight in the evening. We have three children and I am the primary earner (this has been pretty consistent, too).

When our children were younger, my husband mostly stayed at home. He has a college degree in something or other that allows him to teach occasionally, but it's nothing predictable, permanent, or what someone could even remotely consider a career. Now that the children are older, he still mostly stays at home, but he isn't in any way domestic. His daily routine consists of shuffling back and forth between the bathroom, a small office, and the shower, all of which are located on the second story of our numblingly average two-story house. He has a perverse affinity for taking showers, and a measurable distaste for nearly everything downstairs, to wit he bought a grimy garage sale refrigerator and hired a couple of movers to lug the damn thing upstairs to the office.

It really shouldn't come as a surprise that my husband never checked the mail on any other occasion than a whim or when he was expecting some trinket he'd "won" on eBay. This is partly what I meant by saying that he's started talking too much. We have been married for well over twenty years; until very recently, there wasn't a single second of those twenty years that he's discussed his personal shopping forays so frankly.

"Did you know," he blurted out just last week, "that there are people auctioning off those inflatable love dolls?"

Please tell me what I should have said to him. Because maybe you know. You are, after all, a Real Woman.

Well, this real woman was completely tongue-tied. I'm not certain what would inspire someone to auction a used love doll, and I'm even less sure of what array of search terms and hyperlinks would lead somebody to one. What I do know is that I'm married to a man who not only found such an item online, but recounted the excitement of finding it to me with a pubescent grin that I haven't seen for decades.

And I know it well, girl, because I used to tell my friends about it, when I still cared about being smiled at and being talked about long after leaving a conversation. It's the same rumpled, Z-shaped grin he gave me before we started dating back in junior high. It was a signal that he was coming for me, in the way that I was supposed to want to be wanted. It was the first thing I saw before and after. The first thing he saw before and after was you. Meaning me, when you were me.

Hopefully you see where I'm going with this.

For a long time, before and after had different looks. After the children, we didn't seek out each other's faces; the room was a tangle of distractions from the television or neighborhood traffic, me thinking about waiting my turn, him guessing at what I was thinking. And we were perfectly fine with that. Really. We raised our children and I worked my job and he officed his mishmash and we looked our different looks. That's the way it was for a long, long time. And it was fine.

Really.

Fine.

And I should be happy now that the grin is back, right? It should remind me that the core of him is still there, despite what the shell of him looks or smells like. Well I am not happy. Now that the grin is back I am reminded of being me more and more, while feeling like you less and less. And I'm not sure who to blame for any of this. I see you in my mailbox, on my computer screen, in once-sacred places and thoughts I used to visit because I thought they were truly sacred. I'm wearing your clothes, brushing your hair, shaving your legs. I'm becoming un-Real.

I didn't want to end up finding sticky pictures of myself all over my own house, so I started tacking up pictures of you instead. I put them everywhere I couldn't reach': above the sink, on top of the refrigerator, in the bookcases, under the pillows. I put them in these places, thinking I would see them and he would see them, and that would somehow roll back the grin. I started handing them to my husband when they came in the mail, and bcc:ing them to him when they clogged my inbox. I made a pimp and whore of him. He did anything I asked, and he talked dirty to me irregardless of my being there. He loved me completely. Stupid me.

So what I'm asking should be fairly obvious.

I want you to go away.

I want you to slink back to Jackson or Tempe or Crystal Lake or wherever you came from, and I want you to do it as quietly as possible. No cameras or recording devices allowed. Don't make a spectacle or big deal about it. I'll do your press release and call all your people. I'll tell your mom you're already on your way.

You don't have to consider the alternatives. I'm already there.

The Show

This is the story that manufactured the other story that became the relationship premised on all of the above, a Jenga tower assembled high and without wide enough base to support itself. Pretty much like everything. This is the selection of promises that were never made good upon, the best intentions not withstanding, the trying times mutating into the tired times, the lie and deceit of love, the selfishness of wanting to stay forever in the dream state and loathing every miserable second of the waking state. He told her a long time ago to practice signing his name, again and again, so she could replicate it perfectly, so their handwriting couldn't be distinguished. And when she did this, when she had it down cold, that was the point when he took it away and made her promise to never ever do it again, promise to forget him. This, after all, is why it's called "breaking up." Because she didn't, you see. She really really didn't.

This is the dream she can't ever make just a dream, and not because he won't allow it or it's impossible. This is the part that's real, and it starts this way: he ties the straps tight on the trailer carrying his motorcycle, the one she still makes payments on because he hasn't worked for four months straight. His daughter, 2 dogs and aforementioned wife are all tucked into the car in front of him but this is the persistent pattern: drive drive drive, stop; pull pull tie tie; drive drive drive, stop; pull pull tie tie. This morning he made sure his wife wrestled her wedding band over her knuckle, the one she hadn't worn for the better part of two years, the one which kinda-sorta matched his (both were *round*), purchased 10 minutes before their courthouse scene scripted out of some

horrible cable TV show, the scene where the friend and the other friend take an extended lunch break to stand somewhere and witness something and sign something before they all leave to swill 64-ounce sodas and swallow biggie-sized fries from a drive-thru on the way back to work. *Ceremony*, of course, isn't the right word for this, but that's what it was called when someone garbed in a Carolina blue suit handed him an itemized receipt with very word on it, and his sense of the world was that multi-syllabic words rarely lied.

It is pouring rain, unusual for Utah in August. The high elevation desert floods within minutes, the baked clay tight from the hot summer and totally uninterested in loosing its grip on the landscape. Lake Bonneville used to be one of the world's largest bodies of water, in an era before humans walked the planet, invented religion, pretended to be gods, and conjured impossible stories to justify their behaviors. Now there is barely a sketch of the lake, its shores mere traces along the horizon of a past no one remembers because they never experienced it, not entirely unlike the one he had before moving here and having her and all of the whatnottery that came along. But like the lake long gone, the past is as well.

His wife is asleep, dreaming. The dream is always this one: spies in glass rooms, smoke and bullets filling the space, the world just a heartbeat away from total annihilation. She has this dream and never shares it. She doesn't know what any of it means and she's smart enough not to trust anything her husband might say in response. A recurring dream, it follows and haunts her, like a spurned lover who just can't accept the finality of things, who somehow always finds a way to play semantics when she says things like It's Over and I Don't Love You Anymore and I Don't Think I Really Ever Did and This Is Really Goodbye.

In the dream there is a company that pays her money to build databases. Virtual vaults of information programmed to sort, stack and sift until patterns form, ciphers blurring into meanings before fuzzing into facts. She has done this long enough and well enough to understand the volatility of the entire universe, how removing a single term—sarcoidosis, say—from a medical database literally loosens the entire

economy and knowledge base of the world that teeters on top of it. The thing that's present but not acknowledged, the complete lack of syntax necessary for a language to arrive and convey itself.

He, of course, works for The Networking Company, the backbone of the entire universe, the gatekeeper of zero and one, and the entire spectrum between the two. He is full-force static-skin. In this dream his reasons for being are entirely financial, and she is here in her sift of bytes simply because of her market value, because of all the things they've come to own that aren't children, and how those things were never worth the price they paid in the first place. No such thing, then, as value appreciation. Value, in the dream, is only ever inflated. As it always is in the non-dream.

This isn't the thing that keeps her sleeping. Her rest is finite and not all that restful, but it is a deliberate choice and hers to make and the most obvious one given all the pit stops. What keeps her sleeping is the low level of fuel it takes to maintain herself as Just Fine, how here she can't feel the metal above the webbing between her fingers and her hand, and can displace the muscle memories of his tugs at the tips of her, his palms simultaneously at her temple and back of her head, his thick burn in her throat and stomach.

Another thing keeping her sleeping is the release she feels from instructing her daughter in the delicate performance art of committed relationships, and she deals with this by making the girl sleep as much as she possibly can, sometimes using any means necessary. Methods and/or chemistry. She isn't proud of this. She knows the damage this is causing. But therapy exists for that sort of deal. There is no cure for alone.

The irony for her is that when we sleep we are at our most isolated and vulnerable, so our brains try to tell us fictions about how this isn't the case; when our brains succeed, we call that bliss; when they fail, we call that nightmare. States of bliss and nightmare are both just stories, the stuff of fairy tales and horror, stuff that never lasts, and never existed in the first place. The truth of any committed relationship is that it always is struggling to find balance between these stories, rendering

its participants little more than actors on a stage laden with trap doors, false floors and falling. Ever falling.

Dreams within dreams. This is the thing that keeps her sleeping the most. The thing that keeps us all. The labyrinth and puzzle of them, the awareness that waking isn't really waking. Or doesn't have to be. The thick comfort that arrives like a blanket, after the adrenaline shot of having survived the nightmare, of watching it evaporate, of feeling more dead than alive than dead than she probably should. Than we all probably should.

There is much to pity in both of them, but we will always choose a side. We choose hers. Why?

Perhaps it's because we know her better, which is to say we know more of the things she's done that she would take back if she could. Perhaps it's because we don't know him at all, which is to say he's made different choices than us, takes on a different set of priorities and responsibilities than us, does whatever it is he does that keeps us from knowing him in the first place. Perhaps it's because she is beautiful, which is, in most cases, to say nothing in particular, to say nothing stands out. But you. You do what you like. Like you always do. Like anyone ever always does. Dreams within dreams implore, seduce us all to sleep. Not another word now.

Shush.

When You're Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want

You can paint every room every color. All at the same time. And you'll be able to see every color distinct from every other color. You can do this. And you will love what you make of it. But you need to know that no one else will be able to see this but you, not even your dead children. Only you. If this makes any difference in your choice of palate or pattern, perhaps you don't understand what painting really is.

family **WE MAY NOT HAVE IT ALL TOGETHER, BUT TOGETHER WE HAVE IT ALL**

Unsolicited Advice

The only true and permanent and legal form of revenge is to conceive a child with Sig.Other. But only proceed with extreme caution on this after long and emotionally crippling conversations about it that spiral for hour upon hour, night after night, month after month, year after year. If you are still able to engage in sexual activity after this, consider it a Sign From Above that you are blessed and special. Because that is, without any hesitation of doubt, exactly what it is.

Ontology

My children are usually messy eaters, but last night was an exception. They sat properly at the table, waved their forks and spoons through their food in correct, symmetrical patterns, sipped their beverages from their cups without a sound, and dabbed their mouths thoughtfully with their napkins. We were so proud of them when they thanked us for the meal, excused themselves from the table, cleared their plates, glasses and silverware, and retired in single file up the stairs, as if we were Roy Scheider's angelic little family in *Jaws*.

That's the movie based on a novel where a Great White shark bigger than Vermont tries to eat everyone on Martha's Vineyard over a single Memorial Day weekend. I spent my entire childhood terrified of that shark. When I was 6 years old, my family went on vacation to southern California, which is quite a long way away from Martha's Vineyard. I grew up in Twin Falls, Idaho, in the most working working class neighborhood imaginable, despite the fact that all the streets were named after famous presidents.

In southern California, there are real Great White sharks, but there are also fake ones. Metallic robotic fake ones. Families on vacation pay real money really on purpose to have them (the fake sharks) terrorize them (the families on vacation). My family was always equally interested in commerce and terrorism. But this doesn't make them special. Any family on vacation is geared this way. For this particular trip we drove from Twin Falls to Anaheim and did so in my parents' burgundy Volkswagen bus with a pop-top camper and 8-track player. My parents were the farthest things from

hippies: their Volkswagen bus was only an occasional weekend driver; their Volkswagen bus wasn't originally burgundy but gunmetal gray, and it wasn't originally shot with a clear coat of metal flake; their Volkswagen bus, on the occasional weekend it was driven, was most often parked on a gypsum-crusted driveway perpendicular to a three-bedroom, air-conditioned cabin complete with full kitchen and microwave oven and curved glass television and linoleum and 20-foot picture windows that stretched all the way up to heaven. My parents were the farthest things from hippies: the rotation of 8-track cassettes was tight and small, and they were all greatest hits compilations: The Bee Gees, Waylon Jennings, Barbra Streisand. My father looked nothing like Waylon or Barry Gibb, but my mother did strike a close enough resemblance to Barbra in both face and figure (Robin Gibb in face only), and especially close enough for a southern Idaho ditchweed town like Twin Falls so as to earn herself a catcall or two.

The drive down was 78 hours of early August swelter. My father's sole sibling, an older sister, caravanned with us in a royal blue Chevy pickup whose ass end shook with the weight of a much-too-large camper shell. (This, I discovered over and over again in my adolescence, was a physical trait my aunt shared with the vehicle; she never did lose her high-school moniker "Mudflaps," nor her well-earned reputation which amplified it.) The camper had one of those peeling manufacturer's stickers on its plexiglas window, the kind depicting a cartoon Indian or a cave man or a turtle or a penguin or a whatever in full-wink mode, its big fat thumb pointed up in the air as permanent affirmation to the camper's owner-operator that he had made the right purchase.

My older cousin—named after Captain Kirk because (a) he was born the same year *Star Trek* premiered and (b) his mother had a raging girl hard-on for William Shatner—rode with me and my parents. He, too, was an only child to parents of non-hippies, evidenced by the fact that the family pickup remained static with its stock Delco push-button radio, and even moreso that its big bouncy bench seat was eternally (and deliberately) tucked and swaddled into a horse blanket. For the simple

majority of hours we spent not sleeping, Captain and I smashed miniature metal cars against one another in the back-back of the Bus, over and over again, head-on and t-bone and rear-end collisions, for pretends. When we were each only a couple of years older, we would practice these collisions with our own bodies, for reals.

When our caravan pulled onto the enormous lake of sun-warmed asphalt which was the Universal Studios theme park's parking lot, we had largely trekked the distance to see a fake shark. After spilling out of the Bus, our non-hippie parents paid Captain and I's entrance, and the entire family cluster made right for *Jaws: The Ride*, when we rode a fake tour bus around a fake lake. The fake tour bus had a fake stall as it traversed a fake bridge which, of course, bent us down to the lip of the water when there was a fake collapse of the fake bridge to heighten the very real anxiety we felt.

I immediately scrambled to the high side of the bench seat, but my aunt pulled me back with a large jerk of her football-wide forearm. She grinned and gnarled her eyebrow at me. Then she shoved me flush against the opening on the low side of the bench seat, right where the water line met the itchy, flaky fiberglass of the fake tour bus's window.

My aunt crushed her forearm into my back, splaying my little flab and even littler muscle with her big fat football arm, forming a perfect perpendicular line right up against my spinal column that I could feel all the way up in the tops of my teeth. Captain giggled and pointed from the high end of the tour bus, where he was pinned against the opposing window frame by my aunt's enormous ass and thus kept clear of the fray at the water's edge. The fake shark fin broke the skin of the fake lakewater not even 10 feet away from my window, slicing its way not only into my direct line of sight, but quite directly right towards *me*.

Which, of course, is something entirely different; separating a human being from what they can *see* and what they *are* is—as far as I'm concerned and have conducted rudimentary research into—a fundamental distinction that we make all the time and helps us sleep at night, for if we were to

fully experience (and I mean this in the most visceral ways: *in our bones*) everything that we saw, we wouldn't last too long, and most likely wouldn't want to.

Being witness to something *is* experiential, sure, but only in and of itself. To witness something isn't to actually experience the thing being witnessed, like how seeing a fake shark fin make a bee-line for you in the real water of a fake lake tricks all your senses and even sizable chunks of your cerebral cortex into triggering your instinctual mechanisms to take flight of the situation; however, the reality of the deal is that you are only witnessing your own fear, feeling it surge against your aunt's big meaty forearm that certainly feels like it's all the way up inside you but it isn't, feeling it dart up through your blood and throat and lips like tiny knives stabbing at the air around you that would whistle and scream —in that eye-popping way that only 6 year old boys can scream—if you, of course, had the full capability and capacity of your lungs at your disposal, which naturally you don't, because of the truly over-the-line amounts of pressure your aunt is exerting to keep you locked in the magnificently monstrous moment when the fake fin juts suddenly and terribly up with a great shudder of its hydraulicky-robotty parts down from somewhere way underneath the water line, exposing the big shiny nose and eyes and mouth and carrot-length teeth all flapping together in the most ghastly, rickety chomp-chomp-chomp of your worst nightmares up and over and—wait—yes yes yes—past you.

Because you were, after all, merely a witness, and when you hear third and fourth-hand accounts of how eyewitnesses totally fuck up the details of what really happened of the things they've really and truly seen, you nod your head accordingly and without uttering a chirp.

Death Do Us Part

Firecracker rolled his thick head counter-clockwise until it was directly parallel to the ceiling. A thin green haze floated over him.

02:43 a.m.

The cold crept over his toes, buried underneath a metric ton of cotton, acrylic fleece and honest-to-god, real duck-feathered down, zig-zagged by a mile of thermal wire heating the lumpy electric blanket below him. He knew at this moment what it felt like to be a slice of bread left in the tray too long after it had finished toasting, the scarlet wires beneath him cooling to a dirty grey as the heat left him there, suspended in a half-still of his former self. He wiggled an ankle to feel the blood slosh into his heel, the warmth spilling up his calf like the floorboard heater in the car. Jangling the other ankle, he felt nothing but the graze of the fleece against the top of his foot.

Nothing.

His wife Flame lay sleeping in half-wake in the guest room across the hall, as she had been doing off and on for the past thirty years. Well before Firecracker took sick, she siphoned her clothes and rose-colored cans of Aqua-Net hairspray into the little room as a meek protest against all the cooking, cleaning and obligatory sex duties she superimposed upon herself while he was away (ten out of every fourteen days on average) driving long-haul to Portland (via Bend), Missoula (via Idaho Falls), and Los Angeles (via Wells). After Flame and Firecracker's second divorce, they married a third (and

final) time with the stipulation that she would learn to run the rig herself and accompany him. Their living, sleeping, driving and working together lasted all of a month, just long enough for Flame to quit her waitressing job and pick it right back up again with no questions asked. She took her rightful share of Firecracker's check and decorated her new bedroom with everything her heart desired (under $19.98, natch) from the Harriet Carter catalog. The last thing to arrive in the deluge was a digital alarm clock whose undeniable selling feature was its ability to project military time onto the ceiling in glorious 3 X 5 foot lime green numbers. When the clock failed to distinguish between sixes and eights, she transplanted it into Firecracker's room. Served him right, the sunnovabitch.

His eyes veered towards the small bathroom strategically planted directly at the foot of his mammoth California King. It took six weeks in a miniature hospital bed for Firecracker to completely forget the cool sensation of a plastic toilet seat below him. In the terminal two months he had spent at home he was only able to muster one brutal bowel movement. His time in the bathroom here at home was largely out of routine, not necessity. He reminded himself of this: his dentures left soaking in their sterile cup on the counter for over a year now; his bland reflection in the mirror above them. [Re]Cognition failing.

02:44 a.m.

When the cold in his feet boiled into his stomach, his initial urge was to squeeze the remote control for his blanket that had planted itself into his left hand. In his right lay the controller for the TV/VCR combo; for weeks he had been devising mnemonic devices to differentiate between blanket and cable TV, but ultimately none of them stuck. Upon gripping and squeezing what he thought to be the plastic box in his left hand, televisual light and sound pummeled the room in both the image and sardonic volume of Fox News' Bill O'Reilly. Firecracker prodded his left hand to respond again and the volume grew louder. Again and the image changed to Chris Matthews. Again and the volume grew louder. Again and the volume grew louder. Again and the volume grew louder.

Again and the image changed to Flame. She blinked a thin blink and felt the weight of his stare, felt it full at the back of her head and down into her neck, the slow creeping cascade over her shoulders. Firecracker ceased his prodding but the volume grew louder, his thumb slack and growing heavier than his stare.

Flame blinked another blink, 02:45 am, and another, still 02:45 am, and another. When the image first changed to Chris Matthews and the volume was lower, she hadn't flinched. She never had, never in their entire relationship, and with his blood cooling in his veins, finally after all these years, after all the uncertainty and contempt, she sure as hell wasn't about to return his gaze. Not now. No fucking way. Her moment. Arrived.

Authorization Declined
(with Lily Hoang)

James's grandfather always said that Frey was a dead ringer for the boys' grandmother. He usually said this when Frey got himself into trouble, which he did every time he got near his grandfather. James, on the other hand, never gets caught.

Their grandfather would say, "Frey, you little fucker, you look just like your fucking grandmother when she's fucking another man."

And together, they'd pout their twin pout.

James's grandfather just could not control himself when he saw them.

It was never clear to James or Frey as children why their grandparents lived in the same house. They fought violently over anything: what was cooked for dinner, the way it tasted in their old mouths, the matching silverware. They talked openly of their disgust for one another at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter dinners. They viciously plotted against each other by intentionally overdrawing their bank accounts and bouncing mortgage checks. It wasn't that they didn't have the money. They simply enjoyed watching the humiliation of the "declined" look some waiter or whoever would give. They would be even more proud, depending on how many other witnesses were present.

The grandparents kept their entire financial realities at the same bank where James's mother worked, and because James's mother wasn't their daughter—family isn't a technicality: you're either family or you're not—they took ready advantage of her willingness to clean up their messes:

“Now tell me dear, why would they call it overdraft ‘protection’ if we’re not really protected?” She could be so sweet when she felt like it, but this was rarely the case. James’s grandmother scowled and stood, her knobby fingers plunged into her hips.

“And what…”

James’s grandfather also stood, although he was always slightly stooped from years of bad posture.

“…are you *implying?”* the grandmother snapped. “That we need *your* credit?”

Her scowl lunged deeply into the grandmother’s cheekbones. James’s grandfather shot a glance towards the thick oak door, but just as quickly, he corrected himself and returned his glossed eyes back onto James’s mother. She was sweating.

“I’m only ever going to say this once.” His eyes narrowed in perfect tense with his voice. “You are a whore.”

The grandmother knocked the knuckle of her index finger on top of her daughter-in-law’s desk before straightening, then wagging, the full, fleshy digit at James’s mother. “A *fucking* whore.”

That night, James’s grandparents tried anal sex for the first time in decades. The grandfather’s skin fell loose around his waist and abdomen. The grandmother grabbed until she felt moisture under her nails. That was the kind of woman she was. Then, she bent him over the lime green dresser that he’d painted for her a lifetime ago and pushed a Vaselined 7UP bottle up his ass.

As she worked him over the glass bottle, she thought about the first time they did this. She’d begged to use an unopened bottle, which he thought was a bad idea from the start, but she insisted it would increase the sensation. She said she’d done it a million times.

Of course, it was a tight fit going in, but it was well lubricated and chilled, which he liked.

Afterwards, he painted the dresser lime fucking green, even though he couldn't sit, so they would always remember how much he hated her.

James's grandmother, every time she sees it, can't help but laugh.

The truth of it was that James's grandfather didn't think that Frey was his grandson. Sure, they came out of the same pussy, but that doesn't prove anything. James, however, he proudly claimed as his own. James's grandfather always said that Frey belonged to the old hag, meaning James's grandmother.

There was no real reason why he chose one boy over the other. They looked exactly the same. They had the same voice and opinion. There was just something plain dumb about Frey that James's grandfather couldn't quite place. He'd say, "Must be that you're part whore," which Frey came to believe, although he didn't know what part of the world whores came from.

James's mother didn't like the boys to go over to the grandparents' house, but James's father wanted them to have a "relationship" with their ailing grandparents.

"Ailing?"

"Honey, they're old."

"Fuck you. Don't call me 'honey.' You know I hate it."

"You know what I mean."

"If they're old, it means they'll die soon, right?"

"I don't understand this resentment you have towards them. I mean, what did they do to you?"

James's mother had pretty but vacant eyes. Whenever his father tried to look her in the eyes—to try to guess what she was thinking—he'd become even more confused.

"My parents have been nothing but generous with you."

James's father was neither a fool nor ignorant, and the only thing he'd inherited from his parents was their need for sexual adventure.

James’s grandparents’ house was a dump. It’s always been a dump, not because of the house itself or the neighborhood but because they didn’t care to maintain it.

Whenever James’s grandmother cooked, the house reeked for weeks.

James’s grandparents left stains where they’d fucked.

James’s grandfather refused to throw away his used tissues and q-tips.

When James and Frey came over, they wouldn’t want to sit down or touch anything.

And their grandfather would say, “Frey, you little fucker, you look just like your fucking grandmother when she’s fucking another man.” It was like he just could not help thinking about his wrinkly wife in bed with another man when he looked at the boy, and this always made him a little excited.

James’s grandfather would call James over. He’d say, “Boy, do you know what a hard-on is?”

James would nod his head, since he’s had this conversation with his grandfather a million times.

James’s grandfather would say, “Boy, do you know where you put a hard-on?”

James would nod his head, since he’s had this conversation with his grandfather a million times. James would show his crooked teeth in something resembling a smile. Frey, however, had learned—a million minus one times ago—to start running.

Saint Fred Rogers

I am remembering this day for all days.

Remembering. All days. Always.

This is the day you threw the TV out the upstairs window.

I'm remembering.

Always.

This is the day that started with you shaking the toaster over me so all the crumbs fell out.

This is the day that followed the day where you broke the egg in the silverware drawer.

This is the day that followed that day.

I'm remembering.

This is the day that you told me to stand still so I stood still and kept standing there.

But that's not unlike all the other days. Still.

This is the day you dumped salt all over the table.

This is the day you fed the goldfish.

Kept feeding them.

Kept feeding them.

Kept feeding them.

This is that day. I'm remembering.

This is the day you bruised my mouth with bubble gum toothpaste.

I’m remembering that, too. This is that day.

This is the day after the day the grocery store lady gave you Fred Bear stickers to give to me.

But you never gave them to me. I remember.

This is the day that followed the day where you promised the Fred Bear stickers.

Remember? This is that day.

This is the day that it rained and rained and rained and rained and rained.

This is the day that you went outside and said how hard it had rained.

This is the day that came to you like all the other days. One at a time.

I’m remembering.

This is the day they came to cut off the cable.

This is the day they repossessed the car.

This is the day they turned off the electricity.

This is the day they disconnected the internet.

Just like all the other days. One at a time.

This is the day the refrigerator defrosted.

This is the day the toilets backed up.

I’m remembering. Everything.

This is that same day. Just like all the other days.

One at a time.

This is the day where morning broke wide open, and everything was still.

The day where nothing moved. And then everything. In one huge motion.

This is the day after the day they all said it would be okay.

They promised. With their big eyes, too. I remember. They promised.

That was the day they said whatever they could say to make you put me down.

Walk away.

Slowly.

Turn around.

Hands on the hood.

One at a time.

The day where, well, you know.

You know.

When You're Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want

Apologize. For everything. You may not have time for haunt, but you do have time for this. Start with the one that ends This Isn't Really Goodbye.

breathe, YOU'RE HOME

Unsolicited Advice

In the event of Ex's death, you are, unfortunately, 110% on your own. But in consolation, know that the current page you are currently holding is redeemable for one free draft at The 1853 Club in the sleepy but painfully fair township of LaRue, Ohio. Please don't mind that the page wasn't pre-perforated for you to make this last conscious act of yours on the planet just a little bit easier. Rest assured none of it was done on purpose. You're feeling better already. Or you will. Or you should. Especially if you're packing.

Siren

Wendy Peterson is pulling me into her bus line, the one for the #43, the pencil-barrel yellow monstrosity that slides past Candy Cane Park and the Kiwanis tennis courts before it deposits her exactly five houses down from where she lives on El Monte St, 70-some footsteps to her parents' front door. In less than 45 seconds my bus will depart, the #19, the one that scurries down 2nd Ave and only turns right one time before spitting its passengers out at Lincoln ("Stink-in.") Elementary and shoos them away.

The thing/dilemma is this: the #43 is nowhere to be seen, which is typical and expected, but something that is not typical and expected is how Wendy Peterson is knotting all of her fingers into all of mine ("I forgot my gloves.") and has no pretense of letting go anytime soon ("Keep my hands warm.").

Tammy Tanaka is standing behind Wendy Peterson, which means that Tammy Tanaka is staring at me from over Wendy Peterson's shoulder. Tammy Tanaka is silent for right now, but at the end of 7th period she began begging her best-best friend Not To and/or At Least Think More About It, but as usual, Tammy Tanaka is just in the way.

Wendy Peterson is wrenching my wrists, pulling our maze of fingers and thumbs up into the gap between my chin and the forward nape of my Columbia ski jacket. I don't drop the backpack usually slung over just the one shoulder because I don't have it because Wendy Peterson gripped it off my shoulder between 6th–7th period and locked it inside Wendy Peterson's own locker using Wendy Peterson's own combination which is only one of many sequences of numbers

Wendy Peterson knows I can never remember ("You *don't have* any homework tonight, silly."). Tammy Tanaka is shifting her weight and sighing; she disappears behind Wendy Peterson's torso entirely but I can see her breath on the cold air, rising out of the back of Wendy Peterson's hair.

Wendy Peterson is sliding our hands up my face, rotating them and pressing them forward. I am feeling the bones of her hands against my nostrils and lips (*"Blow."*). Our hands are not cold and they haven't been but that is besides the point because I do as I'm told. Wendy Peterson knows this about me intuitively; this is, after all, why I'm here, doing my best to force the air inside my lungs against her skin, but she is pressing too hard and I'm spitting more than anything even resembling blowing, and the vibration causes a small farting sound that only we can hear at the back of the line for #43.

Wendy Peterson is wriggling her knees into my legs, her torso leaning forward to counterbalance, her own forehead pitching into my own forehead. She is raising like an elevator, straight up, our eyes in parallel after pushing her toes deep into her Keds, lifting her heels at least a good inch off the rock-salted sidewalk, her eyebrows levitating into commas as her mouth disappears behind our nest of fingers and thumbs, and I feel her lips between my knuckles and I hear the same farting sound from behind the curtain of digits, and her eyebrows flatten a bit so I know she is smiling.

Tammy Tanaka and Tammy Tanaka's breath are nowhere to be found in the periphery. It's just Wendy Peterson and I, farting in stereo, as the #19 pulls away ("Oooooops! Now you *have* to.").

We are losing track of every second it takes the #43 to take the #19's place. Steam and spittle are boiling in the air between us.

The column of beanie caps and backpacks is marching slowly up the #43's steep stairs. Tammy Tanaka is already sitting in the first seat, first left, staring straight ahead into the bus' monstrous glass windshield and is trying really really hard not to blink the eyes behind her tortoise-shell frames.

She is leading me to the very back of the bus, but all of the seats are taken on either side in the last row.

She is following the bus driver's rules by letting me hold my own hands as we are shuffling our way down the aisle.

She is sliding her hips into the last empty bench, four rows up from the back, right-hand side, scooching all the way down to the window.

She is unlashing the glass from the windowpane.

She is sitting down with her back set a perfect 90 degrees to the wall of the bus, framing the space.

She is extending her hands to me ("Come *here."*), both of them at the exact same length at the exact same time.

She is singing to me when I land on the big bouncy block of naugahyde (*"Oooooh baby do you know what that's worth?"*) and attempt a resting place perpendicular to her.

She is wedging her leg down into the gap where the back and seat meet, arms in perfect parallel with the line she's drawn from her waist down to the toe tips of her Keds, hands spidering past the puffy shoulders of my jacket ("No, silly. *Come here."*).

She is breathing big breaths, deep into my vertebrae.

And she is crossing her arms in front of me, cinching me in by clutching her own elbows.

And she is singing to me again.

And she is here.

And I am here.

And this is home.

The Pearl of Great Price

As he approaches the end of the notebook he's spent months upon months smearing with waterproof ink, she is perfectly content to sit on the balcony and watch the pigeons take aim on all the poor bastards below them, all those people they've finally succeeded keeping at bay through their cleverness, lawyers and patience.

She unlatches a flat of plastic dividers and begins selecting beads from its compartments, careful not to drop them through the slats of her table out here, the one she knew better than to have purchased at IKEA, the one she bought on her very first visit out here, when both of them were formally attached not to each other, the one she asked him to hide in his garage and then shed and then garage again and then storage facility and then other garage and then same storage facility again, kept sealed in its thin, worn cardboard wrapper. She's sworn him not to open it until she had arrived here for keeps, and he was fatally incapable of telling her no.

To say that she enjoys watching the birds assail the sidewalk and whomever might be unfortunate enough to traverse it at those most unfortunate of times wouldn't at all be correct, because in her heart of hearts she just isn't geared that way. This never stops her from laughing when she sees it happen, though. And that's probably why karma is such a bitch, for this is when she's most likely to lose a bead to the table's maw, and this is usually a cause of great concern/expense/danger. For it is certainly one thing for a bird to evacuate its bowels from such a height so so far above the concrete/asphalt/steel of this gentrified nightmare of a

neighborhood, but it is quite another to have a ceramic/glass/nylon pebble plummeting from that same height, falling and spinning with enough velocity and friction for it to pockmark anything it touches before shattering into a furious little puff of something no one below could have ever seen coming.

This, of course, is easily the best way to describe their relationship: an asteroid or errant comet from deeper space, a fragment or shard from something larger that has existed in another universe for forever and forever and is only now hurtling through our atmosphere, scorching everything it touches. Because as calm as they currently appear, as serene and satiated as they seem when they aren't sharing the exact same physical space, the simple truth of the matter is that they are literally burning for one another and have been for aeons.

For your consideration: the constant mess left on the massive red couch she'd bought at Pottery Barn, the one purchased when she formally purchased their condo and hired a small army of people to grunt everything up the 10 flights of stairs, the same couch stained with little oil slicks from their buttered popcorn and sticky from grocery-store-ready tubes of unbaked cookie dough.

For your consideration: the never-ending parade of sheets washed/dried/stretched daily onto their king-sized bed, draped in a goose down comforter that rarely sees the top of the headboard because he is constantly kicking it up and over the footboard, his scrawny ankles working feverishly to scrape the heavy fabric off the legs and the feet where for years she's kept little reminders of him under skin with permanent ink.

For your consideration: the dual heads installed in their stone-tiled shower, the one upgraded with the largest and most expensive water heater that keeps the red-hot rainfall running for well over an hour easy, because this is where they enjoy each other's company more than most places, because they don't feel compelled to utter even a single syllable here when they are together, the morning sun sneaking through the one thin window and spilling onto the floor, waiting quietly for them to step out and dry their toes without thinking about

anything except the slapping their skin makes, the sound still echoing inside long after they leave the room and take their places here past the sliding glass door on the patio overlooking the world they've built here together.

On purpose.

For each other.

Forever.

Apartment M

Listen. I moved out so I could have a secure, private place to masturbate. I told the children it was because I "Couldn't Do It Anymore," and I left their mother to parse my pronoun usage. I rented a one-bedroom apartment a block away from where my family lived, using an alias and a Gold's Gym membership card set to expire exactly one month into the future from the date I signed the lease. I did this to do the necessary thing.

When the children's mother asked me how long I thought I'd be gone, and how long before I'd be back, she honestly thought she was asking me two separate questions. I responded flatly and fatherly with one answer. "Until it's done." Her reply was her typical reply. "Of course."

I requested a specific apartment for this and did it a specific way. I signed the lease sight unseen. I sent an assistant to do the walk-through. He set up my space with the basics I would need to be done: a dresser, a bed, a futon and an armchair. Some of this furniture had already hibernated at my former residence, but I liberated and repurposed it, much to the surprise of the children's mother, who figured I would buy all new because I always insisted on buying new simply for the sake of being able to do so. The children's mother and I had built a comfortable life together and each of our seven children had a sizable segment of our 15,000 square foot house to merrily label "My Room": seven doors adorned and complete with seven separate ceramic name plates, each indicating which child belonged behind which of the seven doors designated for this particular habitation process, wherein a parent (usually the children's mother) points in a general

upward direction with an outstretched finger and says, “Your Room,” and thus begins a long game at tug of war wherein the child and parent(s) negotiate via a wide spectrum of hard and soft terrorism and threats as to what exactly can, should and will be done with and in the child’s designated space.

Listen. I’ve been called plenty of things. Selfish is frequently one of them. Does my awareness of this fact about myself and my declaration of same give me permission to do whatever I want? No. And I will tell you why, but not right now.

I specifically targeted an apartment complex that only used letters to designate and separate its units. My assistant looked all over the city for an Apartment M; he had specific instructions to find something as far away from the children’s house as possible. He failed. My Apartment M could not have been closer, despite his insisting every complex in the city with lettered units was occupied and locked down in leases that were at least 18 months away. My assistant is in desperate need of being fired. Some more. I spared him this again by reminding myself that it was the letter that mattered most, not the distance. It was the letter that would keep me on task. Keep me focused. Remind me why I was there before I turned the single key in both of the doorlocks.

I have lots of spaces to keep track of, see. The only space with a number is the children’s house, and it’s 7 digits long. Listen, I read. And what I read tells me that contemporary psychology proves that the longest list of things most people can recall on the fly is a list that has no more than 7 items. What I read calls this the “Magical Number Seven,” and uses quotation marks and capital letters to say it. This is what most people’s brains top out at, 7 items. The children’s mother used to ask me about having an 8th child. I always said no. Not because I don’t want an 8th child. Not because I couldn’t support an 8th child, or 9th, or 10th, or 20th for that matter. I always said no because I read. The children’s mother asked about having an 8th child because she watches television.

I’m pretty sure what I’m saying is pretty clear here, but I’ll say it anyway: I pride myself on being a good father. I

remember dates, names, and the faces they are all attached to. But this has limits. Imagine being the 8th child, and being the reason your parents can't remember not only *your* name, but all your *siblings'* names before you. And it's not your fault, you didn't ask to be 8th. You probably would prefer to be 2nd or 7th, occasionally 1st or 4th, but you're not. You're 8th.

My assistant, by the way? I'm pretty sure he is an 8th child.

And being the 8th child means you bear the special designation of being the demarcation point for when your parents hit their capacity to snap recall your name and not just your name. All the other names, too, all in a jumble.

Listen. It's not that they can't remember your name and all the other names *at all*. It's that they have *to stop* and *think about it*. Your parents, they actually have to look at you and sometimes do some math as well. If they speak before they think, they will jumble all the names, call you someone else's name, a lot of times call you several other names before successfully arriving at the one they gave you. And speaking of the name, again it's not your fault. You didn't choose the name. And they didn't as much *give* it to you as *brand* you with it. And sometimes, 8th child, you might even feel it would better for them to literally heat a piece of iron in a red-hot fire and sear the skin above your eyebrows with it, so they could simply look at you and call you the right name. But that wouldn't do any good, see. Because most times when your parents are talking about you, you aren't present. You aren't anywhere around. You could even be dead. And they would have scarred you for nothing. Because even if *they are* looking right at the long wart of scar tissue on your forehead, their brains are already beyond capacity and will hiccup. And you're the reason. Your existence, I mean. 8th child.

So yeah. Each time I stepped into the 670 square foot space of Apartment M was pretty much like the first time. I can tell you about that one. The key loose in the doorknob, the door itself heavy and designed to automagically close without anyone having to pull it shut behind them. Big and green, the door. Chrome knob, brass deadbolt, rainbow-colored key from one of those grocery store key-cutters. My assistant, he said

the girl who cut the key for him, she got her hair caught in the machine. The machine that makes the keys. He said he had to wait until a department manager came. No. He said he felt *obligated* to wait until the department manager came, who used an orange-handled pair of tin snips to free her hair from the bristles of the key machine. That the manager cut her hair in spite of him saying he would never do it, that her hair was too long and beautiful, saying this over and over again as he repeatedly leaned into her, over and over again, crotch to ass, crotch to ass, that she was trapped there, bent over the counter, hair wound tight into the bristles and spokes of the key machine after dropping the freshly-cut key on the floor, that the girl kept looking at my assistant with her liquifying eyes, saying things with them she didn't dare say out loud, but what she did say when she said something out loud was intended for the manager, but directed towards my assistant, and it was this: "Cut It Cut It Cut It Cut It CUT IT!"

And later, he said, after he'd been given the rainbow key gratis and a bonus 10% off next purchase coupon for having to witness all that, the girl, he put her probably no older than 18, she stood there with her lopsided head of hair and her blue polyester smock and her embossed nametag with her name in all caps embossed in it and said the only reason the manager grabbed the tin snips was because he was married. Whatever that meant.

The big green door. It slams shut pretty hard on its own because of the weight. I never let it shut on its own on purpose. I don't like things to do stuff on their own. Not doors and not key machines and not even people if I can help it. Underscore the *if I can help it* part. There is only so much one person can control. I may be selfish but I'm not a control freak. I know that sounds weird. I know those things usually get grouped together, and maybe they do get grouped together with most selfish people, but I'm totally serious when I say this. Meaning I believe what I'm saying. I'm called plenty of things but liar isn't one of them. That doesn't mean I don't tell lies, because everyone tells lies. No one can tell the whole story of anything. Not even God. God chose certain stories to tell. He didn't tell everything. In fact, he didn't tell *most*

things. That's why there's a God at all. I know this because I read. I try to read everything I possibly can, but that doesn't mean I succeed. I never succeed at that. Reading everything, I mean. I succeed at a lot of things, but reading everything isn't one of them. No one can do that. No one can read everything. Because no one can tell us everything. Not even God. I know I said that already, but this really does bear repeating.

You want an example? I'll give you an example. When's the last time I jacked off and said "Oh God!"? Never. Not one time have I said that when I've jacked off. And I don't think I'm alone or unique in this by a long shot. I'll bet almost no one dead or living in the entire history of the universe has said that when they've jacked off. Men and women both. I definitely mean both here. Because women jack off. They do. Listen, I read. I keep saying that, but my repeating it doesn't make it less true every time I repeat it. And what I read tells me women jack off. What I read tells me half of women ages 18–50 have jacked off during the previous 90 days. What I read tells me one-third of women ages 60–70. Yes, what I read tells me men jack off way more than women. That isn't the point.

Here's the point. I never say "Oh God!" when I jack off because that's something you say in the presence of someone else. You say it for them. It's part of the story you're telling them. The story isn't necessarily a lie, either. I mean, it can be. But it doesn't have to be. And most times it's not. Most times you are telling them because you believe what you are saying. And what you are saying is this: God is here, and he is here because I'm saying so. Not because he *is* here, but because *I say*. What you are saying is this: this is the story I want to tell you, and I want you to believe it as much as I believe it. You don't have to believe it very much, by the way. You can believe it as much as you want. But when you say that, when you say "Oh God!" in front of someone else, you are imploring both them and yourself to believe. That's why it hurts some people as much as it does when they find out the other person is faking. It's about God. About not being able to tell us everything. About telling us to ignore all the things that are happening except this one simple thing. And that thing?

It’s that we aren’t alone. We speak God’s name, say it out loud, to celebrate not being alone.

Listen. I’ve never been called a liar. Or a faker. The children’s mother, she will tell you. She’ll tell you before I even tell you. See, that’s why this story is even being told. “It’s done,” I said, flatly and fatherly. Because it was, and it still is, and I told her so, eleven months after that Gold’s Gym card expired. But you already know what she said in reply. So, so typical.

Miracle

The miracle of the place isn't in its year-round heat, its silica-slick water that makes you feel invincible, as if you could dodge the oxygen and hydrogen molecules even though they are literally swimming around you as you float and turn here, your eyes afire as you slide next to me before showing me the world inside.

The miracle of the place isn't the parking lot spilling over with out-of-state license plates, their respective out-of-state stares boiling out of the windows to take their turns gawking at the alligators living here in the fucknut cold of winter, the high elevation desert plain no place for reptiles come January yet here they are nonetheless.

The miracle of the place surely isn't the cashier/pool attendant, a stringbean of a man in his forties, his long thin hair flapping against the middle of his back, his even longer and thinner smile practiced and imprecise for the thousands of couples he's greeted here for decades, his mind always spinning in counter-rotation to theirs, the three of them always nimble to avoid the obvious future that poises and readies itself when the pair outside his sliding glass window requests a "VIP" pool and pays for it with two crisp twenty dollar bills still warm from the ATM just across the parking lot.

The miracle of the place isn't the thick PVC drainpipe anymore than it's the thick steps descending downdown-downdown anymore than it's the lone plastic patio chair pretending not to watch from its vantage point on the concrete slab overhead anymore than it's the dressing area always clammy like a 19th century mudroom anymore than it's the

thin wooden door to the outside where you've purposely abandoned our big cotton towels to chill.

No.

The miracle of this place is the pulse of you, the words on your lips right as you bite down on them, the flutter in your eyes matching the one in my heart.

You. The One.

When You're Dead You Can Do Whatever You Want

Promise me the moon. No, seriously, go ahead. Okay now grab it. It's smaller than you think. Hold it in your hand but don't give it to me. Put it wherever you want, and it will stay there (I promise), but you can never give it to me. That's what makes a promise a promise. Promise me you'll keep this promise. Which is about keeping another promise. Now promise that you'll never ever ever come back. This shouldn't give you any trouble, not a single ounce of it. Where you are is a place where trouble is only a figment of someone else's imagination. See why they call it Heaven?



TREVOR DODGE is the author of a previous collection of short fiction, *Everyone I Know Lives on Roads* (Chiasmus 2006), and a novella, *Yellow #10* (Eraserhead 2003). His stories have appeared in print and online journals such as *Sleepingfish, Gargoyle, Notre Dame Review, Plazm, Golden Handcuffs Review, Hobart, Gobshite Quarterly, Natural Bridge, Nailed Magazine* and *Portland Review*, among many others. He collaborated with Lance Olsen on the writing anti-textbook *Architectures of Possibility: After Innovative Writing* (Guide Dog 2012) and hosts the creative arts podcast Possible Architect. He is fiction editor of the literary journal *Clackamas Literary Review*, lives and teaches in Portland, OR, and can be found online at: www.trevordodge.com.


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