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MAMA'S BOY

by

JAMIE BERGER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MAY 2010

ENGLISH

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MAMA'S BOY

A Thesis presented

by

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ABSTRACT

MAMA'S BOY

MAY 2010

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“Mama’s Boy” is a collection of fiction and nonfiction by Jamie Berger.

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Anja, for an infinity of help and love and ideas and reading and patience.

Mark Berger. Pop, you're all over these pages, even if only you and I know it.

“Peep Show” previously published in the *The Sun* magazine and in the anthology, *Flesh For Fantasy: Producing and Consuming Exotic Dance* (Thunder's Mouth, 2006)

“Close” previously published in *In Posse Review* and *Watchword*.

“Shaken, Stirred” Previously published in the anthology *Fucking Daphne*

Exerpts from *Bo's Arts* Previously Published in *Bo's Arts: Visual Interpretations of a Soft Dog* (Evil Twin, 2006)

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INTRODUCTION

Scribble Scribble Scribble

(Note: After a bunch of revisions, I realized I had no idea who my audience was for this introduction, so I've decided to address it to just about the only people likely to ever read it, my committee: Chris Bachelder, Alex Chee, and Sabina Murray.)

“Scribble scribble scribble!” -Sheila Berger

“Make sure you address the inclusion of fiction and nonfiction,” Noy advised me, before she fled the country. Why? I asked and quickly answered myself: because my mixed genre manuscript is unorthodox for an MFA thesis and very likely unpublishable as a book.

When I left San Francisco and headed off to MFA school, as we like to call it these days, my literary-agent friend Jandy Nelson said, “Write me a novel!” She had read and had very complimentary things to say about some of my stories and essays, but among the nice things was definitely *not* that she could find a publisher for a book of them. Well, five years later, what I've produced at Umass is the dreaded collection of stories and essays, fiction and non-. It is, in all likelihood, unpublishable as a whole indeed, although I do hope to publish a portion of it (the very closely related pieces

“Close,” “Peep Show,” and “After,”) as a chapbook, and, of course, to publish some of the individual pieces.

In Fall of 2005, when I got to UMass, I started my work here by taking a creative nonfiction class with Tony Giardina. In it, I reworked my personal essay “Peep Show” for an anthology called *Flesh for Fantasy* (Thunder’s Mouth, 2006), and began work on a follow up piece, “After.” Around that same time, scandals about the veracity of supposed nonfiction were popping up left and right. From smaller peccadilloes of respected memoirists like Vivian Gornick to the wholesale fraud of James Frey and several others, fictionalized “nonfiction” seemed to be everywhere. As someone who’s both obsessive and maybe a tad moralistic, I really latched on to the Frey story (some would say, joined the lynch mob), even going so far as to keep a blog for a few months called “Memoir Is Not Fiction,” in which I ranted and raved and posted every news story about the scandal I could find, right up to Frey’s public flaying on Oprah, after which I more or less let it go, which was lucky for me in that if I spent much time thinking about Frey’s continued success as a writer and public figure (there really is no such thing as bad publicity), I’d be a bitter, bitter man.

Point is, I am very interested in/concerned about the similarities of and differences between and grey areas shared by between fiction and non-. In my own nonfiction, I struggle, often too hard, to make sure that what I recount is as close to factually true as I can make it, even vetting my work with corroborating witnesses whenever possible. In my fiction, I often explore directions that a guy a lot like me might’ve taken. In nonfiction, I explore actual events and their importance to me. In fiction, the situations are not “actual,” but the explorations are still very real. And

sometimes a piece will mix the two. But what I can call nonfiction, and what I must call fiction, well, they're really fairly simple to distinguish.

Well before my mother became ill (she died in December 2008), I wrote a story about a man returning home to care for his dying mother ("Sleep"). When my mom was sick but not yet dying – when we both still held out hope of her getting well again – I wrote a story about a man driving back and forth on the highway to visit his ailing mother ("Homing"), which was the closest I've come to fictionalized reality – the situation was mine. But the scenes, the characters, the mother, the son, they were not us, not true to life.

And as my mom was dying and in the year since she's been gone, I've written about that time in the essay-as-journal "Itch Itch Itch." To write about her death in fiction wasn't a choice for me, not yet anyway.

Oddly enough, "Homing" is one of the last pieces I wrote before my mother became very ill, and it's one of the few pieces I never showed Sheila Berger. But she managed to read it anyway – found it online in *Crate* after googling my name. Good old mom. The story upset her greatly because the mother was such a "type." I tried to explain that it was both fiction and still a work in progress, and that I'd focused thus far on the son (the "Jamie" character, she might've corrected me) but she had a hard time with it nonetheless. As she saw it, the mother was her, and inaccurate, lacking all nuance. She was wrong and right, of course; the mother was a flat character, but she wasn't finished, and she wasn't Sheila Berger. At that point, I found I could more deeply explore my stand-in's consciousness in fiction than I could my own in nonfiction; once my mother read the story I hadn't been ready for her to read and voiced her opinion, the

boundary between the real and imagined became very blurry indeed as I wrestled with the need to make the character I did and didn't see as my mother more like her.

At times, I've been able to approach issues in fiction that I wasn't ready to address head-on (most pointedly, my fascination/obsession with porn, strippers, etc.), first in private, then finally testing the waters with a story "Close," which then let me tackle the material directly in nonfiction with "Peep Show" (and then later, bringing those issues back to fiction again).

While preparing this book, looking back at guys more or less, or more *and* less, like me, who appear in the fiction, and, hell, guys more or less like me in the nonfiction too, I've noticed some commonalities I hadn't seen before, and been surprised by looking at the whole, the forest of it, after looking at the individual trees for years. As Lewis Buzbee, whom I studied with back in SF once asked, (of course, I paraphrase), *Who is this Jamie Berger, who are his protagonists, what are they up to?* Or was it Tony who asked that? Memory is a fickle secretary. Well, in these past few years, my alter-egos are less traditionally successful than I, both in terms of career and relationships and generally sanity and moral fiber. They are lost, they are searching, they are somewhat cynical but also romantics. They are darker versions of me. I've never written a lighter, more sentimental or more successful version of myself or my life.

If there's a vaguely playful fictive version of me, it's the one in "Shaken Stirred," which was written for the anthology *Fucking Daphne* (Seal Press, 2008). My old San Francisco friend (who's actually "G." in "Peep Show"), the poet-performer Daphne Gottlieb started noticing a few years ago that she was appearing in a lot of her friends'

work, always having sex. So she sent out a call to more writer friends to write on the theme “Fucking Daphne.” I had never been good at writing to an assigned theme, and had no first-hand experience with the particular subject to go on, but took a situation from one of her poems, put her in a situation we used to find ourselves in (I as bartender, Daphne as customer), and wrote a story. Again the lines got blurry, fiction based on an actual friendship and an assignment to imagine something more, but fiction it surely is, and with more of a noir-pulp feel than I’d ever found myself playing with before.

So, getting back to the forest and the trees, what do we have here? Admittedly, a whole lot of *me*. Fictional and nonfictional, voice- and idea- much more than plot-driven explorations of self, my self. When I spend too much time thinking about my work this way, all of my writing feels awfully self-involved, with multiple meaning of “awful” intended. But then, Stephen Dixon, Philip Roth, Spalding Gray, Lydia Davis, Dave Eggers (the list, of course, goes on and on) have made great work, sometimes over and over, based on versions of their own selves. And I’ve been by turns annoyed and incredibly inspired by their work. Or, I think of Haruki Murakami, Spalding Gray, Laurie Anderson, and others who seem to spend their entire careers trying to perfect their one story, reworking it again and again. And when I think of Murakami in terms of my work, I think of how so many of his protagonists are men with varying backstories but very, very similar personalities. Whatever I think of such self-reflective work, it’s clearly what I’ve made a lot of.

What, in the end, do I offer myself here, as I leave the MFA world? What I realize as I come down the end of this thesis-compiling process, right down to this paragraph, is that, while several of these pieces may stand on their own, and while this book as a whole

interests me, more and more as I've edited it these last weeks (as I hope it does you), what these pieces really offer me, whether I like it or not, are large chunks of the lives of a character or two whose novels I hope I'll now dive into now in earnest. And that is exciting. And scary.

As I wind down this introduction, it suddenly occurs to me that this more-or-less chronicle of my and not-me's last decade and a half is missing one huge piece of my life and my writing, one that culminated in an a book, and that's my dog, Bo, who died in February 2010 at fourteen. Late one night back in 2003, while watching two friends do charcoal sketches of my dog, I came up with the the play-on-words "Bo's Arts" (as opposed to the "Beaux Arts" movement, architectural style, etc.), and imagined a world of art inspired by Bo. Always one to brag about my worst puns, I started talking to everyone about it and, to my surprise, artist friends started asking when the Bo show was and if they could make work for it. I felt like Tom Sawyer getting the kids to paint the picket fence: artists wanted to make work based on *my dog*! In the end, more than fifty artists made work of or inspired by Bo, and I wrote the "Bo's Arts Manifesto" to accompany the show, which was held at San Francisco's Adobe Books Back Room Gallery in 2004. A year later, after I'd moved back east and begun school, I met Stacy Wakefield, founder of and publisher at the art book house Evil Twin Publications, which, in 2006, published *Bo's Arts*. While I didn't work on the book in workshop, I did revise and edit and publish it since beginning at UMass, with the assistance of MFA colleagues, and an east coast Bo's Arts exhibition, with some new artists from UMass, RISD, and the Valley, was shown at the Student Union Gallery in 2006. A selection from the book is included here.

Life is recursive. When I keep scribbling, I come back around to things, things come back around to me. “Things” is a vague word I teach others to avoid, but I like it here, as there are so many and varied elements I’m thinking of here, and the word “elements” is much too formal to do them justice. Mothers and sons and love and women and lust and porn and cities and couples and woods and women and dogs and lust again and love again and loss and strippers and husbands and mothers and sons. People, Places, Things – it starts there. Some of my fiction has eerily predicted my future, while nonfiction has greatly changed how I see my past. And now this collection makes me see that it’s really all of a piece or pieces of a larger piece or pieces of fiction that I’ll now tackle. And when I’m done scribbling out that first draft, I dearly hope can find a way to see it with Sheila Berger’s eyes and hear it with her ears even though she’s not here to be my reader.

PEEP SHOW

“I understand that sex should be peaceful and good and loving, but what about the things that turn me on and are repellent at the same time?”

-Lisa Palac, *The Edge of the Bed*

“The men [who frequent peep shows] don’t know it, but they are secretly coming to church. They are seeking absolution, acceptance, compassion, kindness, and caring from a willing, friendly woman — if she is pretty, so much the better. They believe themselves to be fundamentally unlovable because of their sexuality. . . . Granting these men acceptance and understanding instead of disgust and ridicule is the single most profound aspect of sex work.”

-Nina Hartley, “Bodhisattvas Among Us,”

Tricks and Treats: Sex Workers Write About their Clients

In the fall of 1997, my friend G. asked me to give a reading at a benefit for a San Francisco alternative performance space. G. is a radical-queer woman. I am a heterosexual white man. I hemmed and hawed and tried to duck her invitation. I said I was busy, that I hadn’t written anything in ages. I even told her I just plain didn’t want to do it, but she wasn’t having any of my excuses. The truth was I wasn’t at all eager to be the token straight white male in the show. It’s not that I’m uncomfortable in the radical queer world. (OK, maybe I’m a little uncomfortable, but less so than many in my world-dominating shoes.) I just have absolutely no interest in stepping up in front of that community and proudly representing the patriarchy.

With about a month to go before the event, though, I gave in. All too soon it was the week of the show, my name was on the poster, and I had no idea what I would read.

Again, I tried to think of a plausible excuse to bail out: Broken limb? Dead relative?

Laryngitis? As the fateful date loomed, I anxiously sifted through old grad-school poems, pulling out some “nice” ones about my mother and a snowstorm, about a fondly remembered ex-girlfriend, about a long nighttime drive filled with hopeful thoughts of the future. Hey, pierced, leather-clad lesbians like mothers and snowstorms and ex-girlfriends and hopeful thoughts of the future as much as the next guy, right?

In the back of my mind, though, nudging at me, and probably what got me to say I’d perform in the the first place, was a new short story called “Close.” It was also the worst possible piece of writing for this particular show. “Close” is the diary of a museum guard named Henry – a mulleted, unkempt, oily-faced junior-college dropout in his early 40s. Socially inept and utterly isolated, Henry divides his time between home, work, and a Times Square peep-show joint, where he’s fallen in love with a curvy Slav whose stage name is Nadja. The story includes several scenes of Henry participating in the only form of intimacy he knows: masturbating while awkwardly touching Nadja’s breasts through the eye-level porthole of the peep-show booth. I imagined I’d have a hard time reading “Close” out loud anywhere — much less to an audience of hardcore dykes — for fear of offending people and revealing the sort of knowledge about strippers and peep shows that can only be learned, well, first hand.

I grew up the only child of two academics: Mom, a feminist English professor, Dad a Philosophy prof who specialized in ethics. At dinner my father would sometimes present ethical dilemmas. *A hard working but poor man’s wife is ill, needs an expensive operation. The man has no health insurance, is poor. Should he steal from a local merchant to get the money for the operation? What if stealing from the merchant will*

bankrupt the merchant? Would it be more acceptable to steal from a large corporation? I always wanted to get the right answer, but of course there was no “right,” only choices to be made about ethics, pragmatics, other “ics” I can’t remember any more. Together we formed a left-of-liberal family unit whose values included strong stances against racism, sexism, homophobia, and other social injustices. Though the Berger family values were ethical guidelines, not moralistic strictures, many of them engendered as much guilt and shame as Catholic doctrine.

The names of radical feminists like Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin were familiar to me even as a preteen from eavesdropping on my mom’s consciousness raising (CR) group. Sitting at the top of the stairs in my pajamas, I learned that thousands of years of patriarchy, with its literal and metaphorical sexual slavery, had done women an incalculable injustice. I also learned that men started wars and were the source of violence, greed, hate, murder, rape, and just about everything else that’s awful in the world. The ’70s was a hyperbolic time for the women’s movement, and while I now know that my mother hadn’t intended to teach me that men were evil, per se, that was the lesson I absorbed. As I grew older, I began to see myself as oppressor-by-default and — though it may seem melodramatic and hyperpolitically correct today — of sexual penetration as an inherently violent act and my penis as a weapon of said oppression. It put a real crimp in my enjoyment of sex (not to mention my performance) as a young man, but it added immensely to the taboo, and thus the rush (and, afterward, the shame) of indulging in pornography and strippers.

My parents made no explicit rules prohibiting drinking, drugs, and swearing. (Well, the obvious words that were offensive to various oppressed groups were

forbidden. And the word *sucks* was also a no-no, I think because it debased the sucker, as in “cocksucker,” who is by inference a woman or a gay man. But *fuck* was acceptable in moderation — in fact, I’m pretty sure I first heard the word from Mom.) Civil liberties concerns aside, though, both my parents were against pornography. So, naturally, I found it enticing, to say the least. After a brief pre-adolescent obsession with forbidden toy guns — I traded some prized Matchbox cars for a heavy, metallic Luger — I quickly moved on to the glossy pages of *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. And soon I made the jump to grittier, nastier stuff.

I stole my first *Hustler* from Tom Denton’s house one night in eighth grade. Denton was a gentle giant, a baby-faced star football lineman who effortlessly tossed opponents about without malice — it was just what you did. Then the game would end, and he’d become his big harmless stoner self again. The Dentons’ liquor cabinet was always fully stocked and free for the raiding. A bong sat out on the rec-room ping-pong table. And, most exciting to me, Tom left porn just lying around in the open, all over the house. The Dentons were not your average middle-class suburbanites. Once, when Tom wasn’t looking, I snuck a *Hustler* into the secret zipper pocket of my parka.

I still have the cover of that magazine somewhere, with its picture of a devilish blonde in shiny red leather, head thrown back and to the side, mouth forming an *O*. The look in her eyes is not soft-focus come-hither but straight-up lust. The image, a thrilling combination of the combative and the submissive, contradicted everything I’d been taught. This woman was objectified and loving it. She didn’t want to be tenderly made love to. She wanted — no, she *needed* to be taken, to be fucked, hard. This was so wrong, so

confusing — and so damn *hot*.

The images and words throughout the magazine evoked similar contradictory feelings, exciting and disturbing at once. In my first, furtive jerk-off sessions to the photos I focused on the soft smoothness of breasts and bellies, legs and asses, averting my gaze from the pink, fleshy, wetness. Learning to like pictures of women's genitalia was like learning to like the taste of booze. The pictures in *Hustler* burned like bourbon. I started with little sips.

I discovered 42nd Street in the '80s, toward the end of its *LIVE! NUDE! GIRLS!* heyday, late one night in my freshman year of college after a Public Image Ltd. show at Roseland. I was walking through midtown with my jaded New Yorker friends (I was a recent arrival from upstate, still wide-eyed, just beginning to discover big-city splendors) when we passed through the heart of Times Square in all its former porn and peeps glory. I was riveted. Of course, there was no way I was going to admit, let alone indulge, my fascination in my punk-rock friends' company; it would've been uncool on so many levels. (Things sure have changed in that regard, but I'll get to that later.) But after that night, at least once a week, I took the subway downtown and spent several guilty, anxious hours lurking outside peep show after peep show in the late autumn cold, furtively glancing at the windows and wanting badly to go inside, but always chickening out and heading back uptown to my safe college haven. What was I so afraid of? I can't say exactly. That I'd be "sinning"? That I'd get caught? Found out? That I'd suddenly be sucked into a vortex of scantily clad women who'd scorn me and lure me into giving them all my work-study money only to disappoint me in the end? Something along those

lines.

Finally one night I had a couple of beers, got up my nerve, and walked into Show World on the corner of 42nd and 8th, the least seedy, most legit-looking of the porn-and-peeps emporiums. I remember fluorescent lights and imported “Swedish Erotica” magazines that showed full-on sex right on their covers. It had the grotesque allure of a street fight or a car wreck. A flashing, multicolored arrow that read *Live Show* pointed up a flight of disco-lit stairs.

I didn’t go upstairs that first day, but I did soon after, to the little peep-show booths that opened to those live, nude, girls, onstage. That first incursion was both unsatisfying and achingly thrilling. I practically sprinted away afterward, repeating to myself, *I’m a pig. I’m a bad, bad person. I will never, ever do that again. I’m a pig. I’m a bad, bad person* — my secular-humanist Hail Mary.

At contemporary peeps, unlike the Times Square windowless shows of my youth, there’s no tipping, and no touching. And while it’s still an undoubtedly commercial interaction, the balance of power is a little more to my liking. I’m a sort of captive in my little cage-like booth: the dancer can choose to come over to my window or not, and once there she’s not bound or influenced by money; she can stay and dance for me until I’m done, or she can just walk away. It allows me to feel that, as improbable as this may sound, once in the bluest of blue moons a dancer may actually enjoy our wordless interaction. Part of me wants to believe that if I can make even the tiniest connection with a woman in this most wretchedly sexist and commodified environment, I can somehow be forgiven for my eternal objectifying and wanton lust. Eye contact from a stripper can be sexually satisfying, and even spiritually fulfilling – akin, I imagine to the intimacy of

recognizing the voice of the “anonymous” priest on the other side of the confessional – that cannot be duplicated outside the odd, controlled space. Very few strippers have shared that intimacy with me. It feels akin to the near-cliché of the prostitute who won’t kiss the john on the lips, an action less sexual than what he or she will do but more intimate. Some strippers have scorned me for trying – after all, that’s not what I’m paying for nor what they’re paid to do – others have been bored and just ignored my too-high glances and kept dancing. But one dancer in particular knelt down to my little window and generously looked back.

But back in my peep-show youth, at New York’s seedier venues, the booth windows were glassless, and patrons were strongly encouraged to reach through and touch the strippers for a fee. These women didn’t actually strip. They sat naked in chairs on the stage, looking preternaturally bored, barely able to muster the energy to mumble, “Tipping, honey?” in accents that ranged from Puerto Rico to Prague. If you said yes, the woman you selected would come over to your window. (The windows of several different booths would all open to the same raised stage.) “Up or down?” she’d ask. It cost more for down. At first I didn’t want to touch at all — hell, I didn’t even want to touch the booth’s doorknob — but the only way to get a dancer (of course, they didn’t actually dance either) to come over to your window was to tip, and if you wanted to tip but not touch, well, that was considered weird.

At first I found the experience repulsive and literally dirty — some of the dancers would wipe with wetnaps after each customer — but I kept going back. It was another acquired taste, and I acquired it. I always went for “up,” so the woman would kneel down to my level, where I could hold a breast and, more important, look at her face. If I was

lucky, she might look back.

On the floor of the peep show booth: Other men's semen, with its eerily clean, bleachy smell. Tissues. Quarters that men have dropped and weren't about to pick up. Condoms, some from couples who have sex in the booths, but also, I think, from men who jerk off into them. (Which just seems depressing; why would anyone jerk off into a condom?)

Once, I saw a semen-soaked twenty-dollar bill down in the muck, and I concocted a story for how it got there: I imagined a khakied yuppie, laughing nervously at the way-too-real-looking women on the other side of the glass. (This is a quarter peep show, after all, not Larry Flynt's posh Hustler Club next door.) He laughs because it's too much to handle otherwise. I pictured him jerking off even though the dancers don't even vaguely resemble Pamela Anderson. (*Dude, I'm here, why the hell not?*) Then after he's done, he realizes he has nothing to clean himself up with, and, again chuckling, he pulls out a bill, which chafes a bit, but does the job well enough that he can stick his dick back in his Dockers. He laughs a third time as he imagines some poor little immigrant who won't be able to resist picking up the goeey twenty: his cum on another man's hands. My fantasy gives me solace: I'm not nearly so bad as my imagined yuppie, I think, tugging at my own member, looking back up through the thick glass at a fine, round ass, a pair of swaying hips. I'm a very different kind of man indeed. I'm more like the women I'm jerking off to than I am like him. And then, just as I'm about to let go, I glance down, think, *Hey, did I drop that bill?*

The peep-show scenes in "Close" show how unhappy Henry is in his isolation, how badly

he needs human contact, which he finally finds with a young museum patron. Though he evokes sympathy, Henry remains an objectifying, straight white male who jerks off daily to peep-show strippers. “Close” is the diary of a man who could easily (if rashly) be labeled a misogynist, but whom I think of as a self-made pariah, a freak, the kind of person for whom porn and strippers serve a clearly ameliorative purpose. Henry’s interactions with Nadja lack any of the mortifying ambiguity of his other interactions with women, or people in general. He pays her; she gives him what he needs.

Until two years ago, when I moved to western Massachusetts, I went to peep shows more or less regularly for 10 years in New York and another 14 in San Francisco. As the panic and shame faded (but of course never entirely disappeared, especially the shame), I slowly learned how to get what I needed from that world. The kind of peep-show performer I craved was hard to find. She had to be someone I found physically attractive, of course, but more important, she had to look me in the eye and *see* me, to accept my gaze, my confession.

In the months leading up to the benefit I was to read at, I had been frequenting San Francisco’s famed Lusty Lady strip club two or three times a week. I had my own “Nadja.” Her stage name was Sassafra. She was small, maybe five-three, with auburn shoulder-length hair, full breasts, a freckled, cat-like face, and smoldering cat eyes that were somehow simultaneously sultry and kind. I learned her schedule and planned my visits accordingly. But it wasn’t so much the way she looked that did it for me — peep shows are filled with women I find physically attractive. It was the way she looked *at me* that made her perfect.

Once I'd become her regular, as soon as I shut the door and slipped my first quarter into the slot, she would come right over, say a soft, smiling hello, and begin to dance for me. Eventually she would kneel down, to be at my eye level, and just look at me and hold her breasts in her hands and faintly hum. Through the glass, I could never make out what she was humming, just that it wasn't the Jane's Addiction or Prince song playing through the PA. I was never sure if she knew I could hear her, but the humming was just the sweetest, sexiest thing. And best of all, she looked at me as if she were actually seeing me, as if she inherently knew and was happy to give me what I needed: acceptance, forgiveness, and, well, release. I had found my ideal confessor.

The day before the dreaded Saturday benefit, I had my little passel of sensitive-guy poems ready to go, but an unwelcome thought was edging its way into my brain: that I should read "Close," my museum-guard story, instead.

I fought the impulse with all my might, couldn't believe I was even considering it. But I also wanted to read the best work I had, and despite my fears, the story was, in a sense, absolutely appropriate for the sexually radical and politically engaged audience I envisioned. That night I asked my wife whether I should read it.

Yes, I was married during my Lusty Lady period in San Francisco. J. not only knew about and accepted my visits, but encouraged them and got off on my descriptions of that world and the porn in my collection. Now my ex of many years, J. has always identified with men and masculinity. Her father is a strong, silent heart surgeon. Her four brothers are all great athletes, quietly brilliant types who build beautiful, solid things with their hands. In many ways J. tried to be — and in many ways succeeded in becoming — the

fifth boy in her family.

So I, who never really learned any manly arts like carpentry, was married to a woman who was a professional carpenter, painter, and contractor to supplement a markedly less lucrative career as a dancer and choreographer. When we redid our floors, she wouldn't let me handle the big, unwieldy belt sander, nor would she let me touch a paintbrush when she painted our apartment, although she was kind enough (or patronizing enough, you make the call) to let me sand a couple of walls — after which she touched up my work.

She desired, in an ideal lover, someone bigger, stronger, and tougher than she, to make her feel more feminine – in bed, she by no means wanted to be one of the boys. I met the physical requirements, barely. My pervy predilections were my most masculine feature, and offset my more wifely qualities, such as making sure she paid her parking tickets and brushed her teeth, made it to doctor's appointments and returned phone calls. She painted the walls, but I arranged the furniture and hung the art just so.

She replied that she didn't see why not. I tried to explain exactly why not: i.e., that *they'll fucking hate me, that's why not.*

She still didn't see it. "It's a great story," she said. "Read it. What's the worst that can happen?"

I reiterated: the worst that can happen is that *they will hate me.*

"And then what?"

"And then what? They'll hate me, that's what, and I don't want to be hated."

"They won't hate you," she replied. But then, she loved me, what did she know?

I asked another friend and got pretty much the same response. But just letting that

friend read the story had been terrifying. Why was I even thinking about reading it in public? I kept saying to myself, *No way*, but I was starting to think, *Yes way. I'm going to read that story, and it will be great. The audience is going to love it, and radical lesbians will begin to understand men in a new way, and their understanding and eventual forgiveness will allow men to grow to better appreciate and respect women, and a movement will rise, misogyny will die, and peace and love will reign supreme on earth.*

Maybe I was getting a little ahead of myself. But clearly I had decided to read “Close” at the show.

That night, I slept horribly, and I awoke agitated and filled with second thoughts.

Suddenly, finally, it's the Saturday of the show, and I feel awful, my stomach tied in a knot. In the afternoon I stop by the Lusty, hoping to relieve my anxiety over reading a story about jerking off to strippers by jerking off to strippers. Sass isn't here, and I'm not turned on by any of the other women, so I go into a video booth and watch porn, jumping from channel to channel: women's bodies, a mouth on a cock, cum spurting onto artificially enhanced breasts. I have to pull hard and fast to get there, but eventually I have a weak, twitchy orgasm.

I go home and shower, put on a pair of old cords and my favorite vintage button-down shirt — a simple, non-confrontational outfit — and head over to the theater with both “Close” and the “nice” poems under my arm, just in case.

A big crowd is already filling all the chairs and floor space beyond and spilling out almost into the hallway. The audience is more mixed than I'd expected: maybe 65 percent women, maybe half of them wearing leather, chains, piercings, or elaborate

tattoos. And then there are my friends and neighbors, my little support group. They have no idea what I'll be reading either, and I worry about their reaction, too. I say hi to the host of the event, G., who tells me I'm scheduled to close out the first half. *You'll be great*, she says. (Oh, how I hate when people say that.) She tells me to relax and gives me a big hug, and I just want to melt into her embrace and disappear. I haven't told her what I'm reading, and I begin to imagine her fury and embarrassment when she hears it, perhaps even my ritual hanging-in-effigy to close out the evening with a bang.

The readers who go on before me include a very young, beautiful, gay Asian man and a lesbian poet who is not only leather-clad and angry, but palsied and in a wheelchair to boot. The boisterous crowd is loudly supportive of both of them. And then G. introduces me.

As I step onstage, the audience gives me what I hear as a decidedly lukewarm welcome. I feel big and white and male and straight. The blood begins its mad rush to my face, as if I need to be red to be seen. I arrange my papers, adjust the mic, look around the room, mumble a hello, give a spastic laugh, and take a deep breath.

"This is a short story called 'Close,'" I say. My amplified voice sounds very loud. "It's . . ." I stifle the urge to explain or apologize up front. "It's the journal of a museum guard named Henry."

I take a deep breath and look around the room, searching for friendly faces. Then, just as I'm about to look down again, I see her. Unfathomably, in the back left corner of the room, leaning against the wall, is Sassafras. I look down, blink twice in what feels like slow motion, and think, *Hey, I just imagined I saw Sassafras in the audience. How wacky is that?* I look up again. She's still there. I did not imagine it. She can't possibly be

here, and yet there she is, looking right at me — I mean, of course she’s looking right at me. Where else would she be looking?

Her presence isn’t actually all that improbable. San Francisco is like a small town within its artistic communities. In fact, I know several women — one a writer, one a dancer, one an academic — who’ve done stints at the Lusty Lady. The Lusty has always been an offbeat, radicalized strip club (it’s the first of its kind to be first unionized and then worker-owned) and, accordingly, it attracts artists, students, and other non-typical strippers.

So to run into a stripper in my life outside the Lusty Lady isn’t so unlikely. But to see Sass in the audience when I’m about to read “Close” for the first time is no less than breathtaking. She is my perfect erotic dancer, my dream — and nightmare — audience member. As much as I’ve always wanted to be seen by strippers, I never imagined this. Here she is a real person, much smaller in real life, wearing jeans and boots and a lacy peasant blouse under a worn black biker jacket. Maybe she’s even a writer, like me. But perhaps not so much like me at all, more like the women in front of whom I’m so petrified to read my story.

For a moment I hold my breath and ride that fine edge between exquisite pleasure and almost unbearable discomfort. I begin to wonder if there’s enough blood in my legs to hold me up. I am petrified, thrilled, nauseated. I think to myself, *Don’t lock your knees*. I remember marching in a Columbus Day parade as a kid, standing and waiting for hours in a hot woolen uniform, and being told: *Don’t lock your knees. That’s when you pass out*. So I bend my knees a little, look down at my pages, and begin to read:

April. The weather is getting warmer. The other day I was walking home after my stop off, and I looked through the window of the old office

building on West 52nd they've gutted and are turning into a Sure-Guard Storage. They finally installed the shiny corrugated lockers. I looked through the window and just happened to be right in front of number 1354, which is also the last four digits of my Social Security number. This may mean something. Or not. Sometimes these coincidences mean things.

I look up from time to time at the listening faces. I don't look toward that back left corner. A page or so in, I pause, take a sip of water, slip out of Henry's edgy persona, and smile as if to say, *Hey, everybody, don't forget: that's Henry; I'm Jamie*. I think of the clichéd advice offered to nervous public speakers — imagine the audience naked — and I almost laugh out loud. I'm feeling more naked than I imagine Sass has ever felt in front of me.

About two pages in I get to the tough stuff: "After work, I stop at Babeland." I feel as if I'm about to freeze up — or throw up — but I manage to keep reading:

Today Nadja is there. I feed the machine an extra bill and give her five bucks through the window even though it only costs three to touch. I tell her "high" and she kneels down so I can reach her. I hold one breast gently with my left hand and jerk off with my right. I like how heavy it is. The breast. I like that she kneels so we're at eye level. I like to feel the weight, the warmth. . . . Sometimes she holds my face in her hands and calls me "baby." I know it's an act but still it feels good. "Baby," she says, "my sweet baby." I always forget to bring tissues.

The audience laughs at the "tissues" line, and I'm starting to feel a rush. I'm becoming Henry, slipping deeper inside his clipped, anxious voice. The final pages go by with a kind of rich, elastic slowness that I've never experienced before, onstage or off.

At the end of "Close," Henry accomplishes something monumental for him: he spends an afternoon with a woman without a plexiglass wall between them. I feel as if I've broken down some barriers of my own as I read his story: I've done something difficult and monumental for me, and done it as clearly and honestly as I can. I notice my

pulse slowing, my sweat cooling me. The story ends, and I say thank you.

There's a pause, then a roar as the crowd begins to whoop and whistle and clap. My applause probably isn't any longer or louder than any other reader's, but to me it feels like absolute thunder. I say thank you again and step offstage.

G. announces the intermission, and several people, among them a couple of the women I was so afraid of offending, come up to tell me how much they liked the story. A tough and talented writer I recognize tells me she's "heard a lot of crap on that subject" but that my piece was "really pretty OK," which I'm later told is high praise from her. And G. gives me another big hug and, with a proud grin, tells me I did a great job.

Suddenly I remember that back left corner. I wheel around and look for her, but she's not there. I scan the room like Rocky, punch-drunk and reeling, searching for Adrienne. And then, over by the door, I spot a familiar face, and the woman I know only as Sassafras gives me that sweet, sly smile, turns, and is gone.

FROM THE BO'S ARTS MANIFESTO

In Spring 2004 an exhibition of the works of more than fifty artists was held at San Francisco's [Adobe Books](#) and The Back Room Gallery. "Bo's Arts: Visual Interpretations of a Soft Dog" consisted entirely of works of, about, or inspired by a soft dog named Bo. The following are selected from "The Bo's Arts Manifesto" or "32 Short Ways of Looking at A Soft Dog" or "Why So Much Art About A Dog?" In 2006, the book **Bo's Arts** was published by Evil Twin Publications.

1. beaux arts, pl. n. French, pl. of beau, *fine* + arts, pl. of art, *art*. the fine arts
2. Beaux Arts, adj. of or relating to an architectural style originating in France in the late 19th Century and characterized by classical forms, rich ornamentation, and a grand scale.
3. beaux arts, n. the study and creation of works of art
4. Bo's Arts: Visual Interpretations of a Soft Dog



Rain

We walk one night after rain, streets shiny, full of wet San Francisco winter smells. We head down an alley where someone has pitched a tent next to the North Face outlet. In a doorway is a tiny, white-haired homeless woman. She models a newfound cardigan in the plate-glass window. She turns, sees us, and in the sweetest granny voice says “She’s a little sweetheart.” And I say thank you, then to Bo, “You’re a little sweetheart,” and I want to stop, to bring Bo over to say hello, to let the woman pet her, but we keep walking. The rain is starting up again - it’ll be a cold night.

Later that week. Colder, but no rain. We are walking on 17th at Mission. A crazy lady talking loudly to herself weaves her way toward us. Often, Bo will growl or bark at people who are loud or move erratically. But she doesn’t with this woman. In fact, while I speed up to avoid the woman, Bo, off leash, lingers to say hello. The woman, suddenly transformed, says to Bo, “Sweet fuzzy pet.” and then again, to me, “Sweet fuzzy pet.” Disarmed, “Yes” is all I can think to say to the woman as we part ways, and then keep repeating the phrase all the way home, “Sweet fuzzy pet.”

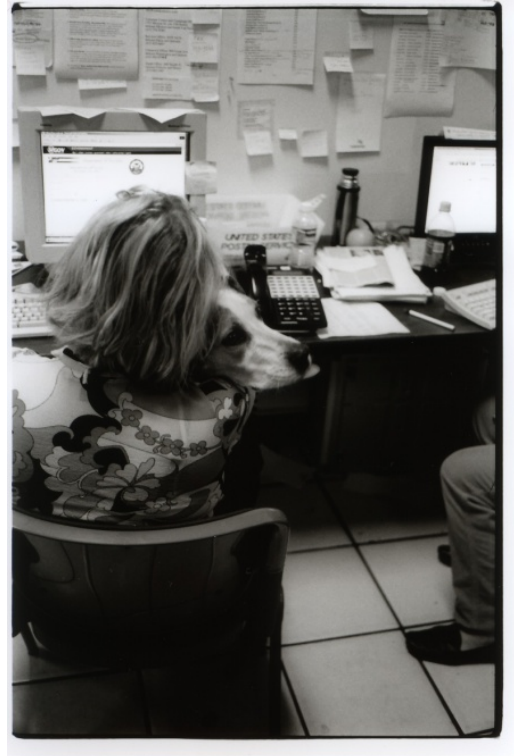
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All Dogs Are Male (and cats female)

Nearly everyone says “Good boy!” before I correct them. The question of gender arises with a butch female dog with a traditionally male name (but for Bo’s Derek and Peep). I have a compulsive need to correct, “It’s a she” or “She’s a girl” over and over again. As if she cares. And then I think, “Not girl, *woman*, she’s a grown dog.” But people will

really think I'm some kind of psycho doggie feminist if, when they say "What a good boy," I reply, in all earnestness, "Actually, she's a woman dog."

* * *



Reticence

"Your dog hates me," people say when Bo avoids their advances. "She's just hand shy," I tell them. What she really is is coy. People expect things from a dog. They hold out a hand to be sniffed, then expect to be allowed to touch, even to be encouraged to do so. Bo is friendly in her way, will come running up to friends (human and dog) wagging with her whole butt. After the enthusiastic greeting, though, she'll give a quick sniff or even a kiss, but then she pulls back a few feet. If they reach for her, she pulls back farther. When a stranger offers a hand for smelling, she often doesn't even bother to smell it. *Okay,*

that's your hand, what's your point? But if a person doesn't approach her, she will often choose that person, move next to them and lean into their side, looking away. If it's cold, or a scary place, she may even hop up and sit on a lap, but always looking away. The person so graced glows with pride. Her soft fur is hers, a gift she offers as she sees fit.

* * *



* * *

Fury

Bo lingers behind me. I turn around and see she's chewing on something as hard and fast as she can before I catch her. But I've caught her alright and I've had a hard day and it's cold and wet out and I'm probably mad at the government or my crazy neighbor or my apartment for being messy or some piece of writing for not getting written or some perfect lover for not appearing in my life and I scream at her **NO!** I growl at her in my meanest, scariest screamgrowl **DROP IT! DROP IT!** and amazingly she does drop it

and I look down and can't tell at first whether the brown chunks are meat or shit and then I see that they are in fact meat, pork chop I think which beats the hell out of shit but I'm in a rage by now and I screamgrowl again **DOWN GET DOWN** and she cowers and eventually lies down on the cold sidewalk and looks up at me wanting to fix it and I'm holding her snout to my face and spitting **BAD DOG BAD DOG BAD BAD BAD** **FUCKING DOG** I snap her leash on and jerk her close to me alternating **BAD DOG** and **HEEL** as I drag her along and she's trying to do what I want but at the same time she wants to get the fuck away from me so she's pulling down and away at the leash and we get around the corner and down the block and finally I stop and stand still and breathe and then bend down and hold her and pet her saying good girl good girl it's alright it's alright. This is as much violence as I've ever inflicted on another being and I'm thinking she'll never forgive me she'll always be afraid of me but in a minute she's standing up straight and her tail is wagging and she is jumping up trying to kiss me with that poison-meat mouth. Every time I behave unforgivably she forgives me and forgets to stay afraid of me soon after and I can't think of any two greater gift from dog to man than that.

* * *



Obsession

Outside the café, a man pets Bo. I watch from inside. He cannot stop. For those obsessed with dogs and softness, Bo is a dream and nightmare because they can't keep petting forever. This man pets and pets, mesmerized, then finally leaves just when I'm starting to imagine he has the look of a dognapper. A little bit later, a woman is outside the café petting. I read her lips as she tells her friend, "This is the softest dog, this dog is so soft." She stays there, in the cold, on her knees, petting and petting. "Such a soft dog." Bo feigns indifference, shivers and waits.

* * *

About an hour after she eats something just awful, when she's licking her lips nonstop and burping these hellacious, fetid burps, Bo looks accusingly up at me as if to say, "How could you let me eat that shit?"

* * *

Pet

The notion of owning a beast, of petting, of being petted. Nearly all of us want to be stroked, many of us want to own a creature, and some of us want to be owned, to have a guardian, to *be* a pet.

* * *



Object

We look at Bo, we touch her softness, we yearn for her attention that she offers in measured doses, aloof, catlike. We make art of her, hoping to win her approval. Supermodel. Bodalisque. Bo Derek, indeed, we imagine her in tiny cornrows atop a white stallion galloping along a pristine beach. Bo is the perfect object of our gazes and subject of our creativity in her modelesque consciousness of/obliviousness to her own beauty and these objects we've made to try to capture it. We tell ourselves she's really not really *all that* but she does have *something*. We are lying, of course.

* * *



A soft dog walks into a bar. All eyes turn.

* * *

Minna Street

Late at night, I park the car two blocks from home. A skinny guy in a hoodie appears to be sleeping across the street. When I close the car door, though, he jumps up. He grabs an empty beer bottle, breaks it on the curb, and crosses to our side of the street. He faces me from maybe twenty feet away. Bo, inexplicably, uncharacteristically, walks over and stands at his feet wagging her tail. He looks even skinnier standing, and young – pasty-white, tweaking, broken bottleneck in his right hand.

“You wanna fuck with me?” he spits.

I am watching Bo. “No, no man, just trying to get home.”

My voice is so soft and even-toned, it’s silly. I am never this calm.

“You wanna fuck with me?”

His voice is strained and twitchy, the voice of someone who expects to be jumped while he sleeps. I start to back away, thinking we’ll go around the block the other way.

“Bo. C’mon girl,” I call.

But she ignores me, remains standing at the kid’s feet, still wagging. He must smell good, I think, ripe. She’s waiting until I raise my voice, until I mean it. She turns and they’re both facing me.

“I will cut this fucking dog, man. I will cut this dog!”

The bottle is green. He could just reach down and do it. I picture the green glass and red blood on white fur. *Like Christmas*, I think, and then think of the seconds I’ve wasted on this thought.

“*Come ON. Bo! NOW!*”

My scream-whisper kind of gets her attention. She trots a few feet in my direction.

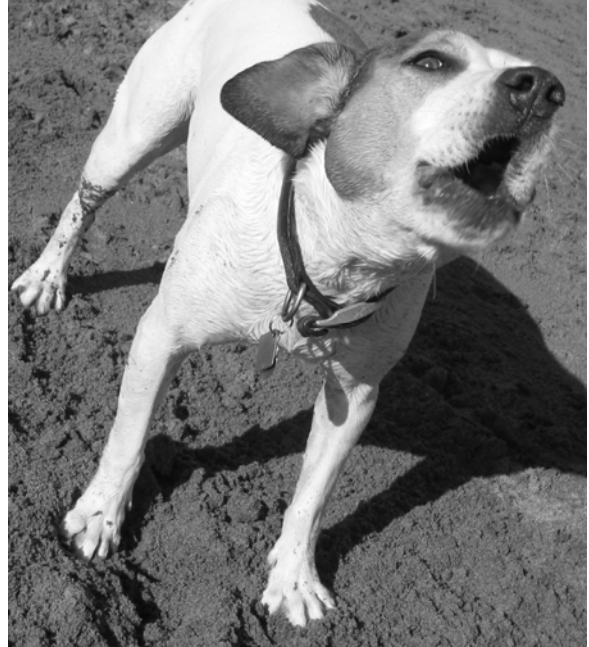
“We’re just gonna move on now, okay?”

“You don’t *fuck* with me!”

“Okay. We’re gone.”

I turn around and walk. Bo follows. We get to the corner, and around the corner, and around the next corner, and I sit down on the sidewalk and hold her on my lap. My legs are shaking. I am soaked with sweat.

* * *



Beach

Bo runs and runs and runs and runs and swims and swims and swims. She digs and digs and barks and barks and barks and digs and digs and digs and her barking gets higher and higher as she loses her voice, reaches that kooky squeak, disappears into her freshly dug hole

* * *



LEAVING

Ran into you on the street the other day, standing outside the bar, smoking. You always were a sexy smoker. I didn't want to chat, really, was rushing off somewhere or other, but I found myself asking what was new and how you were which led to your reciprocating, to a conversation. You told me that your furniture-making was coming along - said things about tongues and grooves that I didn't really understand but that sounded like progress. We talked about our friend's band, how they really deserve a record deal we both know they're never going to get. Then you asked about me. And I told you. And your face dropped a little, then brightened. You said you thought it was a great plan. You were happy for my "escape," you called it. I think you meant it. Everyone seems happy for my escape. We're all struggling, and going elsewhere suggests less struggle, great hope - escape. We all love this city, but we all yearn to flee. As we parted, you hugged me, looked at me intensely, hugged me again, closer, "In case I don't see you."

"You'll see me."

"You never know."

As I walked away, past the laundromat with its murals of clothes hanging on lines out in the idyllic countryside where you imagine I'll be living soon, I thought of the first time we met.

It was two years ago, maybe more, an unseasonably warm night for whatever season we were supposedly in the midst of. The streets were filled with people, and we walked through the neighborhood for quite a while, stopped at the park, a café, the bookstore. We had just been introduced by two mutual friends, whom we followed on our journey, and my dog, who sometimes followed, sometimes led.

We got flirty and narrative, talked our way through courtship, moving in together, getting married and having kids - two girls, we agreed, two years apart. Somewhere along the walk, though, it occurred to me that you were more than a little crazy, and you could see me realizing it. I backed off, and then you did too, a fairly amicable divorce. We walked for a while in silence, listening to our friends argue the merits of a former wrestler turned actor. Since that day, and our fifteen minute lifetime together, we say hello on the street or in the bar or at the café, we shoot the shit, that's pretty much all.

But saying "that's pretty much all" belittles our knowing each other. For me, leaving you and others I know from the bar, the café, people I've spent hours procrastinating with in the bookstore or just always said hello to on the street corner, people I've served goods to or been served goods by - this will be the hardest of all, because so many of you I may never see again. We'll exchange email addresses and phone numbers, of course, and I'll keep them in a desk drawer as I move from place to place, or grow old in the place I'm leaving for. And, while we'll look fondly at those pieces of paper each time we clean out our desks, then put them back, we won't write or call because that's just not how we know each other. We know each other from the neighborhood, and I love you, and I am leaving.

MONEY

We sat in the car in the lot underneath Costco. It felt kind of like being in a political thriller, but parking garages do that. I was Denzel Washington and Fran was Julia Roberts, passing me microfilm and trying to pretend we weren't falling in love. Except that I'm not even vaguely Denzel, and white skin and brown hair are the bulk of what Frances and Julia share, and, well, after six years, while not out of love, we weren't exactly in love either. And we were talking marital issues, not intrigue. We were *having a talk*. A talk about money, her money, about what it would mean to our marriage if she lent me some of said money, specifically twenty-two thousand dollars of money to pay off my credit cards.

Her money, our marriage, my debt, a possessive adjective drill for the romance language speakers; this term's Asians were strong on adjectives, but I could always add some prepositions to the mix, "with," "for," "over," and make it work for the whole class. The dog sat between us looking concerned. The dog always looked concerned. We were closing the deal. *I was closing the deal. Coffee is for closers*, I kept thinking, a line I always loved, but the closers in the movie of the play were crooks. Perhaps "but" isn't exactly the proper conjunction there, maybe "and" better fit the bill. I was feeling like half a crook myself.

"I just want to put it out there," Fran said, using her *calm* voice, "that I don't want to feel, don't want you to feel either, of course, that I have something over you or that you'll be afraid I'm watching you all the time or anything like that."

I nodded. Vigorously. Expressing my newfound responsibility in even the commitment of my neck muscles to stolid nod. All that mattered was my writing those checks, getting out from under.

“The other major thing that I just want to say now and put it behind us is that I *have* thought at some moments that you *did* spend all this money and I *didn't* and now you're getting let off the hook after you got to buy all those things.”

“I know.” More vigorous nodding. *Things. What things? What did I buy for \$22k?* A car repair here, a pair of shoes there. Clothes, too many clothes, but not fancy clothes. Plane tickets, but just home to family. Books. And a few CDs (“You have five *hundred* CDs, hon,.” I can still hear her now). It was closer to six hundred, actually, but I didn't feel it was the right moment to brag about my expensive, precious, now nearly obsolete discs.

“I just had to say it.”

“I know.” Why wasn't I hating myself for this? Because I was closing, I kept reminding myself. I was going to get coffee.

When her mom died two years earlier, Fran inherited a good chunk of money – she also slipped into a two year semi-catatonia, but that's another story – and I was sitting with good chunk of debt, which only grew in those two years. Try explaining that use of “good” to a spoiled Thai 21-year-old. My spending had leveled off, but the debt certainly wasn't shrinking any – I could barely pay my minimums, my stomach was a mess all the time, I was a constant wreck from the anxiety. If I could just get one insurgence, with my new salary, I told myself, I'd easily stay solvent. I had matured, wasn't as impulsive, had

a steady teaching gig, if at a barely solvent ESL school. I was a different man than I'd been those first ten years of post-college life.

When we'd been together for about a year, Fran and I went to Florida to visit my grandmother. One night we went to Jai Alai. I had never been, and had always wanted to see them hurl that little ball in the gigantic racquetball court, the *fronton*, as the motel lobby flier read, and continued: "This fast-paced game stands alone on the merits of its agile athletes who hurl a rock-hard ball, back and forth, at speeds *up to 150 miles per hour!* But, when one adds the dimension of wagering, with the opportunity to win up to \$10,000, jai-alai becomes the ultimate sport!"

Fran, as a dancer and athlete, would enjoy the sport, the grace of it, we both would, and I'd get to appreciate "the dimension of wagering" and learn firsthand the notoriously corrupt game. I harbored no illusions about making a killing at Jai Alai. I just wanted to gamble a little. Vacation, after all. I considered the twenty bucks I was sure to lose just part of the admission fee, and on the drive over I told Fran so, that I planned to lose twenty bucks and that she should be ready for that. She gave me a smirk.

We found seats in the half empty theater/stadium, among a sickly looking bunch of gamblers. These were not Jai Alai fans. There are no Jai Alai fans, it occurred to me, only gamblers. It felt like OTB if they held donkey races in the parking lot. I studied the program before the first match, went up to bet.

"Be right back, hon."

“Are you going to bet?”

“*And* get a hot dog. You want?”

“No.”

“Okey dokers.” I was sure she wanted one, we hadn’t eaten in hours, and Fran was a hot dog aficionado. But \$3.50 for a weanie and a bun just added insult to the injury of my gambling. Fran despised and feared gambling.

I had a great time that night, or would’ve if Fran hadn’t been so distressed. I rooted, learned, lost. Watched the players in their crisp white shirts and pants catch the ball in their pelotas, wicker-basket scoops attached to their arms, and whip it back the hundred yards to the wall. The arc of the ball, pelota-ed arm catching, hurling in one sweeping motion, was really impressive, rigged or not. I thought I could see how the game was fixed, maybe a little, an intentionally dropped celesta here and there. But I couldn’t see a pattern, had no idea how to pick who was going to throw a game – it seemed like inside info or dumb luck were the only ways to win. And that was okay with me. It was twenty bucks, for god’s sake. Okay, thirty-five. But there it was. Wasted. Spent. Gambled. Gone. This was Fran’s thinking.

And now, here we sat, in an underground garage that purposely shook with each passing car, flexible to withstand earthquakes, but which also made it felt like a constant tremor. We discussed my plan to repay her two hundred a month. We discussed “power issues” and “plusses and minuses.” We hadn’t planned to have this conversation in the Costco

garage. Somehow we'd ended up having a lot of big conversations in garages. Or driving. Maybe it's easier because we weren't looking right at each other. A year later Fran confessed her fling with Roger, a fling that had actually been going on when we sat in the car at Costco that day, while I drove us to Santa Cruz on the coastal highway. I somehow managed not to drive us off a cliff, either on purpose or by accident. I remain proud of that. But I digress.

I said "I really don't think I'll resent you, Hon." and "Remember, it's a loan, not a gift." I said all the right things – amazed myself with my poise. I was being completely honest but I felt like I was shamelessly lying. Mostly because behind every word was a chorus of *I really really need that money*.

Eventually we just stopped talking and sat for a minute. The dog had been alertly staring at the cinder-block wall in front of us for the last half hour, with occasional glances back and forth at us. I wondered where Costco went to get their cinder block, is there a Costco for Costco? And if so, at what price per block or per flat, or however you buy cinder blocks, and whether they were actually made of cinder, or cinders, whatever they are. Cinders from a fire? Once, I had a brief infatuation with glass brick. I even found some on sale at Discount Builders, but I never quite figured out what I would do with it and L never liked glass brick much anyway. Too Deco for her. I'd imagined some kind of a bathroom wall, maybe one wall of a shower stall, but Fran'd have had to really like the idea because she's the one who does all that kind of work. My husband, I liked to call her; housepainter, contractor Fran – she built, I bought and fretted – the Pilgrim and the Jew, stalwart wife and nebbishy husband.

Fran's father has never been in debt - two houses, five-of-five kids through prep school and Ivies (and one cousin through RISD), house, beach house, and the exquisite "barn" at the beach house. All paid for with cash. Seriously. I mean, not cash in a suitcase, but you know what I mean. Not one loan, not one mortgage. He was a heart surgeon, a very successful one, and an extraordinary one, by all accounts. But I think of him more as a farmer in a movie, quiet and kind-eyed, exhausted from a day of haulin' sandbags to the levee before the big storm. He retired the year of our wedding, the year his wife lost the fight with her third cancer at 62.

Why I brought the money up that week is anyone's guess. Maybe not knowing where I was going to find this month's \$450 in minimum payments had something to do with it. I just sat down one day and knocked around the numbers and the next thing I knew I was drawing up a contract and writing a serious, sheepish letter. I thought it was just another bad idea I'd never follow up on, like getting the dog into TV commercials or writing a screenplay of *Catcher in the Rye*. But when I was done, I printed and looked at my work - \$200.00 per month for a-hundred-some months (I'd even pay her a little interest) and the nice formatting with the official-looking typed names under signature lines I'd made on our contract - and I thought, *Why not?* The thought scared the hell out of me, so I went and gave it to her as fast as I could before I could change my mind. I guess I knew she'd say yes, but the thought still filled me with terror. Not of her. I normally wasn't afraid of my wife, I'm happy to say. More fear of money or its lack, fear of admitting I didn't have any and that I owed that much and that it was killing me.

After I gave her the letter, I went outside with the dog to play in the dusty vacant lot next door where another new i-beam-and-cement loft building was about to go up. We played with her latest squeaky toy for a while. She loves the squeakies, destroys at least one a week, which gives me the opportunity to run out and buy a new ones. This one was in the shape of the continental USA. “Where’s your America? Go get your America!” I’d say. My heart was racing and my chest felt caved-in as I distractedly went through the motions – threw the toy, played tug of war. The dog kept prancing around squeaking the America, first with her mouth, then with her front paws, kind of pouncing on it over and over, trying to get me involved. I halfheartedly tossed the nation for her. Then we both sat down in the sun and waited. A precious few minutes of windless sun on another chilly San Francisco day. I tried to slap dust from the lot off the dog, like beating a rug, until the cloud coming off her made me cough. Finally Fran leaned out the door, “Honey, are you ever going to come back in the house?” And that was pretty much it – done deal. In the car at Costco a few days later, detailing my new budgetary self-control measures, I felt like a kid making final arguments for the new pet that I’d already been told I was getting.

When we had to wait in line just to get a cart, I could tell Costco was going to be a madhouse. And, once we got inside, it was. July 3rd at a discount consumer depot. Large families on field trips for cookout items. Lots of extra-wide Costco carts. Some people had skipped the carts altogether and were pushing giant flatcar things. In-store Gridlock, another band name for the list. Impatient grown-ups, running, falling, crying kids, idle chatter and family arguments. Angry looks and rough apologies. Fran chugged on ahead

as I ogled all the non-food items. Humidifiers, watches, stereo equipment, bread makers, fancy pens in the jewelry case, cheap pens by the gross on the shelves.

When I was a kid, my dad would take me to Al Smith's Athletic Footwear, in run-down, nearly abandoned downtown Albany. Dad had bought sneakers from Mr. Smith for maybe twenty years and Al always gave him a little extra discount. I didn't mind going to the dusty shop instead of Herman's World of Sporting Goods in the mall because it was the only way I might get the shoes I wanted: Adidas Superstars with their cool molded-plastic toe for basketball, Stan Smiths, white with the green piping and just airholes for the three Adidas stripes, for tennis, and parties - whatever the season called for. For a while, I was an Adidas purist. My dad didn't want to pay for the expensive sneakers, but I had to have them. I really had to. I was a marginal jock at best. I went to a small, preppy, suburban private school and while I wasn't a bad athlete, I was no starter, and thus marginal in the only measure that counted for boys. I already had too many strikes against me to risk having the wrong footwear. I lived in the city, my friends all lived in the suburbs. My parents were professors, their fathers were doctors and lawyers and businessmen, and their mothers stayed home. I was one of three Jews in a class of forty-four, and the other two were really Jewy, yarmulkes and all. There was no way I wasn't going to have the right cleats. And if that meant going downtown instead of to the mall, where a cranky old cigar-smelly guy hung on, cutting prices to the bone to attract any customers at all, then so be it. It was fall of 10th grade year. I was trying to make varsity soccer, and everybody was buying these cleats, Patricks, some new Irish company, I think. Things were not going well, in part because last year's Adidas were half the price

of the Patricks and, according to the infuriatingly sensible Mr. Smith, were just as good, if not better. Plus he probably had a crate of Adidas he was desperate to unload.

“Dad, please. I really have to get the Patricks. The traction is totally superior. C’mon, you said--”

“Look” he started. “Look” was never a good sign. “Don’t ‘you said’ me. We’ve talked about that. There’s no way I’m getting you an eighty dollar pair of sneakers that are going to last one season.”

“Cleats,” I said.

“Cleats.” His jaw muscles clenched and unclenched. “I’m just not going to do it, so you might as well try on the Adidas--”

“Dad, that’s not what you said. You said--”

“I said I would get you a good pair of cleats, and that’s--”

“Dad, for once don’t be so cheap.”

As soon as I said it I knew in a flash that I’d won. My father was not cheap, had never been, and I knew it. But I also knew, somehow, that it was his Achilles heel, my trump card. Mr. Smith looked down at his referee shoes. My father just nodded at Al Smith, who went and got the Patricks. I tried them on, they looked cool, black with a green “P” logo, they fit, dad paid for them, all without another word. I made the team. My father didn’t come to any games, which was just as well. I hardly ever played and would’ve been embarrassed if he’d shown up. But I had really hurt him, and he was helplessly stubborn. After that, he always gave me more money, more *stuff*, than I asked

for, and I, in turn became a big spender, a guy who bought what he wanted and bought stuff to share, who bought that last round at the bar. A guy who wasn't cheap.

We grabbed a ten-pound pillow of ground chuck, foot-long Kosher dogs, foot-long buns and some big, seeded hamburger buns, and two humungous bags of Ruffles. We got a monster jar of ibuprofen, a four pack of toothpastes; a million-pound bag of dog food. I noticed that Kirkland made nearly all of it, made *everything* – kitty litter, crackers, soap; I noticed a green cashmere sweater that was just fifty bucks – Kirkland. Fran got in line and I went back in for more: a big, bear-shaped jar of animal crackers for the snack table at work, six cans of chunk white tuna in water, a bag of pig's ears for the dog. I tried on the Kirkland cashmere. It was comfy and soft. I put it back. Next week I'd sneak back for it. When I got back to the cart, Fran gave me and my precarious armload a look. I grinned.

“They're for everyone at work, they're \$3.99, L.” she was looking in particular at the bearful of crackers.

“They're pretty goofy.”

“Goofy's a dog. This is a bear. If anything, these are Yogi. You know better, hon.” That almost got a smile. “There's a good deal on a phone. . . .” We needed a new phone.

“I don't want to look at phones today.”

There were three carts ahead of us in line at the register – ours was one of about thirty registers, all with long lines. An argument started between an employee and a

small, wiry Asian guy. He had his wife and small boy with him and he was fuming. “Fuck you, man! You scaring my boy! Get the fuck away from me!” He pushed the chubby assistant-manager-looking kid back into the next register. The kid kept his cool. “Sir, Relax, just relax, let’s talk about this.” The angry man’s little boy was crying and holding on to his father’s leg. The register area got quiet, just the clinks and squeaks of human weight on shopping carts. The manager, maybe 25, blond, goateed, well trained, talked quietly to the man, and slowly turned them both away from the crowd. Soon we couldn’t hear the angry man anymore. He and the manager shook hands and then the father looked around and caught his breath, embarrassed. We all wondered what happened, then we stopped wondering and got back to wanting to get the hell out of Costco.

When we got to the front of the line I said, in grandiose jest “Baby, I got this one.” She was gracious enough to stifle a guffaw, gently smile (Okay, maybe I heard a giggle), did a mini-curtsy, and stepped aside. While I unloaded the cart onto the conveyer belt, Fran got in line at the snack bar for a hot dog for her and a slice of pizza for me.

The cashier was handing me the receipt when I heard the pop. It sounded like a firecracker or a gross of shrink-wrapped boxes of *Tide* falling perfectly to the floor, *thwack*. *If this wasn’t fourth of July weekend*, I thought, *I might think that was a gunshot*. Suddenly people were screaming and running in the front door, some of them pulling and ducking behind their carts. Then suddenly everybody hit the floor. Everyone but me. I just left our cart and started walking over to the food court. I took maybe five steps in what felt like super slo-mo but I didn’t see Fran. I called “Frannie!” and she popped her head up about ten yards away, over by the condiments, and raised her hand like she was

going to ask a question. She is a tall, strong woman, and in times of crisis she seems even more so. But right then she looked small, birdlike. I suddenly realized I might actually be in some danger and sat down right there against the snack bar wall. Next to me was a woman in shorts who had run back from the entrance. She was holding her knees and crying. I touched her shoulder and she leaned into me, gasping. I put my arm around her, told her it was going to be okay.

“I saw this man he had a black mask with eyeholes. He had a gun—I heard the pop. I never been that close to a gunshot. Shit’s loud.”

She rubbed her ears hard with the palms of her hands and started to sob. A young, ultra-composed Costco woman came and took her away. I stood up. Other people were also starting to get up and various store employees were running to and fro. I kept thinking they really shouldn’t be running, that it was scary the way they ran like that, and that there should be some kind of announcement, why wasn’t there an announcement?

Right after the shots, the gigantic metal garage doors had come down, shut us in and, presumably, the shooter out. I walked over to the condiments, hugged Fran. The snack bar, bizarrely, re-opened. I said, “You still want to eat?” She nodded and we got back in line. While we were waiting, the door cranked slowly open.

Fran said, “I want to get out of here” and I agreed, but we didn’t move, still waited in line for our food. By the time we got it, people with their carts had lined up to leave. A security guard looked at receipts very carefully as EMTs and cops and S.W.A.T.-looking guys in jumpsuits milled around. Outside, helicopters thwacked overhead.

We packed the car and got in and gave the dog, who looked even more concerned than usual, a hug. We received ecstatic dog kisses. We gave her a pig's ear and she grabbed it and went to work in the back seat, trauma forgotten.

“At first, didn't you think it was that guy in line?” I said.

“Yeah.”

Exiting was slow, everyone driving excessively politely. At the gate, a chunky, baby-faced cop was stopping each car and peering inside. He had his pistol drawn. I'd never seen that before. The gun was an automatic, sleek and metallic, the kind of gun the bad guys always carried in the TV shows when I was a kid. Good guys carried revolvers. It looked heavy and valuable. He seemed uncomfortable, like he'd been told to draw his weapon but didn't see the point, didn't want to scare anyone. His finger seemed really close to the trigger. He looked in our car, then smiled, said thank you, waved us on, and we crawled home in gnarled traffic to watch for it on TV. We needed a new TV.

SLEEP

For me, being a gambler is this: no matter how much you lose, and no matter how much losing hurts, the love of winning is so sweet and deep that you keep coming back. There are other kinds of gamblers, “sick” gamblers who love to lose, for instance. But then I’ve only known one sick gambler who ever admitted it. And even he kept right on playing and losing and losing and losing to the end. That’s not me. For me it’s the winning, and the belief that you can win, when you know you’re not just a better card player but a much better person than the slob next to you because you’re beating his fat, stupid ass and luck has nothing to do with it. Then you lose two big hands and feel exactly the opposite, like you’re beneath pathetic, that unlike him, you don’t own your local Midas franchise or have a wife and kids to go home to, you’ve barely got a girlfriend and you don’t even have a friggin pet. And, on top of it all, you’re a loser. Literally – one who loses. And you swear to yourself at that moment that this is it, you’re done for good.

If you’re really, really lucky, when you have the “done for good” epiphany for about the millionth time, you go home and there’s actually someone there to take you in her arms and tell you it’s okay, that you’ve got plenty of time and plenty of love and plenty of other things to do and see and be in the world. And she means it and even though she’s heard it so many times before and even though she was attracted to you in part for the danger of your gambling in the first place, she hopes against hope that this time, finally, you mean it, and you hope you mean it, and you have deep loving powerful

sex that night and sleep the whole night holding on to her, tight. You sleep eleven hours that first night, the sleep of the about-to-be-just, then spend the next week looking around at the real world, the everyday world you've forgotten exists, savoring the feeling of breeze through an open window. This, instead of spending days jonesing and nights fixing at a green felt table in a sad fluorescent room. Or, even worse, in front of your computer at three AM, barely resisting smashing the damn thing, swearing at some guy in Finland because *how the fuck can he play like that and keep winning?!* You rediscover the satisfaction of domestic clichés: reading the morning paper with a hot cup of coffee, renting a movie and snuggling under a comforter, maybe even a little one-on-one in the driveway with the neighbor kid, thinking *when did he get so damn tall?* (and when did I get so damn slow?) as he swats another of your jumpers across the yard - all that stuff that seems so utterly tedious, shit that's just in your way when you're deep in the game, in the headrush of constant competition. The world feels calm and good. You savor that feeling, and if you're lucky a week of that becomes a month. It really is like coming off drugs, maybe speed - at first a relief, then, an unbearably hard, empty feeling comes on, and back and forth. And there's always the lurking itch, just out of reach. Actually, in reach, as close as the computer or a ten minute drive. And sooner or later, usually sooner, calm becomes boredom, the boredom becomes torture and the itch becomes unbearable and eventually you scratch scratch scratch and it feels so good, you're back at the table and everyone's saying *hey* and *hiya champ* and *where ya been*, and you've come home again. Home, a place with sad, gray-skinned men sitting around in smoky rooms lying to each other and calling it a game. It's kind of like being one of those traveling salesman with two different families in two states, each secret and completely separate from the

other, each deeply loved, but neither one enough on its own. Or like a dream I've had periodically in which my apartment, my house, wherever I'm living at the time, opens up into a whole other world teeming with seedy, thrilling action, partying that's been going on 24/7 around you forever without your knowing it. Except with the game, the action really exists, any time you want it.

Usually, though, after a bad run, you don't have what I like to call the Loser's Epiphany. You just feel like the shittiest of shit, hopeless, you wouldn't know an epiphany if it—you get the idea. You go home, too beaten down to even get drunk about it, collapse, sleep like crap, replaying hands over and over, and the next day, well, the next day is another day and after a few cups of coffee you feel sharp and confident - you can't go out like that, no way! You'll play one more cash session to bankroll the big Friday tourney, and that's it, and you head for the ATM, or maybe even the payday advance place if you're that kind of desperate. They say that Johnny Moss, one of the old-school greats, went from dead broke to millionaire dozens of times. When he was getting old, friends tried to get him to put some money away in a trust. They told him to think of his wife, what will she do when he's gone, but he wouldn't do it. Couldn't do it. He had to be risking it all. Every day. Not you, kid. You're done with all that. You'll have one good run, go out a winner, then take some time and figure out what you really want to do with your life. Then, best case scenario, you play that cash game, and do alright, then final table the big tourney, cash third, a very nice payday, so close to winning the whole thing, and now you're on a roll. And so it goes.

A year and a half ago Sharon finally gave up on me and I came back from Tucson to stay with Mom til the end. Home to the house I grew up in, in Albany, NY, a small city's version of urban-suburbia – three bedroom, two story, brick prewars and fifties colonials on a tree-shaded street two blocks off the main drag and a million miles from my regular game. My own private rehab. Our house was brick and always felt solid and safe. Now it felt safe like a prison.

From the day I got home, regardless of, or maybe because of her cancer, Mom and I got into it, same as ever. We fought about my lousy beneath-me jobs and how I should've gone to grad school, about my gambling and losing Sharon because of it, even though, as I always tried to point out, Sharon and I had a lot more "issues" than just "my gambling." I've long since given up explaining to her, to anyone that poker isn't pure gambling but rather a game of skill with gambling in it. To Mom it was simple: I lost Sharon's car in a poker game, gambling, whatever I want to call it, and that's when Sharon left. Ipso . . . facto. The hand was a 99.9% lock, my aces full of deuces beaten by quad deuces. Quad deuces!!! Bad beat of a lifetime. But live and learn, or die and stop learning, as I like to say. Ninety-nine-point-nine isn't a hundred, and nothing's a lock unless it's a *lock*. That Corvair was a rustbucket piece of shit, not nearly worth the \$2500 that Dale let me call his bet with, that's for sure. But to Sharon, well, it had been *her dad's* Corvair – twenty-five hundred, hell, it was priceless. And to mom, well, who lives like that? Who gambles their girlfriend's car? People in the goddamn movies, Jim, *gamblers*, Jimmy, that's who lives like that.

When I win, I'm so full of love, or something that feels like love – but maybe it's kind of how you love everyone when you're tripping on ecstasy. When I was still with Sharon and I won a big hand, I would always think about her hair, how it was so thick and dark, and straight and curly at the same time, how her bangs would fall in her eyes, how she liked to have me stroke it softly or grab a handful and pull on it really hard, depending. On good nights, early on in our relationship, I'd rush home to tell her, I'd throw money on the bed and we'd roll around in it. There was no one else, nowhere else I'd want to go to celebrate. And sometimes it would be good when I got there, but not after she'd seen the flipside a few hundred times. To Sharon Winner's Love wasn't real – “adoration borne of adrenaline,” she once called it. It wasn't really me, I wasn't really there, she'd say.

She was wrong and right, of course. When I'd just had a great night and bought flowers and rushed home, part of me was still back at the table, replaying hands, planning moves for tomorrow. My love at those times – a quarter real, a quarter adrenal, half absent altogether - but sometimes, some amazing times, I really could win and leave it all behind and just want nothing else but to be with her. She couldn't trust that, though, couldn't tell the difference.

The night I came home without the Corvair, Sharon stayed calm, just took out a suitcase and started packing *my* stuff, said “Jimmy, this is the last straw that broke the camel's back” and I just couldn't stop myself, said, “Which is it ‘the last straw’ or ‘the straw that broke the camel's back’?” And she said, not so calm now, “What the *fuck* are you talking about?” At that point, I'd had a few, a few more than a few, to brace myself, and was feeling witty, and I just started riffing on it, said that she was mixing two

metaphors, or clichés or axioms or whatever, even though they probably both refer to the same “proverbial” - even though they’re not really proverbs - refer to the same “proverbial” camel, overburdened pack animal falling down dead in the desert, which has one “s” and “dessert” has two because you want seconds on dessert but not the desert, especially if you’re the camel carrying too many straws.

What was that game called, with the blue plastic camel and the colored plastic straws that you pile on until the kid who puts on the last straw breaks the camel’s back and the straws go all over? In the TV commercial everyone laughs hysterically and points to the kid who put the last straw on, and that kid, I think it was a little blond girl, holds both shocked hands up to an “oh my!” mouth and then she laughs too. But in real life you have to pick up the damn straws all over the place and you keep losing them under the couch until pretty soon there aren’t enough straws to break the back anymore, and the camel game gets put in the back of the closet until, thirty years later, your mom dies and you go back home to clean out the house before it’s sold and you find it. Actually, I didn’t find it. Mom probably chucked it years ago.

I did find the remains of my awful Mickey Mouse Gumball Machine. “Penny for a gumball, Mickey? Thanks for the gumball!” Almost 30 years later and I’m still thinking of that horrible ad. Cheap, plasticky, Mickey Mouse in more ways than one. I couldn’t believe Mom got it for me because she was anti-candy and anti-“those-Disney-fascists” big-time and anti any-toy-that-advertised-on-TV, anti-plastic. She made me put the pennies I put in the gumball machine into my savings box, an orange and black Trick-or-Treat for UNICEF box we never used, and she wouldn’t buy more gumballs after the first bag (she was pretty much anti-sugar too) but instead suggested that I fill it with marbles,

and I got so mad I went out to the driveway and smashed the thing with a hammer and then the dog stepped on a shard and cut his paw and I had to pay the vet bill with half my allowance for six months.

While I prattled on, Sharon kept packing, a second bag, then a third. Then she called Dan to come pick me up. One camel's back, broken for good and all.

When I came back home, like I said, Mom would go on at me, go off on me, same as ever, but then she would get tired all of a sudden, which she never did before, not of nagging me anyway, and she'd take a deep breath and sigh and close her eyes, and just like that she'd be asleep, and I would sit and watch her face soften until I couldn't recognize it anymore, and eventually I'd stop thinking about getting a job or applying to graduate school, or Sharon, or poker. I'd just be there looking at my mom's sleeping face, more calm than it ever was in waking life. Sometimes she'd wake back up, see me, mumble something about Sharon, then drift back off, and her words would hang there in the dusky room. Or at least I remember it as always being the gray of dusk, or late at night. Then I'd watch her until I'd fall asleep too.

Sometimes Mom would wake me up with a groggy "Sweetie?" and take my hand, and we'd have a quiet moment or two before she'd get rolling again, trying to get my ducks in a row before she died, in part because it was too late to re-row her own ducks I guess, her ducks set in stone by that point. Stone ducks. I could start substitute teaching and then maybe move into a full-time teaching job like she had. Or maybe even eventually go to library school. That was a favorite of hers, "lots of people start that late

in life” and I would tell her that I wasn’t nearly “late in life.” You’ve always liked books, she’d say, boy did you fuck up with Sharon, she’d say, you didn’t listen to her, she’d say. I’m not saying she was wrong, or that all of her ideas were bad, or even that that’s all we did. We would also watch movies, or we would both sit there and read – she something literary, usually written by a woman, me, mysteries. Any and all mysteries. Once I made the mistake of telling her I wanted to write a mystery. She got much too excited, started conniving how we’d get it published, she could show it to her editor friend in the city. She wanted to see pages. I told her I wasn’t comfortable with that, but the truth was that the pages were all up in my head. But when she got toward the end, we quieted down, and mostly just sleep and wake together, waiting.

About a month after Mom died, I’m going through the paperwork she kept in the fireproof box in the hall closet, detailed info about chunks of money that added up to a lot more than I’d imagined, and I get a call from a real estate woman Mom had told me to contact, Eunice. Eunice Bacon, if you can believe that. Kooky, chubby old lady name, but on the phone I guess that she’s around my age, somewhere just under or over 40, and anything but kooky. She’s almost friendly while teetering on the edge of officious, calling me Mr. Strasbourg. I ask her to call me Jim. She suggests she come over and talk and she does and we do.

Eunice comes right over that same day, eight months ago. Yes, I tell her, I want to sell, or, at least, I know that’s what I’m going to do, that was always the plan. Eunice suggests “staging” the house.

“You mean, like bringing in fake potted plants and cheesy furniture?” I say, and realize that sounds a little harsh. Eunice is unfazed, but her eyes narrow a bit, accenting a feature I’ve always found sexy but that women tend to hate in themselves, crow’s feet.

“I can use real plants, Jim, and the furniture we use is all quite tasteful.”

“Of course, Eunice, sorry. I guess I just don’t want to see that. I want to show it empty. Someone wants this house, they’re going to have to at least be able to imagine their own stuff in it.” Eunice nods, not worth fighting over. Mom kept the house in shape, the neighborhood is desirable, this house will sell fast, we both know it.

Eunice in person, tight bun and glasses, looks more like a cliché librarian than a powerhouse real estate agent. Definitely not a Eunice. I recognize her from the memorial. The day she comes by the house, she’s wearing a beige skirt suit, carries a snappy leather briefcase. A streaked bottle-blond hiding some gray, I’m guessing. No wedding ring. Tallish, gym-fit, attractive in a kind of B-movie way, a not quite so skinny Laura Dern type playing a waitress-turned-realtor with two kids and no man, a woman who’s pulled herself up by her hardscrabble bootstraps. It’s hard to tell if we could possibly have anything in common with her in her real estate lady costume and character. I’d have to see her off duty. I picture well-worn jeans, clogs, and a hoodie. It’s a pleasant enough picture.

That first day, we talk about everything practical, nothing personal beyond “Your mother was a dear friend of mine,” and “I saw you at the memorial.” Mom had been kind of a mother figure to Eunice, I’m not sure how that came to pass, they met at the Y and became yoga buddies, something like that. Mom would tell me about Eunice, how she

turned her life around. Mom's idea of a subtle lesson. I wondered how much Eunice new about me. Too much, I was pretty sure. At the memorial, Eunice was crying, bigtime nose-blowing, sloppy crying. It inspired trust, if not exactly attraction. I tell her I'm going to stay in town for a while, clean out the house myself. She tells me to take my time, and to call her when I'm ready. We shake hands – she has a nice firm shake, of course.

Mom's house. My house. 248 Elm. Even after so many years gone, I always thought of it as home and mine, and now, for a little while, it actually belongs to me. I constantly reach up and touch the low ceilings in the kitchen and front hall, obsessively, remembering how I used to reach up like I was shooting a finger-roll, run and jump as high as I could when I was eleven and in love with Dr. J, until finally I could just barely touch. Then I couldn't stop because I *could* finally touch and soon the ceilings were streaked with my finger marks and Mom laughed when she first noticed but then made me get the stepladder and scrub them off, with the soft side of the sponge, of course, so as not to scratch the paint.

Emptying the house feels like a superlong version of that Japanese tradition where people make pilgrimages to see the cherry blossoms dying because it makes them sad in a pleasing way that Westerners don't even have a word for, melancholy mixed with nostalgia, a sweet ache. I think of the Japanese blossoms because I read an article the other day in *Newsweek* that said Japanese people are having all kinds of new psychological problems because they're all taking antidepressants just like us now, so they don't experience the sadness they need. Which is almost exactly what Mom said

when she went in the hospital and they gave her Zoloft. She took it at first but then stopped, said to me “I’m *dying*, Jimbo, it’s *supposed* to be depressing.” Fair enough, I guess, but she sure was easier to be around when she was taking those pills. But sometimes “happier” isn’t what someone wants to be, which is the point that the Japanese are trying to make, that we Westerners don’t get, but that maybe I get now, somewhat, from watching Mom die, from cleaning out the house, from sitting in the attic with all my old toys and games and clothes and books and band posters, *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issues *Rolling Stone*, My first *Penthouse*, still hidden at the bottom of my trunk. My blossoms. I’ve bought some porn since I’ve been back home, mags, mostly, and a few dvds. I guess I’m old school, the web just doesn’t do it for me like those glossy pages, the smell of a new magazine, a dvd in a box – objects you can hold. Still a dirty thrill to jerk off in the house I grew up in, especially now that I can do it in every room.

I take my time going through Mom’s papers, reading her travel journals, dealing with lawyers and money, and then start emptying the house. I play online a little, but online poker, like online porn, has never worked for me. I need felt, cards, the click-clack of chips, warm bodies, there’s nothing like it. Eunice calls once a month, third Monday. I can picture it programmed into her PDA, “Check in w/ J. Strasbourg.” After month two, I start thinking of scenarios to ask her out, something casual, maybe coffee on the weekend. I want to see that other Eunice, out of uniform. How *did* she get that name? But each time she calls, her formality on the phone talks me out of it. I can never tell if it’s just professionalism or maybe warnings from Mom too that keep her at such a distance. Mom’s habit was to speak well of me to others, though, saving her frustration with me for

me alone. But she and Eunice were pretty close. Hard to say. Eight months later, the house is nearly empty, and Eunice is eager to start showing it, she tells me during our monthly chat. I decide to take my shot.

“Okay Eunice, I guess I’m ready. I’m out of town for the rest of the week but you think maybe we could meet sometime this weekend, go over last details?”

“Details?”

“Prepping the house, how much time to be gone when you’re coming, offers and counter-offers, you know.”

There’s a pause on the other end of the line, Eunice thinking we both know she could just tell me all that on the phone.

“Okay, Jim, sure.”

“Just for peace of mind.”

“Of course, Jim.”

“I don’t want to bust up your weekend or anything, but if you want to get this rolling . . .”

“No, of course.”

“How about Saturday at the Peach Tree?”

“Sure”

“11am?”

“Fine.”

The Peach Tree is a café and bakery on a side street downtown, overpriced but with great coffee and pastries. Little metal tables and chairs. Steel and brick everywhere. Modern. On weekends it bustles with yuppies and a couple of what passes for hipsters in Albany, guys and girls in matching too-tight jeans and Chuck Taylor’s. I get there early. Eunice, well, you know when she arrives. I got the jeans right, but she’s wearing a comfy big wool sweater and crocs. I give myself half credit for the crocs. Her hair’s down in a loose pony. And she’s with a girl of about ten. Why didn’t Mom ever tell me about Eunice’s daughter? I wave.

“Hello Jim.”

“Eunice.”

“This is Molly.”

“Hello Molly”

“Hello Jim.” Yup, Eunice’s daughter alright.

“Had a little schedule screw-up today,” Eunice quickly explains. “But she’s got a project she’s going to work on while we talk.”

“Great. What’s your project, Molly?”

“A collage.”

“Cool.”

Eunice goes up and gets herself a coffee and Molly a cocoa. Molly proceeds to take out a pile of magazines, a glue stick, scissors. I watch for a while.

“Is this for school?”

“What, Jim?”

“The collage, is it homework.”

“No, I just like making them. I’m a collagist.”

“I see.”

“What’s it gonna be about?”

“I don’t know yet, Jim. The first picture will tell me.”

“Good idea.”

“Thanks, Jim.”

I laugh and she gives me a hint of a smile, we’re in on a tiny joke on Mom.

Eunice returns. Her eyes have a little sleepy in them. Her brow a tiny knit from the frustration of the morning. But as she becomes caffeinated, she loosens up. We take care of our business quickly, but Molly has just settled in and gotten down to work. She carefully snips a pair of lips, pastes it in the center of the page. Her collage will be about “red,” she tells me. A barn, a car, a tricycle.

“So how did you and my mom meet?”

“In yoga, you know that.”

“I mean, how did you become friends.”

“I don’t know. You know your mom, she talked a lot, and fast, and she just kind of adopted me.”

“Maybe you needed adopting. You’re the only young friend she ever had.”

“Besides you.”

“Besides me, yes.”

“She talked a lot about you.”

“Yes.”

“I think she wanted me to help her understand you.”

“Ah. Did you?”

“I think so. Or I helped her understand the person she laid out for me.”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean, of course you’re not him exactly.”

“How so?”

“How could you be the same? I don’t know. You fit the description and all. Handsome but unkempt. Lost.”

“Lost.”

“Yes. Sorry.”

“No no, I guess I’m kind of lost. Just wasn’t a word she ever used to my face.”

“Yes, well, maybe that’s my word. What would she have said?”

“Unfocused.”

“Sure.”

“A screw up.” I smile at using the child-friendly version of Mom’s favorite phrase.

Pause, “Yes, once, right after the Corvair.”

“You know about the Corvair.”

“I know about the Corvair, Jim.”

“I really wish you didn’t know about the Corvair.”

At that Eunice looked up, looked me right in the eye, and smiled a big, warm, generous smile. Molly was finishing up her collage. Red nearly covering every inch of goldenrod construction paper. We complimented her on it, which was easy, it was really great.

The next night Eunice calls and tells me she’s going to show the house to a young couple, the first ones, early Monday afternoon. They’re very eager, they like the neighborhood, they’ve seen the house from the outside. “Cased the joint?” “Yes, I suppose so,” Eunice offers, deadpan. Getting a laugh out of Eunice Bacon has become a goal, a dream, of

mine. I consider telling her we'd make a great comic duo. She tells me that they're coming at 4:30 on Thursday.

Thursday morning I get out of the house early. I figure I'll go read the paper at the cafe, maybe catch a movie and wander around the mall or something. But instead, I find myself pulling onto 90W, then the Mass Pike, and I'm headed to Connecticut, to Foxwoods. I'm going to play some poker.

Poker players are the same everywhere. Deluded, egotistical, greedy, hopeless, fat, pathetic. Well, these days, that's not always true. So many young kids now, since all the TV poker, gym fit, smart and cocky, dark shades and baseball caps, clones of one lucky millionaire. Of course, there are others you can't pigeonhole, but those are the two major groups.

For the most part poker players can make you feel a lot better about yourself by comparison. Unless you lose to them, that is. Nothing worse than losing to a moron who thinks he's a genius. The thing about the luck/skill ratio is that on any given day, anyone, absolutely anyone, can win. The game is 90% luck, but the few geniuses who can maximize that 10% will, over the course of a long, patient career, in between lots and lots of losing, win. But then there are the few who just got really really lucky, one time. That's why poker's such a big deal now, because one of them, an utterly mediocre guy with the incredible name of Moneymaker, went on a crazy run of luck for a week and ended up three million dollars richer, all on national TV. Poker is the great equalizer. Along with the lottery, it's the last gasp of the American dream. I'm playing \$5-10 no-limit, and through my first five hours I'm up six hundred bucks, which is way better than

playing twelve hours and losing eight hundred, but not my best hourly rate for seven hours of pretty much tedium, which is what it takes to win. Steady, tedious play. Hours of boredom interrupted by moments of panic, some poker legend once said. Fold fold fold, wait wait wait, then when the geezers and young studs finally think I'm a rock, make a small bet on a straight or flush draw, or maybe a small pair, and either they all fold and I take it down or they call and I hit the draw. It was good luck hitting those draws, but I played well, too, and luck counts. *Luck counts*. It counted the night of the Corvair, so it counts when it goes my way too. Sometimes you just run good.

It's late afternoon and I'm thinking about calling it a day, I'm getting distracted, curious to talk to Eunice about the showing. I'm about to cash out when a fat, pink, happy Texan with two racks of chips sits down on my immediate left. No matter where you play poker you'll always find a New Yorker and a Texan at the table. He's maybe 55, and loud, gold Rolex with diamond bezel, big school ring that he taps on the felt when he checks. Right off the bat, he's betting big and raising big, pushing everyone around in that pseudo-friendly Texas way, then laughing and backslapping when everyone folds. He's drinking Johnny Walker Red and coke – another classy touch like the jewelry – drinking it fast. I play scared for a while, fold crappy hands to him in my blinds, nurse a coke, all the while acting as if I really like my cards but he's forcing me out. “Too rich for my blood,” I mumble after one of his raises. He'll say, *Wise choice, son*, or *Good fold, friend*, every time, and shoot me that smile. Then it's my big blind and he raises, but less than usual, looking for a caller. I just call with a pair of kings. The flop isn't much. I check, he checks. The turn is a four, the river a jack. He bets the pot on the river, and I

just call. He turns over Ace-jack for a pair of jacks and leans to scoop the pot. I flip the kings. Now he thinks I only play big cards and play even them passively.

Nothing much happens for a while. Tex raises a few hands, everyone folds. He raises once and a sunglass kid goes all in and everyone folds. It comes around to my big blind, and Tex raises his usual, to \$40, four times the big blind. It's folded around to me. I call with A-3, hearts. The flop is Q-10-6, all hearts. He bets \$200, a big overbet of the hundred buck pot, and I'm thinking he has a queen and wants to bet me off a flush draw. I really ham it up, stew about it, ask the dealer for time, stew some more, and then just call the two hundred. Now there's about \$500 in the pot. The turn is the king of clubs. He bets \$750. I go into the tank again, and again just call. The river is the queen of spades, my dream card if he has a queen. Now he calls time, and after about half a minute bets \$900. At this point, I'm sitting with about \$2,000. I'm almost sure he's got ace-queen or king-queen and has just hit his set, not the full house, and I wish I had a bigger stack, because I'm pretty sure he'll call any bet I make. This time, I don't go into the tank, I quickly, and a big to loudly, say "All in," faking a nervous bluff. He instantly calls, turns over his queen-jack, I show my flush and I take down nearly seven thousand dollar pot.

He musters a weaker smile, "A-3, Huh?" I shrug, and think, *god it's good to be around people again*. He's given me about half of his huge stack. I'm ready to cash out, but you can't just take a hand like that off someone and walk away. Besides, he's on tilt now, raising more and sloppier than ever. But after he took that big hit, other players are playing back at him. Soon he's all in to the sunglass kid with KK, the kid calls and turns over AQ, flops an ace, the turn and river offer no help, and the big man stomps off.

I stand up too, and go cash out, \$5,800 and change, a nice, nice cash, and step into the crisp November a happy man. And then it hits me that I left an especially nasty copy of *Club Magazine* next to my bed. I picture Eunice walking in with the clients earlier. Eunice would surely have done a walk through before they got there. But the thought of even Eunice finding the mag After another moment of clammy panic, I decide not to worry about it.

I go to the bar for a couple of bourbons to celebrate the wad of bills in my pocket. I watch women pass by, hips swaying in skirts tight jeans and stilettos, then go eat a \$60 steak. I finish off with tiramisu and three cups of coffee, take a piss and wink back at the winner looking at me in the mirror as I wash my hands, think, *home at last*, and head for the door. The sky is lit pinkish gray early winter clouds and the first November snow is falling in big, lazy flakes.

Driving home, I imagine Eunice being shocked and grossed out even though she didn't show it on the phone. I wish I could explain it to her, explain to her I didn't do it on purpose, that I just forgot, that I've been alone so much of the time lately, that being at home makes me feel and act like a horny teenager, that I usually don't buy magazines that are as graphic as that, usually much more tame stuff really. But talking about specifics like that would also make it clear that I do indeed usually buy other porn that isn't quite so graphic and gross. And makes it all too clear that I care about what Eunice thinks about it. I decide I'm not going to say anything more about it if she doesn't.

All the way home, the wipers wipe those huge, mesmerizing flakes. I scan the radio. Hip hop, sports talk, classic rock, NPR. Somehow all of it, with the fading booze and the buzz of the coffee and my full stomach and the afterglow of playing and winning after not playing for so long, all of it – except for Eunice and the magazine – feels warm and comfortable and okay. More than okay. I feel good about the job I’ve done on the house, about Eunice walking through with strangers, showing them the floors, the bathrooms, the detailed woodwork, talking about the roof, the new furnace, showing them my room. She must’ve walked through before they got there.

I get home a little after midnight. Eunice’s Cherokee is parked in the driveway. Unexpected, to say the least. As I open the door, I think about calling out hello but don’t. Eunice’s raincoat and briefcase are by the front door. No Eunice, though, in kitchen or living room. I go upstairs into my room and stand in the middle of the floor. Empty, it seems twice as large, but there’s nothing strange about that, I suppose. In the emptied house I sometimes feel like a giant, sometimes like a dwarf. Then I hear the TV in Mom’s room and head down the hall.

Eunice, still in ecru skirt-suit, lies curled up on her side, sleeping deeply on the mattress on the floor that’s been serving as my bed. I can hear her breathing. The copy of *Club* sits next to her, and next to it, the copy of *To the Lighthouse* I’ve been trying to read because Mom always wanted me to.

“The Swap II” is playing on the TV. Well, at least she picked one with a plot. It’s about two couples wrestling with that age-old question: to swing or not to swing. It’s up to the scene toward the end when two of the stars are at a swingers party in a swank

suburban house. Our leading lady is being serviced by four other women. It's all soft focus and cheesy soundtrack, not sexy at all. The next scene is way better, when our main man has hard, fast sex with a wild-eyed, dark-haired, maybe half-Asian woman with small, decidedly real breasts (as compared with every other balloon-boobed woman in the movie). It's the scene I usually watch when I get down to business, and I just stand there in the doorway and wait for it, then watch it, maybe the first time I've ever seen it without jerking off.

Toward the end of the scene, when the woman gets loud, Eunice jumps up with a start, looks at the TV, then at me, in a panicked half-sleep, "Oh-god oh-my-god I'm so sorry! I--"

Surprising myself, I remain semi-calm, say, "It's okay. Don't worry about it."

Catching her breath, Eunice says, "I was waiting for you and . . . believe it or not, I've never watched this stuff."

"So *you're* the one. Waddaya tink?" I ask in my best Brooklynese. Sometimes I do accents when I'm nervous. I'm nervous.

"It's kind of silly, really."

"The acting?"

"Well, that, yes," she goes on, "but the sex too, other people having sex."

"Yeah, that's a big part of the allure."

"You like it?" she asks.

“It keeps me out of trouble.”

“You like it,” she repeats, this time a statement.

“I like it some, hate it some,” figured I’d go with the truth. “Fair enough,” she says, and sits up.

I sit and join her. We watch the last twenty minutes of the movie in silence, like a long-married couple watching Leno. When it’s over, I turn off the set and get up. Standing at the foot of the bed, I really look at Eunice for the first time since I got home. She is decidedly, cutely rumped, “tousled” I think, fits nicely too. Her hair is down, but she’s still got her glasses on.

“How’d it go today?”

“I may have sold your house.”

“That’s good. . . . Sad, though.”

“Often is.”

“Yeah.”

I stand in the doorway for a minute, for the first time considering options. I could probably at least kiss Eunice right now, at the very least. I mean, when someone sleeps in your bed and watches your porn, they probably have at least a passing interest in getting naked with you. It’s been a long, long time.

“I went to Foxwoods on a whim. Played some poker. Won a little.” I can tell from the pause, from a slight squint that comes and goes in a beat, that Eunice isn’t sure how to feel about that.

“That’s fun. Good for you to start getting out in the world again.”

“Yeah well, I’m going to take a shower.” I pause, then add, “You can stay there if you want to. I’d like that.” Then I leave the room without waiting for a response. A small bet, looking for callers.

I take a long hot shower, scrub the green off my hands and nails, the film of air-conditioned air and sweat off my face and body. When I get back, Eunice’s suit sits neatly folded on Mom’s old comfy chair, glasses on the night table, and she’s curled up under the covers facing the wall where Mom’s feminism bookshelf used to be. Where I used to sneak peeks at *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and think there must be better pictures of naked women than this.

I put on clean boxers, climb gingerly into bed, resist the urge to speak, to joke, to use a dumb accent. I lie there on my back for a while, not sure what comes next. I worry that she’s expecting me to try something, worry that I won’t be able to sleep, that I’ll twitch and fidget and wake her up all night. Then I start to drift – to pot odds and bad semi-bluffs, to Mom and the house and me in this bed, then back to Eunice and thinking I’m breathing too loudly, to Mom again and whether I know how to listen, to my new friend Tex. I try to imagine Eunice’s house or apartment but can’t quite picture anything. And, as ever, I think of the Corvair, and now Ralph Nader, how his career got made when he called that car a deathtrap, and deathtrap becomes mousetrap becomes mouthtrap and

something sexy and funny about that, Eunice Bacon Mouthtrap I say to myself and have to keep from laughing as the goofy logic of half-sleep pulls me under. I roll over on my side and put my arm around Eunice outside the covers. “G’night,” I say. “Night, Jim.” she mumbles back. Out the window, the street lamp lights the whitening trees across the street, the snow coming heavier now. It’ll be a snow day tomorrow, and I remember a particular snow day, remember it clear as a bell the way we re-imagine perfect days, waking, looking out the window, turning on the radio just in time to hear my school on the closings list, jumping out of bed, calling Tom, rushing out to go sledding, catching perfect air on the bump in the big hill in the park again and again, and I’m gone.

CLOSE

4/3

The weather is getting warmer, finally. The other day I was walking home after my stop-off, and I looked through the window of the old office building on West 52nd they've gutted and are turning into a Sure-Guard Storage. They finally installed the shiny corrugated lockers. I looked through the window and just happened to be right in front of number 1354, which is also the last four digits of my Social Security number. This may mean something. Or not. Sometimes these coincidences mean things. Omens. Sometimes I just think they do. Then one of three things happens. Either I am disappointed when nothing happens, or I unconsciously make something happen so as not to be disappointed, or something actually happens. But if that's the case then how can I tell the difference between an actual significant coincidence and a falsely significant one?

4/4

First day of the Chuck Close show. Giant paintings of people's heads. I'm stationed under one of the ugliest. It's of a really old lady. Black and white. It's my own fault. I always ask for Gallery Two. It has a view of the lobby, and kids usually aren't fidgety enough to want to touch the paintings yet. Little did I know. The painting's a good 10 feet by 10 feet. She has a million wrinkles, just stares blankly. But the kicker is that there's a fucking hole in the middle of her neck. The wrinkles go right up to it, like a volcano. Scary. It looks like a photo, but the guy painted it with his fingers.

The show was packed as any opening I've worked. I tell twenty-seven people where the bathrooms are. "Across the hall to the right." Sometimes they say "Thanks" or "Thank you." I never say "You're welcome." There's something presumptuous about "You're welcome," especially in my position. Like I'm saying, "No. Thank *you*." I try to be above all that.

I heard Mr. Close was here in his wheelchair. He's paralyzed pretty seriously and that makes people like his art more. Inspirational. A youngish woman came and stared at the old lady for about an hour. The painting is called "Fanny." Middle-schoolers read that and giggle. At one point the young woman looked at me, self-conscious for having stayed so long. I looked away. It happens every now and then, becoming visible. From time to time she'd sit on the bench and write in a notebook. She was old to be doing that, maybe thirty-five. Too old to be hanging out in a museum writing in a notebook. She wore corduroys and a button-down shirt, white, with a sweater. She was thin, very thin, too thin even, and tallish, maybe 5'8" or 9" with big frizzy hair, reddish brown. She slouched, hunched her shoulders like she was embarrassed to have tits. You have to be able to describe people, in case something happens.

After work I stop at Babeland. Babeland is one of those peep show places where you put tokens in like a video game slot and a window (a 15" x 15" hole where a window used to be, actually) lifts slowly up and you talk to the to the naked woman you want to touch and she says "up or down" or "high or low" and you give them a few bucks and they let you touch.

I ignore the token guy even though he knows me by now – we see each other every other day, most weeks. I just say five dollars please and he gives me the twenty tokens. I go in the room that Nadja usually works and hope for the best. The rooms are like phone booths and they all surround a stage. There are four stages, loud music and trashy red and white lights. Nadja is usually on stage three. I take booth three to stage three. I put a token in and the window grinds up. Booth three has a noisy window but it's a lucky number so I take it anyway. Today Nadja is there. I feed the machine extra and give her five bucks through the window. I tell her "high" and she kneels down so I can reach her. I hold one breast gently with my left hand and jerk-off with my right. I like how heavy it is. The breast. I like that she kneels so we're at eye level. I like to feel the weight, the warmth. Nadja's a big blond who always looks me in the eye. She says she's Slovenian and I like the sound of it. She has some kind of accent. I know they don't give their real names, and they really shouldn't. Sometimes she holds my face in her hands and calls me "baby." I know it's an act but still it feels good. Baby, she says, my sweet baby. I always forget to bring tissues.

4/8

Sunny today. Brisk. It occurs to me that I really like living in the West Forties. There's still kind of a neighborhood feel, if a seedy one, and some Italians, Irish, Polish are mixed in with Blacks and the PRs. I blend in. Nobody bothers me. It's near the peeps and the subways and walking distance from work. I go home, make a TV dinner, sleep, get up, go to work, Babeland, home. That's pretty much it. Not so bad, really. I've got health insurance and a retirement plan with a 401K. I even like wearing the so-called uniform:

“blue blazer, white shirt, name badge, dark tie of your choice, grey slacks [khakis optional, 6/15-Labor Day], black nondescript shoes.”

4/9

Day 5 with Fanny. She looks at everyone. (Note: find out how artists do that - make the painting look at you no matter where you stand.) I have to admit, I’m getting to like her face. A gentle grandma kind of face. The lines around her eyes, around her mouth. She is very calm. I’m never that calm. I look forward to seeing it in the morning. That girl, that skinny youngish woman who was there the first day with her notebook, was back, and it was much less crowded. She stayed for maybe half-an-hour this time. She’s actually a little cute. Skinny though. No Nadja. As if I could ever get a Nadja, let alone a freaky skinny girl who looks at paintings for hours at a time.

4/12

I have a goal. I want to be as calm and peaceful as Fanny with her wrinkles and her wide face and her neck hole. That’s my goal. Thought of it just today and practiced all day. Ideal job for it. I mean, if I was, say, a check-out guy in a pet store, no way. So I stood there and I breathed. After work I stopped at BDalton and bought a book-on-tape about relaxation. It pretty much says to sit there and breathe. \$15.95 I paid for that. “Repeat until calm like old lady in Chuck Close painting.”

4/16

Chuck Close (abridged) Chronology (from catalog):

1940 Born in Monroe, Wash. Only child.

- 1946 Parents give him oil paints from Sears-RoebuckCatalog.
- 1952 Father dies.
- 1953 Mother takes him to Seattle Art Museum, where he sees a drip painting by Jackson Pollack. “At first I was outraged. It didn’t look like anything . . . but later I was dribbling paint all over my canvas - probably even later the same day.”
- 1958 Graduates from Everett High School. Enters Everett Junior College as an Art Major.
- 1960 Transfers to Washington State.
- 1961 Visits NYC for first time. Goes to Yale Summer School of Music and Art.
- 1962-64 Attends Yale U. School of Art and Architecture.
- 1965 BFA with highest honors from Yale.
- 1966 Starts working from photographs.
- 1967 Marries Leslie Rose. First sale to Museum: Walker Art Center.
- 1970 Referred to as “Chuck” in an interview. Name sticks.
- 1973 Birth of first daughter, Georgia Molly.
- 1975 Purchases house in Southampton, Long Island.
- 1980 Mother dies.
- 1984 Birth of second daughter, Maggie Sarah.

1988 Stricken with convulsion that leaves him in a state of “incomplete quadriplegia.”

Begins painting with brushes strapped to wrists.

1991 Exhibits new paintings at Whitney Biennial.

1998 Retrospective at MOMA.

4/20

Older couple, more or less as overheard by me and Skinny today:

“That isn’t the issue, Arlene.”

“Fine. But then why’d he have to make her look so awful? I’m telling you, he’s an anti-Semite.”

“How the hell can you say that. You think everything’s about that. How do you know she’s even Jewish, because she looks Jewish? Who’s the anti-Semite, now, Arlene? And how do you know this Close isn’t Jewish? Didn’t think of that, did you? Maybe Close used to be Closeman or Closeberg.”

“I know he’s not Jewish, Melvin, because I take an interest in these things, that’s how. And I know anti-Semitism when I see it.”

“You know, Arlene, she doesn’t even look that bad. Just a very wrinkly nice old lady.”

“With a hole in her Goddamn neck, Mel. With a hole.”

During above conversation, Skinny smiled at me and I smiled back *and* rolled my eyes. Henry, you devil, you.

4/26

Henry David Schenk: Chronology:

1959 Born in Reading, PA to George and Marian Schenk.

1964 Parents die in car crash after movies. Moves in with Grandmother in Parsippany, NJ.

1964-66 Attends Parsippany PS 3. Kids call him Hank, in mocking reference to baseball hero. Is no athlete. Hates the name Hank forever.

1969 Grandmother dies. Goes to live with Mean Aunt Gretchen in Wilmington, DE

1976 Graduates Monroe High School in Wilmington. Starts attending Wilmington Area Community College as English major.

1977 Drops out of WACC. Moves to NYC without telling Aunt or anyone else. No-one else to tell anyway.

1978 Gets job at Museum of Modern Art. Finds rent controlled apartment on W. 46.

1977-98 Stops talking to most people. Discovers peep shows. Works.

Christ.

4/30

Day off. I went to the museum and went through the entire exhibit. I don't say hi to staff and they ignore me back. Up close the paintings really are abstract, squiggles, fingerprints, dots, all in little boxes. Grids. That saying about "the forest for the trees" comes to mind. I take the audio tour. Mr. Chuck Close himself narrates it. I always take the tour. I want to be able to answer questions - occasionally I am asked. I like the paintings he's made since his seizure the best. Huge grids filled with little squiggles of color that from a distance make up the big faces. Fucking incredible.

On the audio, Close seemed pretty happy for a guy who's lost nearly all use of his limbs. Not bitter at all. He seems like a nice guy, too. Not a snob. Loves his family, his work, his friends that he paints. I wonder if his dick works.

I stayed as long as I could, but it was a lot of people to move through. Too many people thinking things. Probably not about me especially, but some do. They look at my ratty clothes, my balding head, the greasy long hair too far down my neck. I wonder if I smell bad even though there's no reason that I should.

Later, Babeland. The token guy says, "Off duty, today, officer?" in his Arab accent, but I ignore him. Asshole. Nadja doesn't care what I wear. That's what's important. Today she was especially gentle with me. I told her I was all keyed-up from being around lots of people at the exhibit. Calmed me right down, Nadja did.

Home. The News, then Jeopardy and the Wheel, then whatever crap is on. (NOTE: Look into cable! It's cheaper now.) A Hungry Man Turkey Dinner. The turkey's the best

part. I'd love to get turkey in every compartment just once, like a factory slip-up. Turkey in the potatoes section, Turkey in the apple sauce section

5/5

This beer commercial on TV really pisses me off. It shows this yuppie guy in a peep show booth but instead of just a naked woman he's watching a sexy woman in a bikini peel the label off a Bud Lite bottle. His mouth hangs open and just when she's about to rip it completely off, the window starts to shut and he panics. Then it switches to a picture of the logo and a stupid announcer voice says, "Feeling a little hot under the collar?" Then they cut back to the window and his fingers reaching under trying to pull it back up. The following are my objections:

1. It's just stupid.
2. Women don't strip in the rooms. They're already naked, or sometimes wearing some little piece of underwear.
3. Real peep show women are no way as good looking as the woman peeling the label in the commercial.
4. The exciting part of the beer is not the label coming off, it's drinking it. And isn't that supposed to be cool and refreshing not sexy and hot?
5. If you ever tried to pull open the window they'd have security on you in a flash.
6. Handsome young yuppies don't go to peep shows. They have girlfriends or go to a fancy strip club (which I've never understood what's so great about because everything's out in public so you can't jerk off. It's just a big tease, as I see it.) No, peep shows are full of slobs like me, and a lot of really short immigrants who want to see big

blonde American women, which the women usually aren't. American, that is. And if they are American, they're not blonde, usually not even white.

5/6

I put some postcards of the faces from the exhibit in my room, over the bed, to help me practice my relaxation technique. I only bought the really calm ones. Close takes their picture, then makes it into a big grid, then he makes the painting. But how does he get them so calm?

5/9

Skinny came again today. She kind of looked over, to acknowledge we know each other, maybe. Probably not. After work, Nadja wasn't at B'land - called in sick, they said. I could tell the token guy was laughing at me, but I had to ask. So I just went home. I'm kind of stuck on Nadja right now. Crap on TV tonight.

5/12

Nightmare: God, it was awful. I was on a date with Nadja. We were in a fancy restaurant, only it wasn't really fancy at all, everything was fake and falling apart and the waiter was rude. I chose the place, of course. I was wearing my uniform and some kind of a cap like Ralph Kramden wore to drive his bus on The Honeymooners. This didn't bother me because it hid my shiny head. My head shined all the more from the bright lights. Nadja said nothing. I said nothing, for a long long time. The food came. It was terrible. The restaurant was bitter cold. Cold steak, cold baked potato, cold, bitter coffee. Then I realized I had no money. Searching pockets. Total panic. It went on like this forever.

5/16

“Have you ever been in a car wreck with the car spinning out of control? You know that strange eerie calmness that takes over as you almost go into slow motion? You turn the wheel this way, that way. Only when it’s all over you fall apart and go into shock. This was an attenuated, drawn-out case of that, where many days I experienced a profound calmness, eerie even to me.”

- Chuck Close, after his “disabling event”

The above freaked me out because it almost perfectly describes my entire life to date, especially the “slow motion” part. I have always known this. In JC I even wrote a poem about the feeling:

Mom, remember that time
driving us
through the park
deadened
after a winter storm
and suddenly spinning
slow
but out of control
a wide arc
five six seconds
before finally thumping
gently into a snowbank
and laughing
laughing at safety.

One of my only memories of my Mom. I think it happened right before the accident.

5/17

I thought of telling Nadja about my nightmare today but then I figured she'd probably think I was obsessed, so I just said, "Up, please" and gave her a five and held her soft, heavy breast, felt its weight in my hand, and my own weight in my other hand. Warm.

(NOTE: Tissues!)

5/18

Skinny came today. Smiled and said hello! I said hello back. I think she's actually not afraid of me. Likes me? Easy there, boy. I don't know why most women act so scared. Maybe they're not, maybe unattracted or repulsed would be a better way of putting it.

To do:

1. get haircut
2. buy some new clothes
3. buy deodorant
4. shower more often

This is so stupid. Skinny wants to be left alone, too. Just like me. Hangs out alone in museums and writes notes. But if she wants to be left alone and I want to be left alone, why do I want to get my hair cut, etc.? And why did she go out of her way to say hello?

5/25

No Skinny for the past four days, but Fanny's very kind. Watches me, comforts me (not really, but still). I am approaching her calm, her resolve. Breathing. To be so calm at the end of your life, with a hole in your neck no less.

Cut my hair in the back this morning and showered with lots of Dial soap and bought Speed Stick.

6/2

No Skinny again. I'm such a moron. Shit. At least Nadja was at work. I spent a lot of money, didn't try to just come quick and get out like usual. Ten bucks in tokens, and ten in tip, but it was worth it. She's the only woman who's held me in my life. Held my face, anyway. If you don't count my mom, which you shouldn't, she's my mom, after all, plus I hardly remember her. Nadja is good to me. Our arrangement is so simple, so clear.

Skinny's too skinny, anyway, that's why I named her that, RIGHT?

6/5

Last week of the exhibit. Friday is the closing. I've started saying goodbye to Fanny, and bought an extra copy of her postcard – I wish there was a poster. I might enlarge the card to 8.5" x 11" in the copier in the office, but then the image gets all fuzzy. Tomorrow's Tuesday. Skinny's been here nearly every Tuesday. If she comes, if she gives me a hello smile, a look, anything, I'm going to talk to her. I am going to say something to Skinny. "Hello. Isn't this painting wonderful?" I'll say, and talk about Fanny. Maybe I'll tell her about Mr. Close, how Fanny was his mother-in-law he was especially fond of, or talk about his accident or about how much I like getting close-up the way he does when he paints them especially with the recent color ones or how I have a goal to be calm like Fanny and another goal—Nonononono! Too many words, too fast. If I'm really going to do this, got to slow down, one step at a time, one step at a time, simple. Like a cooking show. Prep Step One, Step Two, Step Three: Quiche. Am I really going to do this? She probably won't come anyway. End of issue.

6/6

She came! Skinny came and she smiled, plain as day. I went over, said something, I was so nervous I don't even know. I know I didn't say that much, and that's good. Anyway, then we actually had a little conversation, I'm pretty sure you could call it that. She said, "I wish I had your job and could look at the paintings all day." Then I said, "It gets kind of old after a while, but I will miss Fanny here." She said "I'm coming on Friday, will you be here?" I said, "It's my day off but I'm going to the reception. Maybe get a look at Mr. Close." She said, "Maybe we can walk through the whole show together," and laughed kind loud, maybe even nervous? I laughed too, definitely nervous and said . . . absolutely nothing. Froze up completely. "Noonish?" she finally said, her face all red. "Uh, noonish," I kind of nodded, I think (I hope!) then went back to my post without falling down or anything. Unbelievable! She stayed for a few minutes and looked at Fanny, then left in a hurry. Hope I didn't scare her.

6/7

Bought some clothes. NEW clothes, not Salvation Army. Plain stuff. Levi's cords, navy blue. Some tee-shirts, yellow, brown, red. Cardigan, grey. Plaid button down shirt. Sneakers. Casual wear. I'm wearing the cords, the plaid shirt, the cardigan. I'm breathing.

6/9

Today Sarah (not "Skinny") and I walked through the exhibit. The first thing she said was "What's your name, by the way?" and we both laughed. *Nadja calls me 'Baby'* flashed through my brain, but then I said "Henry." Her name is "Sarah, with an h" which I took at first to mean Shara or Hsara (I was a little nervous) but then I got it.

We looked at the paintings. Breathing. We didn't talk much for a while, beyond saying "I like this one" or "He's kinda creepy" about another. Then we sat on a bench in Gallery Eight and looked at a painting called "Roy." - the "lozenges" (Close calls them) of color that make up the big face, rippled like through water. After a while, Sarah whispered in my ear "He looks like a bird." and I said "Roy the bird-man." We looked at the painting for a while more. Finally, I said "Ready?" and she nodded. We went back to Gallery One where they had set up a cordoned-off area for Mr. Close and his friends and the press and rich people whose names are on the wall on the first floor. I went up to Jerome who was working the cordon and he just opened it up and let us in like we were invited, didn't say a word. (Note: Thank Jerome!!!) We stayed at the edge of the party by the food and watched. I concentrated on my breathing. Finally, there was Chuck Close wheeling his way down the hall. He looked like the later self-portraits. Balding, bearded, glasses, slightly chubby, friendly looking guy in an electric wheelchair with wife, kids, and museum admins and curators in tow. They came into the party and people kind of swamped him and we lost sight of him for a while. Sarah and I watched the hubbub across the room. After about forty minutes, the crowd started to thin. I could see Mr. Close was getting ready to leave. I said, "Let's follow him out," and Sarah said, "Let's do." We hurried down the hall caught up to the right side of his chair. He had his younger girl in his lap and the rest of his family were on his left. As we passed I leaned in and said, "Thank you." I think I startled him, because he stopped. Everyone did. Then he looked me right in the eye. He said "You're welcome."

EPIPHANY

He loves that little red car. Some days he just sits in his room and looks at it for a long time. At first he used to vroom it around and up and down stuff, even his own arms and legs, but then one day it fell and got a tiny chip of paint chipped off it and so now he'll either just hold it or put it somewhere flat and safe and look at it from various distances. It's a 1988 Lamborghini Countach. Kuhn-tash, Kuntash, Mom looked it up on Google. He colored in the chipped fender with red sharpie, the permanent kind Mom doesn't let him use for obvious reasons given the word "permanent," and especially since the little sister face-painting incident, even though the word "permanent" as in forever definitely isn't true because it really wasn't all that permanent after Mom scrubbed for a few days.

One night at dinner his little sister wouldn't pass him the butter so he called her a dickhead. "Pass the butter, dickhead." Mom almost started to laugh but then got all serious and stood up from the table and said, "Come with me, young man."

He always had a hard time taking Mom seriously when she said stuff that sounded like it came from TV and he wanted to laugh but instead used the bite-the-inside-of-your-cheek technique that he and Tommy Schmoltz had perfected for when Sherry Bargy would say something super retarded in Mrs. Renkel's class, because Mrs. Renkel said that if anybody laughed at Sherry Bargy one more time they'd have triple homework that they'd really have to do and she really meant it. He also said they couldn't say retarded even though it wasn't a swear word. So now when Sherry says something bargy they bite their cheeks hard so they won't laugh and it works except that after a while the scar tissue

builds up leading to accidental cheekbites again at lunch and screaming "Fuck!" That gets them in trouble with Mr. Mankowitz who's always monitoring the cafeteria even though there's no such actual job because he's a dickhead who Tim Kaplan swears he once saw eat half a fishstick off someone's abandoned tray. But Mankowitz isn't even a problem because he never really does anything just yells at them and drools at their food so he's like totally a joke but it still hurts to cheekbite by accident.

Mom led him into the living room. He was way too old to like Mom taking him by the hand but he liked it anyway so he pretended to pull away - not so hard that she'd actually let go, but hard enough for her to know that he was too old for it and maybe hint a little that he wasn't quite ready for her to stop doing it. She sat him down on the couch facing her so that that over her shoulder he saw the one empty shelf of the big white bookshelves at the end of the couch in a new way and thought that the Countach would look really cool sitting there and that he'd have to put it there later and see.

"Sweetie, I know your sister was being a jerk but you know that little kids can be jerky sometimes and that I count on you to be bigger than that."

He nodded. "Jerk" was an okay word at home and at school.

"As for that new word you were trying out, do you know what it means? Do you know what a 'dickhead' is, Sweetie?"

"It's like a jerk," he said, but he knew what she really meant by asking what it means, and that that wasn't it.

"Okay, but do you know what 'dick' and 'head' mean when you put them together, really?"

"Kinda," and he really kinda did know but he was no way going to say the words.

"Dick is an ugly word for your weenis and the head is the end part of it. But it's an ugly word, Boyo, and your weenis is part of your whole beautiful you, and your sister doesn't even have one, so to call her that doesn't even make sense and wouldn't really even make sense if she did have one."

"Uh-huh." He could feel his face and ears hot and red. He knew his sister didn't have one because they used to take baths together and once she showed him that she could pee standing up too after he said that girls couldn't do it but she really didn't prove anything because it didn't go straight, sprayed all over the bathroom floor.

"Now if you were to call her a big turd or something like that" - and Mom almost giggled, and then he did too but bit his cheek instead - "it'd make a little more sense but it would still be very mean and immature and wrong, so I want you to apologize and not call your sister names at all anymore, okay?"

He nodded, Mom smiled and squeezed his knee in the tickly way.

"Now let's go back to the table" and they did, and he apologized to his bargy dickhead turd sister, and she passed the butter.

After dinner, he went and got the Countach and put it on the white bookshelf at the end of the couch while Mom gave his sister her bath upstairs. He put the car on the shelf and it looked good there just like he knew it would. Not as good as on the bathtub rim but still pretty good, and he didn't put it on the bathtub rim much anymore because of the paint-chippage risk of wanting to vroom it all over the tub. He positioned the Countach on the shelf, headlights facing straight out, then tried both the left and right facings, before finally settling on a nice right diagonal display like in the articles in *Road and*

Track, only in the ads the car would be in the Alps or something, not a bookshelf. But the bookshelf was kind of like a perfect white showroom. Then he sat back on the couch.

He looked at the car, at the doors that really opened, at the hood that really opened too, at the sloped back window, all well lit by the table lamp light reflecting off the glossy white shelf, a perfect showroom. He thought about the “dickhead” conversation and stuck his hand in his pants and touched his weenishead. He pulled his shorts down and looked at it. He wiggled it around and laughed at how dumb that was and then went back to looking at the car. His weenis started to grow. He took his hand off it. He had felt it grow once before when he saw a red 1974 Ferrari Testarosa on TV. He didn't know if he liked that it grew or the stretchy feeling of it. He knew from the booklet it was "perfectly natural" but he didn't know if he liked it. So he sat there looking at the Countach with his weenis sticking halfway up pointing right at the car for a while, and then he put his hand back down there and started to tug in counts of four, *one-two-three-four-one-two-three-four*, because that was the number that he always had to use for everything, and he thought of Mom saying his weenishead was beautiful, her pulling him into the living room and her soft voice even when she was mad and how she laughed when she leaned in to talk about calling his sister a turd, and then he thought about his sister and his weenis started to get small again, and then he looked at the car again and his weenis started to grow again, and *one-two-three-four*, and he thought of his mom's big warm hand and her voice and the Countach and the Ferrari on TV and all the while his hand on his weenis tugging and tugging and tugging in fours, and then it happened.

LETTERS TO WENDEROTH

Dear Joe,

The idea is to get as close to the core, as if a burger were an apple, without hitting a a pip. You never write of Spicy Chicken, Joe, but you must know it's there. Tacit? And when the burgers stopped being square? When did they, Joe?

I recently began (re)reading your renowned book. (Isn't renowned a strange looking word?!). Re-n-ow-n-ed. My wife and I used to read *Letters* at bedtime, I-Ching like. Before we were married, which is to say, long before we were divorced. That is, we would open to a random page and would read to each other a few – what? – *entries*, let's say, in a row starting at our night's fateful page and moving forward until we got sleepy, or horny. Usually sleepy. Usually just two or three entries. Sometimes we would break this rule and just ching it over and over again to several random pages for the delight at the odd and magical connections to our day, to our lives!, we would inevitably find/concoct to make our lives seem more serendipitously blessed. By you! At first, we were putting post-its on particular favorite entries, but then we got lazy, it was bedtime after all, plus it was fun to happen upon and reread them! And it is now being fun to reread the re-n-owned book sequentially, as you intended.

I remember you, the once or twice we were in a room together, as sexy. That rare thing, a sexy man, brooding and dark. Was it just a phase, the darkness? I hope so. I also assumed back then that Sarah, my brooding dark love back then, had a crush on you. Did she? Did you? On her? I picture you right now as whatshisface in “You Can Count on Me.” And Sarah as Laura Linney: Almost incestuous movie siblings. I am turned on.

Dear Sarah,

Long time no contact! Hey, I’ve got a question for you. I’m (re)reading *Letters to Wendy’s* and I’ve wondered both times if I’m just imagining that Joe Wenderoth was a pal of yours at NYU, a dark, mysterious fellow who I felt somewhat threatened by – seemed more your type than goofy, talky me (right?!?!) – whom I met when you read with who?– when? – where? – in some basement? And your mother and Tom were there? Was this all a dream, was it some other poet who’s also now vaguely famous? Please advise.

Hi!

-j

I should just say it: Recently, in our area, here, all the Wendy’s-es suddenly closed. A bankrupt franchisee. My loneliness compounded a millionfold. How could HQ let this happen? In America? Apocalyptic. Anchorpersons sat dumbstruck.

Today I sat in a doctor's waiting room. The receptionist just said to the other receptionist, "Have you heard from Wendy?" Serendipity! A portent?

I accidentally put a pen mark – that is, my pen slipped, or rather, my hand holding my pen, right next to the J. in July on the "July 13, 1996" "chapter." That's what you'd call them, right? Chapters! Of you"novel," right? Poetry doesn't pay, so call it a novel!

You've said as much. I've always thought maybe you should've just come clean and called it what it was, a memoir, but you know best, Joe. Hey, nice touch with the no-page numbers, Joe! We've got dates, who needs page numbers! Or does your publisher deserve credit for that? But because of the pen mark I worry that someone will borrow my book and think it intentional, that I found 7/13/06 particularly noteworthy. I don't. It's the one about you looking hard at Wendy, feeling like a doctor. "I like to dream that she will come to me for futile treatments." Remember? I shouldn't worry, but I do. The ones I find brilliant are the ones I find brilliant and I wouldn't want anyone to misinterpret. I've tried, but can't seem to dream of Wendy, Joe. But Britni with an "I", who works the counter at the Blandford Micky D's, oh baby, I've had to change some sheets over her. Did you mean literally dream?

You said in an interview, "I am a fairly witty person and can come up with funny things to say, and part of the *Wendy's* project depends on this talent, but ultimately I came to understand that I was trying to do something more than be funny."

Me, too!

Wendy and I too have a long and colored past. Perhaps she already told you (joke!). Back in the day. I was working telephone reference at the public library in San Francisco. All morning I'd stare at my monitor waiting for the phone to ring. (And at nights that was when we'd read you before bed!) Google had been invented, and suddenly no one but crazies and old people called anymore. Like Roger, who was both, and would call several times a day. He was a drunk with a raspy drawl. I'd say "Information services, how can I help you?" and before I could finish he'd start right in by shouting, "I'm blind" which sounded like "Ahm blaahnd." Then he would ask the president's birthday, or whether Pino Grigio was white or red so he'd know whether to refrigerate, or how you can tell when the cat's sick, reiterating that he couldn't actually *see* the cat. Sometimes he'd even play his guitar and sing and tell me how he'd once opened for JERRY LEE LEWIS! The job left lots of time for boredom, which led to hunger and horniness, surprise surprise! I obsessed about my lunches, planned them fastidiously. Wednesday was Wendy's day which had a nice ring to it and which came with a special added bonus I'll tell you about later. Fast food in the city, is always disappointing. The suburban antisepticity is utterly absent. This particular Wendy's was on one of the the worst corners in town, Market and 6th, you know it Joe? I'm guessing yes. And would often smell, right up to the door, of the smells that you smell on worst corners in town – piss, shit, puke, booze, sweat. This all created a cognitive dissonance, like when your brain just can't register what it's sensing, but you knew that's what I meant. Wendy's expectations raised by the sign, by Wendy herself, waiting for me as I approached through the squalor, then said hopes repeatedly dashed, then revived when my Spicy Chicken, baked potato, butter only!, but

it wasn't butter but only yellow margarine, and Biggie Coke were placed in front of me. Then dashed again by the urban curtness of the pierced, tattooed, blinged, foreign-accented chica, (no Wendy, she) doing the placing. The worker, her scowl reminding me that she was indeed, working, taking no pleasure in serving me, none at all, Joe. Then, hopes revived, resuscitated by that glorious first bite. Here's the bonus: After lunch I would sneak into *Multichannel Peep City* just up the block and jerk off standing on the booth's sticky floor with beady men outside the door going "psst, psst" hoping to come in and suck on me. I always looked for the irreducible "severally penetrated" women you write of, long before you'd even written *Letters*, even, so kindred are we two. I too craved that awe, Joe, an unquenchable craving. All in half an hour and for under ten bucks! Those were the days.

Dave,

No, you are not imagining that Joe was my classmate. And yeah, he was really dark. And kind of an asshole most of the time, but I loved him anyways. And yes, we read in a basement, which was really the Cornelia St. Cafe, and yes, my mother was there, god help us, or really just me, she'll never let me forget that particularly dark and juvenile but at the time totally rockin' evening. So. Not a dream. But it would have been a good one. I recently visited the city. Remember when we saw "Burn This"? I went to Brooklyn and walked up and down Pineapple and the promenade. Did we really live there? It all looked smaller, but so beautiful.

-Sarah

“It’s sad to everyday come to Wendy’s and see faces that will never be given to me in their porn depth.” I have waited all my life for someone to write these words. It’s as if they were written just for me, Joe. I know I know, but still.

Hey Joe, Where you goin’ with that pun in your hand? Off to to the interview you’re going to pretend you don’t love being interviewed at, aren’t you Joe, aren’t you? Just today (of course, I’ll have edited this and time will pass, so just today will be a lie but I hope the-lie-that-tells-the-truth kind, but as I sit here in this café, not Wendy’s, typing, it is just today, a gray Sunday, but I digress). The point is that just today I was listening to the NPR, and of course, I’m being arch, being hip, calling it *the* NPR, like calling it the internets, or the interweb, or, gilding the lily, the interwebs, mocking the ignorant, the unconnected, with my faux naivete, or even faux stupidity, so to say. I’ve been around the block, Joe. I’m down with the lingo. Did you know that John McCain can’t use the internet because he doesn’t really have hands? (JOKE!) But I digress. I was listening to the NPR, to that young author guy being interviewed on the radio talking about some really fun! regional! Historical! Travel! anthology or some crap like that he had edited, and he was just being so fun! and intellectual! and easy going! And I just hated him, hated him hated him hated him because he’s just a superconnected guy from a rich, society family who wrote one nasty-tell all memoir about famous people and his horrible mommy so now he gets to be on the radio because he knows cool people and wrote a horrible, bitter, mean, crappily-written memoir. I repeat because it bears repetition! He’s

a staple, he's set. He's set, Joe, more set than you, even, and where am I? I know where you are, Joe, but, really, where am I?

“I love you, even if you don't understand me, even if you burn my attempts to reach you, even if you are no one, nowhere.” I quote you Joe, from “September 3, 1996,” because how could I be more clear?

And speaking of transitions, so the other day I'm eating at the Blandford Plaza Mickey D's, visiting my Britni with an “I” who is looking delicious today. I want to unbutton her uniform oh so slowly. I'm heading east, back from Albany to Western Mass, where, as I mentioned in a previous missive, they closed all our Wendy's-es going on two years ago. On the wall is a sign for a new! healthy! Happy Meal that's “*a full serving of fruit. How a-peeling!*”! The one exclamation was on the sign, the other is expressing my own delight at such cleverness in advertising, and at the rise of healthy fast-food options. Lenny Kravitz just came on the McSoundssystem – that song “Fly Away” that's on some airline commercial now. I had a nine piece McTenders and a big Mac and an extra large fries. Who's to say what's “too much”? You are, Joe! You are to say: “Today I had a Biggie. . . Some days . . . Only a biggie will do. You wake up and you know: today I will get a Biggie and I will put it inside me and I will feel better.” And I did, and I did, and it was good.

Hey, Joe,

Where you goin' with that bun in your hand?

You know what I like best about Frosties? I'm lactose intolerant and they don't upset my stomach in the least! Frankly, I'm skeptical about "July, 3, 1996" because of this. And I quote: "Purchasing a Frosty, then, is no different than hiring someone to beat me." (You, re Frosties and your lactose intolerance). Me, I could just suck 'em down all day, have trouble believing there's even any dairy in them. So did you lie here Joe? Or, I'm sorry, *too strong!* Use "poetic license"? Can I see your poetic license and poetic registration please? (JOKE!) God I hope they reopen our Wendy's-es. Someone said they were going to, but I don't believe it. Best not to get one's hopes too high. I miss Frosties so much.

Joe. Joe joe joe joe joe.

Today I sit in Micky D's – don't be a hater, it's all I've got right now, Joe – eating my three-piece Chicken Selects Meal while reading *Letters* ching-style. First ching, jackpot!:
May 28, 1997:

“At any given “point,” one can look “back” and say, *what was that?* But then one can never answer sufficiently.”

Yesyesyesyesyes!!! But *all I do* is look back, Joe, and let me tell you, friend (may I call you friend?), I do not like what I see. This is why I know I must and do so very much look *forward* not back to our meeting, to answers said meeting must provide for me, and, who knows, maybe even for you. I once met a woman named Destiny and for the next few hours couldn't resist making all the jokes, about my "date" with her, about her "child," the list goes on. But after a while I started to believe that because she *was* Destiny she was MY destiny as well. I'm sure it happens to her a lot. I never saw her again. Fate. While the term "selects" is a fabulous euphemization of the age-old "fingers," I pine for the days when I'd ponder just how gigantic a chicken (and with hands!) would have have yielded such meaty digits. Good old "tenders" is my most preferred term, though, for those little breasties, as it evokes tender, pink, rawness both chicken and pussy. I resist "taste like chicken" references, but I fail, having just mentioned the resisting. "Selects" leaves so much unresolved. What, in fact, does the chicken (n.) select (v.)? "Meal"? As in "Chicken selects meal, details at eleven!"?

I think we were in the same room together, like I said, at least once, probably more, and Sarah confirmed the at least once part, but I just don't remember, or rather, I don't remember whether what I think I'm remembering is real or one of those things like when your parents tell you some story over and over again about when you were three and you said something funny about the Thanksgiving turkey, that it was "big as a dumptruck" and everyone laughed and that that was the day when you started being a joker, an entertainer. You think you remember it but do you, really? I so want to remember it Joe, to remember you, but I don't want to fake remember it. It's important to me.

I'm on the road again, back in Blandford. I'm eating a New! Southern Chicken! Sandwich! Meal, large. They don't say "Supersize" anymore Because of that movie. It's Southern because it just has pickles and mayo and nothing else on it, I guess. It's the sandwich from the commercial with all the hip looking kids in it – sexy, skinny youth with "vintage" dungarees, hair in their eyes, all saying earnestly to the camera that it's a Time for Something New, a Time for Change, and then (wait for it!) . . . cut to a photo of the Southern Chicken. I can't tell if it's supposed to be a joke or serious that the sandwich is the New! the Change! I think they want you to eat it for breakfast too. Chicken for breakfast is a big change, I guess. The egg came first, after all (SORRY!). Anyway, in the booth behind me are two collegiate youngsters. I think they grew up in the same town, shared a ride home from school for the weekend, and are sharing a ride back and testing the waters of romance.

Her: *That's a lot of ketchup.*

Him: *I love ketchup, I put it on everything.*

Her: (long pause) *Everything?*

Him: Mmm-hmmph

Then he starts listing off weird foods he ketchups. He's particularly into ketchupped pretzels. (Can you say "dealbreaker"?!?) They go on chatting, but with a much less flirtatious lilt, let me tell you. At one point, she asks, *Like where are we, are we in Mass?* *Yumph*, he replies, ketchup-mouthed.

Her: *Some random place in the Berkshires.*

Him: *Yumph.*

Blandford!!! I want to scream out for poor Blandford, doomed to ketchuppy randomness. Without fame we are all random, all Blandford. You are so much less random than Blandsford, Joe. So much less random than me. Than I, that is.

I heard you being interviewed today. You're just what I expected! I'm overdue for a visit back to the Bay Area. Can we get together some time? There's so much more to say.

"One yearns for such affirmation." It's only lunch.

- Dave

SHAKEN, STIRRED

“Fucking Daphne.” I barely mumble it under my breath, then turn to serve someone at the other end of the bar. I can see from fifteen feet that she’s already a mess. Martini Monday’s been over for an hour and her friends are all gone, so that makes her *my* mess. I don’t know how she could’ve heard me, but when I turn back around to her at the bar, she’s taken off her coat and is sitting on her stool, giving me the stink-eye. “Look, Jamie, you don’t have to be thrilled to see me; just pour, baby.” Now I see the shiner, and that both her eyes are red and puffy from crying. She’s dressed in girl drag, a Daphne I’ve never seen: a tube top, a miniskirt, fuck-me pumps, pink frosted lips; Daphne as one of those cigarette-swilling heartbreakers who strides in and gets things going. She pulls a blond wig out of her coat pocket, makes a weak attempt to put it on, but then just tosses it on the bar. I reach for the Stoli. She tells me her story.

Daphne turns into a tree in Greek mythology, but everybody knows that. Daphne shifts shapes, appeals to gods. Fucking Daphne can be a tricky proposition. There are a million versions of the joke: I like my women like I like my coffee—warm and rich. Well, most people don’t realize it, but they like their martinis like they would never like their sexual partners: ice cold and a little weak (although lately, I get a lot of requests for dirty and salty as well).

The regulars christened it Martini Monday, a small off-night indulgence amid the decadence of the dot-com boom, and it became a tradition. The crowd was queer, mostly female, and loud. One was a lawyer, another a programmer; others edited tech magazines

or wrote lesbian theory and porn, BDSM manifestos, and cyberpunk novels. They loved my martinis because they were easy to drink: cold and a little weak. They drank vodka, so I could throttle the shaker until tiny ice crystals snuck through the strainer into the chilled glasses. Vermouth was but an imagined voice. I'd swish it around in the glass, then shake it all out, then pour in the cold, clear, water-mellowed booze. My martinis tasted like martinis taste to William Powell in *Thin Man* movies, like the loveliest thing on earth, like a soothing mountain stream. They were martinis that made you feel as if you were an adult who'd learned to really love martinis. But what you were actually liking was cold and easy. Maybe that's how I like my women: oxymoronic, cold, and easy. Daphne was neither cold nor easy, and who wants a hot and complicated martini?

Daphne was ruled out from the day I first served her in '95. The reasons for that are vague, beyond her being with a woman and my being married. But I classified her as "friend" from day one. Mine was a classification system as unconscious as it was trained, a convolution of Mom's feminism, and its rules were simple: One has sex with women for love, women one might partner with forever. Women not loved are not to be lusted after, or flirted with. They are to be thought of as no different from male friends, utterly platonic. If I someday found myself attracted to men, new rules would have to be written.

Who was I that Monday night in 1998, three years after I first met her, when Daphne showed up trashed, beat up, looking for trouble, for me? And who was Daphne? Time, of course, confuses shit all to hell. I was someone who never learned how to have fun in bed. Daphne was someone who'd never learned how to have fun in a relationship. That's

one way to look at it. But then, who was I to talk? Jen, my wife of eight years, had left me three months earlier. Daphne and I spent many a Monday like this, talking over the bar—her telling me the misery of her long-term relationship; I, half-there, racked with self-pity, mourning my lost love and a lifetime of wrong priorities, of always making earnest love to one potential life mate after another and never fucking. What a pair we were.

Daphne always told me how she and her girlfriend, Amy, fought, what they fought about. Not with fists – they beat each other up just fine with words – but that drama came in a distant second that night. The shiner was from a stranger on the street who mistook Daphne for a guy and fag-bashed her. When he realized she was a real-life girl, he told her he was *so so sorry, I thought you were a guy*, and took off in his car real fast. As I digested this information, it occurred to me that I really was a bartender now – all atrocities were predictable and almost bland. All couples were miserable, and their miseries were generic. I made a note to myself to quit bartending before it was too late, if it wasn't too late already.

A Daphne walks into a bar. It's not the Daphne you know, or the Daphne I know now or knew then, it's some part of both and a lot of other Daphnes and not-Daphnes. A fucking Daphne walks into a fucking bar. Does she even have dreads back then, or all that ink? I don't think so, but that's the only way I know how to see her now, to see us then: It's eight-thirty, it's 1998, it's San Francisco; the Martini Monday crowd has wobbled on home. There's nothing going on tonight, just me and D holding court in some dark corner bar for our respective sadnesses, which, come to think of it, fill the place quite nicely.

Daphne falls in love with me when she's sad and drunk. I'm a bartender. And she's a regular. And she's nearly always sad. So Daphne loves me.

Her eyes, red and swollen. She tells me about the black eye, about how good a day she was having up until then, about sitting on the sidewalk afterward with a steak she'd just bought slapped on her eye, tells me, again, to "just pour, just keep pouring." Take away all our fancy education, and we're a regular Jim Thompson novel, a Bukowski poem. I give her medicine, listen, talk a little, give myself medicine – we get medicated. Here, I'm pharmacist and therapist, not customer or client, so I listen more than I talk. But eventually I talk, too. I get drunk and vulnerable, which makes D. love me all the more, and I love her for that, for listening and loving, as much as I hate my wretchedness and hers. After two martinis, we switch to Jäger shots with Stella chasers. This is before the frat boys completely took over Jäger, but still, it's not our usual. This is a special occasion. And the Jäger does its speedy, crazy, almost hallucinogenic job. I start to sneak my usual peeks to where the ink meets the edge of her stretchy knit. I've always loved a tube top. The trashiness of it, the boobness of it. Daphne leans in just a little to give me a better view.

A couple comes in, sits at the end of the bar. Their body language is undoubtedly first date, maybe even one of those new Internet first dates from Salon.com; they're too upscale for a Craigslist hookup. He has a beer, she a glass of merlot – it's not starting off well. Watching them and interpreting their gestures lightens our load. They have a second round but don't grow more at ease with the alcohol. In fact, they seem more tense, he gesturing more broadly, laughing too loudly, slipping into the hard-up hard sell, she

sitting more and more upright. They're done forever after round two. He pays, leaves me a buck, thinking, *I've already wasted enough on this tight-ass bitch.*

One o'clock in the morning. It's just the two of us, the Marilyn wig – which, in our newfound wisdom, we've decided suits me quite well – and the juke. We've been feeding it all night. Al Green, the Cure, AC/DC, Foo Fighters; so long as it's sappy or angry, it's on our list. Then she finally says it.

“I don't want you so bad, you know, Jamie. I don't want you forever or anything. I don't want to be your fucking girlfriend. I just want to know that part of you, the part of you that gets naked and has sex and loses control. I want to know the fucking Jamie.” I say nothing at first, pour us another drink, turn out the sign, lock the doors, and sit down on her side of the bar. I take my shot, chase it down, watch the room shiver.

I say, “I'd like that, too,” and I reach over and trace the patterns down her chest, reach under her top, cup a breast.

We kiss and we kiss some more and then we look at each other and laugh. I glance over at the pool table, raise an eyebrow, and we laugh again. We've both seen it in movies, both the rape scene and the fantasy, the porn of sex on a pool table, the gangbang video of sex on a pool table, guy after guy taking his turn, the woman, the “slut,” voracious, unquenchable, soaked. *How did they clean up that table?* I find myself ruining porn with thoughts like this all the time. *Do they just throw the table away after? You don't make enough cash on a twenty-minute gangbang video to just trash a pool table, do you?*

Women I'm with ask me if I've ever slept with a prostitute. I usually lie and say no, not because of shame or because I want to make some kind of impression, but because I don't remember the details. If I say yes, then they'll ask me about it, and I don't want to make stuff up and I don't want to be abrupt and say, "I don't want to talk about it." But what I really don't want to say is that I just don't remember. I remember the circumstances, the anticipation, but not the incidents; the talking in the alley, but not the blow job; the seedy reception room, but not the sex. I can't remember a lot about a lot of things, sex especially. It's not just that it was with a prostitute and I block it out because I have shame, so forget that interpretation. It's sex in general, and I don't think I'm loaded with shame about sex in general, at least not anymore. With the prostitutes, I remember the before, the fear, the anxiety, the excitement that turns to revulsion at myself once the conversation part—the, "Hey, baby, how you doin' tonight? You wanna date?" part—is over and the money has been exchanged. Then all I can remember is how fast I want to get done with this act that the prostitute has to be either bored or repulsed by. The women I'm involved with don't ask about sex with former lovers, not once, and I sure don't ask them – only a fool asks to be compared with other lovers. Of course, we're all fools, but not usually such foolish fools. So I don't have to worry about having to remember the sex in other relationships. But about prostitutes, they ask what it was like. Do they ask every guy who's dumb enough to admit to it, or just me? They're intrigued. They don't feel a direct comparison; they want to know that I didn't enjoy it too much or too little, just enough that they can enjoy the whoremonger in me, that I can accept the whore in them. But I can't say, "Yes, yes, I have had sex with prostitutes," even though I want to.

What does this have to do with fucking Daphne? I'm not sure. I didn't feel as if I were a john or she a whore. In fact, maybe less so with her than with anyone else. Maybe it's because Daphne was some converse of that – someone with whom I let go of something that never came back, for better and worse. The kind of experience that one imagines happening with hookers, or in the shacks and ships and secret rooms in dreams, anonymously, but that in real life, well, maybe just takes a certain kind of friend on a certain kind of night.

We roll around on the pool table, we rip off clothes. Daphne is sucking me on the pool table. I go down on her, her head hanging off the edge of the table—pure porn imagery. And then we're fucking on the pool table. Fucking Daphne on the fucking pool table. Belly to belly, I try to let go and trust that all she wants is whatever we might do and I'm making my way, the best part, pushing my way inside her, and then, just when I'm really starting to get going, she stops me, says, "Jamie, sweetie, pool tables are made of slate; pool tables are like rock," and we stop.

We get off the pool table and she says, "Do what you want. Show me who you are," and again, "Show me the fucking Jamie," and I realize that I've never done that in my life. I'm not a masochist, not a sadist. I don't have to hit it hard or soft, I just like it all and I like to please; my pleasure is involved with making my lover happy. But she says again, "Be who you are," and I'm frozen, perplexed, and we're standing there, holding each other, leaning against the pool-room wall. I look at her and she's looking at me as if she knows exactly what's going on in my head. And then she turns around and leans over the pool table and spreads her stiletto-heeled legs and I do what's expected, what she thinks or maybe knows I really want, and pretty soon I'm feeling this is exactly what I

really want, and we start to go at it hard and furious and fast and beastly and wet and I am fucking Daphne, fucking and fucking and fucking.

I grab a handful of dreads and yank her head back. I slap her ass and she laughs, tells me, “You can do better than that,” so I do better than that, much better. And I stop thinking and grab her by the hips and just *do*. I just *be*—I don’t think about her pleasure, about safe fucking sex or the violence of penetration, about pregnancy or abortion or objectification or the male gaze. I don’t think about her feelings; I don’t think *don’t think don’t think* and I come and come and come and come and come. The room is spinning and Daphne is saying things I half-hear; she’s calling me “good,” calling me “baby.” I am good. I am her baby.

We lie on the pool table and we laugh. I get up and grab us waters and two more shots, and we drink the shots down and the water is cool and we lie there, our heads resting on the felt rail. We tell stories. Daphne pours some water on my belly and I jump and yelp and then worry about the pool table, and then I stop worrying about the fucking pool table and we lie there and talk and smile and giggle and eventually fall asleep for a little while. A man, a Daphne, and a pool table are one, more or less.

When we wake up, it’s 3:04 AM on the clock on the pool-room wall, which makes it about quarter-to-three in non-bar time, about the time I usually lock up. At home the dog will get up, sniff at the air, wander over to lie by the door and wait. After a few minutes on the cold kitchen floor, she’ll give up, wander back to a slightly worried sleep. At first, after Jen left, Bess would just sit by the door all the time. After a few weeks she gave up—soon I did, too. When I get home, she’ll smell me thoroughly, smell fucking, smell Daphne.

RAIN SONG

I sit in the car in the supermarket parking lot waiting for The Guy I Know Socially Who's Recently Gone from Becoming Famous to Just Plain Being Famous to be interviewed on the radio. He's going to come on sometime in the next half an hour. It is raining hard. The Guy will say things I've heard him say more than once before, will tell jokes I've already laughed at, read stuff that I've both read and heard him read before. I am hungry and tired and once I stop waiting for The Guy I Kind of Know Socially to come on the radio, I will go out there in the rain, buy the food, drive home, and cook it. The dog waits beside me, stoic beast. The announcer introduces The Guy I Know, begins his interview by saying that "This Guy That Guy in the Car in the Supermarket Lot Knows Socially is a *very funny man*." He then plays clips from The Guy I Know's series of funny TV commercials, asks The Guy to read from his new satirical encyclopedia, and then interviews him. During the interview, the interviewer is immediately charmed by The Guy, at one point is laughing so hard he can't ask his next question. The dog and I watch the rain. I smile occasionally. The five minute interview ends. I say "Stay," as ever, pretending the dog had a choice in the matter, and "I'll be right back," pretending she understands English, and make my way in to the store.

WATCHING

I don't know how they didn't see me or hear me, or maybe they did. Or maybe they saw me before I saw them and just went right back at it. But I don't think so. It was a late fall afternoon and I was walking the dog on the ridge trail.

There'd been no rain for a while and no snow yet, the ground was dry and hard. Leaves crunched under our feet, the wind made wind noises, the dog's collar jingled as she trotted along. I could see my breath for the first time this year, just a little. Occasionally she would tear off after invisible squirrels. And then she'd come trotting back. Eleven years with no luck and she was still at it, almost as if she just wants to chase, not catch. Who wants a mouth full of squirrel?

I was at the part of the trail where it crosses a knee-high old stone wall. The girl was sitting on the wall. The boy stood above her. She had on one of those blue parkas with that fake fur that's not even pretending to be real fur around the hood and the orange lining. Blonde curls pushing out from under a knit winter hat. She was maybe 18, but probably not even. The boy was a big kid in an even bigger red coat. He was a few years older, but still a kid, with fuzzy pink cheeks. She was sucking on him pretty furiously. Her hands and mouth working toward the time-tested goal. I stood there for what felt like a long time. They definitely hadn't seen me, come to think of it, because when he looked up he gave a little yelp and then an "ouch!" when I think she must've accidentally bit him as he jumped. The dog gave her hello bark and then trotted over to them, wagging. The

boy began to make a vague gesture with his arms, as did I, raising my hands up in front of me, trying to signal, “Don’t mind me, you kids go right on ahead,” and then I started back walking. I got maybe ten steps and whistled for the dog when the girl called after me, “Hey . . .Sir!” I stopped and turned to face her.

“ Twenty bucks and you can watch.”

I found myself rehearsing a *Sir’s* demurral, something like *Why that’s a very nice offer, young lady, and a fair one, but alas, I must be going* I’ve been called sir in recent years, since my hair got more than a touch grey, and haven’t liked it much, but this was just weird. *Sir, would you like to pay to watch me suck my boyfriend off?* I was about ten yards from them at this point. I think we were all shocked at what she’d said, she was maybe the most startled of all of us, eyes wide. The dog looked up at me, and then at them, then trotted back over to say hello again, which we all ignored. The woods rustled and the wind whushed through the trees. I felt as if I was at a showdown, waiting, ready to draw. I found myself counting *five six seven eight nine*. I’ve always done things in nines. And then I reached for my wallet and pulled out a twenty, which I held up as if it were a white flag. The guy looked down at his girlfriend quizzically. I thought maybe he was about to say, *just kidding, you fuckin’ perv, get the fuck outta here*, but he didn’t. I walked over until I was about four feet from them, placed bill on the wall and a rock on top of it, and stepped back gingerly, kind of like I was trying to get a deer to eat out of my hand. She shoved the bill in her back pocket. This close she was younger than I’d thought, maybe sixteen, no way 18. He was still 18 or maybe a little older, something around his eyes, already jaded. I was thinking that this is probably illegal in several ways. He is committing statutory rape of a sort. And I’m contributing to the delinquency of a

minor and I'm sure a few other things, probably not felonies, but not good, not good at all. I began to panic, thought about just walking away, but what difference would that make? He stood there with a lump in his jeans - he'd shoved himself back in when he first saw me and he was still hard. Impressive. I backed off about ten more feet and sat down on the wall. All I needed was popcorn and a coke. She looked up at him, said "It's okay, baby, it's okay," then looked at me, gave a sexy little smile, as much to herself as to me. She looked like the cat who swallowed the canary, as it were - double pleased to be doing something even badder than the bad thing she had been doing with an unmistakably bad, older boy - his shiny red football jacket passed for colors among the wannabe gangstas in our depressed Western Massachusetts town. And then she turned back to him, undid his pants and took his cock back out, said "Close your eyes, baby," and he did and she took him in her mouth and hand and went back into her rhythm, hand and mouth, steady as she goes, her other hand reaching underneath, pulling him to her. His hand moved to the back of her head, not so much pulling her onto him as feeling it, with his eyes closed, hands, as if reminding himself that there she was, this girl was sucking his dick here, in the woods, that this was a good thing. *Except for that pervert watching, but twenty bucks is twenty bucks.* Or at least that's what I might've been thinking in his place. I kept expecting him to check on me from time to time, but he didn't as far as I could tell, but then again, I wasn't spending much time looking at his face, to be honest. I must be even more harmless looking than I think I am for him to be able to do that - stay hard, close his eyes - which was kind of disappointing. If I were in his position I think I'd have to look, to keep an eye on me. Occasionally she took him out of her mouth and looked right at me while working him with her hand. Soon enough he

was getting close, his hips moving in rhythm with her. I was thinking I *should* be jerking off I really should be jerking off this is a once in a lifetime thing and I'm doing it anyway not going to make it any better by not getting off on it, so I should really be jerking off. It's what they expect me to do. I'm the pervert in the woods. It doesn't make it any less bad to not jerk off. Why am I not I jerking off?

But I couldn't get myself to do it. The dog sat at my feet, sniffing, combing the horizon for squirrel, glancing at the couple, at me, yawning. I remembered that Lori wanted me to pick up Q-tips on the way home. And then the boy growled *I'm gonna come baby* and she started moaning and doing him faster until it happened. I could see her face contort as she took his orgasm, and everything stopped. I sat still. The boy, convulsions abating, caught his breath, relaxed his scrunched face, opened his eyes. She took him out of her mouth, looked at me swallowed, wiped her mouth on her sleeve, and stood, and then we all just stayed like that for a moment. I got up and turned to go, the dog followed.

As I walked the mile back to the car, I wondered what they thought of me. I suppose I looked like someone's dad, maybe someone from the college in my scruffy beard and thermal-whatever-tech coat. I was glad I wasn't someone's dad because if I were someone's dad I probably wouldn't have watched, or if I had it would've felt way wronger. I was even glad to have given them some beer money. I guess I was enjoying being bad too. Lately, I've had fewer and fewer chances to do so. I beeped the car open and wiped the dog's feet and she hopped in. I turned on the radio and listened to people talk about the war and the economy and the election and forgot about the Q-tips completely until I pulled into our driveway, where I sat, thinking about whether to go

back to the store. I sat for a while, stuck between going inside and going back out to the store, wondering if Cumby's had Q-tips or whether I'd have to go all the way to the supermarket, which would make more sense anyway since Cumby's was so damn overpriced. But if I was going to the supermarket I might as well wait and go on the way to school tomorrow. This happened to me more and more lately, getting stuck over unimportant choices. I tried not to let myself get upset about it, looked out at our yard of un-raked leaves, and spaced out.

I remembered when I was a kid and the cops caught that pervert in the bushes by the playground. I remembered the man sitting on the bench with his newspaper, but I never saw him in the bushes, and I felt less scared than sorry for him when Mary Taglioni told me about it on the swings. I was on the leftmost swing, the one I always chose when I could, and was kicking high, and Mary just sat there next to me, swinging her legs, so damn proud of herself. *Like you even know what a pervert is*, I thought. I remembered finding my first porn in the woods behind school, how Bob Dugot and Jimmy Manheim and I looked at it for hours, weeks, without talking to each other hardly at all, all of us wanting to take our dicks out and tug on them but all too shy to do it. As an adult I'd been told by several friends about their own similar finds of porn stashes in the woods - apparently they were strategically placed by some charitable pervert parks and rec organization, Porn Fairies of America. The radio voices blathered on and I pictured of a porn fairy, jumping out of a pile of leaves and yelling "Surprise!" in a suit made entirely of Q-tips.

When I woke up from a slurpy dog kiss to the ear, it was completely dark out. I was cold and clammy. It'd been just fifteen minutes but it felt like coming out of a coma.

I remembered the Q-tipped Porn Fairy, then the Q-tips, then the kids in the park. Where were they now? In a basement somewhere with friends, drinking beer, taking bong hits, playing whatever video game they play these days. Thinking about me? Maybe a little. Talking about it? No way. Not if they were still hanging out together. Maybe she'd tell girlfriends, later. But I doubted it. Why did I care? To have something to care about? Then I decided I cared about Q-Tips, and I pulled the car back out.

AFTER

Woman overheard on the subway: “For men, jerking off is still shameful, but for us, now it’s like totally liberating.”

After reading “Close” in public at the benefit, after reading it in front of Sassafras, I basked in the buzz for a day or two, after which I allowed myself a jarring, thrilling, obvious thought. *What happens when I go back to the club and see her?* Was my ultimate fantasy now over? Would it be tainted, somehow, by our fleeting contact in the “real world” – the world so far removed from the capsular one of the Lusty Lady? Will she like me more, or less, as a customer? How will I feel when I see her, besides more self-conscious (and, probably, correspondingly more turned on) than ever? And how will she feel when she sees me? Scared that I’m an obsessed potential stalker? Just vaguely weirded out? I considered, for about a second – okay, less than a second – just avoiding her, going to the club when I know she won’t be working (I knew her schedule by heart, after all) and leaving if I saw her when I dropped in my quarter and the window opened.

But, of course, that wasn’t going to happen – after the reading, I was more drawn to her than ever and I was much too obsessed to let it alone. And remembering her smile through the crowd as she left the benefit gave me confidence that I wouldn’t be feared,

snubbed, or laughed at. But what if I did get snubbed; what if she saw me and turned away? Or saw me and was over-solicitous, patronizing? Or turned to the other strippers, and said, *Hey ladies, this is the guy I was talking about, the nut job who read that story about us at the benefit.* And they all come over to my window and wave and giggle and I feel humiliated. I imagine being described as *that writer guy who's like totally obsessed with me.* I am almost physically revulsed by the thought. Nothing could make me feel worse as a peep show customer – not only to be recognized, and recognized as a pig, but, much worse, to be recognized as a pathetic, obsessed, maybe psycho pig.

Two weeks later, on a chilly Sassafras Tuesday at 7 p.m., I head to the Lusty. The Lusty Lady sits on the border of San Francisco's Chinatown and Italian North Beach neighborhoods and the area is always bustling with tourists. It's evening, and I stop in at Mr. Bing's, the tiny old-Chinese-guys-and-random-others bar around the corner from the club for a shot and a beer. I sit down at the bar – there are no tables – no room for them at Mr. Bing's, just a bar. College basketball blares from the wide-screen TV, which competes with the jukebox, which competes with the men in the corner playing liar's poker, laughing and shouting in Chinese as they slam dice cups on the bar. I read a little and write in my journal. A couple sits at the far end of the bar, in the only seats even vaguely obscured from the plate glass windows facing Columbus Street. He is boringly handsome, a 32-year-old sandy-haired former jock in a Men's Warehouse suit, carrying an extra thirty pounds he keeps swearing he's gonna work off; she, more casual in skirt and blouse, is a work subordinate. She's thin, younger, wide-eyed, light brown hair with highlights. He is married, she is not. She's in love; he's in trouble. I'm stalling, distracting myself with my fantasy of their tawdry rendezvous, but I'm also enjoying the

anticipation, milking the moment. As much as I fear her scorn, of course there's always the hope, at least until I see her again, that Sassafra's liked the reading, liked *me*. So, yeah, you bet I'm stalling.

The juke plays Frisco-themed cheese ("I Left My Heart . . .", "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay") mixed with old disco, Billy Joel, Journey, Abba – name your musical guilty pleasure, Mr. Bing's has it. Something about all this sensory input feels just perfect. I have a second beer, stay maybe 45 minutes all told. Then I settle up, thank the chubby, middle-aged Chinese bartender who I always assume is Bing himself, and head across the street and the maybe fifty paces up Kearny to the Lusty Lady.

I get singles for a twenty from the black-clad and scowling punk-rock kid at the front desk, then quarters for a five from the change machine. I take a deep breath, and step into my favorite booth, number nine (each booth has a number above its door – why, I don't know). Depending on which way my superstition is pulling me on a given day, booth nine is always the one to choose or avoid. To choose, in that nine has always been my number, to avoid, in that it's bad karma to (ab)use my special number to get the best time I can have jerking off to a stripper.

I drop in a coin and the window grinds up and . . . she's not there. Panic, dismay. I had imagined I'd feel some relief if she weren't there, but I feel none. I linger for a half an hour, hoping maybe she's on dinner break, but no Sass. I swallow my pride and go to the front desk, offer a mumbled question to Scowling Boy. There's something about asking an angry 22-year-old about the whereabouts of a stripper stage-named Sassafra's that makes me feel old, uncool, and very pervy. He smiles, choosing extra-friendly as his

mode of derision, loudly tells me that *Sasssss-ah-frassss* is on vacation, she'll be back next week. I jerk off to bad porn in a sticky-floored video booth and skulk home.

The Sassafras vacation week somehow passes and it's Tuesday night again. I perform the same ritual, shot and a beer at Mr. Bing's, but this time I can only manage to stay put for maybe 15 minutes before I practically sprint across the street.

I get change, shove money in, coin drops, window up . . . and there she is. There she is, THERE SHE IS. She sees me right away, smiles big and comes right over and everything is wonderful – the same only not the same at all. By “the same” I just mean it is immediately still okay, more than okay, that I am there, and she, as Sassafras, gives me the same show, the same eye contact, the same wonderfulness; by “not the same at all,” I mean that it's much, much more exciting – charged, loaded, *real* – for my having exposed myself to her by reading “Close” at the benefit. For having seen her as a real person, in the real world, not-Sassafras, wearing clothes. I force myself not to hurry (In my shame at going to the peeps, I tend to rush once I'm there, and today, there are reasons beyond my usual shame why I might “finish” sooner than I'd like) and she dances and hums and kneels to be at my eye level and looks me in the eyes and cups her breasts in her hands, and I look at her red-brown pubic hair and her sweet smooth belly and sweeter, heavy, round breasts and that gentle cat face, that slightly-too-small but cute ass and the elaborate tattoo that runs up her back above it. Initially, I could've done without the tat, but now it's become a part of her, often the first thing I catch a glimpse of when I arrive and last thing I see as the window closes and I'm leaving and she's walking away. She dances and turns and kneels and looks at me and dances again and finally she comes back down in front of me and holds her breasts in her hands one

more time, comes as close to the window as she can and looks at me and keeps looking and I feel a hint of her watching, seeing me differently too, and she smiles and hums and I come and come and come.

When I'm done, and before the window closes, she says, "Meet me in the hall." I leave the booth and wait outside and in a minute she comes out the stage door. She tells me she can't really chat here, hands me a small piece of paper and turns away before I can say anything. I put the paper in my pocket and walk outside. Immediately, I dig for the slip of paper, I can't find it, and I'm sure that I dropped the tiny slip somewhere inside and I'll never find it again and she'll never give me another and I search all my pockets frantically again and finally find it. An email address and a name, a real name. I expected a phone number, but this is somehow even better, maintains the increasingly tenuous gap between fantasy and reality, a.k.a. adultery. I rush home to my computer.

Looking vs. Looking: Apologists for male objectification often argue that men are simply much "more visual" than women. In my experience, this is inarguably true, which is not to say it justifies our leering. When I look at naked women in magazines, or even clothed women walking down the street, the feeling is incredibly akin to when I look at a classic Porsche or a pair of shoes in a shop window. I am looking, often hopelessly, helplessly at an object of beauty that I would hold, touch, possess, if I could. As a child I nearly ruined a family trip to Italy with my need, it really felt like a *need*, to have every amazing die-cast toy car in every shop window. When I was a teen and young adult the pain of looking at women only to have them disappear from my view was almost unbearable. But

when I go to peep shows, when I'm looking at an actual naked woman paid to be naked in front of me, while I do indeed go through that objectification process, my experience is infinitely complicated by my intense desire to make some connection to the person in front of me. It's a connection that not only are strippers not paid to make, but that most actively, wisely, perhaps, refuse to make. It's also why my relationship with Sassafras was so rare and so important for me. She gave me that connection, a connection suddenly, intoxicatingly more complex.

Once, I was jerking off while watching a dancer who had always pointedly ignored me. She just plain didn't like me, would walk to the other side of the stage whenever she saw me in the window. Usually, such rejection ruins the thrill of watching for me, but her body was incredible – long and lean and strong, with smooth olive skin, small breasts, and tiny, button nipples. And sure, her aloofness was sexy too. For some reason she deigned to dance for me that day.

I must have stopped stroking myself for a moment and put my hand up by the window (I'm left-handed), because she noticed my wedding ring and said, dryly “Why don't you go home and fuck your wife?”

“I will,” I replied, more angry than embarrassed for once. *What's your point?* I wanted to say. *They're two completely different things. I'm not coming here instead of fucking my wife.* But there was no way to have a discussion through the thick plexiglass about the many differences between sex with one's spouse and masturbating while looking at a sex worker. And, of course, the disgusted dancer would have had no interest in any such conversation.

Rather than leave chastened, I fed the machine more quarters and kept jerking away. I came hard while looking at her ass swaying haughtily, almost mockingly to the beat. (It reminded me of the way squirrels sat atop the fence in my backyard when I was growing up, wagging their fluffy tails at our tantalized cats.) It was the only time in my life I can remember coming in anger.

I struggle to make up a name that will do no-longer-Sassafras justice. Her real name is a Californian, commune-given, four-word-amalgam, a lovely one that hints at wildlife and Native-American culture in a way that nearly avoids cliché. I can't rival it, so I'm going to call her Triste. It's odd, as is her real name, and it touches on sadness ("triste" is sad, in French) and tragic romance (Tristan and Isolde) and secret sex ("tryst").

That night, when I get home from the Lusty, I write my first Triste email quickly, rewrite it so many times that it feels as if it no longer has anything to do with me, then I delete it all and start from scratch. I tell her how thrilled I was that she was at the reading, how I felt horribly, wonderfully "naked" performing in front of her. I tell her how strange, different yet not, it was to see her at the club again afterwards. I tell her I'm married.

The next day I check my email a dozen times. Okay, a few dozens of times. And the day after that. And the day after that. I begin to think I wrote something inappropriate or just boring or stupid, or that she just changed her mind. Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned the whole marriage bit yet. I read and reread the email I sent her, looking for

clues. On the fourth day, a response! A response beyond my wildest dreams (one that, sadly, I am not at liberty to reprint). She writes about her nervousness at seeing me read (wanting me to do well), about her attraction to me that night (*her* attraction to *me*). She tells me she noticed my wedding ring a while back, but says no more about it.

She tells me she's a poet and a playwright. She includes a poem of hers that I immediately adore, that feels like magic to me. Sure, skeptical reader, I suppose almost any poem from Triste would've felt like magic right then, but now, years later, it's still a magical poem, as are many others of hers, filled with sadness and clever, absurd and tawdry humor. A sexy epistolary friendship had begun; Sassafras had become Triste.

For a few weeks, email was all it was beyond our commercial relationship, and email was plenty. I would see Triste (Was it Sassafras, or Triste, or both, behind the glass now?) at the Lusty once or twice a week and we'd write every few days - sometimes sexy, sometimes literary, sometimes just shooting the shit. She would send me poems. She wrote extremely candidly and confidently. At first, I would stammer goofily, chattily back. After a while the stammer subsided, and became candid conversation, discussion, flirtation. It was inspiring, it was challenging, it was sexy as all get-out.

Sometime in those first weeks of emailing, Triste gives me her phone number. I memorize, but don't dial it right away. What was already going on was so good, for one thing. And for another, as much as my wife not only tolerated but encouraged, even got off on my predilections, and knew about Sass being at the reading, I *was* married, monogamously so up until that point, and phone numbers on small slips of paper lead to phone calls, which in turn lead to meeting without a translucent barrier in between, which

leads to touching and then to the use of a very different kind of translucent barrier, to sweaty nakedness in a small room with a bed: to actual adultery. That was the way my thinking went, anyway.

Now I tell J. that my stripper friend and I have been exchanging emails, that her real name is Triste. J. is excited, intrigued by it all too. She asks if I'm going to meet her in person. I hem and haw, then say no, I don't think so, no. I am lying, I know I am lying, J. must know I am lying, but the words still come out. *No, honey, not gonna meet her, uh-uh, nope.* She eggs me on, says she'd sure do it if she were in my shoes. Couples do play these games. I think she knows that encouraging me is a little dangerous, but that after five years together, maybe she wants a little danger. And still I hesitate, lying to myself that I really won't call.

Finally, right after an especially sexy session at the Lusty, I dial the number and get voicemail. I leave a short, awkward hello message. The next day, Triste leaves me a message, plans are made, and the "tryst" part begins.

When I think of sneaking around, I think of those gay men who hang out in video peep shows – usually over fifty, usually sad or desperate-looking or both. I remember once, while jerking off in an especially grimy video peep joint in San Francisco's seedy Tenderloin district, hearing a tiny voice going "psst" through a little waist-level hole in the wall to the next booth. I nearly hit the ceiling, and got out of there fast. I also inevitably remember the men who used to cruise the block in front of my house in

Albany, NY, when I was growing up. They'd drive around and around in their white Country Squire wagons with the wood paneling, picking up the skinny rough-trade boys who skulked around after dark. My house was on a "nice" enough block, but it was "downtown" (which, like in much of America in the '70s, the middle class had abandoned for the suburbs) and faced Washington Park, the biggest park in town. The cruisers would drive around, then park with their engines running and turn their lights out, and the boys would skitter up like squirrels and talk to them through the passenger windows, and sometimes get in with them and drive away into the park. I don't know at what age, probably 12 or 13, I realized what was going on, but almost as soon as I knew what the transactions were, I also could tell by their cars that many of these men were well-to-do fathers from my friends' suburban neighborhoods, and that what they were doing would ruin them if they were caught. I had contempt and pity for them.

One hot August night I was sitting on our stoop and one of them, more aggressive than most – maybe he hadn't learned the rules yet – pulled right up in front of our house and looked at me, thinking I was just hanging out on a stoop waiting for action. I glared back at him, not scared but angry, or maybe scared of my anger, but he didn't read me right. He pulled away, drove around the block and pulled up right in front again, in case I didn't get it the first time. By this time I was filled with the most righteous of indignations and when he circled and pulled up a third time, I waited for him to fully stop and turn off his lights, then I stuck out my middle finger and screamed at the top of my lungs FUUCK YOOOOU! The look of abject fear in his eyes as he peeled away was awful, just sad. But it was *my fucking block*, how dare he, I just wanted to sit on the stoop

how fucking dare he, I kept telling myself –my rage and guilt lingered well into the summer.

An excruciating week after making our plan to meet, before her Tuesday shift, Triste and I meet at Mr. Bing's. At first we're both shy. This is all so backwards. We've interacted sexually, but never platonically. We laugh about that. I'm wary because we're sitting behind a plate glass window facing the street. Two of us on display now. I think of the former jock in the gray suit, of his affair. I don't want to have to explain this. I've never told anyone but my wife and therapists about any of my furtive habits, have always been mortified that someone would see me coming out of a club, first in New York, now in San Francisco. Regardless of whether this thing with Triste remains more or less platonic, my sexual habits are still a dirty secret, and if I were to have to introduce her to a friend who happened by on the way to City Lights Books up the block, saw me from the street and came in to say hi, well, Triste might be the kind of person who'd be much too upfront about how we know each other.

After our first drink, conversation eases, I stop sneaking wary glances outside, she seems less leary of me. Dusk fades and streetlights come on. After our second drink, our hands touch on the bar. We leave them touching. They intertwine the way hands do. We talk about both being nervous, about poetry, about theater, about life. Somewhere in the middle of our third drink, she moves closer, we kiss – she moves closer still, and we kiss some more. Then she checks the time, powders her nose, leaves for work. She leaves behind her a lilac smell that's still with me a little while later when I see her through our

little window, boundaries more blurred than ever. I am dizzy with it, linger as long as I can, and stay in the booth, looking back at her, for quite some time after I'm "done."

I've never caught my father checking out a woman. I've always known, somehow, that this isn't from a lack of desire on his part, but rather an abundance of principle: it's something you just don't do. I do remember one time, when I was in middle-school, an attractive young woman working behind a shop counter was extremely friendly, even flirtatious with my dad (who bears a strong resemblance to Paul Newman). As we left the store, he said, "What a *bright* young woman." The message, as I interpreted it, was that a woman had to be intelligent or interesting in some other non-physical way for a man to like her, and only after she'd been well appreciated as a fellow human being could she be — maybe, someday — physically desired. Never objectified, of course, but desired.

I never imagined that my dad would ever let himself think, let alone say, *Wow, those are some sexy eyes*, or, heaven forbid, *What a rack on that broad*. Part of me is proud of him and wants to follow his example. Another part likes to believe that he can leer and fantasize with the best of us, or perhaps the worst of us. Most importantly, with me.

Before I began writing "Close," before my coming out began, when my father was visiting me in San Francisco, he came home to my apartment after a day in the city, sat

down on the couch, flipped on the TV, and, out of the blue, said, “I figured out who goes to those porn places: gay guys looking for action.” It almost sounded like a confession; Professor Morris I. “Mark” Berger had wandered into a peep-show joint, or at least lingered outside of one. The thought was so unimaginable to me – my dad, looking as dignified, as Paul-Newmanesque as ever, in a peep- show booth. And in his twill slacks, unthinkable – they could get stained just walking through the place, never mind – well never mind what I’m never minding. He must’ve either gone in or seen men coming out or lurking, and sure, there are some gay men who frequent straight strip clubs and peep shows and porn shops.

That first day at the bar my relationship with Triste became adultery to me. We didn’t have sex, but we met, sexily, stealthily – that was enough. We met maybe eight times after that over the course of several months. In Mr. Bing’s, in another bar in her neighborhood (both of which were thankfully very remote from where I lived, from where most people I knew lived), in Golden Gate Park, in her apartment. We first had sex in her apartment. It was immediately disappointing in the way that almost any fantasy turned reality is disappointing, at least at first. The real person, Triste-not-Sassafras was, well, a real person, a young, troubled, often sad person. A college educated, literary, damaged, creative person. A person who often cried during and after sex, but didn’t want me to stop. A sexual adventurer, a risk-taker; an abused child, raised largely in communes by hippie lesbians; a person I was fascinated by but whom I knew in that illogical, intuitive early-on way – in the various substantive and amorphous ways that one

knows such things – that I would never want to be in a serious relationship with, and who didn't seem terribly interested in anything more from me than whatever I had to offer. As I look back now, I wonder what I did offer. An adventure, a crush, a human face to her job, another taboo (sleeping with a customer) to be tested?

While the sex was a letdown, in part because of her sadness and the confusion it caused, in part because of my guilt and anxiety about sneaking around, in part because our bodies just didn't inherently connect, there were still thrills when we met, the most torturous of which was that she always wanted to make out in public. She'd put my hand up her shirt in bars, try to get me to have sex in the car – scary stuff for most people, all the more so for married-man me. Once, while we were parked in her neighbor's driveway, a cop pulled up and tapped on the window (which was actually fogged up, just like in the movies) at a very awkward moment.

What surprised me most was that I still enjoyed seeing her at the club more than anything else. It surprised me twofold: that the reality of Triste didn't become better than interludes with Sassafra; and that I could still recreate the fantasy of Sassafra (made better by Triste's lurking somewhere behind Sassafra's eyes, although she never discernibly altered her stage persona as I'd always known it) as soon as there was that little window between us.

In large part, I was also unable to enjoy the sexual part of the affair because it was just that, an affair, and I am a miserably guilty person – I am not built for affairs. I told my wife, finally, that Triste and I had gone out for drinks, but never about the sex. My

reticence wasn't out of fear of recrimination or even guilt so much as greed: Sassafras, my wife and I could share; Triste was mine and mine only.

About three months in, I cut things off with Triste. Or rather, I imagined having to cut things off, but it was much easier and more ambiguous than that – I just stopped calling and she didn't try to reach me. I was just one of several sexual adventures she was pursuing at the time, in addition to having a serious boyfriend of over a year's standing; she was in a stage of sexual self-discovery that I envied, but could never have indulged in. After the calls faded out, we still exchanged emails every now and then, and I would see her at the club and it would be what it had always been, if a little newly tinged with a vague sadness, and that was it. A few more months later, she moved to New York. We still exchanged emails, but with less and less frequency.

In June 2002, my therapist of six years was retiring from her practice, retiring quite young – at around 50, I guessed – to pursue the sculpting career she'd abandoned long ago. J. had left me eight months earlier (on September 12, 2001, to be exact, that timing being just about her only unforgivable act) – women were ditching me left and right. Laura, my shrink, was a native Californian, a small, attractive woman with freckles and blonde hair with some gray sneaking in; she was thin and thoughtful, with a face that, while lined and angular, was still gentle. She had kind eyes and solid insights. During that final appointment, we were of course talking about porn and strippers and about their relationship to me, and my relationship to my mother and her feminism, and round and round we went, as ever. One of the main reasons I had originally gone to therapy was to

address the shame and guilt I felt about my sexual predilections. Actually, that's not quite right – I went to therapy, in large part, to “cure” myself of the need to get off by objectifying women through porn. Over the years I'd learned that reconciling those places where my values and lusts didn't jibe was a much better goal.

But this session was about closure and we were focusing on my desire to write about all of the above. (The other major reason I started therapy was to rid myself of my hopeless procrastination. What I had succeeded in doing for much of my time in therapy was to neatly combine these disparate elements: I procrastinated about dealing with wanting to write about porn and strippers.) A dozen years and four therapists later, while the shame was still there, it was markedly reduced, but the “adult” material remained – if less obsessively and painfully so – a substantial part of my sexual life and identity, a part that I had come, more or less, to accept, but that was still secret. During that last session, Laura and I talked about my progress over the years, about my plans for the future, for the writing. I told her that I was petrified, that any such work, if done properly, would offend some people, alienate others, and, worst of all by far, expose me. As the session ended, I told her that I didn't know if I could go through with it. Laura paused, I think pondering the uncharacteristically and arguably inappropriate sweeping statement she was about to make, and the burden she was going to leave me with: “It's kind of your life's work,” she said, and we sat there with it in the air for what felt like a long time. It's the last thing I remember her saying.

A few months after that last therapy session, I was back in New York for a few days. It was summer, nearly a year since J. had left, and I was finally feeling okay to pretty good on a consistent basis. I was seeing old friends, walking around Manhattan and Brooklyn in the sticky New York heat, experiencing that subdued first summer after 9/11. My last night in town I had planned to stay with my friend Joel and his wife and two kids. That day, after resisting all week, I left Triste a phone message (we had exchanged brief emails for the first time in over a year just before I left on the trip). I mentioned to Joel that a friend might call me for a late-night drink, but I didn't really think there was much chance of it.

At about 9:30, Triste called. She said she was still at work (word processing and graphic design now, not dancing, to support her career as a poet), but she would be off at about eleven and would love to meet me for a drink at 11:30 at a bar near her place. She lived at one corner of Prospect Park, Joel lived at another. At about 10:30 I set out walking. It was a longer walk than I thought, and I was full of food and a little tired and drunk. At 11:45, I got there. I saw her through the window. She was sitting at the bar. She looked smaller than I remembered. When she turned, her eyes twinkled and she seemed happy to see me, if a little wary, cat-like, as ever, as if we were back at Mr. Bing's for that first drink and she was sizing up to what degree I was just a dude looking to fuck a stripper. We drank and talked, and my shock that she'd want to see me at all faded and her cat-eyes softened as we became more and more comfortable with each other. For some reason, long after I got over my original fear that I'd repulse her, I always expected Triste to be bored by me, and always felt honored, somehow, when she wasn't. For my part, I was re-encharmed from the moment I walked in the door. Soon we touched hands,

reenacting our first date, and then moved to a table in the corner and started kissing, except this time without all that pesky guilt and anxiety attached.

A little while later, when I got up to get us another round, my wallet was gone. In all likelihood, I had left it at our first table before we moved to the corner, and someone had come in and grabbed it and left. But I didn't remember anyone coming in to the bar, which was empty but for us and the bartender, who lent us a flashlight. But the wallet was gone. At one point I went back up to the bar and gave the bartender my address and phone number, just in case. He asked if I had looked in my friend's bag – maybe it fell in there or something. *Had he seen her take it?* For the rest of our time in the bar, I stewed about it. She had a big sack-like handbag and I kept wanting to look inside, to ask her if I could, if maybe it had somehow, as the bartender had said, *fallen in there*. But of course, I couldn't ask to look in her bag. That would be to accuse Triste of stealing. We drank some more, kissed some more, she bought one round, then a second. She invited me over to her place. She wouldn't buy drinks and invite me over if she'd stolen my wallet would she? Maybe she would. Just because she stole my wallet doesn't mean she didn't like me too. Maybe she was desperate, maybe she really needed money. Maybe she's a klepto. How would I know? She had a good job, word processing, or so she said. How well did I really know her, anyway? We walked to her apartment, around the corner, at about 2:30 in the morning. By then, I was quite drunk and exhausted but still anxious about the wallet. When we got inside, we immediately started undressing each other, and, finally, this once, I let myself fall fully into sex with Triste as I never could back in San Francisco. And she fell into me. It was the first time I felt an intense physical connection to her outside a peep-show booth. Afterwards, I dropped into a deep sleep, and suddenly

it was six in the morning and my flight was at nine and all my stuff was at Joel's and I was in a panic apologizing as I rushed to get going, but she didn't seem bothered at all, just helped me get myself dressed and after one more embrace and one more deep kiss I was out the door.

A month or so after that visit to New York, feeling nostalgic, I stopped in at Mr. Bing's before going to the Lusty. I hadn't been in the bar in over a year – Mr. Bing's was part of another era. I still went to the Lusty, though, but less and less frequently, and more out of habit than anything else, since Triste had moved. The usually reticent Bing recognized me, asked, "What happen to your friend?" I tell him that she moved to New York. "She was really something, your friend." He smiled somehow benignly and hornily at the same time. I smiled back awkwardly, wanting to be proud, and ordered a shot and a beer.

What Sassafras – that character Triste played – gave me, what I had looked for but never found in so many dancers before her, was, as I wrote in "Peep Show," a confessor. A woman who would accept me at my basest, my most, as I saw it, grotesquely sexual, jerking off to a naked woman paid to dance for me, through a window smudged by the greasy hands of the men who came before and after me for the same reason. Sassafras offered a small piece of herself, well beyond her job requirements, to me, and I'm sure to many others, but it felt as if it was just to me, with a sweetness, a generosity that felt completely genuine. Her acceptance of my sexuality, my undeniable lust for her body,

face, *her* gaze, was like a balm, and having an orgasm in front of her like a million Hail Marys.

So I don't know why I was surprised that no matter how wonderful real-life Triste was, an actual relationship with her wouldn't be as satisfying as the fantasy Sassafras. How could any real person live up to that? And from her side? What did I do for her as a customer before we met? I've never asked her. I think her enjoyment of my gaze was beyond simple exhibitionism – she seemed to really enjoy the giving of herself, and seemed to understand exactly what I needed and why, perhaps better than I did or do to this day. I know I take great pride when I can give something that someone wants but can't quite ask for – a compliment, a piece of advice, an orgasm, or even, simply, another person to talk to. Perhaps on that stage, Triste-as-Sassafras was able to give – in a simple, straightforward way that everyday life didn't allow. Many strippers have made clear to me their reasons for doing what they do – pride, need for acceptance, rebellion, anger, and of course, first and foremost, money – but Triste/Sassafras had an agenda that defied my understanding, and I like to think we already had a relationship before we met that was not the typical stripper/customer one. But back then, I didn't want to understand, I just wanted to be healed of my guilt, of my shame, of my lust, and she healed me again and again.

Spring 2005, San Francisco. A few months before I move back east, an old friend walks into the bar while I'm working one of my last shifts. I haven't seen him in almost a year.

Paul was always tall and thin, but now he looks gaunt, his head is shaved, his skin pale; he looks as if he's been going through chemo. After finishing his Psych PhD, he moved away about a year ago for a tenure-track job at a state university in a small town in the Northwest. In fact he *has* been having a rough go of it, but not cancer: divorce. He didn't want the divorce, doesn't like the town he's living in. He has a small child. His ex doesn't want to move. He feels trapped. Part of the reason Paul's getting divorced is his wife's discovery of all the porn he's got on his computer, a scenario that's been played out ad infinitum across America over the past decade. I learned about his situation in an email he wrote me after reading "Peep Show." Like me, Paul had been suffering with very similar issues of guilt and shame and lifelong secrecy involving porn. The first thing Paul says after hello is, "I'm here visiting you so I won't go to a strip club." I tell him that if I'd known, I'd have worn something sexier. Then I ask him why, why come see me instead of going to look at naked women? I pour him a drink and tell him to go the club first, then come back and tell me all about it. He shakes his head, takes off his coat. The bar is empty but for us and a couple on a first date nervously interviewing each other, so we have plenty of time to talk. I'm thrust into the position of bartender-confessor-therapist, a role I don't mind at all. What I do have trouble with is the sex part. Ever since "Peep" was published, friends had been telling me things – personal, sexual things, that I didn't always want to hear and often didn't know how to respond to. Paul talks to me about his guilt, his self-flagellation, he talks to me about, more or less, a mirror image of the former me. And he looks at me, to me, as if I have answers about divorce, answers about porn. I remembered feeling the way he does now after J. left – looking for someone to tell me an answer, any answer. I tell him it gets easier, the divorce part. I tell

him to breathe, as New-Age silly as that sounds, *make sure you breathe*. About porn and strippers, I tell him that once I stopped beating myself up so much and just let myself have my desires, those desires and the guilt both lessened. I tell him that the taboo was a huge part of the attraction, and that once I let go of porn being forbidden I didn't need it as much, and when I did indulge it was easier to enjoy myself. I tell him everyone has fantasies that don't match their values. I tell him that therapy helped. I suggest again that he go to the strip club. He stays, has a second drink. After drink three, he tells me it was good to see me. I hug his bony frame. I don't ask him where he's going.

Hanging out with friends in my San Francisco neighborhood bar a few days before I'm to leave town, I see a woman who looks very familiar yet utterly out of place. I stare at her for too long, trying to figure out how I know her. Finally, she fixes her gaze on me for several seconds, then turns abruptly away – that's when I recognize her as a stripper. She looks very different in clothes – '80s punk-disco, thrift-store trendy, with big nerdy glasses. She slouches. On stage, naked, she does the opposite of slouch, throws her shoulders back to accentuate her two nipple rings that she tantalizingly plays with. I know her with a much saucier attitude – I know her in-character, in another universe entirely. A few minutes later, she comes over to me at the bar. She's obviously a little drunk, and says, playfully, loudly enough to be heard by others, "I won't tell anyone where I know you from if you don't tell anyone where you know me from." And then she walks away. It occurs to me that, for the first time ever, I wouldn't care all that much if she told everyone where she knows me from, and that feels great to realize. She looks over at me from time to time. I can't tell if she wants to talk to me more or is

uncomfortable that I'm there. If I could be sure she wanted to talk, I would go over and talk. Instead, I move to the other end of the bar to say hello to a friend, and when I look for her a little while later, she's gone.

I see her again at the Lusty a month or so later. I'm about to move back east in a few days – this visit is my last. She asks how I am, and how's my dog (whom I'd brought with me to the bar that night). Then she tells the other strippers on stage what a *cute little doggie* I have, and I get a little embarrassed.

“You don't usually come out this late, do you?” she asks, and I say no, that in fact I haven't been to the club in a long time.

“Been keeping to yourself,” she asks, and we both laugh. Yes, *keeping to myself*, I think, as opposed to jerking off in front of strange women in a little booth. She tells me about how she sees someone she knows on the other side of the glass at least once a week.

She goes on, “Sometimes it's creepy, like when someone from high school shows up, but I mean, it's bound to happen, and you're alright, I mean, you don't hate women.” Her tone is teasing, almost mocking, but not viciously so.

“No, I don't,” I say, shout-talking through the glass while looking up and down at her lovely body, her softness, her smoothness, her hooped nipples, her huge eyes on her goofy-cute Betty Boop face, listening to her words, “I don't hate women at all.”

“You’re not going to chop me up into little bits,” she goes on in her charming affected ditziness, making meat-cleaver motions with both hands for a moment, stopping dancing to do so. I start to lose my erection in a hurry.

“No, I’m not.”

She goes back to dancing, first a mini-jitterbug and then something marginally more sultry, and I go back to jerking and she mentions my dog one more time, and I give her a look like *c’mon you’re really blowing my buzz here* and she says, “Kidding,” and shrugs her shoulders and I say I know and I go back at it and eventually I do come, which she either doesn’t notice or has no intention of acknowledging. The hatred I fear from strippers, from any women who catch me sexualizing them, is nowhere to be found, but then neither is any hint from her that this, even for me, is a sexual experience. She’s passing the time at work chatting with a customer – I’m jerking off. Not a particularly sexy interaction, but it is ridiculous and amusing, though.

When I wave goodbye she says, “Aw, you’re leaving.” Then, “You know, I think I saw you in the park once too. See *I’m* the one who’s stalking *you*,” and she makes a monster face and claws with her hands and growls and I put claw hands up to the window, respond in kind. I think to myself that this may be my last interaction of this absolutely weird sort, ever. I may never be here again. Maybe a little embarrassed by her display and because she told me that she had noticed me in the park, she steps back from the glass and says, “Well, bye,” and I wave again and I’m gone before the window even fully closes.

August 2005. I recently moved cross-country, from San Francisco to western Massachusetts, back to academia after over a decade away. At a backyard barbeque, a dozen people I've just met, my new colleagues, sit in front of a fire on a cool late-summer night. I'm introduced to a fellow grad student who asks me, loudly, "Jamie Berger? Aren't you the guy who wrote that peep show piece?" I say yes and look around the fire. People have stopped talking at the words "peep show" and are now listening to us, ten glowing faces turned our way. He tells me he thought the essay was great, but that it'll sure be a lot harder for me to find strippers to visit around here. Your average asshole would be inflecting this last part with an unspoken *har har, nod's as good as a wink*, a poke to the ribs. But this guy isn't doing that at all – he's being earnest, complimentary. I am mortified. He goes on, and on, and on, about details of "Peep," then about what passes for a local adult entertainment scene here – from what he's heard, of course, no first-hand knowledge here. None but mine. I'm being introduced to my new community through this conversation. This kind of thing will keep happening for as long as I keep writing about this stuff. The glowing faces look silently on as he speaks.

I've never liked "fancy" strip clubs, with men gathered around a stage, the dancers trolling the bar for lap-dance customers. I don't go to peep shows to talk to women, to buy them over-priced drinks. I can do that elsewhere. Nor do I go to go behind a curtain and be danced on top of, fully clothed, by a near-naked woman. No, I go first and foremost to get off, and that just doesn't happen at expensive "gentlemen's" clubs, at least not without a whole lot more money than I've had to spend. Those clubs are all

about tips, and I've never had the cash for that, either. Plus, if a man tips at an upscale club, a dancer will dance for him and talk to him even if she's repulsed by him — he's a paying customer, after all — and the inherent artificiality of that transaction is more than my suspension of disbelief can handle. And those clubs are all Western Mass has to offer. Thus, unless I'm back in SF visiting, my decades of looking at naked strangers through a little window has all but come to an end.

There was one very negative and upsetting response to “Peep Show” – from Triste herself. Before publishing “Peep,” I mailed her a draft. I wanted her to like it, of course, but I also wanted her to vet it for accuracy and to tell me if I had misrepresented her or our relationship. Months passed, and, despite my nagging emails (or maybe in part because of them), I got no response. In October 2004, two years since I'd last seen Triste and a few months before the essay was published, I visited New York again and she and I met up for a drink. As we parted, she handed me an envelope. I read her letter on the subway back to Brooklyn.

Triste wrote that she found “Peep Show” intellectually and emotionally boring, naïve and shallow. She claimed that she was writing her letter out of love and not anger and resentment, but the opposite seemed true, or both seemed true at once. She faulted me for my silent neediness as a customer, and concluded by informing me that strippers dance for money, not to be loved. But I certainly had never felt that strippers dance to love or be loved, which was why her seeming connection to me as a customer had felt so special. She wrote that she was disgusted by my guilt and shame, and felt that I rationalized a great deal. I was shocked by her response, and in that shock made the

mistake of writing back quickly, defensively, via email, responding line by line to what I felt were her attacks. Although I later wrote her again expressing my regret about my initial response, I didn't hear from her again, and assumed I never would.

But in December 2006, out of the blue, Triste emailed me saying that she was enjoying reading a version of this essay (which I ran serially in my blog, *Masculinity and Its Discontents*) and that she'd even be interested in writing her own take on our relationship, something I had vaguely suggested as a collaborative venture in a previous email. It was the most unexpected and satisfying response I could ever have hoped for.

December 2007 I'm sitting in a café in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, checking my email during a Christmas visit to the city. Over my shoulder, I hear, "Jamie?" and look up to see Triste. I am nearly dumbstruck, but gather myself. We say our hellos, hug, and she tells me that she makes jewelry now and teaches others how to make it, that she has a booth at an outdoor mart across the street. She tells me she's moving to Boston with her boyfriend in January. I tell her I'm engaged, about writing and teaching, about the bar. I tell her I'll come over in a little while and look at her stuff, and she heads out. In a few minutes, I meet up with my fiancée, Anja, and we walk over. She's read "Peep Show," of course. I tell her who she's about to meet. I introduce them, and then, feeling awkward, focus on Triste's jewelry while the two women talk. While in the city, I've been looking for a special present for my mother, who's just started chemo for ovarian cancer, and one of Triste's pieces catches my eye: a ring – a large black, faceted almond-shaped stone wrapped intentionally roughly in copper wire. I walk away, browse other artisans'

booths. From time to time, I look over at Triste and Anja, wonder what they are talking about, what they could be thinking. Look at how different they are. Anja is tall and thin, can be almost severe-looking, looks nothing like Triste. I notice crow's feet around Triste's eyes I remember so well, more wise than wily now, still so lovely. In our odd ways, we've known each other for over a decade. Then I collect myself and join them. Anja and I have to go meet friends for brunch. I buy the ring for my mom. We say our goodbyes. Later, I feel, perhaps wrongly so, that for Triste seeing me was a nostalgic pleasure, one that she was ready to be done with when we parted, while my attachment to her remains intense in ways I still don't quite understand. When I get back to Massachusetts I write her a short, great-to-see-you email. She doesn't respond.

HOMING

This is what we get. Weaker and weaker and sicker and sicker and then gone. Not much humor in that. The mother will soon become nothing. Gone, invisible, as if she never existed. As if it ever even mattered that she existed in the first place. He is driving to her now. The guy on the radio thinks the team made a good trade, callers disagree, how could they have let Denny go? Our Denny, friggin' Denny. This is nighttime, when you can drive and push the scan button and hear AM radio from hundreds of miles away, from the vague Midwest, from the Yukon Territories. He doesn't know who Denny is. The radio guys substitute friggin' or frickin' for fuckin' and the censors look the other way. The mother will have a tumor the size of a lemon removed in five hours. He knows about sports but he doesn't know who Denny is.

The mother needs more power strips. In her new house. Apartment. Her new apartment. Two months ago she sold their house, her house, she sold the house that her son lived in from age six-months to seventeen-years-and-eleven-months, that he visited every year since. The house now belongs to a rich, hipster New York artist who wanted to move upstate, to get away. The artist has hardly been there since he bought it. He flies all over the world to art shows or following his girlfriend to fashion shows. The son knows

because the mother tells him the artist has a Russian-model girlfriend married to a regular Russian guy. The mother knows because she has lunch sometimes with the artist. She says she worries about the artist, that he is naïve. The son thinks whatever. Then the son wants to thank the artist for giving the mother something to worry about besides him. The mother needs things to worry about besides the son. Or. The son needs the mother to have other things to worry about besides the son.

Tonight, the son walked up the block to the house that isn't their house any more – it's just up the block from the new apartment – he walked by, just to look, half wanting to say hello, to meet the artist, to see the house. But the house was dark. No lights were lit. It's a beautiful, narrow nineteenth century townhouse that faces the park. The mother sold it and two months later was diagnosed.

He thinks of women all the time during this, of meeting strange women. Strangers, not strange. Fantasies all the time. During the surgery, they sent him away. It would be many hours. In the café near the hospital, a woman stands at a counter in front of him. She is young, barely a woman at all. She has freckles all over her face like that movie star who's been getting in all the trouble lately, only this young woman has much larger breasts. And is younger. And she looks at him, twice, turns around to look at him. Smiles. Walks out of the café and is gone. The son imagines the two of them in a white room with two open windows. Taking off her shirt, showing him her breasts, telling him it's okay, it's

okay. One ex-girlfriend used to whisper “Do it . . . do it. . . “ when she knew he was almost there.

The mother in intensive care. There is momentary grace - she laughs, at herself, he’s not sure why, then sleeps, wakes, sleeps again. The son watches her sleep. She dreams, mouth moving –talking, maybe chewing, legs and hands twitch. He feels as if he’s intruding, he has never watched her sleep before. He watches her breathe to make sure she’s breathing. She asks for very little and apologizes. Says, “Poor sweetie, shouldn’t have to see your mother like this.” She is too kind, too gentle – she is never this gentle in real life. In real life, the mother is strong and intense, obsessive, demanding, angry, powerful, full. This is empty mother. Walking down the hall to leave the hospital, he catches a glance at a very old woman standing in a visitor’s lounge next to her seated visitor. She is in her hospital gown, standing there, holding on to her IV stand. She is much farther along, she glows with death. She is elegant, miraculously tall, her face long and lined and calm. He thinks of grace as a gift. He imagines his wife someday as this old woman, he imagines taking care of her. But this is likely backwards. When he’s 80, if he’s 80, his wife will be just 65. He will likely never see her as a very old woman. He’s surprised to find this moves him. He revises: when I’m a hundred, she’ll be 85 and then she’ll be old, we’ll be old together.

The next day the mother is stronger, but still so weak. Too weak, weaker than they expected. The mother may be dying right now. The mother and son are not used to this

thought and so they stop thinking it. But it's there in the room. The son thinks turning on the TV would help – the mother is not up to TV. This is what they try to think instead: we go into the hospital, and the doctor hurts us, and is arrogant and aloof, but in the end he – they both imagine a *he* – he makes us well again. Until he doesn't anymore – that's the part they're trying to ignore. Until they don't anymore. The mother talks, this day, late October, suddenly, in terms of a few years, of maybe five good years, tops, of "I won't be a little old lady but that's okay." And he thinks but doesn't say that she's looking awfully little and old now, at just 68, there, oddly gentle, weak, in pain, in bed. An 80-year-old woman in the other bed went home in two days. They are going on day four, and a second neighbor is packing her bags. This can't be good. It means they did a lot inside her, moved a lot of stuff around. Nurses and orderlies come in and shift the mother, hoist her.

He is too numb to the mother's pain. He wants to feel it tougher. Instead, he looks at the nurses. The mother is dying and he can't feel it enough. If he stops taking his meds he will feel it, feel her, the loss of her, much more acutely, but he will also be angry and impatient with her and so much less useful to the mother. He doesn't want to be angry with her ever again. This is a little kid thought, a stupid useless thought. He will be mad at her again and she will be mad at him and they will argue and he will feel terrible and they will make up. Why should this change that, how could it? Today she said, *sweetie*, she said, and she started to cry, *sweetie, please don't be mad at me if I can't go through this again, if I can't have another operation*. Fucking-surgical-fucking-procedure is what she might have said, mocking the jargon, if she were healthy, if she were strong. *Living is*

so important, she went on, *but I don't think I can go through with this again*. And the son said, *no no, It'll be okay Mom*, and laughed kindly, *I won't be mad at you, Mom*. But he knows he would, she knows it too. He might not show it, but he will later rage at her for not raging against it the stupid dying of the stupid fucking light. For not fighting for every last wretched breath.

It's late October and he sits outside at a café in this his home town, the café where he saw the freckled girl-woman with the breasts, during the surgery, It is 75-degrees outside. In upstate New York. In late October. On the phone, his father says it's beautiful out. The son finds it apocalyptic. It *is* beautiful out. It is not supposed to be beautiful out. He's sitting outside at a café, coatless, in late October, in upstate New York. A woman sitting at the table next to him says, in a thick Italian accent, that doctors are scary people, hospitals are scary places. Her companion, an American, says, nasally, *American* doctors are scary people, *American* hospitals are scary places.

He sits at the mother's old kitchen table in the strange new apartment, answers some email, makes a five minute attempt at writing, then jerks off to porn on his laptop. His mother's kitchen table, an 18th century tavern table. She never would poly it, only wax it. One of his chores for a few years. He spent his childhood scared shitless of putting a glass down without a coaster, of leaving a mark, a circle, on that marked up, gouged, table, that ancient table. It is a beautiful table. He will poly it – his children will not live in fear. He laughs out loud, thinks, LOL, LOL, and laughs some more. The mother would

like that, will like that when he tells her – Mom, my children will not live in fear, I will poly the goddamn kitchen table! He will inherit all her objects – he is the only one. He has no children.

In the mother's new apartment, the TV is just outside the kitchen, where the table now sits. When the son was growing up, the TV was in the kitchen. The living room was for guests and holidays. Not a rule, just the way things happened. They would sit on kitchen chairs at the kitchen table with their beverages sweating onto cork coasters and watch *Welcome Back, Kotter* and *Upstairs Downstairs*. He would slouch and put his feet up on the kitchen counter, she would let him get away with that much.

The day after the mother told him there would be exploratory surgery, there would be cancer, almost surely, there would be Stage 3. And he went home and looked up Stage 3. A bad stage. Only one worse. Diminishing returns. The day after that, the son met with that student of his to talk about her writing which does show promise. She was talking about something he can't remember now, and she said, *I mean not **bad** bad luck. I mean, it's not like your mom getting cancer bad luck, which is horrible and maybe isn't really about luck, but you know what I mean?* And he thought, yes, I do, I know exactly what you mean. And he thought, How did she know? But of course she didn't know, she just got lucky.

The mother is still weak. Surgery was on Wednesday. It's Monday. They said she'd go home on Friday or Saturday. She is too weak. The mother is on her third neighbor, this one with kidney stones. Others have come and gone. This is too slow, they both know it. She is too weak. Chemo will be too hard. Two of the neighbors were older and with cancers, but they went home fast. They want the mother out, the administrators do, maybe tomorrow, but she is weak, can only walk halfway down the hall and back. One of the administrators talks to the son in the hall, suggests his mother isn't trying hard enough. He wants to lift the administrator up against the wall, to shake the administrator and scream, This is not a woman who doesn't try hard enough! But he just nods, and then even wonders if it might actually be true even though it's the last thing he would think of the mother. She tries, has always tried. They tell him her progress is still within "normal," but he can feel them worrying, the administrators, the doctor when he appears that one time. She's getting a CAT scan, he pictures a cat in a lab coat, sniffing her up and down, purring, kneading her chest. He is glad he hasn't lost his sense of humor. She has to drink iodine so the machine that's not a cat can scan her.

She's so full of liquids from the IV. Her arms and hands are unrecognizable, like the mother in a fat suit, puffy. Every day he wants to show up and see them smaller, her arms and legs, hands and feet. They tell her it could take months. They tell her the chemo will help with this. By nearly poisoning her to death, he thinks. His mother, the real one, not this ballooned one, has thin, elegant hands that he never thought of as elegant before - these are borrowed, gag hands. Elegant is a word people have always used to describe his mother, it always makes her laugh, as if she doesn't get it. Look at me. I look like my

sister Joy, she says, My hands are like Joy's, she says, and starts to cry. Her sister Joy is obese and homebound in Florida, a hopeless, depressing human being. This is cruel, it's also true. Once a month he will call Joy and talk to her about television – she likes *Law and Order* so he watches it from time to time so they will have that to share.

He is leaving the mother today, driving the two hours back across the mountains, he has to teach the next morning. Doctors don't return her calls, or his. Then they do, tell her she won't be going home right away. She will move on to residential rehab, in a nearby building. He will be back at week's end, visiting her in rehab, running errands in preparation for her return. Filling her apartment with food, emptying it of the food he bought while she was in the hospital: 7 Bananas, 7 Anjou pears, cottage cheese, one-percent milk. It all has to be very fresh. A week of fruit and dairy.

He will drive home with seven week-old bananas and seven week-old pears and cottage cheese. He will pour the milk down the drain. He won't eat most of the fruit before it goes bad. He wonders how much gas he'll burn driving three pounds of old fruit 140 miles.

He drives late at night. On the dark highway, he talks on the phone to a friend far away, tells him details. They move on to other topics. The death of the sultry singer, the one who'd become a disco icon after been blacklisted in the '50s. Flu shots, war. The friend

mentions that everything our driver brings up is about sickness or death. So he changes the subject, but not for long. Drowning polar bears, his aging dog. They laugh and say good night. No one on the radio is talking about Denny any more.

Back where he lives now, between drives to visit the mother, he runs into a woman he knows in the café:

You look like you've been being chased, she tells him.

I have, he replied.

By whom? she asks, grammatically.

Myself.

Sounds rough.

Oh, it's not so bad really, so long as-- . . . and, as he finishes the sentence with *-I don't catch myself*, she finishes it too, but with *you catch yourself*.

They both laugh, our man and the woman in the café, at their opposing imagined ideal self-chase outcomes. The woman imagines that the son catching himself would lead to some sort of reconciliation, reunion of chasing self and running-away self, if she had to explain, that's what she would've said. She asks why he keeps running.

Because if I catch myself, I'm gonna kick my ass, he says, and they both laugh again.

The son buys a little digital recorder to record the mother. He records their conversations without telling her. About his mother's deceitful friends, about an artist whose show she'd wanted to see but will miss, about the son's father, the mother's ex-husband who has been visiting. The only person besides the son she lets help her. Poor Mark, she says, he worries so. The mother was never this kind before. He was always "your father" with that certain tone. The son worries so. He wants to record her breathing, but can't think of how. Even if he could get that close, the instrument isn't sensitive enough. He wants to record her breathing because he remembers a moment long ago when he was very unhappy, almost unbearably so, and what he found to grab on to was that his mother and father were out there, somewhere, breathing. And now that won't always be the case. It never was going to be always the case, but he didn't think about that back then.

The son drives away on the highway, late at night. He zones out. Sometimes he thinks zone out is the opposite of hone in, sometimes he thinks he's really honing in by zoning out. It's pleasant on the highway. It is the definition of pleasant: bland, gentle enjoyment. He listens to classic rock, to hip hop, to a string quartet, but mostly he listens to mostly stupid people calling up arrogant hosts to talk about politics and sports. Sometimes he wonders how he manages to drive places because he doesn't remember driving anywhere. He listens to the public radio woman interviewing a film director who is really not too pompous. The drive is becoming automatic. These two hours back and forth to and from death, to and from life.

The son drives toward death, gets fairly close, then drives away, zones out. He visits the mother in rehab, still not ready to come home. He gathers more old fruit, drives back, hones in. Homes in. Drives away, drives back. The mother is home now. She needs help, will continue to need help. He braces for it. For her needing things that will embarrass them both. Wiping, cleaning, dressing. For things she won't ask friends for. She will have an aide, on and off. But the mother doesn't have any close friends, or, rather, she's come to distrust, almost hate them all, for crazy complicated reasons. She doesn't trust anyone except the son. For now, the things she asks are not embarrassing. He buys more bananas and pears, and cereal. Protein drinks. A TV Guide. He picks up her mail at the post office. She is starting to eat more. He buys those metal safety bars for the bathtub, but she won't let him install them. There's a guy for that, the mother tells him. The building has a guy.

Next visit, the mother is strong enough to get annoyed at him for buying her the wrong shape Tylenol PM capsules, strong enough to start making her monthly lists. This is cheering, and not. The son watches her at her kitchen table, with her white-out, post-its, and tape, glasses on, glasses off, pen in hand, pen down. He thinks: she is visibly smaller. Or rather she is visibly small, finally. She has always been small, calls herself five-two but is lying. People always think her taller, her features sharp, her language strong, elegant. Now, she is inarguably tiny.

On the way home, each time, always at night, he stops at both highway stops, wanting something to happen, something involving a stranger, usually involving sex. He wants to go home with the cherubic young woman at the Dunkies. To have sex with her and drink leftover coffee and eat Munchkins in bed. He wants to go home with the old lady sweeping up over by the Pretzel Haus booth. These old people in their Pretzel Haus uniforms. They're certainly more upbeat than the blinged-out high school girl at the Mickie Ds counter. He has a three piece chicken strip meal with both buffalo and honey mustard. He thanks the bling girl, she mumbles a hateful welcome. Then he has a pretzel, lets the big salt burn into his tongue. He wants to sit in the Pretzel Haus woman's non-pretzel house and watch QVC all night, to disappear into TV shopping, an old lady's world. Maybe he'll even dial the number, buy her something. A blouse-and-pants set. A pink tourmaline brooch. By way of thanks. The house the old woman lives in, empty since her husband passed – that's her word, passed – will smell of Pledge and mothballs and old person, but it won't be bad, it will comfort, somehow.

The son wants to disappear for just a little while. To stop running. To be elliptical—no, to be inside an ellipses, between the second and third dot. To disappear for part of a sentence and return. Not forever, no fourth dot end-stop, just long enough to let himself catch himself.

He drives and remembers other times at that kitchen table. Laughing fits. Sometimes both of them, but usually just the mother would have laughing fits that went on and on. About

something he said? Maybe. He pictures her doing something, accidentally throwing a pea up in the air with her fork. No. Not about food. Doesn't matter. She would laugh until she cried, and then kind of stop, and try to speak, and then start up again. Like that time when he was a fidgeting teen, pacing, jumping to touch the ceiling because he could, while the mother worked on her lists at the kitchen table, and he hit the on button, started the drier going for some reason, to push a button, to hear it go, to annoy the mother? Then the loud thumps like a drier full of sneakers. The son reached down and opened the door and the calico stumbled out, dizzy, and staggered some before scampering off. And they laughed and laughed and laughed.

ITCH ITCH ITCH

“Scribble scribble scribble.” At the end of emails, the occasional letter, phone conversations. Or, rather, *Scribble! Scribble!! Scribble!!!* Sheila Barbara Strongin Berger’s mantra for her only son. Part tongue in cheek, part earnest, part nagging, part self-mocking (“Here I am, good old Mom telling you to write, again, sweetie, to keep writing.”) Started maybe ten years ago, when writing really, one last time, this time I meant it, became the thing I Wanted To Do, again. Like every big decision I’d made, as always, she panicked, worried, then quickly came around to the idea and began planning how we would accomplish my goal. Well, everyone knows the only way to write is to write and write and write, which I had never steadily, regularly done, not as a poet, not as a writer-performance artist, not as a fiction writer. Thus: Scribble scribble scribble.

Fall of 2007 she was diagnosed. Then surgery, then chemo, then good prognosis. Then six months of waiting, even some celebration, at my wedding, then another test. Still a good prognosis, but a little cancer left. More chemo, starting right away, September. She was weak all fall, and sick, much more so than the first round. November, she finished chemo, but stayed weak. Two weeks later, again the dreaded test. Our Thanksgiving plan

had been for me to drive to Albany and pick her up and bring her out to our new house, her first visit, for what has always been our favorite holiday. The Friday before, she called and gave me the news. I don't remember how she put it, but it was very simply, her voice sounding more worried about my reaction than anything, an odd combination of incredible generosity and equal megalomania, as I look back on it now. Or just common sense. How would I ever live without her?

Four weeks to four months, that's what they gave her. I got off the phone, packed a bag, and drove to Albany, stayed with her for two nights. Came back to teach and then, on her insistence, went ahead with Thanksgiving with my wife Anja and her parents and our friend Janel, and our dogs and cats. My favorite holiday. All that food, no other bullshit.

The next day, Black Friday, I wrap the wishbone in a piece of paper towel and take it home to Albany. My ferocious, unsentimental mom nearly cries at the gesture. In the kitchen, we pull at it, or, well, tiny Sheila holds on and I pull, my wish: that she would win this little contest. I bend the bone just so with my fingernail to make it break and it does and she smiles and says, with tiny astonishment, "I won!"

My mother has always been short, small, but no one ever thinks of her as 5' 2" on a tall day. Because she has a largeness, her long, high-cheekboned face, her big personality. Now she is is just plain tiny everywhere but the belly, swelled with fluid around the tumor, as if she is seven months pregnant with cancer. The cancer has already won. It is gloating. She just lies, and thinks, and sleeps, and wakes, and sometimes still

worries over items on her lists, but not so much now, between her inherent weakness and the xanax and now the morphine. Did I have lunch? Does her car need new tires before we give it to Anja? Her list gets shorter every day – mine start to grow and grow.

I sit by her bed. Watching her sleep gives some solace. She wakes up, smiles weakly, says, "I just remembered that I love poetry," and closes her eyes again

I am Sheila's magnum opus. Unfinished. I haven't finished my homework, written my Big First Book. No one told me there was a deadline. And now it's too fucking late. Sheila Berger's existence will not accept any more papers at this date. I FAIL. I fail her. I fail me. She fails? I'm 44, I've had plenty of time, been given extension after extension. But I've dabbled and dabbled and dabbled. In acting and directing and poetry and performance art and voiceover and comedy and journalism and fiction and nonfiction and now bar-owning. Dabble dabble dabble.

I leave the apartment to go shopping. "Life goes on." Clichés exist for a reason. Out in the world, "Sheila," everywhere. On a sign, for "Sheila's Wines and Liquors" I'd never noticed before. On the radio: "Sheila was going to be the tallest person in the house." People think of her as much taller, and elegant. She always laughed at being called elegant.

When I first get to Albany, I bumble about, trying to please her. I talk too much, am “oversolicitous,” a word she would use. “Stop trying so hard,” she says. “Stop talking,” she says. “I’m too tired,” she says. I am wearing her out just being there, wearing her out bringing her her juice to drink. I begin to understand this is a different kind of tired.

One night, I visit my father for a few hours, just outside of town. While I’m gone, Sheila gets up to go to the bathroom, flips a light switch, sees a spark, then nothing, something has blown in the shoddy wiring of the recent, shoddy refurb, the most recent in a series of barely hidden problems with the “upscale” building. She calls, asks me if there’s anything I did that might’ve made it happen. She tells me it’s fine – it is not fine. She’s furious, with the landlord, the contractor, the building manager, my father for making me leave, me for leaving. A bit of the old demon strength, she holds it in on the phone, barely. Tells me to enjoy my visit with my father, come home after the game on TV is over, not to worry about it, enough lights are still working. I worry about it at my father’s for a few more minutes, then head back. When I get there, she sits up in bed, crosslegged, starts talking, slowly, quietly, then faster and faster, but with no strength for volume. A torrent of welled-up rage at all of the above, at my father for existing, at me for suggesting that she might want some visitors. *How could you have suggested those people to me what would I say to them what were you thinking I can’t stand it I can’t stand those people why would I want to see them don’t you even know me you **do** know me though so how so what were you* This is her last rant, last burst, barely above a whisper. She sits and rocks as she speaks, stops looking at me, just looks straight ahead, in a trance. *Fucking Mark Berger your goddamn father just wants to see me because he*

wants to cry . . . maudlin bullshit . . . wants to feel sorry for himself. I sit with it. Go Sheila go. I don't want her to stop but she is running out of gas. She finally stops, starts to cry. Tells me to leave her alone. Calls me back in a minute later. Apologizes, but still doesn't understand *how I could think she'd want to*. . . . I tell her I'm sorry, I won't suggest any visitors again. I tell her I'm sorry I don't understand, but I don't understand. Especially about the friends. I'd want to see every dear face. Sheila's deepest fury is that I don't know the inside of her mind as she does, that not enough of me *is* her, not enough her is me. She reaches to pull me in for a kiss, holds me for three four five seconds, then says she's sorry again, tells me to go away again. I look in maybe five minutes later and she's dead asleep.

Now she's in bed all the time, except to go to the bathroom, which she still gets up and does on her own, and occasionally to the kitchen, to try to eat a few crackers, some ginger ale, maybe a piece of a slice of canned pear. She doesn't like me to linger, just to be nearby, on call in the living room.

It's gotten completely dark in the past hour. I sit down in my chair by her bed, in the dark. She wants to tell me about crackers. *Those crackers, the ones you like. The salty-sweet round ones, you know. Up in the cupboard above the sink. But if you open them sweetie, please tie them up in a baggie with a twisty.* (long pause, as she gathers her strength, something important is coming) ***It would not improve the end of my life to see***

a mouse. Okay mom. I laugh. *I'm not joking.* Okay Mom. *I know it's funny sweetie, but do it, okay?*

Jamie? Jamie! Coming, Mom. *What were you just doing out there? Making a drink?* No, Mom, but I was thinking about it, want one? (a joke – I still try) She: hint of a smile and a look. *What was all that noise?* Just doing some dishes, going through the mail, tossing old magazines, like you asked. But I kept all the clippings, in case. *Clippings? it's too late for clippings. Ha!* (this, and the Mouse Directive, momentary bursts of energy – I've come to savor these instants of not-dying Sheila) – *There's a title for you: "Too Late for Clippings," but no one would know what you're talking about.* She's out of breath from all the talking. *Okay, go away, I'm sorry I bothered you.* No bother. *Go have a drink, sweetie. Have some dinner.* Okay.

And then she lies there, facing the windows in the late afternoon graying, on her right side because that's the only comfortable way for her to lie because of the fluid that gathers in her belly, looking out the window, drifting in and out of sleep, thinking of crackers and mice and clippings and lists and chores. Lists only in her head now. Not like before, the nightly ritual, papers sprawled out around her on the kitchen table, the tape, the post-its. So much of her daily life for decades, adding things to and scratching off those gorgeous chaotic, sculptural documents, layers upon layers. The anxiety of how they grew, of what needed to be done, the joy of scratching things off. The end of that joy. I do the scratching-off now. She is on my list.

I watch TV in the living room, volume very very very low. Young women are competing to be Paris Hilton's best friend. I am watching young women compete to be Paris Hilton's best friend. Sheila Berger is dying while I watch young women on TV compete to be Paris Hilton's best friend. A girl sits in a hot tub telling the camera, telling Paris, quaver in her voice, nearly crying she wants this soooo bad, "I'm not here to be a rock star, I'm not here to get anything, I'm just here to be your friend." Sheila Berger is leaving this world without knowing who wins.

Anja visits. At first, I write the words "my wife." We are closer than that, of course, but in the scope of things, here – that vaguest of word, "things" – she is "my wife," a distant thing from a far place from where I am now. Vagueness on vagueness on vagueness. She and Sheila sit in the dark together. Always thin, nearly skinny Anja looks downright hearty next to my mom. It's almost unbearably good to have her here, because I know she has to go back to work tomorrow. We stay up late, tiptoe, and silently scream at the horribly redone supercreaky floors.

I burn toast in the decades-old toaster oven. Throw it in the sink, put in new pieces. She smells it, calls me. Smells affecting her more and more. *How could you, you know I—I'm sorry I'm sorry you didn't mean it. But dammit—*. Sorry, Mom, Sorry. And then I realize I'm burning the next batch as we speak and run out of the room. Toast on fire this time. A. and I, running around, opening windows (in December), fanning with towels, praying the smoke alarm doesn't go off, as Sheila goes on talking. *Yes yes you've got a lot on*

*your mind, of course, and it's just burnt toast, not much in the grand scheme of things – no – no not much at all, but how could you? You **know** that toaster oven.*

Sheila wants to *talk* to me about something, but tells me to have some breakfast first. Will this be The Big Talk? I am so not ready for The Big Talk. *Sweetie, when I'm gone . . . when I die . . . you like to eat, and you might gain some weight.* This has always been an issue between us. Always checking me, sometimes even patting my stomach, giving me one or another version of: *You're getting a belly. Don't get a belly, sweetie, don't be one of those thin men with a belly.* I've always had a belly. I've never gained or lost more than 15 pounds. I am healthy. She continues, *When I die, you go ahead and eat if it makes you feel better. You'll gain some weight but that's okay. You'll get back to normal in time. Do what makes you feel better, don't worry about it. . . .* Okay, Mom. I will. I feel I might cry. I decide not to. This is an odd gift, an oddly wonderful gift. This is grace, letting go. This is what grace is like. She sends me away. I sit on the living room couch and really cry for the first time since I got the news.

Two giants take my mom to hospice today. Humongous ambulance men. The smaller one is about 6'3" 300lbs. The huge one lifts my mom out of bed. Her not-5'2" is now well under five feet. Her 135-some pounds that she always wanted to lose five of now down to what must be 85, tops. "Just pretend we're dancing, sweetheart" the larger large man says, merrily, as he hoists tiny rag-doll Sheila, incredible, into a wheelchair. Sheila Berger is infirm, she is dying, fast, but she is not nearly as old as she's come to look in

the past month, flesh hanging off her bones, face sunken, more each day, more of a skull than a head, her teeth huge in her smile, when I can get her to smile, or even laugh (triumph, that, but days ago now). It's beyond old. It's deathly. The two giants don't realize they're taking her in for good and all, they just know we're going to the hospital. They ask her about her in ways that someone asks when someone is going to the hospital for the normal reason, to get well. The way you talk to someone who's going to be coming back home again.

I have always trusted doctors, even liked going to them, because they tell me what's wrong and eventually fix it. Until they can't. This is what we learn, now, Sheila and I. Until they can't. Sheila has always driven doctors up the wall. There's a public service announcement ad on tv lately encouraging people to ask their doctor questions. It shows some guy asking a million questions to the phone store clerk, his car mechanic, a waiter, but then they show him in the doctor's office, and Doc says, "Any questions?" and the guys says, nothing, shakes his head, nope, uh-uh, I'm good. That ad was *not* made for Sheila Berger. She researched and printed out articles and clipped and copied and brought her lists into their offices and *got her questions answered*. Not mental lists, mind you – lists on paper, and charts, and clipped articles. She'd sit down in their offices, unpack her bag and begin the interrogation. (How do I know this? Why can I picture it so perfectly? From doctor's visits when I was a kid, I guess.) She made doctors miss tee-times. Male doctors especially hated it. But a month from now, when I call the woman who was her long-time GP for the last time to tell her Sheila is gone, she cries. That's how it is with

Sheila. She's a great pain in the ass, but great means "big" and also "wonderful." A wonderful pain from which I will soon have horrible relief.

Three days after her 73rd birthday, here we are at The Inn. No more research to be done, no challenges or even choices to be made. No more questions to be asked/answered except for a few about time and pain. The Inn, the hospice wing. The place to die. Everyone gets a single room at the Inn. People are dying to get in but then they die to get out. *Ba-dum bum, tshhhh*. I'll be here all week. Try the veal. Tip your waitress. Blue show at eleven. *Good*, she says, *I don't like the number 72*. You don't like twos, it's true. *You and your nines*. Me and my nines, her and her threes. When my father and I went to the track once or twice a summer, she'd always give me three dollars to bet on three in the third. At least once, it won her a few dollars.

Today, the intake nurse came and talked to us. My mom told her she wished she lived in Washington (state) so she could pull her own plug, that she hated this waiting to die, that she didn't want to watch herself waste away. The woman said that at hospice they don't think of it as waiting for death but as "another phase of life." My mom looked the poor woman in the eye and said, "Well I don't see it that way." It was priceless. You go, Sheila! Still tough as nails.

Done versus Finished. I remember a Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner conversation with Walter about “done” versus “finished,” Walter, my mother’s mentor and friend, her former professor, former chairman of the English department they were both in for thirty-some years, disgusted with his students for not knowing the difference. Walter, tall and elegant, Canadian in that old-fashioned British-y way, a tennis great, a decorated WWII vet who came back and went to Harvard for his Phd, Walter Knotts. “How, how can they be so daft?” He actually said things like that, about his students, about issues like “done” versus “finished.” To this day, with my two-going-on-three degrees in English, I can never remember the difference. Sheila is done? Is finished? When food is cooked it’s done, when we’ve eaten it all, it’s finished. Is that it? Is she done, ready to come out of the oven of this life, ready for carving? Or finished, nothing left but crumbs.

Sheila Barbara Strongin Berger lies in her hospice room becoming a skeleton and I think I am fucking hungry I really want to go eat some fucking KFC I really want to go flirt with that bartender girl (she's 24, Rachel, a girl compared to me) at the Thai restaurant, I really want to go play online poker. I want to consume, I want action action action! I crave action, except when I crave sedation. Sedation is easier to come by, via drinking, via Mom’s xanax. And so I go the bar of the Thai place (which happens to be right next to a KFC) where the Rachel girl works and I drink and I chat with her and read my book I’m reading. Action *and* sedation. She tells me about school, about her punk rock boyfriend. I tell her about my mom. I read that amazing page I love and I read it again, and again, and sip whiskey, and flirt, and watch her hands and arms make drinks, watch more of her as she walks away, and read it again, and once more, and the world softens a

bit and I am grateful and thankful for reading it and sad for Mom who doesn't even have the energy to listen to me read it to her, and then for myself for not ever taking the time it would take to even conceive of writing such a page, such an important page, a page that makes several people think about an important issue in a new way, makes others think about it for the first time, makes them think about it and themselves and laugh and maybe later take action on the issue. And then I repeat the process once again: read, sip, watch. And I write a note about it in a small black notebook. Scribble.

Back in the apartment, chomping down my Three Piece Original Recipe. Momentary bliss. *Extremely* hard right now to see the point in healthy living when someone who measured her portions to the ounce, exercised exactly as much as the books told her, did her yoga, drank her green tea . . . you get the idea, is where she is right now four weeks to four months, at 73. And NO MORE TIPTOEING. I stomp the fucking creaky fucking floors. I turn the TV up. I sleep in my mother's bed. On the sheets she's been sleeping on. They don't smell like anything. Nothing left of her to smell, no sweat, no shit or piss, nothing. The idea of sleeping on this bed feels kind of creepy, but what a great mattress! I get good and sedated, actually sleep six hours straight.

Through this all, friends on the other end of the phone, enlightened men, say to me, "Be strong." BE fucking STRONG. How ridiculously macho and useless a thing to say. What the fuck is in that for me. Women do not tell me to be strong. Be weak. Feel

EVERYTHING. That's my fucking motto. Not that I live up to it or anything, but it's good to have a motto. Carpe Mortus.

Five days before my mother is to die, seventeen days after they gave her those four weeks to four months, I sit in the huge leather lounge-chair in the fluorescent dayroom. Two fat teen cousins watch TV. Visiting a parent or grandparent, I wonder. One is on the phone, she is whiny-sarcastic: *You know? Why I don't? find that funny?* she asks.

I play Wurdle, a Boggle-ish word-finding game, on my iphone, at 3am, at her bedside. I love my iphone. Three minutes, ready . . . go! Dead, Deadly, Deathly, ade, deed, dad, done, donut, enod (well, I tried), node, noded, nodes. No "mom" this screen but she does seem to show up a lot lately.

I sit, I pace, I watch TV in the day room in the middle of the night. I leave the hospital, I go to the seedy old-man dive bar across the street. Behind the bar is one very old man, the is game on the TV. I am the customer. One too many, by the look on his face. I have a shot and a beer and go home. I look at porn, I play poker online. I watch TV. All at once. It starts to get light out, so I go to sleep. They have been instructed to call me if anything happens.

Daytime. I visit my father for lunch. He actually asks “How is she?” I look at him. In his study, I notice he’s bought a blood-pressure machine.

That time she said she wished I was gay. Or did it ever even happen? I’ll have to ask her. I know it happened, but in what context. A horrible rape in the news? There’s a sentence very nearly obsolete: “I’ll have to ask her.”

At the end of freshman year, when she screamed and screamed at me on the phone for looking for an apartment and a summer job before finals were over. *Fucking this fucking that, you’re a fuckup!* The Sheila rage. (The apology later. The worry always) She, imagining a life of distractions, of unfinished projects, flawed, unrealized, undone, distractions stopping scribbles from being more than just scribbles, sketches, artifacts of unrealized potential. I remember screaming back at her until I cried, she was being so unfair, but also spot-on: it’s the life I’ve more or less led.

Potential, a word my math and science teachers used a lot once the distracted (ie GIRLS) years began, *Jamie has such potential*. I’m at the age now where “potential” becomes “could-have-been.” Could have been a writer, an actor, a person of note, someone who makes strangers laugh but also think hard about important things. Things, there you are again. Things things things. “No ideas but in things.” That too first heard from her, from Sheila, from Mom. Wallace Stevens? Or WCW? Again, potential. He could’ve been a

poet, now he doesn't even remember where "no ideas but in things" comes from. "So much depends/ upon/ a red wheel/ barrow/ glazed with rain/ water / beside the white/ chickens." When I worked at New Directions, right after college, we published Williams' *Collected Poems* in two thick, heavy volumes with smooth, fine paper. I came up with my one letter revision of that poem. Add an "s" to "beside" and it's a BIG poem. Myriad other things depend on that wheelbarrow besides the chickens. One could go on all day about the things (things!) that depend on that wheelbarrow. No one in the office, no one ever anywhere has found my edit terribly clever or amusing but me. I still like it a lot. In Mom's "Jamie" file, I find the original note I sent her with my revised version of WCW on it. On yellow New Directions memo paper, typed from my IBM selectric, script font! Another unfinished project: I've long planned to turn that little perfect poem into a pages-long catalogue of dependants on that barrow.

Earlier this year, when she was strong, the month of our wedding and a few weeks after, before the final chemo started, strong enough to worry worry worry, I screamed and screamed and screamed at her on the phone. Walking out of the café, down the street, screaming. About money. About her wanting to give me money to help us buy the house, but worrying about my having a job, money, career, retirement savings, her anxiety growing and growing, she'd call me almost every day, visions of foreclosure dancing in her head. Until, cancer-shmancer, I just lost it. *Don't you ever fucking talk to me about money again! Leave me the fuck alone! Keep your goddamn money!* Later she told me that afterward she was afraid I'd never speak to her again. Sheila Berger, afraid of me. Imagine that.

Day two in hospice. She is finally getting comfort, aka more morphine. Hospice is all about comfort. Comfort is all about morphine. A place to go to be given it, to give in. In just the right amounts. We say we don't euthanize, but that's exactly what we do, if subtly. The head nurse, Donna Reed, of all things (thing! things!), is very nice, and good. A bit too hospice spiritual-self-help-y peppy ("What do YOU need?") but good. She cares. For the first time in weeks my mom sleeps for hours at a time, and peacefully. It's just about all she does. When she wakes, one time, I gently rub at the furrow lines between her brow. I am getting used to touching her more. Holding her hand, petting her. I will do these things. She will let me. Sheila Berger is teaching me how to die. She is an excellent teacher, as always.

Sitting on the toilet in the little bathroom next to the kitchen. Outside someone sits down at the dayroom piano and begins to play a player-piano-sounding version of "We Three Kings of Orient Are." It is December after all. Plinky plink plink. A rush of memory comes: Christmastime, years ago. Up our block were two houses shared by six of my mom's Consciousness Raising group friends, her radical lesbian friends, so many of the people she doesn't want to see now. Judy wears a cowl-neck-sweater. Joan plays the piano while Francine directs a small choir of us in rousing "We Three *Queens* of Orient Are" and other de-gendered holiday hits. The dayroom piano plinks on.

Her neck is all spine and two ropey hints of muscle. Skeletal. Her body is eating her to stay alive but all the while the cancer belly grows and grows. The cancer still gloating. We let it gloat. We don't worry about it any more. Just about comfort. To get mad at it now is just to lose again.

Back at the apartment, half-drunk and rageful and full of bad Chinese food. And needing sleep and wanting action action action. I google "strip club" and "Albany." In all my life of strippers and porn and peeps, I've never been to a club in my home town. A few minutes later, I'm down in a seedy edge of wrong-side-of-the-tracks Albany I never even knew existed. Down by the river. "Ciro's Place." The club has a parking lot with a barbed wire fence around it. Inside the club is very small, dark, not terribly filthy, but somewhat rundown. The dancers are black. As is the bouncer. And the bartender. A Bud is just \$4.00, a bargain for a strip joint. It's an empty weeknight, after midnight, just me, the bouncer, the dancers, the bartender. A dancer comes up. We have the usual chat, what am I doing here, what is she doing here, do I want a lap dance, I'll think about it. She is half drunk and pouty. I buy her a drink. She rubs against me. Hand on my thigh. Tells me about her daughter, about moving up from Philly. Do I want a dance yet? Maybe soon. How 'bout now? Okay, sure. I really really don't want a lapdance, but her daughter really wants me to get a lapdance – that is, on top of all my usual guilt, and racial guilt, I now have her daughter to pay off. I pay her \$15 for the dance. She rubs around on me. And I'm not even attracted to her, she's so obviously bored. I pay for a second dance. I manage to beg off on a third and get out the door. Action, yippee.

In the living room, I watch TV and pretend that I can write while I'm watching TV because I'm allowed to do whatever I want right now. Because my mother is fucking dying that's why. You got a problem with that? I can touch-type because my mother made me learn how between senior year of high school and college – so YES I CAN write and watch TV. I'm doing it right now, to NBA highlights, no less! So there. As I sit here, post Ciro's, I wonder what are your secrets, Mom, where are they? You must've written something down, you wrote everything down. And if I find something? Or if I find something in my head that I really really want to ask you, something I want to know, some advice I need you to give, I can't because YOU CAN HARDLY TALK ANYMORE. And in a day, maybe two, you won't be able to talk at all. And a day or so after that I stay up late. Late late. 5am late. I will be in no shape tomorrow. I don't need to be in shape. This is a fucking vacation. A vacation of grief. Give me my fucking vacation.

Donna Reed tells us she needs to perform a procedure to see if my mother is retaining urine, something like an ultrasound, to peer through cancer belly and look at her bladder, to insert something in her to drain fluid, maybe. My mother breathes, *Is this . . . for longevity . . . or for comfort?* Comfort, Donna replies. Sheila nods, this is the answer she wants. If we'd met under more pleasant circumstances, I'd fire "It's a Wonderful Life" lines at Nurse Reed. "Mary, dontcha know me?" A Christmas movie, they'll probably

start showing it any day now. Sheila Barbara Strongin Berger is ready for her life to end. Time's up. Pencils down.

In the day room. Lights are off, late afternoon again, dusky. Quiet but for hum of hospital. I walk down the hall. They have drained the fluid, something they did periodically all fall that offered her some relief. My mother sits upright, her electric bed has seated her upright. After being scanned, drained, and sleeping all day, she can barely speak: *I've been sleeping so much. Usually after they drain me I'm so much stronger. Don't know why I'm sleeping so-- . . .* The pause is long. She takes a deep breath, a big effort. *I'm dying.*

Going . . . going . . . We go to doctors, to hospitals, expecting to be made well, no matter what we know. We expect. To go on. To keep scribbling, etc. Stopping makes no sense at all.

I sit in the day room, three AM, lights out, visitors gone except for the one family on death watch all packed into the room down the hall. I've been at the old-man bar plus half a xanax, but I can't go back to the apartment, can't bear to leave here, to sleep. So I play poker on the screen with people awake, people in Sweden and Vegas. Notoriously, bizarrely aggressive, the Nordic players. I bet and I raise and I fold and I . . . go look in on her. I turn out the bedside lamp. Bedside, lovely word. Her lungs pump air, in out in

out, in and out. The fucking horror. MY MOTHER DOESN'T DIE. All my life I've had nightmares of my father dying. Never her. She is supposed to be driving me up a wall forever. That's the way it's supposed to go, dammit. My heart won't stop pounding and I have no more drugs for it right here and ... fuck. Where's MY morphine? Does everyone visiting The Inn think this at some point? They must.

I am the only visitor. This is how she wants it. How she's wanted it since she got the word. No one but me. They will not will not will NOT see her like this. All those so-called friends, all those people who've betrayed her in one way or another. They will not remember her this way. This is part of her thinking. See Mom, I do know you. I do. I just hoped there was someone, anyone besides me and Anja you could let in, we could let in. But I am the gatekeeper, I keep that fucking gate. But no one dares disobey the rules. They don't come. They sit at home and wait for word. At the memorial they will talk to me about it, some of them, their anger a burden, impeding their sadness, their mourning, and we will all feel better, at the angriest memorial ever.

My mother is about to die, but I will keep on living. A simple, declarative, complex sentence. Declarative? Complex or compound? Do I even know what that means? It is a sentence making a declaration, but is that what a declarative sentence is? Did she ever teach me this? I don't think finished/done meant much to her, but yes, I know she taught me compound and complex sentences. Does anyone even use those terms anymore? Sorry Mom, sorry Walter. Words don't always mean what they mean. This I declare. This

is how it goes. It goes this way. Suddenly I'm writing like Laurie Anderson. Yes. "Oh Mom and Dad, Mom and Dad, ha ha ha ha ha ha ha-ahhh."

One of the nurses tells me Sheila's stable, so I go back to the apartment and shower, long, hot. I hang on to that bar she made them install and lower myself into the tub. I sit, and sob, really really go at it. I force it, like puking, until I am almost gagging. Get it all out. I sleep and wake and go back to the hospital. Morning people coming to work. Others checking out. Shift change. Something very alive about all this. I want to hug them all. In her room, Sheila tosses and turns, opens her eyes looks around, but can't see me, can't see this world any more, I can see by her gaze, different from anything I've ever seen. She was always so present, direct: *Please look at me when I'm talking to you, Jamie.* Now she's all horizon. She scratches and scratches her arms, her belly, then she turns, suddenly stronger, looks right at me, says, *Itch itch itch*, then turns back, closes her eyes. Assertive, almost annoyed, but resolved, an almost comic *what can ya do?* statement. Lies back down, scratches and tosses and turns. The pamphlet told me about this restlessness. Near the end. I tell Donna Reed. She adds more medicine. Mom stops tossing. Donna Reed turns to tell me something. Then she doesn't. Knows I know. That Sheila probably won't be tossing any more. That she's really not here any more. Nothing more to worry about. No more scribbling, no more itching. *Itch itch itch*, famous last words.

First the old woman with the big, weepy family was gone. Then, just today, the younger woman, middle-aged at best, heavysset, who would cry out undecipherable sounds for hours to whichever loved one was at her bedside or out in the hall. I could only see her through a crack in the door as I paced the halls. Her people scowled at me, as if I didn't belong there. But I come this morning and they're the ones who have no place here anymore. I'll be staying from now til the end. Getting so close. Can't miss her going. Can't bear to let her go alone. Not to see her go, not to see her off. Need to see it to believe it. Sheila's dying and death itself. To accept it. A boy can dream.

I call Anja, tell her to come in the morning. Morning comes. Here she is. So good. Young woman, her arms so thick and warm with blood. Alive. Her lovely loving face. So alive, so warm. It's midday, nothing changes, but it's coming, coming.

Donna Reed adjusts my mom on the bed, ups the morphine, for comfort, always for comfort. Sheila moves around now a little, but hardly at all. Is a mind working in there, even to dream, or just a brain sending signals to a body pumping stuff around for a last little while? Donna leaves, shutting the door behind her, and soon Sheila's breathing starts to slow. Five seconds, ten, twenty, between breaths. The inhales are gasps, the exhales define expiration. We think it's over. Then one more. Then one more. Shorter and farther apart. Something still fighting. Then nothing for a long time, thirty seconds, a minute, ninety seconds. Nothing. We cry, we hold each other. I take my dead mother's picture, I don't know why. She would get it, though. She always got it. We say goodbye

to someone who isn't there. I keep kissing her right at the bridge of her forehead/nose.

The horrible horrible relief. Cold little bones. Done.