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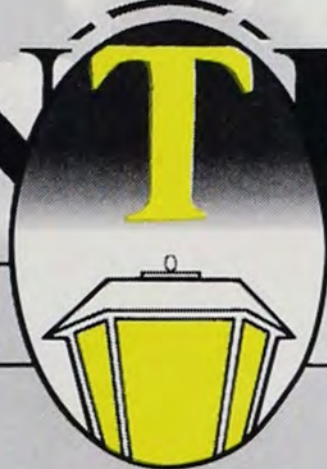
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Judge's Note:

"Sleepwalk" opens as a poem might, describing the lack of coherence in contemporary experience; however, it becomes a narrative demonstrating the complications that transform the narrator with her wayward man-in-the-moon into someone like a mother, who can chart a path around suburban ephemera and into the territory of love and cultural experience. The work is noteworthy, therefore, because it undertakes in an intensely personal situation to show how the mind in the act of writing for others can thrive on earth--one of writing's oldest tasks.

--Douglas M. Cameron

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Editors' Note:

The Lantern congratulates Erin Gorman on her prize-winning essay "Sleepwalk." For the first time ever, a work of creative nonfiction has won top honors. Thank you to Douglas Cameron for serving as judge. Congratulations also to Christine Stella for her winning cover photograph "Winter Break."

Once again, *The Lantern* is proud to present another expanded fiction issue. Personally, I would like to thank Kristen Sabol, Christina Dappollone, Erin Gorman, JonVolkmer, and all members of the staff--this book would not be what it is without your continuous hard work and dedication.

--Jim Maynard

Erin Gorman

Sleepwalk

Because I do not sleep I find myself at 1 a.m. at the local all-night diner. I am imagining the smell of rancid milk, dotted-line composition books, Rubber Cement and saddle shoes going up in flames. I am imagining this because the diner is smeared with the same colors as nausea--the same peach colored walls and cornflower tiles as Notre Dame de Lourdes elementary school--hostile, inexorable. What do the nuns smell like? What do the nuns smell like? Like long unopened closets. Do they burn slowly or suddenly burst into flame and float down as ashes like Dracula in the sun?

All of this imagining is with me as I walk through the diner doors, clouded from grease, out onto the streets of Collegeville--out into an hour of the evening that ticks by for those in the town, behind their Sears curtained windows, in clicks and bolts and kisses and good-nights and languid sex and then nothing. Then sleep. I am envious of that normality in their lives. I am envious of their magazine subscriptions and their domestic cars and their ignorance of politics and fashion. Then again, I am envious of the cosmopolitan, cigar smoking women I see in cafes erected for them, just for them on the streets of Philadelphia. In a world where its has become increasingly chic to be a vampire-sexy, bloodthirsty, nocturnal--where we dedicate nightclubs to this fashion--I am no more than a lonely, socially rejectable werewolf who howls at the moon, who cries for sleep.

I am imagining

On their way to heaven do the ashes of the nuns settle on the moon and does the man living there mind?

The moon has always given me immeasurable difficulty. My brother will tell you that my werewolf syndrome is the product of too many Saturday afternoon UHF horror flicks. (I was, as a child, thought to be too fond of my neuroses. I am, as an adult, not too vain to consider that this may be true.) But just ask anyone whom I have cornered on the eve of a full moon, or when it hangs scarlet in the sky, with my mug of coffee in hand, bug-eyed, brain wide-open and gushing. In my sleeplessness I will tell anybody anything just so I am not

alone with my werewolf claws and cries. After attempting suicide twice I am afraid to have my picture taken, afraid to look at my own eyes. When I was seven I wanted to be a Harlem Globetrotter. I still do. In secret, I am overly romantic. I really did like *Jane Eyre*. I wish someone would send me flowers. I'll tell you anything.

And on these evenings when I am moon mangled I search for faces likewise transfigured from sleeplessness. At a housewarming party I watch a woman twist a painful groove into her finger with her engagement ring. At a jazz club a bartender's tears hit the counter with a deafening sound. We should all gather in a diner though we would probably have nothing to say. But, to be an insomniac, one must at some hour of darkness lower one's standards for the company one keeps. Perhaps we could sit and watch old Bela Lugosi movies and eat Nilla Wafers. We could pretend that the world under quilts and sheets, behind Sears curtains truly envies us.

On a motley, misty autumn afternoon I take the bus from 69th Street Station in Philadelphia to my hometown. I am spending this full moon at home with my mother who is fifty and sad. My mother has the face of an arthritic angel of want. I know this because I watched more of my mother than *Sesame Street* when I was a child. For this reason I am without the light carelessness with which television gives us permission to view the world. I cannot watch my mother, with her swollen knuckles and wrists, try to cook a meal, make a bed iron white shirts for the white shirt who is my father, and not be moved. I must grip the sides of my chair to not run to hold her, and in doing so, remind her that she is no longer young. And I am no longer a child--one reason why my mother is awake at night. One night over tea she said, "I imagined your life would be much different." Though she said no more than this one, despairing statement, I have, in my many hours alone, completed her thoughts: "I imagined you married. With children. I imagined you happy and light. I imagined that you would come to me someday and say you were in love and that I would make your wedding dress. I imagined rhododendron in your own backyard. I wanted this for you."

I want this for my mother. But just last Tuesday I left one of the most gentle men I have ever met waiting in a restaurant for me. I could not go there because he might see the

fear, the deeply romantic and desperate part of me and the nuns bursting into flames. I have failed my mother.

When I walk into our living room, carrying bags and crumpled bus schedules, preparations for the full moon have already begun. It is four in the afternoon and beside the Zenith--a hand-me-down from my brother--my mother has stacked some of our favorite movies--*Play it Again Sam*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Magnificent Seven*. In the kitchen a tray of freshly baked lemon cookies and an unopened box of orange spice tea sit beside a poker deck from Niagra Falls. We have never been there. These items compose all of the essentials to our ritual of mother-daughter sleeplessness. When I was very small, my mother and I would sneak downstairs to the kitchen, while the whole world slept, to eat cookies and fill the air with orange spice. Then, in the light of the moon that hung over our home, (when the moon was still quiet and welcome), we would dance to Santo and Johnny's "Sleepwalk." I would place my pink slippered feet on top of my mother's own and we would spin to the floating notes of the peddle steel. We were at a junior high dance, young lovers about to say good-night. We were an older couple rocking and wishing on the sky. We were alone. She was mine.

We watch *Wuthering Heights* until three in the morning then sit in the dark. My mother has none of my werewolf symptoms or envy so we do not speak of it. But I want to ask her if she still loves my father after being married for twenty-five years. My father, who lets her descend the stairs, unaided, though she must lean on the railing, stepping sideways, pained. My father, who knows that my mother sits in the kitchen and cries that her daughter will never love, never be unafraid, and yet, does not comfort her. I want to know if it is possible to love from such a distance, so blindly. I do not ask her. Rather, I put on "Sleepwalk" and rest my head in her lap.

I once read a book of Gaelic folk practices. One tale about marriage premonitions particularly captivated me. If you go out into the evening, look over your left shoulder and recite these lines:

New moon and moon of truth
Tell me without falsehood in what direction
My true love lies

The clothes he wears
 And the color of his hair.

Then as you recite these lines you are to bend down and pick up whatever lies beneath your feet. When you go to sleep, put your finding under your pillow and the face of your true love will appear in a dream.

If I wander out into the evening, what will I find beneath my feet? What sort of dreams would come from the refuse, from the bottle caps and cigarette butts, that are strewn in the parking lots and streets of my hometown. These questions do not matter, not for werewolves, not for sleepwalkers, who are driven not by desire for a husband or a house or a particular flower garden bed, but rather, who wander looking for something intangible, inexpressible. Something like the note between the notes on a peddle steel. When I lift my head from my mother's lap the sun is rising above the roof of Notre Dame de Lourdes elementary school and nuns roll out of bed.

A month has gone past since I visited my mother and I am back in the diner. This time I do not imagine the smell of burning nuns. But I wonder what the man on the moon thinks about the transgressions of those on earth. He was banished to the moon for gathering kindling on the Sabbath. At least this was the tale told to me by my Irish grandmother to silence my objections to church-going. For far more serious crimes we grant murderers pardons, we allow child molesters to run toy stores and day care centers and we give wife beaters the opportunity to become millionaires. What must this smell like to him? Like musty politics, decaying garbage. I am sure it does not interest him at all. Perhaps he does not see our incidental human moments. Rather, what must irritate him, drive him to intergalactic frenzy, is watching the eyes of the human race gaze upon the moon, oozing melancholy wonder. To listen to them wish for health. Wish for love. Wish for sleep. To listen to the high werewolf cry, while he must live forever on that cold, colorless sphere of dust, of nun and vampire ash.

From my dormitory window in a renovated ivory Victorian I can look out on to the lawn of the campus library. Beyond the volumes of love poems and folk tales the horizon of trees appears as an ocean of obsidian. And somewhere across this glass sea my mother is awake. She does not curse the

moon, or hide behind a werewolf guise. She boils a cup of orange spice tea. She pulls the ties of her robe tight around her waist. She sits to read, to watch a late night movie, to iron tomorrow's white shirt for the white shirt that snores upstairs. In the pane of glass she looks, not at the moon, but at her own reflection, at the gray that frosts her cropped red hair. When she finishes her tea she puts on Santo and Johnny and across the miles we dance and spin and sway together. We are at a junior high school dance, young lovers about to say good-night. We are an older couple, rocking and wishing on the sky. We are together. She is mine.

Lyndsay Petersen

Icky

We have been sitting here like this for weeks it seems, in this coffee house in a college town, listening to the same scattered meaningless conversations on the same wooden deck with distant strains of music emerging from inside. Though our place here isn't much to look at with too many tables for our taste, we come here seeking solace from work, parents, and mundane people. Audrey and I always seem to have some unconscious quest. Our Life. It's what we have been searching for these past years.

Depending on the music played inside, we either go in quickly for only the use of their lavatories, or we go in to lounge on their metal chairs as comfortably as possible. Thus far, we have only ventured inside and stayed to listen once, when my friend Scott played with his scruffy yet talented brother and his clean-cut violinist friend. They are excellent and I am biased but they are still excellent. Because of my constant enthrallment when they play, Scott has attempted to teach me chords on his guitar with which to impress people at parties. Nothing spectacular occurs though and I usually end up giving it back to him relatively quickly so I can hear something of worth.

Tonight he is scheduled to play again, but for an hour or so we will be free from intrusion and interruptions of the folks that come to hear them play. The regular groupies are friends of friends of older siblings, and then subtract a few more years from their age and add piercings and Manic Panic. We cannot be bothered with twelve year olds and luckily for us both, they are in bed now. It's Sunday night, 10:23 and no one of interest is here. It suits us perfectly. Audrey is brooding happily in an uninterested curtain-like drape with her legs folding languidly against the railing and the curve of her back emphasizes her sleek figure. Something she perfected in France she says. These chairs were not made for elegance, but her stance makes it apparent that she was.

I lean back in my own chair, that is one of a set of twenty-three slightly mildewed white plastic porch pieces that are getting dirtier by the moment from our languished

ashing. I exhale completely, the smoke slipping out as I speak, "So, yeah, this summer has been a little rough. I just can't seem to find anything worthwhile. Work is insane. All the customers are complete morons who get neurotic and depraved about the silliest of things."

I have been working at a religious country produce store that over-works and under-pays. I guess I am glad I work there just so my mother will not make me pay rent money at home.

I take another drag and continue, "I feel so constricted and trapped in my house that I almost joined the army."

"What?" asks Audrey as she looks up, "You never mentioned that before. When was that?"

"Well, a few days ago, yeah, I kinda knew you would be against it and I guess unconsciously didn't want to hear my conscience come from your lips. But I didn't join, so it's cool but I was on the verge for a good day and a half." I say, "It took my brother to enlighten me to the fact that the army isn't known for coddling the creative, discouraged inner child in us all."

"He always knows just what to say huh?" Audrey says with a smirk.

"Yeah, but he wasn't very helpful about me getting a car. He always brings up the fact that though he has a car, it's because the 'rents gave it to him for graduation from college. Also, it's over 20 years old, hideous, and terribly temperamental in the rain."

This is always disheartening to hear and repeating it to Audrey makes it seem worse. We're good at these wonderful self-defeating comments. And those about the ignorance of people. We've grown to be quite the experts. Hate, Always, Never, Can't. These are words of our conversations.

"Then he went on like my dad," I say, "and he brings up, yet again, the fact that if maybe I'd have stayed in school, the parents would be more sympathetic to my 'plight'. He seemed really distraught for me as always."

"Sucks," Audrey drawls.

I need a car. Things seem unthinkable if I had one. It is my symbol of freedom that hopefully costs under 1000 dollars and has a sunroof. Without any way of being able to transport myself a reasonable distance, an unwalkable distance that is, without burdening others, causes a feeling

like a washer and a half of wet laundry being dumped on my head. It's not that I want to drive everywhere, but if I can't, I know that if I ever had the desire to, I couldn't. I mean, California is quite a stroll and I'm not known for my high endurance or lung capacity.

Audrey has finished half of her carton of Marlboro Mediums by now. We each got one 2 days ago, and I too, have dented my supply nicely. Smoking is as much an activity as talking is to me, because both give me a relief from stress and let me escape into a slightly altered reality, where I can doctor stories that need more emphasis in order to get a point across that might have originally been splendidly boring and get some cancer as well. Escape.

Audrey looks up from putting out her last cigarette that she claims will be the last one of the hour. She vows solemnly to wait until 11:00 to have another. It's five of. She stares across the table at me and uncrosses her legs to lean low and whisper.

"Billie, check him out. Nice shoes," she breathes, in a voice too low for me to catch the tone. So, unsuspecting, I turn casually to painstakingly scratch that itchy spot on my back that has just suddenly started bothering me and may take all of a few minutes to thoroughly satisfy. That, or until the instant I find this person who Audrey is, oh dear, commenting on and whose eyes I have just met. There definitely had been some sarcasm in her voice used that I wish I had heard. Though, at this point, this icky man, who is far worse than any of the buyers of produce that have ever wandered the aisle of my store, is attempting to stand with a stretch aimed for our attention, with an unnecessary crotch thrust and a sneer that when he grinds his hips into place, seems to kick-start his knobby ankles and knees into an offbeat strut that reminds me of all the stories told by children of incest and sexual abuse that I cared to forget.

I feel like a child. I hear the scraping of his shoes across the rough wood of the deck. I return to my posture of a few seconds ago and though now neither of our faces hold readable expressions, we are echoing the feelings of each other exactly exactly exactly exactly.

"Mind if I sit with you young ladies?" A throat clenching voice asks. I am silent.

"Uh, sure," Audrey says with apologetic eyes to me. I manage to look up and turn my lips in what could be called a grimace, or a grin.

"No problem," I assure him through the strain of clenching my jaw. Audrey looks for solace in another cigarette and as she looks at me to ask for a lighter, she's interrupted by the plastic noise as the child-safety is pressed over and up, and by the flick/snap of the lighter being lit.

"Here you go, babe," Icky says.

Audrey has the same look about her and I wonder if Icky has always passed off this look as one of desire. It looks like it. We sit. He looks at our chests.

"What's yer name?" he asks and glances down at my legs which are thankthelord covered in corduroy.

"Billie," I say, withholding emotions and vomit now.

"Now, why would someone give you a name like that? Not right for a pretty thing like you."

I have no desire to know what this Accident thinks is appropriate, and attempt to abstain from speech with a well placed shrug. He doesn't understand body language either though and starts hemming and hawing on the subject of my inappropriate name.

Then right as I am about to be ill or run, Scott shows up. He looks beautiful in the buglight that silhouettes his face.

"Hey!" I say with the most pleading eyes and hope for telepathy to work. helphelphelp. And as he smiles down at us, I think he could be a Christ figure, here to save us.

"Hey yourself. Weren't we supposed to meet Brian and Jamie at my house in 10 minutes?" he says with probing eyes and a smile. We are already standing and apologizing for having to go in such a rush. Amiable chatter continues until out of hearing range.

"What was that all about?" Scott asks, "Was it just that guy?"

"Well, he just sat down and intruded on us and we couldn't talk about what we wanted to," I say, "plus, it didn't smell like he'd showered in awhile."

"You know, Billie, I've seen him do that before," Scott says, "but usually the girls just ignore him and within five minutes, he's gone. Why didn't you just say you didn't want him there. Like your conversation was private or something."

Audrey is trying to explain that we really couldn't have done anything and that it's best that we left when we did. Now I'm not so sure.

"Scott," I ask, "When are you playing tonight?"

"In ten minutes, so I really have to go back, but you are welcome to listen. I might even dedicate a song to you two freaks. It's called "Mosquito." Very twisted. Thought you'd like it."

I look at Audrey. She seems hesitant. As am I.

She says, "I guess if we sit near the front and leave kinda early-ish, we'd survive. I also need a beverage. Let's go drink. Coffee."

So back to our caffeinated heaven we go. We slip inside this time and, with Scott's help, find a small table close to the front. Icky is sitting near the back and doesn't see us yet. He seems like more of an Unpleasant now, instead of an Icky, but I can't get over his intrusive nature.

Scott's band has started playing and though their songs echo harmoniously through the small room, my head is quiet for a bit. The cynicism has failed me for a little while. "Mosquito" is definitely twisted, and I like it. Audrey seems thrilled with its minor chords and the sad violin strains. As it whispers to an end, she looks at me and I realize it may be time to go now. Just then, Scott announces that they are taking a coffee break and he comes over to wish us a pleasant rest of the evening. He says they'll be playing next week, same time and gives me and Audrey a hug.

We head for the door and then I notice a sneering Growth beside the doorway. Unpleasant stands there in a way so that if we want to get out, we will have to brush unhappily close to him. I can imagine his stench.

"I thought your friends were waiting for you? No show eh?"

"Um, well, they were busy after all," I start a bit more curtly. "So, yeah, but could you excuse me please, I would like to return to my home now. Some things here grate on my nerves."

His eyes give a little angry flash and then he mumbles something mostly unintelligible with eyes that now rest on my shoes. He shuffles back a little to let us by. Just as Audrey is passing, he looks up again and stares at me. Then he says, "I

guess this is the new 'cool' way you treat people, you types are always so stuck-up and bitchy, like you're that much better anyway."

I'm shocked.

"Fuck off or drop dead somewhere and have a nice night!" I blurt out.

Not phased, he turns his back with a scathing, "Whatever bitch."

There's not much to say, so we just head for Audrey's parents' car. At least no one really saw, but we climb into her little Honda more quickly than usual. I even appreciate the obnoxious radio when it comes on with the start of the car. Audrey is muttering about "what a prick" and I'm agreeing quietly.

Uncomfortable with the current conversation topic, we speak of dreams of owning our own coffee shop, maybe with California as the location, and getting a car. Icky/Unpleasant isn't really mentioned, but he hasn't left my thoughts yet. I almost feel like he's staring at me still. I didn't think I was bitchy but maybe, oh I don't know. Maybe he's got a gland problem and can't help smelling like dead things. Still, maybe scent isn't the best way to judge people. I am not stuck-up though. I'm just better than a lot of people. HMMMMMM....So as I'm pondering, I start listening to Audrey again and learn that she plans to furnish the place with navy-blue plush recliners and a large TV with cable. She's wondering whether we can install our own ventilation system. We conclude with a resounding No. Then on to the imagined car.

Our main reason for purchasing a car is so it can get us to California or our state of choice this coming summer. There are a good many months until that time, but I know I'll survive until the desired trip. It feels good to think of it as more of an adventure, than an escape. For a long time, it seemed Thelma and Louise-esque which fit the desperation I had felt. The conversation stays light-hearted and, though cynical as always, it feels less serious.

Oh well, here's my house. My cat, the only one awake, is peeking out at me between the blinds as plans are made for tomorrow. The plans are merely reserved time slots because we never know what to do, we just know we want to do it. When, where, how, will be figured out in time. She flashes

her high beams in quiet good night as she pulls away. The warm yellow kitchen with the forever lazy cat stretched on the floor surrounds me with memories of tense episodes over TV dinners. They seem bearable tonight though and comfort me in their familiarity. I like it in my house right now. My mother always told me that I was "such a nice girl" and I want her to tell me again. She never really told me anything good about how successful or spectacular I am though. I think she'd run out of words quickly. Maybe if I went back to college and could quit this job I would have more of a positive outlook. It's just possible that my immediate dislike for people comes from the preconceptions of a teenager. Maybe a little polite assertion could help. Almost in agreement my purring fuzzball on the table gives a little cat head nod as I rub her belly. I pick up the reluctant beast and turn out the lights. I'll discuss it with her once we're both settled in bed, with me under and her above the covers. Maybe that guy wasn't that bad. The warmth near my feet stretches and I think it over.

Oana Nechita

Learning French

*The thin man is walking
his fat dog in the rain.
It is a lovely day today.
I am studying French.*
Mon Dieu, je détèste des examens!

*Would you like a cup of coffee?
You have a beautiful house.
We shall visit Paris tomorrow,
and we'll have dinner at the restaurant.*

I wish my tongue were younger,
and my wit sharper; instead of
singing you a serenade under
le clair de la lune,
I will hold your perfect hand,
and lose myself **dans tes yeux bleux,**
while mispronouncing **Tu es magnifique!**

*Will you write many letters?
What day is today? I cannot swim.*

JoAnne Sickeri

Hauling the Load

The smell of eggs is the best part of morning. I've had mornings when I've taken five or six dozen eggs out of the swinging door and I can still say how they smell, how they make my apron smell. And my hair. Fried, scrambled, poached, sunny-side up, yeah, those truckers eat a lot of 'em. This summer is no exception.

"Get these goddamn home fries stirred, Diney!" Len's fat voice crackles louder than the greasy grill. I stick my pencil behind my ear like the waitresses on "Alice" always did and run into the kitchen. The hissing, crusty bottom of the fryer spits out hot grease on my arm. I suck on the burning spot for a second and add a mental "shit" just for good measure. Len whizzes a plate across the countertop to me and I load the potatoes on it. He's having a doughnut and a Stroh's, 7:15.

He's on the third by the time I start bringing in orders. He holds the bottle with his hand inside his T-shirt to be sure of not dropping it with a greasy, egg-gloppy hand. It's one of those white V-necks that other men wear as undershirts underneath their button-downs. But there aren't a lot of those button-down kind of men around here anyway. He still manages to crack an egg in each hand.

As many plates as I can carry- I'm up to four-strategically stacked up my arms, I give the swinging door a bump with my backside and make my way to the counter. I slide a steak and scrambled in front of the first of five men on the stools. Twisting on the stool like a kid, he winks at me and grins, a plug of chewing tobacco peeking out the gap in his bottom row of teeth. I deal out the rest of the plates. No one speaks. I'd like to think that people that drive across the country all the time would have something exciting to talk about, but they just eat. Pick their teeth. Use the bathroom. Leave. I try to guess where they're going, what things look like from the road. I try to think of what it looks like anywhere besides here. I can't wait for the breakfast wave to be over so I can sit down for a little while.

By eleven, Len's made good progress on his case and is sitting down. It's finally empty out front, so I grab the spray

bottle and clean up the counter, carry in some dishes that I let sit. No sooner do I sit down on the folding chair behind the counter with a Coke than I hear the gravel rumble under truck wheels and the gritty dust from the highway swirls in the door as it opens. Great. I look out of the corner of my eye. This tall guy walks in and by the sound of his boots on the floor I can tell he's heavy. Len's not going to like this, I think. He's probably going to eat a lot. A lumberjack's beard, dungarees, a blue button-down. He sits down on a stool before I've gotten up and starts combing his beard.

It's not 'til I slide the place mat in front of him that I get a close look at this guy and see my own face and brown eyes. I'm going ohmygod, ohmygod while his lips curl back, wide, over huge white teeth and he laughs this kind, deep laugh as I gasp.

"Dinah."

"Daddy!" I'm running around the counter so I can hug him. I clasp my arms around his hulking shoulders.

"How come you're in town, Daddy? Did you miss me?"

"Well, of course I did, Kitten! I'm on my way up to New York, but I wanted to visit your Grandmom, so I came through this way."

"Did you bring me a present?"

"Nooo, not this time . . ." he answers slowly. "I'd better get a good look at my little girl before I bring her any fancy dresses, right? So they fit." He seeks my agreement with a hesitant smile.

It seems like sound reasoning to me, and I forgive him. After all, even though the one I'd gotten that last Christmas was two sizes too small, I'm sure he hasn't forgotten about replacing it.

"That's ok, Daddy, next time. Size 7, don't forget."

"Sure, Kitten. I'll be coming back through in two days and I'll have something for you then. How does that sound?" I beam.

"How's your ma?"

"Ok, I guess," I state flatly. It's hard to tell on so few words. She seems happy with Jesse, anyway. I don't tell him this. "I tell Little C. stories about you all the time. Like the time we were playing flashlight tag in the woods and we got sprayed by that skunk and had to take our clothes off on the

porch, remember? And how we'd go strawberry picking and eat 'em all before we even got to the alley, and how we'd have breakfast together real early before you had to . . ." I stop, remembering when I first stopped seeing Daddy's boots by the kitchen door. I change the subject.

"Hey, what do you want to eat, Daddy?"

He pats his round belly. "Well, since I'm watching myself, how 'bout some fries and a chocolate shake?" He chuckles.

I dash into the kitchen.

"Fries," I call at Len, sitting on a crate of hamburger buns and leaning against the fridge with his eyes closed. He doesn't move, so I plunge the basket into the fryer myself and pick up his bottle to put in the case of empties by the back door. I sidle out the door and start making the milkshake.

"You know, Daddy, I'm done here in another hour. Why don't we go out to Potter's Pond for the afternoon, feed the ducks?" I hadn't been in the truck since he had to lift me up in it. "I bet Little C. would love to come . . ."

"I was thinking it'd be better to see Claude when I had a little more time," he said. "Maybe we'll wait 'til I come back through on Friday and then you can both come with me on my next run . . . how does that sound?" I can see him picturing the three of us together again, just like I am.

"Really?" I ask. "Us come away with you? Where?"

"Have you ever been to Maine?" he asks seriously.

Before I can imagine it, I remember the fries. I duck into the kitchen and get them out, put the plate in front of him. He puts his hands up on the counter. They're large and rough from hard work, but I remember that they're gentle. His nails are square-cut, clean underneath. While he's eating I just watch him, take him all in.

By the time he finishes, I can go. I clear up the counter and go into the kitchen to see if I can take some bread for the ducks.

"Like hell," Len slurs when I ask him. "I don't run no goddamn duck restaurant." Three o'clock is a bad time to ask Len anything. I put a couple of Daddy's fries into a napkin instead.

As we drive out to the pond, I sit on the high purple vinyl seat, bouncing on the springs, and think about seeing the

whole world from here. I imagine riding with Daddy to places like Maine all the time.

There's hardly any ripples in the pond save the tiny rings made by the diving ducks, really peaceful. Daddy's telling me about how baby ducks latch on to the first thing they see when they hatch, how they'll follow it anywhere. The bigger ducks are snapping up the french fries, letting them wiggle down whole. There's two little ones I want to get some, but the big ones are always in the way.

"You know, Diney," Daddy says to me almost secretly, "there's this little town in New Hampshire I go through all the time that's so beautiful and so quiet . . . there's a piece of land up there overlooking a pond even wider than this that I've been fixin' to buy, settle down on." I imagine building a cabin with a porch, having rocking chairs to sit outside on. "We'll pass through on the way up to Maine; maybe I could show it to you. We could visit the school and see how you and Claude like the teachers there."

I look at him incredulously. "You mean have us be with you to stay, Daddy? Go on this trip and stay with you? Oh, Daddy, Little C. is going to love having a daddy again." I fling my arms around him. I knew he wasn't to blame for leaving us. I'm sure of this now.

"I'll take care of everything, Daddy. Me and Little C.'ll be waiting for you to come back."

I think it's better that he leave me at the truckstop instead of taking me home. I tell him I'll walk. He kisses me on the forehead.

"We'll see you Friday, Daddy. Don't forget my present!" I teasingly remind him.

"Huh?" he asks as the truck starts to roll. "Oh, right, Kitten." He honks the horn as he pulls away. I see a twinkle in his eye as he calls out the window. "Size 3...See, I didn't forget!" He still likes to kid around with me.

The whole way home I'm dying to bust in and tell C. that I've seen him. But I decide to wait until I get everything figured out first. Then we'll go off in the truck and mom can marry Jesse and burn in hell right in this town for all it matters then. Maybe when he's not on the road Daddy'll fix up my old skates for me to give to Little C. and I can teach him how to

rollerskate. Maybe we can get a dog.

Claude is sitting in front of "The Smurfs" with some apple juice when I get home.

"Hi Little C." I smile.

"Gargamel's got Smurfette trapped in his castle, Dine," he says in a grave whisper. "Do you think ten minutes is enough time to rescue her?"

"I'm pretty sure they'll make it. Did you have an ok day?" He nods.

I walk into the bathroom to throw my apron in the hamper and see my mother's bathrobe on the floor. I'm used to seeing her still in it when I get home. She's laying on her bed zipping her jeans. Then she levitates herself and clacks by me in shiny heeled boots, putting a dangling earring in, and kicks a wad of black-smudged towels closer to the hamper. The empty bottle says "Raven."

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"None of your business. Out," she adds smugly, as if answering the question after all. "There's hot dogs in the fridge. The kid needs a bath tonight." Clack, clack, and the screen door slams.

After dinner and his bath, I give C. fifteen more minutes of TV because I decide to start packing some duffel bags. I make sure we have enough underwear for a while and throw in my last report card to show them in case we visit the new school.

I wake up as the sunlight starts to filter in and tiptoe squinty-eyed to the bathroom with my clothes. I have a head-on collision with Jesse in the doorway. He's wearing nothing but BVDs and his hair is hanging loose around his shoulders. After he bumps into me he stays close, his arm around my shoulder, hand dangling over my chest. He reeks of cigarettes.

"Aw, hey, Diney, I didn't know you'd be up so early or I woulda made some breakfast for us."

"I don't eat breakfast anymore," I tell him.

"But you oughta, Diney, a beautiful growing girl like you . . . Just goes to show you kids need a Daddy 'round here to help take care of yous. I'm just glad I'm here to help your mama out like that, be the man around this house. Glad to do it."

I throw his arm off me and duck into the bathroom. I

splash my face and get dressed, walk past the bedroom where my mother is sprawled on the bed, only half wrapped in the sheets. As I pull the door closed on them Jesse grins at me. Asshole.

I get to work, flip the signs over on the door. Open. I do all the morning stuff, lay out the place mats, clean the coffee pot, check the toilet paper in the bathroom. Thursday--that means biscuits and gravy and a side of scrambled and Daddy comes tomorrow. I figure it's time to tell Len I'll be missing some work, that I might not be coming back. But all morning I don't get a chance; the kitchen bell keeps ringing and I'm inhaling egg-smell, and truckers with all the same faces are in and out, in and out. Haul the load. Eat the eggs. Take a leak. Back on the road. Truckers and eggs. We get new napkin holders. When I finally talk to Len, he doesn't yell.

"I'm going to Maine with my Daddy tomorrow, Len. He's coming back for us."

"You can't go."

"On the way he's showing us this place in New Hampshire where we're gonna live. He wants us to stay with him."

"New Hampshire's not what it's cracked up to be at all, Diney...you can't go, I need ya here. Where'm I gonna find another waitress?"

"Aw, Len, be happy for me. Look, I'm gonna work the morning shift tomorrow but I need to bring Little C. here to wait with me, ok?"

"You ain't bringin' that kid here."

Len knows C. won't be any trouble. I smile at him. "Thanks, Len," I say.

Friday. "Two shipwrecked on a raft" and bacon. I'm so busy flying in and out the door I don't even feel my legs trembling. I try to keep Claude coloring and out of the way. The counter is full, the knives and forks are dicing up the silence faster than Len can sweep the grill, and I look at every pair of hands. I tell Little C. I can feel it should be any minute now. When he gets restless, I tell him about the cabin in New Hampshire and the pond. And the school. Twice. Just then I hear the thunder of truck wheels outside and look up to see the glimmering red Peterbilt cab through the window. I grab

Little C.'s hand and our bags and dash outside.

The man who gets down from the truck is not my Daddy.

"I can't take no stowaways," he says, looking at us chuckling. "I just came to drop something off."

I nod my head in the direction of the back door that goes into the kitchen and lead little C. back inside. I tell him Daddy's truck is just like that.

After a few minutes, Len shouts from the kitchen. I push through the swinging door with C. at my heels. Despite his voice, Len's face looks suddenly soft. He's holding a plate in his hands and looking at Little C.

"I set you up with a cheeseburger, kid. I thought you might be hungry."

I poke his arm; C. thanks him shyly.

"Go sit at the counter, C.," I tell him.

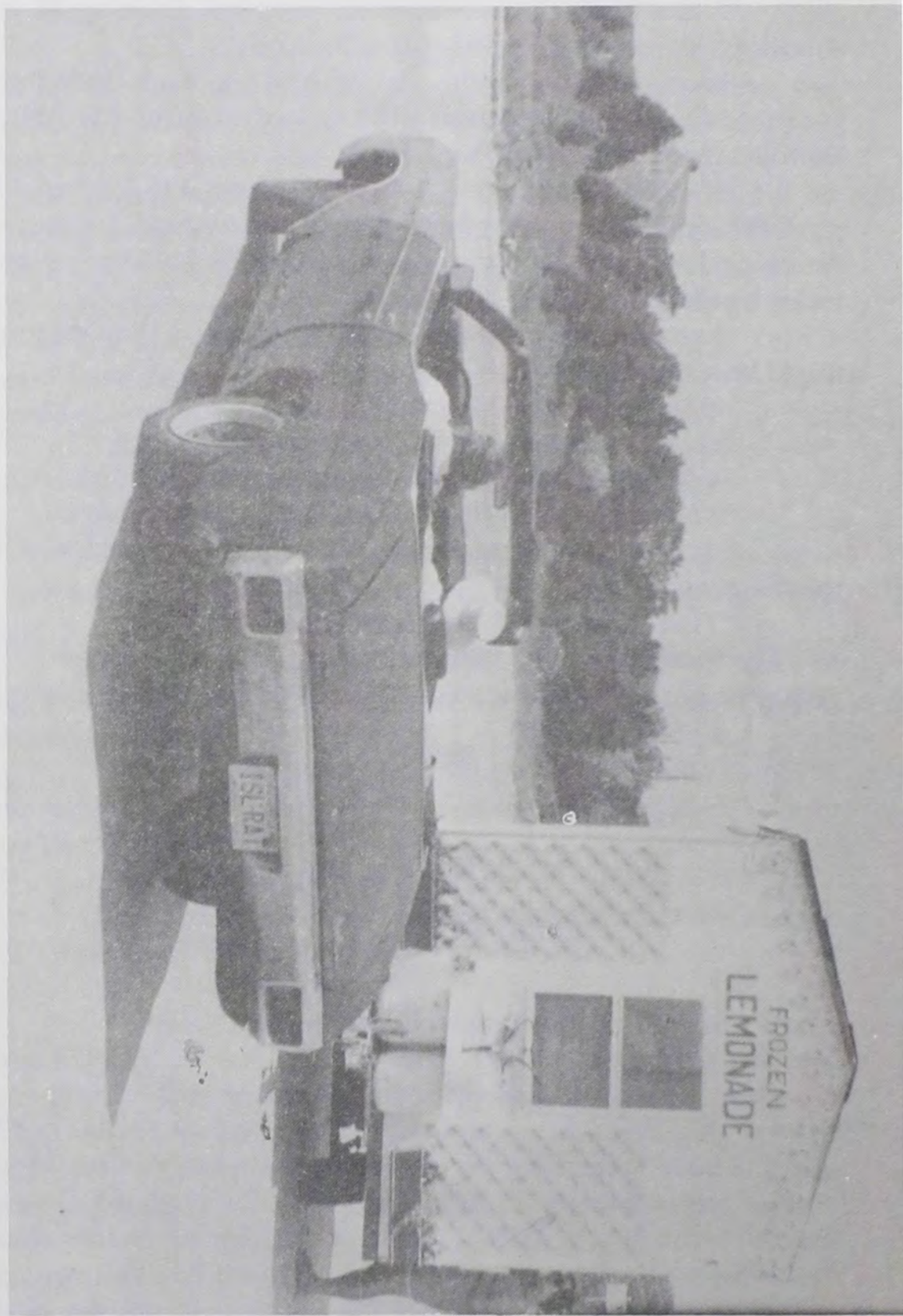
Suddenly I know. Len hands me a rectangular box.

"Your daddy had this delivered for you," Len says.

I take a knife from the counter and slice the tape, lift out the dress.

"That's tough, kid, I'm sorry," Len says.

"Yeah," I say. "C'mon Little C., let's go home." I gather up our bags. "I wanna try this on."



Dennis Cormac McCarthy

Between Days

Even in the third grade, Friday was a godsend, maybe because eight- and nine-year-olds don't have the capacity to think past the moment. There are exceptions, of course. Every morning before 8:25, I darted across Maple Street to Giuseppe's corner store with my fellow schoolmates (which is to say all of the boys in my class), the nickel already clutched in my hand. We bought cellophane-wrapped Smarties to use as power pellets during our daily games of Pac Man tag in our half of the playground, and anyone who forgot his nickel either sacrificed his recess pretzel money or resigned himself to being a ghost for the day. Nothing was worse than plodding back across the street to St. Christopher, empty-handed at the clanging of the bell. Otherwise, though, we were green and unthinking. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday -- it made no difference. But Friday was a godsend, because most of us had never seen it coming.

Friday held special importance for me. Any other day I could come home to find my father passed out under the oak tree in our front yard, livingroom furniture knocked over or deliberately broken, my mother crying without making a sound, her eyes red and swollen, his handprint on her cheek. Don't misunderstand. I loved my father. He never hit me when I was too young to defend myself, and when he was in a good mood, any boardgame or action figure would be in my hands before I could ask. Fear of the unexpected hadn't created a kind of distance between us; rather, some great unknown nested there and could never be bridged or even confronted. I came to understand him less with each drunken episode, and so grew to hate this unknown thing more. The one constant in third grade was Fridays after school, when I would walk straight to Massing Road instead of home, to stay overnight at my grandmother's, so that my parents could enjoy time alone.

I could appreciate their need for a night of dining and relative sanity once I started college, because although Friday remained a godsend, Sunday became the bitter pill I wouldn't swallow, even to save my undergraduate career. That day of reckoning had a talent for displacing the previous week with

stubbornness. I can't guess how many Sunday nights I spent slouched in that wobbly chair, typing term papers on the word processor with my right hand, chain-smoking Marlboro Menthols with my left, straight through Monday morning. Under strenuous deadlines there is no chance to ruminate. You labor to make the pauses between the words pregnant, you try to answer the questions you can anticipate, and then you sleep.

One Sunday evening I was listening to Edie Brickell & the New Bohemians, word-processing the preamble for a linguistics paper, when Jason dropped in -- or so I have been told. Afterwards, of course, I couldn't say if I'd had an emotional breakthrough or a nervous breakdown, but maybe the difference between them is more ambiguous than I once thought -- like trying to divide the days. Earlier that day Jason had bought himself a jeep, used, and as I had spent hours creating new files, prattling in "academicspeak," and then deleting new files, we decided on a drive to the diner in Sedgewich, for late night coffee and blueberry pancakes (They call them hotcakes in this part of Pennsylvania).

Maybe I eavesdropped on the casual conversations from nearby booths, while the hairs on my arms stuck to the tabletop that our usual, cantankerous waitress would never condescend to clean. My favorite diners were the young couples staring zombie love straight through each other's eyeballs to the quick of their starving brains, with dreams of high school prom committees that no longer existed and with contentment in the shrinking space between their lips. Maybe I composed each speech act ten minutes before uttering the first clumsy syllable, assuming I spoke at all before Jason moved the discussion onto another topic, not that I ever minded listening to Jason. But probably I just sat there, staring down a full cup of coffee, considering how to stay awake for the rest of the night and wondering where the weekend had gone.

Communication was much simpler in grade school, even if it wasn't always verbal. Near the end of third grade, Chrissy MacKay drove me to violence. It was near the end of lunch period on a Friday, and I'd neglected to ration my power pellets. Ghost-gobbling pac men were closing in when I tripped and slide across the playground for a few feet, embedding gravel bits in the palms of my hands. I brushed my hands off on a pair of navy blue slacks, and that's when I saw Chrissy,

victim of my crush, sitting alone by the concrete wall that separated the girls' blacktop-covered half of the playground from the convent. That day I broke the rules and crossed the line between gravel and blacktop. She smiled back at me.

I don't remember much of our brief conversation, not that anything important was said, but Chrissy must have said something wrong, because I grabbed her by the hair and struck her head against that concrete wall, not too hard. God, but I liked her. The school bell rang. I started to run toward the line of students forming when something made me turn around. Chrissy was crying with her left hand on the back of her head. I looked around, but no one had seen, so I ran back and said the only thing I could think of -- "What?" She stopped crying then, quite suddenly, and wide-eyed she stared with a confused expression that mirrored my own. The two of us crept into line. She never told.

Still, I watched the clock, avoided Chrissy and escaped my teacher's attention for the rest of the day, just waiting for the last bell to ring and for Friday to begin. At 2:45 I bolted all the way to Massing Road and threw open the front door of my grandmother's house.

My memory gets gray after that.

We strolled along the road that encircles most of campus. It seemed twilight, and Jason asked what day it was. I couldn't say, but why was the sun coming up? I searched for a cigarette and realized my throat was raw. Jason asked if I remembered what had happened. I lit a cigarette and thought it might be Friday. For hours which felt like minutes we continued to wander, Jason helping again and again to reconstruct my memories of the preceding night into morning. Each time I retained more information longer before it all went away.

It was Monday. There had been an accident. Why did my head hurt?

"How's your wrist?"

I tried to turn my left wrist and, to my astonishment, was only partially successful. I looked up open-mouthed at my friend, and he smiled. I got scared. Jason told me (not for the first time) that I had short-term amnesia, but that gradually my memory would return. I remembered nothing of the diner or

my term paper. As Jason talked me through the night, I tried to reconcile his accounts with my own impressions. And as I had no concrete memory of recent events, each new insight turned me toward reflection on more distant, fragmented memories.

We are driving back to college. Between days I am a passenger in a vehicle, its headlights beaming, dividing the dark expanse in front of us before I feel our straight descent into the earth. There is no opportunity to be afraid. I am standing in a ditch in a grassy field, staring at a crack in the windshield. I climb out of the ditch and fall down into the green again. By the time we reach the road, the vehicle does not exist -- there is only the gray of the horizon. I am confused now, listening to Jason. He makes no sense. At first I get the words without context, but then the words themselves break down, and we are walking, walking away from something, and I retreat into my world.

I am nine years old and hear my grandmother calling, "Ma-Ma, come drink your tea," as I walk through the front door. Everyone below age fifty calls her Ma-Ma, and she calls them the same. With twenty grandchildren, no one expects her to keep names straight. I sit down at the kitchen table to pb&j sandwiches and a cup of tea, which she serves with every meal and for every occasion. Aunt Ellen lives next door, so I spend the rest of the day tagging along after my older cousins, listening to conversations I can't understand, jokes about hot dogs in buns and girls giving away their heads. That night, like any Friday night, we watch television sitcoms, and I demand cereal before bed.

Jason and I walk along a dark road, and my memories are disjointed. We are between days, but which days?

I am nine years old, and Ma-Ma has Steve and me sleep in her queen-sized bed, because there aren't enough beds next door, and she always stays up to watch Johnny Carson and a late night movie. Johnny Carson tells jokes for old people, and the movies are full of people pretending to cry, but they look like they are smiling or laughing too hard. Steve isn't much older than I am, so we stay up late too. Steve explains some of the jokes I overheard, and we play with the stuffed animals and the beautiful yarn dolls that Ma-Ma has made

for all of her grandchildren, racing them up and down the mattress. Sometimes Steve does things to me with them or makes me do things to him.

Jason waves at the passing cars as we continue to walk. It is very late, someday. I am not tired, but I want to sleep now, because maybe tomorrow I will be myself again.

I am nine years old, and I watch the alarm clock on the dresser for 12:00, when Friday ends and I will pretend to sleep, but it almost never works these days. I think about what I did to Chrissy MacKay and how much I like her, not knowing that in a few weeks she will move far away to another school, but I am already sorry.

Jason tells me that everything will be okay. I want to be alone now. I don't want to hurt anyone, don't want to hurt any longer.

I feel Steve's hand reach over and grab my far shoulder, to turn me on my back, and my voice box is closing.

"Ma-Ma?"

Steve moves away at the sound of my grandmother's voice, the creaking of her footsteps on the stairs. When her silhouette stands in the doorway, she says, "Your mother's here. She thought if you were still awake she'd take you home now, okay?"

Jason tells me that everything will be okay.

I nod and hurry out of bed to get dressed. I grab one of the yarn dolls by the arm to take with me. Downstairs, I see my mother's swollen eyes and understand. We don't go home, not tonight. We drive around town for hours, my mother clutching the wheel and her son staring into the cross-stitch eyes of a doll with no mouth. Eventually, we park the car somewhere to sleep.

My eyes are on fire from fluorescent light and pastel wallpaper. My gag reflex reacts to antiseptic air. Jason translates for people who want some form of identification, and the questions begin. Everyone seems distant. "My parents should be notified," I manage to say.

"Your dad died last summer."

I didn't learn that he had been molested by his father as a child until Christmas Day. Maybe we could have helped each other through those distant memories that were blocked

but still defined us. One new secret revealed, and our lives settled into place, only a little too late.

Late Monday morning Jason and I walked back to the dormitory. I asked continually if I'd said anything embarrassing, but nothing. I thought back to the divided playground which had seemed so natural in my Catholic grade school years, and it no longer made sense to me. And I began to doubt everything.

In my room, I turned on the CD player while Jason gave my roommate the doctor's instructions, stressing that I was not to be left alone. I smiled. I wanted to hear a particular song. Jason said he needed some sleep. It had been a long night for both of us. I listened to Edie Brickell sing one lyric over and over again, the words rebounding through the insides of my head: "Desperately trying to get you off my mind, but you keep coming back."

I couldn't say exactly what about the lyric appealed to me then, but I began to sing with her in a thundering voice. And I couldn't help myself. I started to laugh, at first in short, coughing fits, but the laughter grew into a racking roar.

Trish Daley

nEverglades

Ever
Glades will not be
Forever if the great
Okeechobee does not gently
Flow free
Snail Kites
Turtles Dragon
Flies Gators and their Gar
Spoon Bills Panthers Cudas Crocs and
Conchs are
But a
Few dependent
On mourning's precious dew
Apple Snails low in scale Wood Storks
die as
Proof Tree
Hammocks decrease
Water Holes disappear
Farewell to the Ancient Cypress
in a
Few Years
Majestic Man-
Groves red black and white hold
Island keys together tight un
like we
Who seem
Determined to
Fight Mother ruthlessly
Pahayokee's song mourns on still
Unheard
Sugar
Cane farms canals
for Lauderdale's Fort and
Ourami stop the slow waters
Seeping
River
Of Grass won't be

Forever if the great
Okeechobee does not gently
Flow Free

Jodi Levinthal

First Day

"Is that door stuck again?"

"I guess," I said over the incessant buzzing.

I really didn't need this my first day. I was standing in a cash room the size of my refrigerator talking to a voice behind a wall.

"Hold on, I'll go around," it finally said.

It was bad enough I had to spend my first summer back from college living at home and working over forty hours a week in a department store. But my mom had decided I was now her best friend which meant she needed to explain every aspect of her life to me including, in explicit detail, her sexual activity, the thing every daughter wants to hear from her mother. And now, finally away from the continuous flow of unwanted information, I was apparently going to spend my first day stuck in the cash room.

I put the change bag on the counter and leaned back against the wall just as the doorknob opened into my side. I turned to find the voice had a body, a body that was way too close to me, blocking my exit.

"Sometimes the darn thing just don't want to work right," he said.

The only thing I could see was "Welcome to Boscov's" surrounding the name "Frank" pinned to a pocket two inches from my left eye. I tried to inhale to relax myself but almost gagged at the smell of cheap cologne and cigars as my eyes watered in an attempt not to cough. I plastered myself against the wall waiting for him to back off so I could get out of the room before I passed out.

He was still talking. "Yep, I got myself stuck with a guy in one of them elevators once. I don't know what he done had for lunch but whewwee did that place stink. You just can't imagine the wretchedness. It was like . . ."

As I shifted my focus from his disintegrating white button down shirt with yellowing armpits to the apparent pieces of breakfast left on his moustache, I was getting the idea.

"And I'll tell you, that man had to piss and all he had

were a half full coke can . . ."

The walls were closing in on me. Apparently something had crawled up in his mouth and died. The potpourri of fragrances was making me nauseous.

Finally, he had some mercy. "Well, I guess I'll be seeing you around. We'll talk again."

I didn't have the strength to reply as he finally stepped back, walked three feet down the hallway, and opened a flimsy wooden door with a huge window in it. It wasn't locked. I stood there trying to compose myself and breathe some fresh air. Someone walked past me and buzzed into the tiny, torture chamber. I watched through the window as Frank took the pouch and reached behind him for the cash. Apparently, the logic was that any thieves would bypass the opportunity of an unlocked wooden door where the money was as no challenge and try to buzz in next to it, or Frank just needed a captive audience. Frank dropped the cash back into the tiny room and tried to buzz this next victim out.

I heard a bang and a few garbled choice words before the door opened and a young man about my age came out screaming.

"Fucking door. Fix the fucking thing already. Fuckers. Hey, you're new here right? What department are you in?"

"Fine Jewelry."

"Where?"

I wondered if I had to say fucking fine jewelry for him to understand, but I decided not to take my frustrations out on him. "Fine Jewelry."

"You look like you just met Frank. Yeah, after he traps you in there and talks forever about nothing you need a break, huh? I swear I fucking hate people that talk and talk and talk forever about nothing. Don't you? I mean why don't they just shut up and fucking . . ."

We started walking back down to the floor. He was about my height, real skinny, and bounced way too much when he walked.

"So what's your name again?"

I couldn't help but stare at the name tag around my neck boldly professing the answer to his question. I looked back at him but he didn't say anything. As we were walking I noticed he couldn't pass a female customer without winking or

licking his lips at her.

"Leah."

"My name's Jack, but everyone just calls me Boner."

I think he wanted me to ask, but I didn't. He stopped at the mirror on the perfume case and squeezed the skin on his chin. "I hate these things. I must have eight buckets of puss in me. So, you're here just for the summer?"

"Yeah."

"Great, I'm sick of only old women and gay guys hitting on me."

"Uh, huh."

When I got back to Fine Jewelry there was hardly anyone in the store so I went back to arranging the promotional two dollar Father's Day mugs next to the register. A short hefty woman stopped nearby to look at something in the case.

"Can I help you with something, Ma'am?"

She didn't acknowledge my presence, but the little blonde haired boy next to her turned and smiled at me. I smiled back at him. His cheeks filled up his entire face.

He gestured to me with his red Power Ranger, but just as he was in the middle of showing me the ranger's karate backflip, his mother apparently finished looking at whatever she was looking at and yanked him by the arm to the next case over. He squatted down to look at something in the case, but in a few minutes got bored and went over to the table with the Father's Day mugs.

"Come on, Brian. Hurry up," his mother called.

The little boy picked up a mug and held it out to his mother.

She huffed her way over and looked at the world's greatest father mug for a second and then down at her child. "No. I'm sorry, Brian, but you don't have the world's greatest father." She looked straight at me and continued. "If you did, he would be here with us and not in Maryland with that twenty year old tramp. You can get the other one if you want although he doesn't deserve it. Maybe it will remind him where his real family is."

She picked up the Father's Day mug. It was in black and white and didn't have the colorful rainbow on the handle. She continued. "I have underwear older than her, you know. Can you believe that?"

"I, uh. . ."

"Bastard. I should have known from our wedding when he was over. . ."

I looked back at the little boy who seemed content enough as his Ranger smashed the monster that now appeared out of his pocket in his other hand.

"I do wonder exactly what it is she does for him. He's always been addicted to that oral thing, but I just think that's disgusting. I mean can you imagine putting. . ."

I was trying to stay engaged in the Ranger's fight with the monster, but she was still going strong.

"Well would you?"

"I, uh, well. . ."

Just then the phone rang with my rescue message that it was time for lunch. Thank God. I walked back up past the cash room again to clock out. In the break room I saw my manager who told me I was working in Hardware this afternoon with Boner. After lunch I clocked back in and proceeded back onto the floor. I didn't have my name tag on but I must have had the words "I work here" glowing from my forehead because I couldn't get five feet without someone asking where something was. In a very short time I realized they'd rather have me send them off in any direction than explain that it was my first day, or they just wanted someone to yell at.

It was almost a relief to see Boner waiting for me. Almost. "Hey Leah. Cool. Mark had to leave early so we're shorthanded. It's not too bad over here though, pretty slow usually."

"That's good. Does everything come down on the register?"

Apparently that was funny. "Sorry, no. Nothing does. Eventually you'll get to know what's supposed to, but usually the customer will catch it if it doesn't and you'll hear about it."

"Great. I thought everything on sale comes down on the register."

"Yeah, only if the buyers get it in the system on time and they usually don't. What do they care if we spend all day getting screamed at? It's not them! I don't know about you but this place is really getting on my nerves. People think I want

to know everything about their pitiful little lives. Like I care. I got my own life. I got girls left and right. It's a problem, you know, keeping them all straight. There was this one chick. . ."

I noticed the garden center outside the door and leaned on the counter watching the birds flap their wings in the puddle leftover from the leaking hose.

"And she said the condom broke. Do you believe it? Are you watching that guy? You know if you catch someone shoplifting you get 10% of the amount or ten bucks, whichever is higher. Anyway, as I was saying. . ."

I thought about whether or not I could really call security on someone and under what circumstances. Just then a code yellow came across the loudspeaker. Boner raced off in some direction tripping over the display of garden weasels dragging one attached to his pantleg thirty feet down the aisle. After I finished cleaning that up and pricing the pink energizer bunny flashlights, he returned and explained that a code yellow meant a shoplifter or somebody was trying to get out of the store so all the big strong men were supposed to race to the mentioned entrance and tackle him. He also explained that it wasn't a shoplifter but the infamous flasher that they were after this time. Apparently, this gentleman made a habit of that kind of thing recently.

I looked at Boner's five foot three, one hundred and twenty pound frame and said as sincerely as I could, "did you get him?"

"No, he was gone when I got there, but I usually do. One time there was this guy, all muscle, that stole all these watches, and I tackled him. I'm a lot stronger than I look, you know. Here feel my arm. Feel it."

"Uh, that's okay."

Boner walked over to talk to someone about the difference between processed and unprocessed manure. I thought he should know a lot about that. I continued to stare at the birds outside, wishing I could join them. A tiny old woman, at least seventy, was walking around with her shopping bag, examining the seventy-five cent impatiens. I watched her for a while before my eyes began to blur. Boner came back and had me ring up his pile of shit as he told me about how he played in a band and all the girls wanted him but he didn't have time for them.

Just then, he looked over to the old woman as I was staring out the window. She looked around slowly, picked up the small, plastic container, holding the almost dead impatiens, and placed it in her bag.

"Did you see that?"

"See what?" I replied, pretending not to have seen what I just saw.

"That's ten bucks," he said as he picked up the phone.

"Come on, you're not going to. . ."

"Get down here now, hardware."

It was too late. Maybe this was why they called him Boner. I never saw anyone so excited. Frank appeared next to the register, then started following the woman from a distance. When she tried to exit the gate he asked to look in her bag. When she didn't have a receipt for the seventy-five cents he told her to just pay for it at my register. I was kind of embarrassed for her so I pretended to not know what had happened and was prepared to shell out the change if she didn't have it. I rang up the sale deciding not to ask the mandatory question cash or charge as she pulled out a wad of money as big as my fist and flipped through it.

"This is the smallest I have," she said sharply as she handed me a one hundred dollar bill.

I looked in the register, not sure if I could break that since we had just done the three o'clock drop. I opened the drawer and gave her the receipt as I counted the change.

"Now don't you cheat me out of my money! People always trying to cheat me out of my money. Like my damn son. I know he's trying to put me in a home but I know what he's up to. Just like his father that one. So you don't even think you can cheat me out of my money."

"Here is your change, Ma'am. Have a nice day."

As she counted the change she continued. "I just like to take care of things my own way, that's all. Like these sores on my arm see." She shoved her hand in my hand. "All you have to do is heat up a real sharp pin and lance the things right open. Then they drain and dry right up. See. But no, you youngings always needs some fandangled contraption or something. A pin and some hot water, that's all. You remember that. No need for all these new. . ."

Frank started laughing after she walked away still

talking. Boner was still beaming.

"Nice job, Boner," he said stressing Boner more than normal.

"Hey, ten bucks is ten bucks."

"Boner, it's ten bucks or ten percent, whichever is lower."

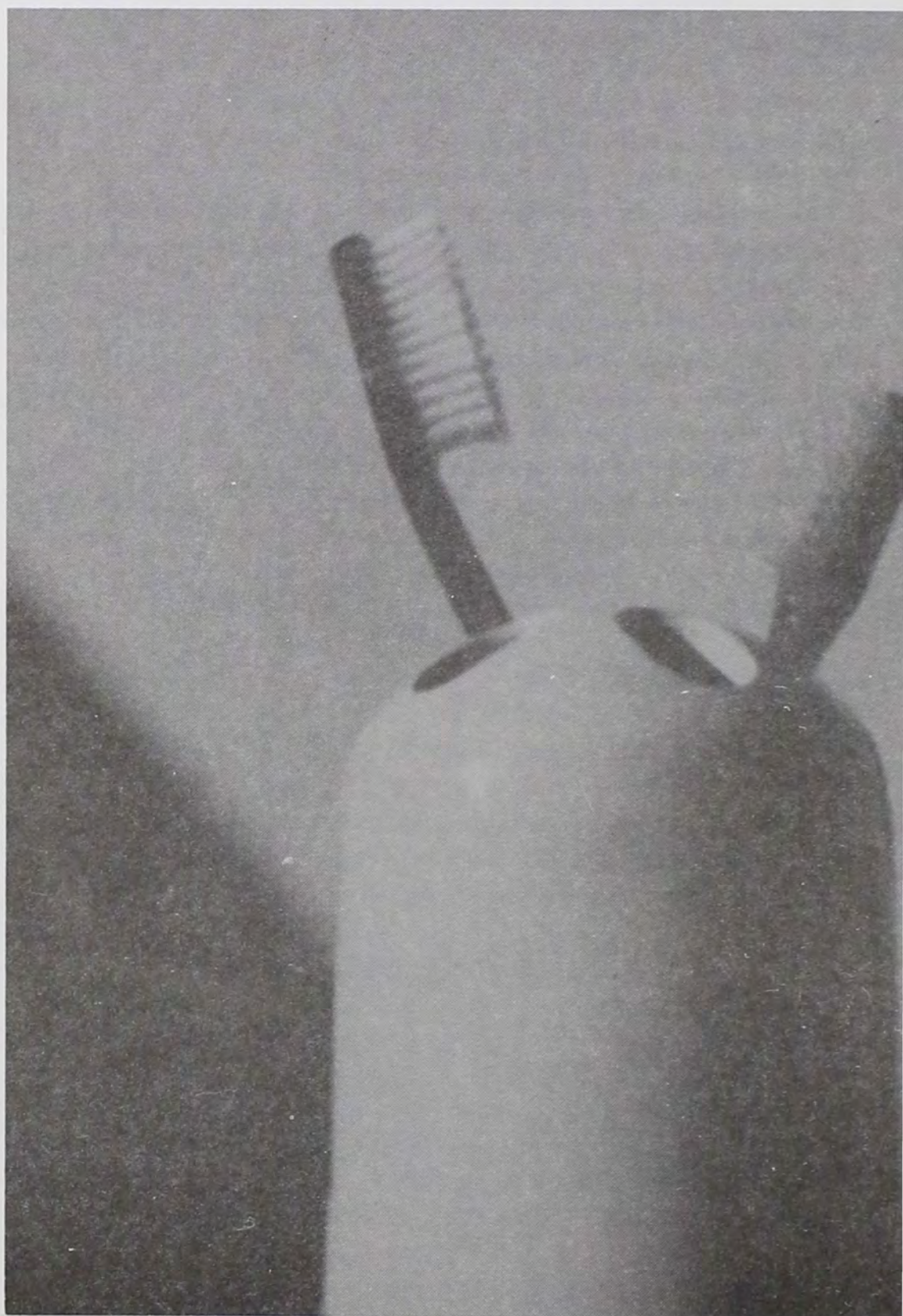
"What?"

"Here, have a ball" he said as he took a quarter out of his pocket and flipped it at Boner. "It's on me."

"Assholes, I should have known."

Boner went to the break room to cool off. I continued to stare into space. A middle aged customer came up to me with a potted plant and placed it on the counter. With the smell of manure still fresh in the air, he opened his trench coat revealing every part of him dangling in front of me. It was the unprocessed kind. I looked at him without changing my expression and exhaled. It had been a hell of a day.

"Will that be cash or charge?"





Lawrence Santucci

The Way Around

I.

I have a feeling.
Not set to soft shag rolling hills
Of some spirituality from where my blood has been.
Not set to geometrically sound skylines
Of immigrant ties.
Neither of them.
Nothing creative, aesthetic, seen in a musical, or in a
 memorial mural
On the side of an inner city building.

But this old non-memory keeps coming back to me:
 Underfoot burned of all small greenery, arid
 So tears are never shed and saliva savored
 A horizon broad and flat
 Continuous at every point of view, blurry
 From heat that can rise up and descend down upon
 Withered crags, large-calved long walks dressed in
 rags
(It becomes so real, during even the coolest morning shower,
 that I fall down
inhaling fast to avoid ancient dirt entering the present nose,
 exhaling image, imagery
 Coca-Cola, 486, the place between East and West Egg,
 ATM
 L.L. Bean catalog, present value of an ordinary
 annuity, NIN
At the moment before my head spills its entire burden onto the
 bathroom floor
I am there and those images are puffy Kodak clouds self-
 contained and not about to rain
(They're all about lingering for spite)
(But they don't really exist)).

II.

What can you say to another body and soul
To convince them that there's something

Behind a congested, confused, dark-haired collegiate these
days?

Being so necessary, can you convince them to bend their necks
To see past "its" and sometimes better judgment
Into backdrops that in some way describe explicitly what you
know

Yourself as?

Who wants to spend time craning bones and unnerving
so-reclusive eyes,

Satisfied with what they see?

III.

It may be that a body and soul can't grasp this
With hands and words like it was an object
So don't try to.

Perceive, maybe

Maybe now you perceive

Maybe now you want to reach.

Yes, I'm aware that it takes some time.

Easy analogy: don't be like those little Army men, olive green
with determination

Bearing flags and rushing about the globe to "explore" and
claim

For a better race or more perfect form of democracy,
Never thinking twice, screaming "I AM WHO IS AND
FUTURE ALSO."

They poke the pointy end of their flag into my history
as I lay (pieces of body on pieces of tile)

They throw my slice of spirit into a sack and claim me
for Spain

Tim McCoy

Slipping

The fat rumble had the sensation that it was rising slower than the rest of the sounds coming from the orchestra. It might have been quiet, but it was as threatening as a man ready with a screw driver to detach a seat from the floor and the muscles to hurl it and its occupant two rows over. The third movement saturated the building with the rumble and sung feathers which glided into the walls. Up in the highest balcony, where most heads were hung down in order to see the orchestra, or because sleep had taken over, Gavin Hardy sat next to Tara soon-to-be Hardy with his head up and level and his eyes closed. His eyelids were rumbled and feathered open once the tear started to form. He looked left, giving the tear the instability it needed to start its glide down his cheek, and looked at Tara. Her fingers stomped on her program in silent tedium as her eyes fixed on the Rolex ad within the pages.

Its not going to work. Gavin's attention was quickly pulled away from the orchestra and instead he considered where Tara's attention was directed. *How many times is she going to read the caption? I could have read it twice by now. Can she tell I'm watching her?* The ad didn't do much for Gavin. He didn't care about the elegance it promised. The gleam and color of the watch seemed nothing more than dull. And whatever else the watch projected, Gavin could do without.

I should have known this was going to happen.

A crescendo emerged from the vast pit in which the orchestra was situated, but it failed to pull Gavin back inside its haven. Instead, the wave broke around him and acted only as a distracting passer-by.

I knew this was going to happen.

Gavin waited for Tara's head to move. Her eyes barely even blinked and her fingers allowed the pages of advertisements and patrons to take their turns. The feeling that gripped Gavin was not a new one. It was not due to a new realization or fear. Instead it was a common truth that would always arrive before too long. Sometimes it would scream and

sometimes, like this time, it would mumble things which couldn't be completely understood and that would make them all the more disturbing. He wondered where a safe place was. Their home always offered the immediate feel of security, but then the truth of how their apartment was strangely divided would intrude. Because there were her things. Because there were his things. Because he didn't understand the dividing line and couldn't comprehend where he trespassed.

I can't let it go on like this.

Of course it would be so much easier to simply let it go on. *And why not? I'm not in any pain here. She's exactly what I need, a reassuring voice of reason. I would have quit my job if it wasn't for her, and I like being a journalist. I never would have gotten things well enough together so we could move into our place if I was by myself. She provides the structure I need.* The rumble had ended. The flutes provided a slight trill and the violas and cellos answered them in perfect unison.

Gavin attempted to refocus on the music again and was not surprised when he was unsuccessful. His job would be waiting for him at eight o'clock the next morning. He wanted to spend more time on his novel, which he had no schedule for completion, but felt he should be farther along in it. And while he had it all sketched out, he still didn't feel that it was developing right.

Of course it's not developing right.

The low rubble began again. It was as thick as the strings that produced it.

You're letting real life intrude into it. It's not just a novel or a long story meant to intrude on the mundane cycles of life. It's your fantasy. It's whatever you want. Gavin never realized he was addressing himself. His novel had been his release for quite some time. He was writing it for Tara. She was the inspiration for it. He wanted to give something that was so much a part of himself and the result of so much of his efforts to her. It presented a place that wasn't in this city, and actually wasn't anywhere Gavin knew. He could imagine what it would be like if he was there right at that moment.

He could stand up and stretch to allow his body to get reacquainted with movement after sitting for so long. He'd arch his back and throw up his arms and they'd extend without notice of the walls. His hands could grip a street light

outside or another building or a tree, one so majestic that it would stand out in a forest. And while his arms were being massaged by the music, they would guide him to where his fingers had felt and chosen as a good place. Then he could move his body in twists and bends that were never possible and thus never thought of before. Then talk with others about shared passions and climb cliffs of gold and white. There would be understanding between and within. On a plain of trapdoors and half-mirrors and light-benders there would be dances and discussions.

"My name is Gavin."

"I know. I understand you write of possibilities."

"Yes. I do. And what about you?"

"Experience."

The possibilities and the choices. And best of all would be the results. In the mud with Ahriman to dabble in dusk, play and run, and escape; that would provide as much pleasure as skydiving with an angel in golden brilliance.

Gavin sat restless in his seat. His eyes and cheek were dry. His structure was sitting in the seat next to him. *I have to tell her.* Tara closed the program and looked down towards the orchestra. She let out her breath and then looked to Gavin. She smiled. She wondered how much longer these people were going to play. She wondered if she was being selfish. *As if it really matters now. I may as well just get up and leave right now.* It was the question of where she would go after that which kept her in her seat. Gavin had the keys to the car. And if she took the bus or walked the thirty some blocks, would she really enter their apartment? Could she claim it as her own? A balance existed in their home. What would she do if Gavin took his weight away or if she left it behind. *I should tell him.*

The rush that Tara had held back for so long was let loose in the rumble. The wave had crashed over her and knocked her back down into the program for an escape. The Rolex on the page had been gold. Her watch was black and plastic. She hadn't expected anything that represented precision to be anywhere Gavin would take her. The ad appeared to be as tasteful as something such as a Rolex would allow. Although she had admitted to herself that she wouldn't mind one. She had flipped through the rest of the

program before she looked up at Gavin. At least he hadn't found the music so beautiful that he was crying.

She felt dumb for smiling. It was like she was offering him something that was smooth and healthy on the surface but made of rot on the inside. What if she told him on the way back to the apartment? She wouldn't be able to go inside after that. What about then? But it didn't seem completely necessary. Gavin was something she could structure. She knew when they first met that he wasn't perfect, that he was sort of lost and was perfectly willing to stay that way. He didn't even wear a watch. He'd sit with her through dinner and a while afterwards. Then who knew what he would do. He'd run out somewhere. Maybe to a jazz club or to a friend's place or to some lecture at one of the nearby colleges. For those, she used to join him on occasion when it was something she was interested in. Now, she didn't. *Not that he even offers much anymore to invite me wherever he's going. Half the time he isn't back by the time he said he'll be, if he gives a time at all.* Or else he'd type, without warning, for hours on end, working on his novel.

It was easy enough to just wait for the nights when he would stay with her. The apartment provided a secure routine for her. She knew when something worth watching would be on television. Or she could clean. Or she could go food shopping. Gavin only bought things when they were needed and so sudden shortages were not uncommon despite her efforts to prevent them. The nights when he would join her in those things which were so simple, no rush or hassle or big deal involved with them, would be unpretentious fun and happiness. That couldn't be found with some orchestra which used feathers for a disgusting tickle and a rumble to dislodge you from your ease with a jab to the gut.

She found herself returning to the program and reading the names of those who gave donations so she could pass the time. *I have to get out of this.* She found a name that was the same as an actress on television.

The first block of the drive home Tara remembered her rash consideration of walking. It was lightly raining. She was desperately searching for a way to tell her doubts to Gavin. *Why don't I say to him what I've been saying to myself almost every night?* Tara recognized the structured way she approached her relationship with Gavin and sought out the

best way to restructure it. She would do it piece by piece. First she would say "Gavin, I can't marry you." And what would he say?

"What?"

"Why not?"

"What's wrong?"

"Are you crazy?"

"I was hoping you would say that."

"Good."

And then what should I do?

Gavin was humming the opening theme of the last movement. *It couldn't hurt to keep this little split between us. I should tell her soon.* He kept driving, thinking of the contradictory things he needed.

They parked and climbed the two flights of stairs to their floor. A door had been left open. It was theirs. "That's our door."

"We didn't leave it like that."

They rushed into their apartment and stood three feet inside.

This isn't sanctuary.

The balance is gone.

Inside the wrecked room they saw their chance. It lay in the open drawers, covered floors, and overturned chairs. It had sprouted in the space left by electronic appliances. Tara walked in slow silence and put a chair upright and sat in it. A tear overflowed out of one eye.

Gavin wandered the length of the apartment wanting to hit something. He wished he could do something so that Tara wouldn't cry. He didn't like seeing her like that. He made his way back to her. "Tara?"

She wiped at her tears and looked up at him. *There wasn't any point in coming back here.* "Gavin." *I may as well get it over with.* She took a deep breath. "I love you."

Gavin closed the apartment door and knelt beside her. His hand took hers in the gesture of a pact. The motion involved little sting. Never having turned on the lights it was agreed that to repair was better than starting over.

Mike Podgorski

College Roommates

Hey Mike,

May 11, 1997

You remember all the shit I was telling you about my roommate?

Well, I've got some more shit to tell you. Get this, he just disappeared about two days ago and he left all his shit here. He said he was going to get a haircut and he never came back. So like, I didn't want to get fined because he left a load of shit in our room. I mean, the semester is over soon. I'm out of this shithole on I think it's Thursday or Tuesday or something like that. So, I called Residence Life and they said they'd take care of his shit. Then I looked at his shit and I thought I'd just make it easy on whoever came to clean up his shit so I cleaned up all his shit. That and I thought he might have some weed stashed somewhere. I mean, I'm broke so I can't get any weed and he just leaves all his shit here for me to deal with and that's not cool. Leaving his goddamn shit here. So this is like his payment to me for dealing with his shit. So okay, anyway, I find a sheet of acid and I'm like, "Cool shit!" Fuckin' rad, huh dude? Then I was about to take a hit and I look at the book I found it in and it's got this writing an' shit on the front and it says, "Personal Journal: 1997, Volume XXXIII." And the writing was really fuckin' small and my eyes hurt like shit after reading it. But anyway, check this shit out. I copied some pages for you. (They're in this letter.) Wait'll you read this shit. He was really whacked out of his skull. I mean, his shit was real fucked up man. I think he just couldn't handle all the shit he musta been doin'. So anyway, read this shit dude. I'm sorry, I gotta go. This sheet is just callin' to me, "take a hit, and sell me to get money for weed" and I can't hold out any longer and plus, I think I got an exam tomorrow and I gotta study for it. Like, I can't fail. I don't want to be at college for more than seven, eight years at the most. I gotta get my degree so I can go onto grad school and do more stuff. That's where all the good shit is. You can learn better ways to grow your own weed and they show you how to make speed and all kinds of rad shit. Okay, I gotta go. Smoke some shit for me dude.

-Mike

P.S. Don't send me your cigarette butts in the mail anymore. It wasn't funny dude.

Personal Journal: 1997, Volume XXXIII

January 15, 1997

Start of the spring semester. We all moved back to school today. Nobody around here is normal. Steven and Mike found my pube hair collection and told me I needed to see Sean Flinn, the school's head counselor. I know what they are up to and it is **not** going to work. Also, Steven's mad because I signed up for all night evening classes again.

January 26, 1997

Explained my plan for world domination to Mike today. He said he thought it was "fuckin' rad." Idiot. I don't think he's part of it, but he acts so dumb. I can't tell for sure. He told Steven my plan and the "shit hit the fan" as he would say. I know Steven is a part of **it**. I'm just not sure on what level though. Tonight I sleep with my .357 Magnum Desert Eagle.

February 14, 1997

I slept in the local graveyard yesterday. It doesn't have as many crypts as the one at home but it was satisfactory. Nobody bothers me there and it's becoming too dangerous to sleep in the room. Steven engaged me in a discussion about JFK today. Said his class was discussing it. Ha. He thinks I don't know about that. Still don't know on what level he functions. Seems like your basic information gatherer but doesn't play his role as a lowly college student very well. Need further interaction with him.

February 16, 1997

Mike set our smoke detector on fire last night because he wanted to see if it would still detect smoke. In his words, "it

was cool as shit." At first, I thought that this definitely proved he wasn't involved in the conspiracy, but then I understood. He must have known I suspected that the smoke detector was bugged and he burned the evidence before I could get to it. Still, I can't see how the FBI would let their agents smoke as much dope as he does. I will get to the bottom of this. They underestimate me and that is my strength and my advantage.

February 28, 1997

Mike's definitely not involved. Now I know the truth. It was just a matter of time. I found out that Steven put him up to burning the smoke detector. Now I can focus on Steven. I've got him cornered now. My power abounds and I will be victorious.

March 4, 1997

Steven found my snot collection in the fridge. Had to beg him to stay. How embarrassing.

March 16, 1997

Had a vision last night. Steven was flying at me attached to cable wires and he wore a black cape, fangs, and a codpiece. I can only conclude he has some latent homosexual desire for me. Now I can include my beauty in my arsenal of powers. The spider weaves a more entangling web.

March 21, 1997

Steven said he was going away for a few days. He said his father died. Acted upset. Fool. Shakespeare would never have cast such a horrible performer. He showed me the obituary his mom sent him. What an obvious fake. I know he's going to report to the director on my activities. I cast a protective spell on myself, though, so I'm safe. Mike set fire to our fridge. Probably burning another bug. Maybe he is involved. Tonight I gather strength from the local souls of the dead.

March 30, 1997

Steven offered me a piece of pizza. I'm not safe anymore. He's got to go down. They're getting close.

April 9, 1997

Just about had my hands around Steven's neck, but then he woke up. I had to explain how I was about to give him a neck massage. Accused me of being a "fag" as he put it. I hate homophobic FBI agents.

April 19, 1997

Getting rid of Steven's body harder than I thought. Mike is so stoned, he doesn't seem to recognize Steven is missing. Keeps asking me why our room smells like "shit" as he says. I tell him it's the fish he set fire to and lost in the room last week. Says he can't remember that but I assure him otherwise. I've got to get rid of the body before more start showing up. They'll start asking about the aliens and what not, and I can't let that happen. Must dispose of body.

April 28, 1997

I'm exhausted. Took Steven out of my closet and spent all of last night chopping Steven into little cubes and flushing him down a toilet. Sprayed some Lysol, but room still smells bad. Don't understand.

May 1, 1997

Mike found a rotting burnt fish behind the couch. Said he remembers now. Asked me about Steven. Told him he was at home because his mom died. Mike said he felt bad because of all the "shit" Steve's gone through this semester. I agreed.

May 9, 1997

I think they've found me. Must get out of here. I think they know the truth. Told Mike he could burn all my personal

belongings. I hope he remembers. Tomorrow I leave for my rendezvous with Agent Big Bird in Spokane, Oregon. He's the only one I can trust. Salvation shall once again be mine.

Brian Hamrick

Rain

The snake curled through the tree,
scratching its skin along the wooden crags
of the weathered wood.

It wound its way around the vines
that clung in a strangling embrace
to those same branches.

Its forked tongue flicked the air
to see what might happen ...

Casual smoke hung in yellow ringlets
as one last couple clung to each other
on the worn jazz club floor,
scarred from countless heels
dancing, tapping, and spinning to the
be-bop and the blues.

Two musicians remained -
a lazy bass laying down a somber progression
and a tired drummer,
who only tapped the high-hat
with a bent and rusted pair of wire brushes,
for the other people in the room
supplied their own rhythms
over the solitary sound
of a whisking beat.

On the playroom floor the monstrosity grew,
a great architecture of
wooden ramps and plastic receptacles.

The girl built this track
for her brother's toy;
all the little balls lined up,
racing along this oak freeway
in a mad railroad
powered only by gravity
and the imagination
of the only person in the room.

Slowly, slowly, finely, and subtly
the pile grew at the feet of the bench
as the paper was rubbed along
the handmade anniversary present
of the carpenter.

The sweat of his brow transferred its moisture
as the red of his cheeks transferred its color
to the finish of the rosewood table top.

In long, even strokes the sand
worked its way along the wood,
removing the burrs and splinters
that could spill blood on this gift.
And still the wood-dust pile grew ...

Beneath the overpass a teenage girl sat
holding in her hands the note which caused
the tears on her face.

It was so unfair that on this beautiful day
her life was ruined.

A tractor-trailer rumbled on the road above her
and she looked up
as the light scintillated through her tears
into her eyes.

The brick was perched on the roof
for the mason
to fit into the chimney being built.
It clung to the shingles by physics,
but when the mason's foot nudged it
it began to slide,
leaving a trail of red dust along the roof
before it fell.

The great stone cathedral was a bastion of strength
for the thousands that worshipped there.

It stood immovable to all but
the most dire of elements,
and inside it was safe.

The chanting was an uneven crescendo
as the bishop raised his voice in glory
and lowered it in humility.

And all his vocal manners were mimicked
by the congregation before him.

An old man sat by a river
and watched its gentle flow along its course.
His breathing was steady,
and his hands were calm.
Today Siddhartha would be 306 years old,
and as a slow boat moved its way upstream
the old man thought the sound
of the hull through the water
reminded him of rain.

Dennis McGuire

Full Moon in Scorpio

It was a beautiful spring day in West Hartford, the kind that could get Mike Kelly really depressed. Brilliant cumulus formations floated majestically past a deep blue backdrop. Scents of lilac wafted on the warm breeze. The stunning sunshine brightened up everything including the spirits of the population, and a cheerful brightness filled the bank office as he waited in line. All this left no room for blaming his mood on the weather. Finally his turn came to transact business with the teller. She was a young blond woman with a pretty face. Kelly had found her figure unusually eye catching during the first year he had done business with this bank.

"I'd like to cash in this IRA," Kelly said to her as he took his place at the counter.

He knew she recognized him as one of the regular customers. He always seemed to be in a hurry. He fidgeted while waiting in line, sometimes rolled his eyes with impatience, and she had seen him walk out in exasperation.

"Are you sure about that?" she said. "You lose your interest, the amount is taxable income, and we deduct a fee plus 10% as a penalty for early withdrawal."

Don't you think I know that? He screamed silently. *Mind your own goddamn business and do your job!* Then the old sarcasm. *Well, what would you advise? I've been looking for a financial advisor for years and I'm delighted to find one as capable as you.* In his younger days he had treated bank clerks to such outbursts and found that it resulted only in their own anger. "We don't have to put up with this," one teller had said to him, a colleague at her side. He had felt embarrassed.

"Yes, I know that," Kelly replied. "This is not the first IRA I have cashed in. Unfortunately, it's the last."

"Just a minute," she said, and took the form he had filled out to a back office.

The queasy feeling at the pit of his stomach was the same as on the previous two occasions when Mike Kelly had cashed in IRAs. He noticed a young woman in the next line. She had two children with her, both well dressed. *No doubt*

they have closets full of expensive clothes at home. How the hell do they do it? And what am I going to do when this money runs out?

At the age of 47 he was getting used to being divorced from his wife of fifteen years. He had dreaded the separation, had seen nothing positive in it. *If fifteen years of loving and sharing and doing my best results in failure, how can I look forward to starting all over again?* he had fretted. *I haven't been on my own for years and I never liked it before. Now it will be worse. No one to come home to. I won't be able to stand it. Why couldn't things have worked out? What happened? I thought no matter what we had to go through we would always get it together. Fifteen years I invested in this relationship, and for what?* When the end came, the sale of their house had left him with a windfall. He had exercised his freedom by resigning his faculty position at the university even though a year remained on his contract. He joined the local racquet club for tennis three days a week, and started his own professional practice as a career counselor. That had been two years ago.

"Here's your IRA refund," said the teller. "The total comes to \$1,785 after the penalty and fee are assessed."

"Okay. I'll take \$100 in cash and put the rest in my checking account," Kelly said as he wrote the amount on the deposit slip.

Kelly felt slightly better as he walked to his car. The warmth of the sun on his face was a comfort. The painful deed was done. The five twenties formed a comforting bulge in his pocket. *Cash!* He remembered a classmate from grammar school days. *O'Brien was always plunging his hands into pockets bulging and jingling with coins. Such abundance. My pockets might have a dime. A lousy dime for lunch milk. God help me if I spent it on something else. It should have been for toys, toys in the store windows that I outgrew before I could afford to buy them. Toys that I knew were out of reach. Had to steal money for Pepsi, to take it on the sneak. Had to fear being caught and punished. And the cash always went as fast as it came. Can't stand it. Never could. Starvation in a land of plenty. People all around with cash to burn, and I can't ever get enough.* He headed for a McDonald's on the far side of town. It was the place he and his ex, PJ, used for their

monthly lunches.

The "PJ" stood for Paula Josephina. All of his relatives in Chicago had no difficulty remembering her last name, Dimaggio. "Are you related to Joe?" they all asked her when he brought her home. "Yes," she said with aplomb, "we're cousins." "Of course we're cousins," she explained to Kelly. "Nobody in my family ever met anyone in his but that doesn't mean we're not cousins."

He got to McDonald's first and waited for her. He found a table in a secluded corner and stood looking out a window at the passing traffic. He was glad they met regularly for lunch. "Let's keep in touch," PJ had suggested when they divorced. "Let's stay friends." He saw her pull in with a new Lexus. The car she had when they divorced two years before had been a brand new Toyota Camry LE. "LE" for luxury edition. *Apparently she is doing well in the corporate structure. No surprise there. She is talented and hard working and knows how to flatter the male ego.* He watched her step from the car and walk toward the entrance. *If anything, she is more beautiful than when I first met her at the age of nineteen.* She flashed him a bright smile and wave of her hand.

Kelly imagined she felt a rekindling of her appreciation for his sensitive intelligence. This, he knew, would be mingled with relief that she no longer was tied to his ventures. Always starting with new dreams of riches and then struggling to make ends meet. The man she lived with now was bright, sensitive, and educated. He was also successful in his work. Kelly saw her glance at his Toyota Corolla. *Same old car, she would be thinking, he probably has another great business idea and no customers.*

It was all for you, he mused. I would have been content to stay on at the university and do consulting work.

Yes, but you didn't get tenure and that was the last straw for me.

We were doing all right. Our income was almost six figures that last year. But it was never enough for you. I finally realized it never would be. I came to see I wasn't responsible for your miserableness and that the money had little to do with it. Such bullshit you used to throw at me. "When poverty comes in the door, love goes out the window." What love? You never loved me like I loved you.

He saw her coming toward him with that smile that said she was glad to see him and dismissed his thoughts. When they met she kissed him on the lips and they hugged. He responded to the kiss by keeping his lips still. As she drew her mouth back he kissed her on the cheek. He did not feel comfortable with the old intimacies. But he liked being kissed in public by a dark-eyed, olive-skinned beauty.

They ordered hamburgers and fries and sat down.

"How are things going?" he asked.

"Great," she said. "I got a promotion. Before we get into that, how are you doing?"

Always the man first, Kelly noted.

"Things would be great if I had more clients. Now that the ad is in the Yellow Pages for my Career Actualization service, I am getting calls. A young lady called a few days ago and we set up an appointment for this afternoon. But it's slow. I don't know what I'll do when the money runs out."

"Oh, you'll think of something. You're like the cat who always lands on his feet," she said.

"I am? Well, this cat is pretty nervous while he's flying through the air. There is the possibility of a job at the Aetna."

"Really?"

"Yes. I have an interview set up for tomorrow."

"Tell me about it. What's the job?"

"I'm not exactly sure what the job entails. It's weird how this whole thing happened. I called an executive there, some guy named Matthews, at the suggestion of Jack McGowan, a consultant with whom I've done some work. Matthews told me to send my resume to personnel. I asked if I could use his name in my cover letter and he said yes. Next thing I know some guy named Spellman called me to set up an interview. He said Matthew's name in my letter was all he needed to contact me. So I have an interview with someone I don't know on the recommendation of someone I never met. Spellman said he's looking for someone to coordinate the efforts of people who report to him. They make up the Advanced Technologies Resources Department. That's all I know about it at this time."

"What's the pay?"

"Don't know yet. Probably in the forties."

"Sounds like it might be the opportunity you've been looking for."

"Maybe. How about you? I see you have a new car. Things must be going well for you at the bank."

PJ talked excitedly about her promotion to Vice President for Corporate Communications.

From pot smoking hippie who hated squares to corporate executive, thought Kelly. I always knew she would do well but why couldn't we have done it together? Shit, she's looking at her watch.

"Well, I've got to get back to the office," she said. "These times we meet for lunch go fast. I wish we could stay longer."

"Yes, a half hour seems like five minutes," he replied. "I've got an appointment to get to."

"Let's do this again."

"For sure."

They hugged briefly on parting. She got her keys and walked hurriedly to her car. He watched as she got in and started it, wondering if she would make a farewell gesture. Her face turned toward him, serious now, the office look, and she waved as the car backed out.

As Kelly drove back to his apartment he started to worry about the appointment with his new client. The address in the Yellow Pages looked businesslike: "211 Main St." But, he thought, his office was in an apartment complex, not an office building. Although nicely furnished with a teakwood desk, chairs, and computer tables, it was an apartment bedroom, not a professional workplace. He envied those professionals who had real offices with receptionists.

Having arrived at his apartment he paced back and forth from the living room to the small kitchen. After a few minutes, he stood on the verandah looking over the wooded valley across the road called Main St. He looked down at the driveway winding up the hill. He waited for his client. His hands clenched the railing, fussed with his tie, checked his pockets for pens. He paced back to the kitchen. He hurried back to the verandah, anxious that he might miss her drive up.

He saw a car swerving into a parking place in front of his unit and glanced at his watch. 2:00. Exactly on time.

Great! He hated it when people were late. A young woman emerged from the car and walked toward his entrance. Kelly hastened down the stairs to greet her.

"Hello," he said. "I'm Mike Kelly of Career Actualization."

"Hello," she said. "I'm Carol Kingsley."

She had a primness of mouth and glamorous eyes, with full cheeks, and lovely hair. It was a good looking combination.

"I hope you had no trouble with the directions," he said.

She got here on time asshole. She'll think you're an idiot talking like that.

"No. Your directions were fine," she replied.

"The office is right this way," he said, ushering her through the dining room to the converted bedroom.

Don't say it. Just shut up about this really being an apartment and get on with the business.

She took a seat and began, "You explained what you do for people on the phone but I'm not sure it is what I need, you know? I'm finishing my third year of college after this semester. I'm a psychology major and I'm not sure what courses I should take during my senior year. Should I consider graduate work and prepare for that or look for a job with a B.A.? It's hard to see what the best decision is, you know?"

The session went smoothly. Kelly felt inspired by the stories he elicited about her accomplishments and intrigued by the maturity of her presentation.

When she left he sat at his desk with nothing to do. He looked to his left, at the printer table he used for storing various items. On the bottom shelf nestled his pipe rack. The three rungs held a pipe each. Two of the pipes were brown, hard wood with curved stems. The third was black and its stem straight. He had paid \$90 for it when the average pipe he bought cost about \$25. It was made of high tech material NASA had developed for the heat shields of its space capsules. A leaflet had described how it would burn cool. Other pipes got hot but this one was designed to remain cool at the stem. Other pipes burned his tongue, but this offered the pleasure of a smoke without such risk. The problem with buying expensive pipes, he had learned, was you never knew

till you smoked them whether the literature was correct. Once used the pipe could not be returned for a refund. This particular pipe had not burned any cooler than a 95 cent corn cob. In fact, the last time he had smoked he burned his tongue again.

The pipes, rack, tobacco, tampers, pipe cleaners, and pipe lighters had been sitting there at the bottom of his printer table since that day. That, he realized, was over a year ago. He had never consciously decided to quit smoking. "I guess I don't smoke anymore," he said aloud. He gathered up the pipes, rack, tobacco, tampers, cleaners, and lighters and deposited them in his waste basket.

The next day there was not much to do before his afternoon interview at the Aetna. He decided he needed a breakfast of ham and eggs at the Quaker Diner. Their home fries were the best. At the diner he argued with himself. Two eggs without ham was a dollar less. *What the hell, if I'm going broke, I might as well have a good breakfast.* After the ham and eggs with home fries he walked across the street to browse through a used book store. That would blow an hour. The store was closed.

Jerry Spellman at the Aetna was a slender man in his forties, the type you see jogging along the road with the latest style of gear. He spoke crisply and wasted no time getting down to business. "I've got an important meeting in 45 minutes and I need fifteen minutes to prepare myself before I get to it. We have thirty minutes. That should be enough time to get acquainted, let you know what the job is, and decide what our next step will be."

He launched into a brief history of his career with the Aetna. He explained his specialty as marrying leading edge technologies with the people in the company who should be utilizing them. Spellman's problem was that he was stuck with the responsibility of trying to coordinate five people whom he referred to as "high tech gurus" and as "prima donnas." "I just don't have time to spend on resolving all the issues around this," he was saying.

Kelly asked for more detail about what the five people did and Spellman elaborated. As their meeting came to a close Kelly asked what the salary for the position was.

"I don't know exactly," said Spellman. "You have to check with personnel. It's a G35 level position and the range is

in the sixties. Well, what do you propose as the next step?"

"I want to meet each of these five people," Kelly said.

"Okay. I'll have my secretary set it up. Hopefully, she can schedule it so that you meet all five in one day. Now I have that meeting to get to," and he was gone.

As Kelly drove home he leaned forward clutching the steering wheel, thrusting his face over it. He came to a corner with a stop sign and slowed down with extra care. *In the sixties!* The most he had ever earned as a college teacher was thirty five thousand. *In the sixties!* He looked left and right, hesitated uncharacteristically, looked left and right again, and drove on. *Relax. Get a hold of yourself.* He slammed on the brake as he realized that the signal he had driven under was a red light. *In the sixties!* A car passed through the intersection. The driver glared at Kelly and showed him his middle finger. "In the sixties!" Kelly yelled through his windshield.

He drove over to the supermarket to browse. He did not need anything at the moment. In the garden department he decided to buy two hanging plants at \$15 each. His apartment needed some greenery and he decided he could not procrastinate buying plants forever. He would write a check for the purchase. He picked up two planters at \$3 each and placed the plants in them. At the checkout a heavysset black girl rang up his purchase. This was unusual since the employees were almost all suburban whites. Kelly guessed that she was new. She averted her eyes from him and pulled the planters over the scanner with the plants inside. The total rang up at \$6.00 plus tax. Kelly paid the girl with cash and carted his purchase from the store. *Training new employees is not my responsibility. He felt uncomfortable. I just committed the perfect crime. Even if I were stopped by a security guard I could say I was not aware that the girl had made a mistake in ringing up the purchase. He still felt uncomfortable. Look, it's part of the cost of doing business. The store management does not want to invest in carefully training their new employees so they have to pay with lost goods.* With that he transferred the plants to his car and drove back to his apartment.

Kelly busied himself drilling holes in the ceiling of his office and screwing planter hooks into them. He hung up

the plants and felt pleased at the result. *In the sixties* continued in his mind like a chant. He drove back to the store and got two more plants. This time as he placed them in the planters it was not by chance. Again the same girl rang up the bill at \$6.00 plus tax.

Why stop now? Why not furnish the entire apartment with free plants?

Because every time I look at these plants I'll be reminded that I stole them.

The next day Kelly checked a law dictionary for the definition of stealing: "removing goods without the knowledge and consent of the owner." He had a money order made out anonymously for the full amount of the plants plus tax and mailed it to the store manager.

The following week brought the second session with Carol Kingsley. Kelly was particularly impressed with her story of how she had helped an alcoholic classmate while a sophomore at a prep school.

Kelly felt an admiration for his young client. As the session continued he reflected that she was the same age as PJ when he met her and wondered what it would be like to date Carol Kingsley.

"My teammates on the lacrosse team," she was saying.

He felt inspired by her poise, initiative, character, and pleasure in helping others.

"My roommate at the dorm . . ."

But he had difficulty imagining spending time with her as a friend.

"My psych 101 teacher . . ."

Her interests were so--he searched his mind for the word that would express what he saw--no, not *naive*--no, not just *different*--yes, *that's it, so young. She's too young for me*, he realized.

He loved being able to give this young woman guidance that would enable her to launch a fine career for herself and those she would counsel. He found satisfaction in analyzing her information so thoroughly that there was no questioning his conclusions.

Career Self-Actualization, a great name for my business. With only one new client a week it would be a success.

Spellman's secretary called to inform Kelly of the time

for his interviews with the Aetna people. On his second visit to corporate headquarters he took in the massiveness of the building. Two blocks long and a half block high. Old brick. Floor after floor of cubicles containing men and women dressed in suits. Searching out paths through the fifth floor maze of cubicles to find Spellman.

"I've got a very important meeting to get to," Spellman said, as he gave Kelly a schedule of the people he would be talking to. "I'll see you later, after you've met with our prima donnas," and he was gone.

The first four meetings went smoothly with the usual get acquainted rituals. The oldest man of the group, his tie loosened and shirt sleeves rolled up, expressed some concern that Kelly had not seen the written job description for the position. "I'm surprised Spellman did not give you a copy," he said, and showed it to Kelly. Kelly noted that the job included supervising a secretarial pool of ten women. Spellman said he wanted his assistant to coordinate the efforts of the five people. Nothing had been mentioned about supervising clerical workers. Kelly knew from experience that supervising people was not for him.

For the last meeting at 5:00 Kelly showed up at the office of Jack Spencer. As he was shaking hands with the stocky, sharply dressed man in his forties, Spellman walked in. "I've got to talk with Jack now," he said. Kelly stepped out of the cubicle into the empty, quiet, immense room that contained dozens of such cubicles. It was a few minutes after five. Except for Spellman and Spencer everyone had gone. With the lights off and the people gone the brightly lit bustling area had suddenly assumed a twilight stillness.

Kelly looked around for some place to sit down. Walking along a cubicle corridor he eventually found a straight backed wood chair. He waited for Spellman to emerge from Spencer's cubicle. After ten minutes, with nothing to read except the one-page job description, and no one to talk to, he slouched in the chair. Then he sat up straight. He stood up and walked around, checking to look back along the corridor. Fifteen, twenty, thirty minutes dragged on. He waited, cursing under his breath, glancing at his watch every few minutes.

Spellman eventually left without a word to Kelly.

Spencer said he did not have much time for their meeting. "It's been a long day and it's after five thirty," he began. "I've got to go or the wife will be upset. Five minutes will have to suffice." Kelly ignored what he felt was the rude reception, introduced himself, and asked Spencer about his responsibilities. After about twelve minutes they both felt like leaving. Spencer had his way with the abridged meeting and Kelly had the satisfaction of keeping him over his five minute limit.

Spellman called the next day to let Kelly know they wanted him for the job. The salary would be \$68,654 plus benefits. Kelly said he needed a couple of days to think it over.

Wow, over \$70,000 if you add on the benefits. What makes them think I'm worth that much?

You're not. You're in over your head and you know it.

Kelly scheduled another lunch with PJ. They met at the same place. Kelly noted that PJ was dressed smartly. He examined her black cashmere double breasted casual blazer with gold crested buttons. Stove pipe slacks with black and white vertical stripes swept down to French shoes. Around her neck was a gold chain with a diamond set into a gold heart. On her left wrist she wore a gold Rolex. *Shit. I don't remember when I last bought a new tie, let alone a watch.*

They greeted with the customary hug and kiss. "Still shopping at TJ Maxx?" he said. "Yes," she replied with a smile. "Quality brands at bargain prices." She had always said that when she became affluent she would continue to shop at TJ Maxx. It was, he knew, her Taurus nature to delight in a bargain.

"How are things for you?" she asked.

"Pretty good," he replied with a shrug.

"Great!" PJ exclaimed. "It sounds like things are turning around for you. I hope this works out the way you want it to."

"I also have a job offer at the Aetna."

"Oh! What is it? I mean, what is the job about?"

Kelly described the job and his experience of meeting with the people at the Aetna.

"I hate to pry, but can you tell me the salary range?"

"Over \$68,000."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really."

"You're the luckiest man I know. Things always work out for you in the end. When do you start on the job?"

"Well, I'm not sure that I want it."

"What? Don't be crazy. You've got to take this job. It's your chance to get out of the hole."

"Yeah, I know. The salary is great. The prestige would be great. But I cringe at the thought of going to work with those people every day."

"Oh really?"

Kelly's head jerked up. The "Oh really" had hit him like a slap. Over their fifteen years together he had noticed how, when someone said something so outlandish there was no intelligent response, she replied with "Oh really" to fill the gap.

"Yeah, really," he said. "I feel torn. Sure I want the good pay, and the job would be interesting at least for a while when everything would be new. But I can't believe they were so rude to me when I went there to meet with them. If they treat me like that when I'm a guest, what will it be like when I'm an employee?"

"You can't take that kind of stuff personally. It doesn't mean a thing. You're the one who says your moon is in Scorpio and that's why you get so emotional about these things. This is a great opportunity for you. I'm happy for you. I envy you. You'll take this job when you sort things out."

"Well," Kelly said, "I have a bad feeling about this job. Don't you remember when I quit my first programming job to take the position of assistant director of data processing? It meant a fifty percent raise in pay and we bought our first house. I didn't feel right about that decision, but the only thing I thought was important was the money. Then I got fired. I don't ever want to live through that again." He glanced at his watch.

PJ seemed reluctant to leave.

"I've got to call Spellman at 1:30 and give him my decision. It's time to go," Kelly said.

"These times with you go so fast. Let's do this again."

"For sure," he said.

Back at his apartment he called Spellman.

"Well," said Spellman, "are you interested in the job?"

Kelly knew this job was the answer to his financial crunch, that his friends would all pat him on the back and congratulate him on his good fortune, that PJ would approve. This was the job that, a few years earlier, could have saved his marriage. At that time he would have taken it without hesitation. *When poverty comes in the door, love goes out the window.* He had not rehearsed what he would say to Spellman, had not formally made up his mind, and he played for time.

"I've been thinking about the job and have a few problems with it."

"Like what?"

"Well, for one thing, the job description says I'm to supervise ten people in the secretarial pool. You did not mention that."

"Yes, that's true, but it's not an important part of the job. What else?"

Yeah, what else?

"I'm sorry," he heard himself saying, "it's just not my cup of tea."

"Okay," Spellman said, "that's that," and hung up.

Kelly's stomach tightened; he felt confused. He called Spellman back, listened to the ringing of the phone, and hung up after the third ring.

He checked his mail and found a letter from North America VISA informing him he had been preapproved for a \$10,000 line of credit. All he had to do was sign the enclosed card and mail it back in the postage paid envelope. Also enclosed was a packet of credit checks that he could use as cash.

The rent was due and his one-new-client-a-week had not yet materialized. *Things will turn around any day now.* He deposited a credit voucher for \$1,500 to his checking account. At the bank's drive up window he felt sheltered by the comfort of his car. He was in the driver's seat. *Things will get better, they have to.* He stuffed a \$100 cash withdrawal into his pocket and drove off, his hands trembling on the steering wheel.

Not your cup of tea! Jesus Christ!

No, it's not.

So what now? What are you going to do if things don't work out?

I don't know. I have no idea.

He felt his grip on the steering wheel relax as he headed toward his apartment. He looked forward to his next meeting with Carol Kingsley. He had spent several hours analyzing her data, preparing a written report, and finalizing his recommendations. He had contacted two practicing psychologists to request that they conduct informational interviews with her. Back at his office he was not happy to see the red light blinking on his answering machine. With a foreboding tension in his gut he rewound the tape and pressed the PLAY button. "I'm sorry I won't be able to make it for our final appointment, you know? I've decided to complete my career planning process with the college's counseling department. Thank you."

Jessica Demers

Solace

Her fingers bleed easily.
The weathered tips leather daily;
Diving under bubbles steam for silver,
Sweating for the perfect garden,
A butcher's block between half sets of teeth
(Placed when the working man bellows home).
Skin peels in layers.
She wonders if she'll ever see China.

Nina Small

Summer Madness

Okay. Now its gettin' tight. Joe and Reg be missin' each other within minutes! Joe just left, and Reg is on his way over. Let me hurry up and wash my face. Maybe I better change my shirt? I hope I don't smell too much like Joe's cologne. He was huggin' all up on me and stuff. I know I shouldn't be playin' games like this, but I'm havin' fun. This is the first time Reg and I have ever been apart during the summer, or sumthin like that. Anyway, I told you about everything right? You know, after me and Reg broke up and everything. After Reg was actin' so stupid and stuff. Well, Bonita and Keith kept wantin' me to meet this guy named Joe, right? That's all they was talkin' 'bout. They kept tellin' me how good he looks an stuff, and sayin' that I need to git wit' em an everything like that, right? So I finally met him. He was cute, and it was cool. But, when I met him I couldn't even talk to him because I was messin' wit' somebody else, but we ain't gonna get into that right now.

Anyway me and Reg started talkin' again. Everything was cool because I wasn't goin' wit' nobody or nothin' like that, and *now* Reg was actin' right. But I still wanted Reg to know that he couldn't mess up and just put things back together again like nothin' happened. We had broken up in the first place because he was so insensitive, and selfish, and stupid. So we were arguing all the time. We would fight over any stupid thing, but he could get along so easily with others. I suspected that he was interested in somebody else. Of course he denied it, and I had no proof, so I let it go. But we kept fighting and arguing, and everything I said and did was wrong according to him. So, we finally came to the agreement that we needed to break up. Well, actually, I initiated it, and he had no choice but to agree. All he could say then was, "I know I ain't been treatin' you right." I guess he saw it comin', and of course he took it like a man. Now since I'm not really thinkin' about him, he's tryin' to act right. And as hard as I try to be, I must admit his cocoa complexion, and coffee colored eyes are makin' me weak. He's about five-seven, he is extremely well built, and he has a close haircut. He has a teeny mustache, a

little beard, and a georgeous smile. He got mad sex appeal! Anyway, when I went back home for spring break, I saw Joe again. That was only because Bonita called me and asked me if I wanted to say bye to Joe, because his spring break was ending when mine was beginning. So I went.

When we got there, the guys were all standin' outside loungin' on Joe's steps. It was kinda chilly, and loud, because cars were gased up and speedin', and people were runnin' their mouths. Joe was lookin' good! He has a rounded cut, and he has a caramel complexion with these big round almond colored eyes. He is about five-ten, he has a medium build, and he has this little teeny mustache and goatee. But, the best thing about him is his smile. He has really straight teeth, and a big bright kool-aid smile. The kinda smile that lights up a room. He was wearing this red and blue Nautica sweat shirt/jacket, blue jeans, and some brown Tims. He gave me this big hug and then he started trippin' smiling the whole time, talkin' 'bout how I played him, and how it shoul'da been us, and we coulda been talkin' all this time, blahse, blahse, blahse. He asked if he could call me, in his most sincere voice and I said yeah. I mean despite his weak game, he was alright, and we got along good so it was cool. Anyway, he said he was going to call me as soon as he got back down South. He goes to school in North Carolina. Me and Bonita left and that was that. Don't you know the next day he called. He was rappin' 'bout the usual stuff. Anyway, we kept in touch, and the next time we saw each other was during summer break.

Reg and I were still associating with one another at this time, but we were not exactly back together yet, so I wasn't worried about seeing Joe. When Joe came home everybody was pressed to go out. They was like, "Come on girl, you know we gotta go out!" Me and my girl Bonita were going out that night anyway, so we just stopped by Joe's house to say whas up! When we got there, Keith was already there. Keith is the comedian. He is short and kinda chubby. He has a full beard and a blow out. His ebony complexion and matching eyes complement his funny smile well. Keith and Joe came outside and started rappin' to us. Keith gave me a hug and then started trippin' and crackin' jokes. Then Joe gave me a big hug and picked me up with the biggest grin on his face. We all stood out there and talked for a little while. Being in

the city was da bomb! I missed the *life* of the city that you just don't see in the suburbs. Little girls jumpin' rope, and the boys brought out their basketball court and was slamin'. I love the urban community. Brothas and sistas greetin' each other wit' a hug and, "Whas up fam?" or "How you doin'?" I was in heaven smellin' those cheesteakes fryin' up from the corner store. I mean the *real Philly Cheesteakes*. Seen' the brothers ride by wit' their suped up whips and the phat boomin' systems. Hearin' little bits of gossip and laughter. Everything was cool, and we was just chillin'. Bonita and Keith go together so they was tryin' to make everybody a couple for the night. Bonita is taller than Keith, and she is a chocolate girl. Bonita is also sorta chubby. She has long hair, smooth skin, a little nose and rabbit teeth that stick out when she smiles. We was all kickin' it in Joe's house for a while, then me and Bonita left. I guess this was like a first date for me and Joe.

The next time we got together it happened. Our first kiss. Joe had waited patiently, so I thought why not? He was leanin' on the stone gate in front of his house, and I was standing in front of him. We were huggin', and then he gave me **the look** and said in a flirty way, "We can't do this when you got a hat on." I was like, "You can kiss me"; implying that I was not going to take my hat off. He got the point and went for it. He pulled me close and it happened, but he was suckin' my lip. Ill! It was okay for a first kiss, but then first kisses are always kinda awkward. He asked me how it was. I was like, "It was okay." He thought it was great. I guess he was a little hurt that I didn't think it was *all dat*. We hugged again, and then I got in the car and left.

Reg called me that same night because he was startin' to get jealous. He has been so much better since the last time we got together. He has been much more patient with me, and he has been super sweet. He's been visiting me and taking me out and just spending time wit me ya know? Now he wanted us to get back together and everything, but I kept saying no because I wasn't ready to get back into a relationship yet. I was having too much fun! Reg kept saying dumb stuff like, "I know you got your other guys and stuff. That's okay, I'll wait for you." Like he really had a choice, right?

Joe is the only young guy I know who actually wants to get married and settle down right now without having

kids ASAP. After a while, everybody was tellin' me how Joe was runnin' around sayin' I was gonna be his wife, and he thinks I'm the one, and all dat jazz. What! How was he tryin' to play me wit' all dat rap right? He just told me how much he likes me and stuff. He *never* got that deep with me before, but he had everybody thinkin' I was mean because I didn't recognize his feelin's. Well he *finally* told me one night on the phone. Joe was like, "Latrell, you know I really like you? I think I finally found the one. I mean you're all I want in a woman. You're intelligent, you're attractive, you're fun, and we get along real good and everything. But I think I need to slow down because you don't seem to think the same way I do."

"What do you want me to do Joe? You know it ain't even like that, I mean your not my man or anything."

"I know, your always reminding me of that."

"No, seriously. I like you alot too. But I told you that I'm not ready to jump back into a relationship."

"I know. But it's like I'm always thinkin' about you, ya know?"

"Yeah. I be thinkin' 'bout you alot too."

"So then your not doin' it on purpose?"

"Doin' what?"

"You know? . . . Uh . . . bein' together and . . ."

"Teasin' you?"

"Yeah, well not exactly teasin' but--"

"No, I'm just affectionate. If you want me to stop beause you can't handle hugs and kisses then--"

"No!, he laughs, you don't have to do all dat. I hear you, I'm affectionate too, and when you give me affection I'm gonna return it. It's just hard bein' wit' you girl. You don't know how much I'm really diggin' you. But I really respect you so I ain't even tryin' to go out like dat."

"That's good, because I respect you too."

Joe and I are too much alike. That's both good and bad. It's good because we get along pretty well and we have a lot in common. But it's bad because we are too much alike. We are both very stubborn, and we are used to gettin what we want. We are also both very sensitive and so we are always playin' games to keep from gettin' played. Now it was gettin' tight, because I was actually startin' to like Joe despite my initial

intentions which were to just kick it wit' him until he left and not really get into him like dat. Between Joe and Reg, I was lost. I love Reg, but I like Joe. That was too much. Reg was always callin' and wantin' to see me and stuff, and gettin' on my nerves. Janet always had Reg's back. We was sittin' on her front steps on her tiny little street, and her cat Khary kept runin' in and out of the door. It was quiet 'cause it was late, and it was cool out cause there was a breeze blowin'. It was bright because the street lights were shinin' hard, and she looked at me and said, "You know Reg is your boo. Don't be dissin' him for Joe. Joe is just yo' side juan right?"

"Right, but I don't know Joe is a trip", I said while tryin' to pull my shorts further down over my thighs so they would'nt get scratched on the gravel of the steps.

"Yeah, but you been wit' Reg forever, *ya'll married.*"

"Whatever. We went through it a couple of months ago and now that we've been apart for a little while he's tryin' to come correct? I'ma play dis out."

"That's what's up. Joe is probably a player anyway, as good as he looks you know girls be sweatin' him." This time she was pullin' on her shorts, and squirmin' cause her long legs were gettin' scratched in the process.

"True dat. I ain't worried 'bout a thing."

"But Reg is your heart."

That is true Reg is my heart. But you know I had to *get my chill on* wit Joe while he was in Philly. I know that me and Reg was just going through the usual relationship drama, but when we broke up, I finally felt free and now I'm not ready to be tied down again. You see, while everyone else was playin' around and rippin' and runnin', me and Reg was serious.

And now that everyone is trying to get serious, I'm playin' around. I figure it like this, if Joe's a player then why can't he get played? And if Reg was frontin' before, why can't I front now? At any rate, Reg was the problem now. He was just *pressed to see me*. Finally Reg broke down and told me what was on his mind. We was comin' from the movies, and we was chillin' in his car, and he was like, "I know I been callin' you alot now and always wantin' to see you an all that. That's just because I'm so into you right now, and I can't stop thinkin' about you. Seriously. I know you be hangin' out wit' your friends and kickin' it wit' them an everything, but I want you

to spend more time wit' me. I want us to be back together, but you're not ready for that yet and I'll just have to accept that. But like I said before, I'll wait until your ready."

This was too much for me to handle. Joe was really startin' to like me now, and I knew this. I was leading Joe on, and neglecting Reg. They were both always planin' "our future"; it was either Reg and me or Joe and me forever. Ill! I had to start making decisions now and it was hard. I was wit' Joe most of the time since he lived closer, and he was going back down N.C. soon. This meant that I was constantly puttin' Reg off. By now I had become "family" according to Joe's father and brother. I was the only female present in their lives at this time. I think this has alot to do with Joe's *need* to settle down and find a wife. The absence of his mother really bothers him, and he be seriously trippin' over the fact that she left them. He feels like she ditched him and he doesn't understand why. That's tight.

Five days before he left, Joe, me, Bonita an Keith all went to dinner and bowling. Joe called me up and he asked me if I wanted to go to dinner and bowling. Me and bonita was plannin' on going bowling that day anyway, so I wasn't surprised he asked about that, but dinner was a shock. We went to dinner at this restaurant called Applebye's. It was a cheaper version of Friday's. We had to go there because Bonita wanted to go to a place that didn't cost more than seven dollars a head, and she was drivin'. Joe is such a gentleman; when we went in the restaurant he took off his cap, then he tried to pull my chair out for me (Reg would never do that), but I got to it before he did, so we were kinda wrestlin' wit' the chair. Anyway, once we were seated Bonita looked at Keith and said, "Okay, who's payin' for who?" That was a joke because she already knew she was payin for Keith, because he never had any money since he quit his job. I looked at Joe and was like, "Who's payin' for who over here?" He was like, "I don't know, and started laughing.

"I got you," I said.

"For real! *Auw she's sooo sweet, she's gonna spot me,*" his sarcasim didn't move me.

"*Yeah, I know I'm nice like dat sometimes.*"

I didn't mind payin for him since he paid for me when we went bowlin. Anyway we ordered. We ate and when the

check came, I was all ready to pay. Joe was actin' stupid and he got all quiet so Keith asked him to come outside so they could rap about it. So right before he got up, he turned to me, took out his wallet (which was loaded wit' tens and twenties), pulled out a twenty and said, "This should take care of everything."

"I told you I was payin man!"

"No, that's okay. Here take it."

"You sure?"

"Yeah girl," he smiled.

"Okay."

I wasn't gonna beg him to let me pay. They went outside and left me and Bonita at the table. Finally we went outside then we left. We went to the bowling alley. When we got there, Joe was tryin' to pay again. I don't like when guys pay all the time; its too much of a power move, so I payed for myself. Joe was acting very distant. He was not his usual outgoing self; he was quiet and boring. Keith said it's because he really wanted to get wit' me. Too bad! I wasn't tryin' to hear that. If he had something on his chest, he needed to let it off instead of acting like a big baby poutin' all night. Near the end of the game he started cheerin' up because I started playin' wit' him makin' jokes and stuff. Then me and Joe played Bonita and Keith and won. We left when the alley closed. Joe was bein' really attentive to me. I mean *really* attentive! While I was bowling my shoe came aloose, and when I sat down to tie it, that boy lifted my foot and tied it for me! He is real affectionate, and everytime I bowled well he had to hug me. He also kept "touchin' me for good luck" everytime he got up to bowl. Then he finally pulled me to the side and asked me straight up, "Trell, when are you gonna stop puttin' me on the run around and be my girl?"

"I don't know. Is that really what you want?"

"You know that's what I want girl stop trippin'"

"Okay. You're sure your serious about this?"

"Serious as a heart attack. Come on let me make you mine."

"Okay. We'll see. We can hang."

"Thank you."

I don't know why I did that since I was gettin' closer to Reg now because I knew that Joe was leavin' soon. And believe

it or not, hangin' wit Joe really made me realize how much I missed Reg. I mean Reg and Joe were total opposites. Reg is real serious and overly masculine and very strong. He is sensitive, but he is so masculine that he rarely shows his "sensitive side." Reg is very educated and he shows this, and he's not very outwardly affectionate. He thinks that he shows he cares by doing things for me or giving me things. He's lost. Joe is much more sensitive than Reg. It is as though he has nothing to loose by bein' real, if he really is bein' real. He is playful, and romantic, and sweet, and charming, and sensitive, but masculine. Joe is educated, but not as much as Reg. Joe is always willing to just trip and be fun.

Anyway, I was really impressed by Reg's new attitude, ya know? He showed me that he really cared for me by being there and givin' me my space and just bein' cool for a while. So now all I had to do was say good-bye to Joe. The main reason I wanted to see him before he left is because I wanted to make sure things were straight between us. When he came over the next day I told him how I felt, and reminded him that I still did not want a relationship and that we could remain friends. I mean seriously, he was bound to get wit somebody down there. I know he wouldn't be just waitin' for me for another school year. He understood me. That's all I wanted. He told me that he really likes me and that he wanted to make it work though. We decided to just be friends instead. Well, we'll see. I'm still trying to get myself together before Reg gets here. Gotta go, that's the door!

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